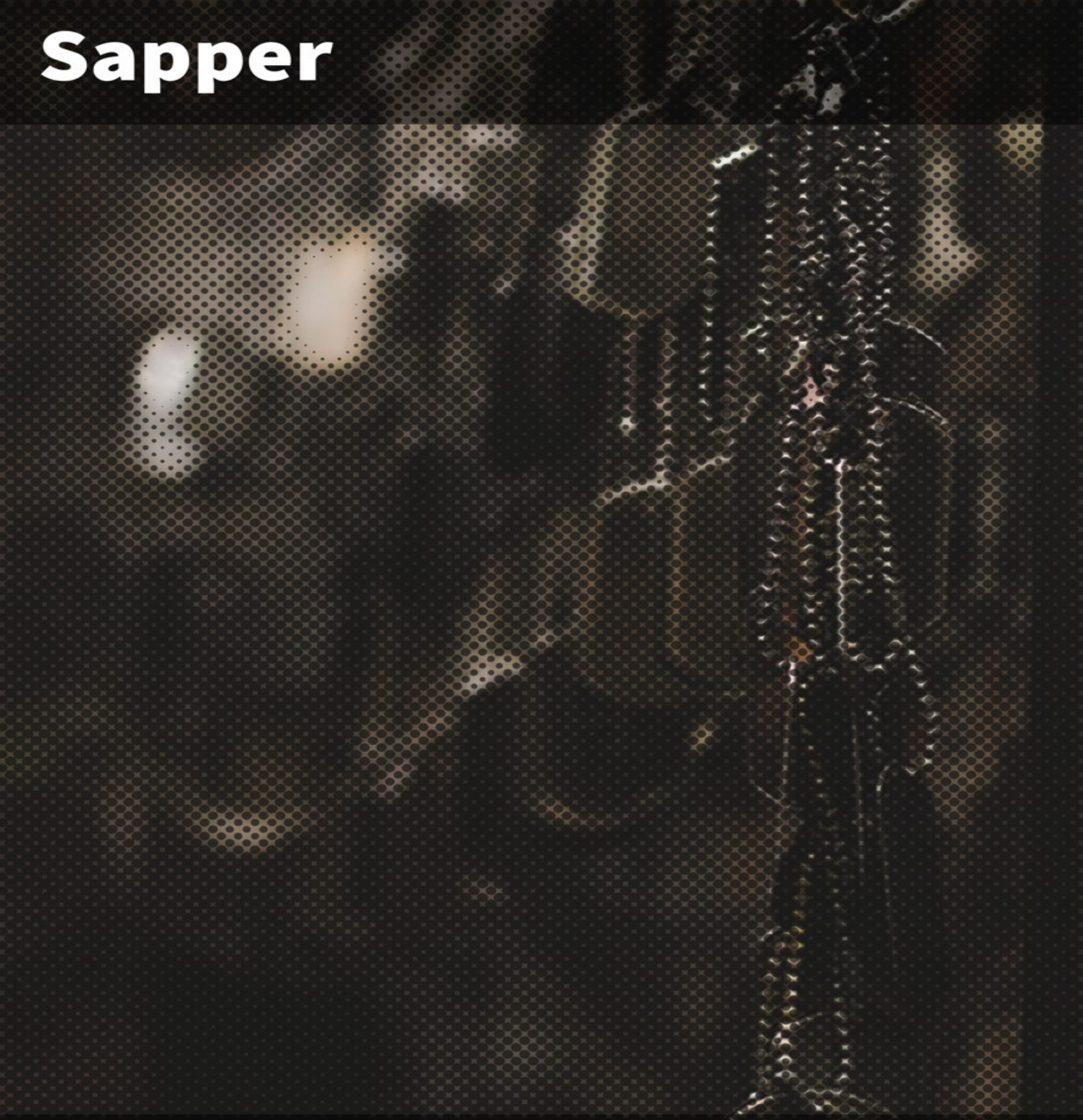
Sapper



Michael Cassidy, Sergeant

Sapper

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I. — THE GUARDS

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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 SUBALTERN OF THE GUARDS

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Slowly the car glided past Wellington Barracks, and as we passed one of the entrances three young officers came out.

"Good lads they are," cried Cassidy, "with that swagger which is right and fitting. For as you know, sir, if there is one thing which the boys cannot abide, it is the officer who creeps about like a cheese mite. They have their faults, those lads, but they are faults on the right side. I mind me now of a story I heard out yonder. They'd suffered, those Guard regiments, lost something cruel, as you know; and the young gentlemen from home were coming out to replace the casualties. Well, as you can imagine, sir, 'tis an uneasy matter at times for a young lad, fresh to the game, to find himself with old soldiers who have him watched, to see what manner of lad he is when the Marias are about. And 'tis the fear of being afraid that makes their hands tremble a bit, and gives them a touch of sweat on the forehead though the day would kill a polar bear with the cold. 'Tis the fear of being afraid of which those lads are afraid. One of those young lads — a proper thoroughbred he was — came out, and found himself in a trench, with the lads with their eyes on him.

"'Tis afraid they think me,' he says to himself. 'I'll show 'em, the blighters. So he stepped out of the trench, as pleasant as may be, as if to take the air. 'Come in, sir,' begs the sergeant — 'tis death outside.' 'Seems quite a healthy sort of death, sergeant,' says he, as nice as you like, and as he was speaking he took it. Luckily for him 'twas only a flesh

wound, in such a place that he could not sit down with ease. The men they roared with laughter, and the sergeant smiled; and at that moment along creeps the captain. ''Tis wounded I am, sir,' says the subaltern. 'Bad luck,' says the captain; 'and where have you taken it?' 'Where it will hinder the easy use of the firing step to sit on,' says the subaltern. 'And how the devil did you take it there?' says the captain. 'Was it out of the trench you were?' 'I was that,' he says — ' taking the air.' The captain looked at the sergeant and saw him smile, and the captain looked at the men and saw them with their hands to their mouths studying the view. 'You cannot with ease sit upon the step,' he said. 'Can you with ease accompany me a little distance down the trench? And you will come as well, sergeant,' he says, 'for I'm minded to discuss this question of taking the air.' When they were away from the men he said to the sergeant, 'Did you tell the officer the air was unhealthy a few feet higher up?' 'I did that, sir,' said the sergeant. ' All right,' he said, 'that will do.' The sergeant backed away a few paces, and then the captain started. 'Mr So-and-so,' he started — I misremember the gentleman's name — 'have you made any mistake? You aren't by any means under the delusion that you are out here to practise open-air pastoral dances, are you? You aren't qualifying for an instructor in Swedish exercises by any chance, are you?' 'No, sir,' said the little officer, looking all bewildered like. 'Then what the blazes do you mean by behaving like an organ grinder's monkey and getting out of that trench?' he roared. ''Twas to show them I was not afraid,' says the little 'un, standing bolt upright and looking him straight in the face. The captain's eyes they twinkled,

and he looked away that the lad might not see; then he turned back. 'The officers in our regiment,' he said, 'are never afraid. Let us not be mistaken,' he said. 'When you come to me as my subaltern, I want you alive and well. It is your job to keep yourself fit, and not get wounded. If I told you to lead the men over that ground there,' and he pointed to the German trenches, 'and you refused or hesitated, though 'twould be certain death you went to, I would blow your brains out if you could not blow them out yourself. But I did not tell you to give an imitation of a skirt dance at the Alhambra merely to show that you possessed what you should blow your brains out for if you didn't. It's taught you a lesson, my lad, and a damned good one. Take him away,' he said to the sergeant, 'and have it dressed. If he can't sit down, he must lie on his face.' The lad was nigh faint with the blood he had lost, but he stood up and he said, 'I'm sorry, sir: I was a fool.' 'You were, my lad,' said the captain; but as he went back to the trench past the sergeant, he said to him, 'They're the sort of fool we can do with, though, aren't they?'

"A thoroughbred lot they are," continued Cassidy, after a pause, "with their eyeglasses, and hair-oil, and the like. Hampers they have from the big shops, they tell me, with bottles of the stuff inside. And the talking of those same bottles reminds me of another story about those same Guards." He paused reminiscently as a huge and majestic policeman barred our way.

"The lad in blue," he went on after a moment, "he over yonder hiding the 'bus, is about the same size, from all I've heard, as one of the German officers that fell into the

trenches the other night. They were our Guards in them, and if I am not mistaken the fat one was of the Prussian Guard. 'Twas in the days two months ago, when they were trying to break the line. They got right up to our trenches, the devils, and jumped in, and there was a grand box-up. The fat lad stood on the side before getting in, and the earth gave way, so he got in unexpected like, and fell upon one of the young officer gentlemen. Well, as was natural, there was a great box-up, and the fighting between the men was of a quality not often struck outside of Ireland. It went on for some minutes, but at last the Boches were all killed or prisoners, when they became aware of a terrible noise at the end of the trench. They looked, and the sergeant he said, 'Mother of Heaven! is it an elephant or a whale that we have?' for there was water in the trench, and as far as could be seen there was a huge fat thing wallowing in it, blowing like a porpoise. They could not see rightly what was happening, so they let him blow for a bit. Laughing they were, when he suddenly says, 'Shall we stop?' in English. 'It's bored I'm getting, old dear,' said a voice from the region of his stomach. 'Glory be,' said the sergeant, 'the officer is underneath. Pull him off, boys.' When they had pulled him off, they dug the officer out of the mud. 'It's a prisoner I would be,' said the German. 'I am not liking the life.' 'It's a prisoner you are,' cried the officer, when he had taken the mud from his mouth; 'but it does not alter the fact that you have the last bottle of my Madeira smashed, and it's amputated my foot must be where you sat upon it. — Take him back out of the trench,' he said to the sergeant, 'with

the other prisoners. His general appearance is beastly, and he has the rum spilt as well.'

"'I'm doubting whether he will get down the communication trench, sir,' said the sergeant, 'for it's a large man he is, and the trenches are not yet widened.'

"'Then roll the blighter along the top,' said he; 'but take him away, for I dislike him greatly.' "

By devious routes we had now reached the Houses of Parliament, and were turning for home. My thoughts as to whether by any chance the arbiter of my fate and finances should be leaning gracefully from the window of my bank, and imagining that someone had given me a Rolls Royce, again become gracious as in the days of long ago, when once for over a week I was in credit, were interrupted by Cassidy's exclamation. The Guard was changing at the Horse Guards, and the usual crowd was watching. "'Tis great lads they are," he said — "great. They can march and they can fight. They can sit still in a trench, and they can charge, and there are few that are their equals."

And then I left him, to squeeze another fiver out of that granite boulder — my bank account.

III. — THE BRIDGE

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"I have been wondering, sir," remarked Cassidy to me the next day, "whether we were not perhaps a little hard on those five boys yesterday, that we saw in the train."

I had strolled round in the afternoon to hear from him the story of Dennis O'Rourke, and what had happened at the Bridge.

"It is not maybe that they are afraid, sir," he went on, "for I'm thinking that if they were, they would be far more frightened of saying so, but it is that they do not realise; and 'tis hard to see how they can, for it has not been brought home to them — none of those little things that one sees, which serve to make one understand what it means.

"I remember one day — 'twas in the early stages when we were drawing them after us into France. 'Twas hot — hot as the devil — and towards the evening I was riding quiet like, along a nice shady road, for all the world as it might have been a lane in England. For the time there was but little noise of firing at all — 'twas just a bit of a lull — but we had seen them, and we knew they were coming, coming in motor-'buses, and the saints know what else; in thousands and thousands they were pouring along after us, though at the time we did not know 'twas as bad as it was. Oh! 'twas cruel; but as I say, I was away on my own — the sappers mostly were those days, being split up for the different jobs — and as I rode along the road I saw a lad leaning over the hedge sucking a straw. Away back behind him was a great