

A Limerick Posting

Part One

by Siegfried
Sassoon

The fact remains that up to the end of 1917 I had never been to Ireland. Outwardly it was a dismal journey, for I left Liverpool late at night and the weather was wintry. Crewe station at midnight was positively Plutonian. Waiting for the Holyhead express to come in, I listened to echoing clangour and hissing steam; people paced the platform with fixedly dejected faces, while glaring lights and gloom and vapour intermingled above them. Crewe station and everyone inside it seemed to be eternally condemned to the task of winning the War by moving men, munitions, and material to the places appointed for them in the outer darkness of Armageddon. This much I observed as I stood with hunched-up shoulders, feeling sombrely impressed by the strangeness of the scene. Then I boarded the Holyhead train, remembering how I used to ride along the Watling Street with the Packlestone Hounds and see "Holyhead, 200 miles" on a signpost; this memory led me to wonder whether I should get a day's hunting in Ireland. After that an "inevitable sequence of events" carried me across to Dublin, and thence to Limerick. There was snow on the ground and the Emerald Isle was cold and crunchy underfoot.

By the time I had been at Limerick a week I knew that I had found something closely resembling peace of mind. My body stood about for hours on parade, watching young soldiers drill and do physical training, and this made it easy for me to spend my spare time refusing to think. I felt extraordinarily healthy, and I was seldom alone. There had been no difficulty in reverting to what the people who thought they knew me would have called my "natural self". I merely allowed myself to become what they expected me to be. As someone good-naturedly remarked, I had "given up lecturing on the prevention of war-weariness" — (which meant, I suppose, that the only way to prevent it was to stop the War). The "New Barracks", which had been new for a good many years, were much more cheerful than the huts at Clitherland, and somehow made me feel less like a temporary soldier. Looking at the lit windows of the barrack square on my first evening in Ireland, I felt profoundly thankful that I wasn't at Slateford. And the curfew-tolling bells of Limerick Cathedral sounded much better than the factory hooters around

Clitherland Camp. I had been talking to four officers who had been with me in the First Battalion in 1916, and we had been reviving memories of what had become the more or less good old days at Mametz. Two of them had been wounded in the Ypres battle three months before, and their experiences had apparently made Mametz Wood seem comparatively pleasant, and the "unimaginable touch of time" had completed the mellowing process.

Toward the end of my second week the frost and snow changed to soft and rainy weather. One afternoon I walked out to Adare and saw for the first time the Ireland which I had imagined before I went there. Quite unexpectedly I came in sight of a wide shallow river, washing and hastening past the ivied stones of a ruined castle among some ancient trees. The evening light touched it all into romance, and I indulged in ruminations appropriate to the scene. But this was not enough, and I soon began to make enquiries about the meets of the Limerick Hounds.

No distance, I felt, would be too great to go if only I could get hold of a decent hireling. Nobody in the barracks could tell me where to look for one. The genial majors permanent at the Depot were fond of a bit of shooting and fishing, but they had no ambition to be surmounting



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tone walls and big green banks with double ditches. Before long however, I had discovered a talkative dealer out at Troon and I returned from my first day's hunting feeling that I'd had more than my money's worth. The whole thing had been most exhilarating. Everyone rode as if there wasn't a worry in the world except hounds worrying foxes. Never had I galloped over such richly verdant fields or seen such depth of blue in distant hills. It was difficult to believe that such a thing as "trouble" existed in Ireland, or that our majors were talking in apprehensive undertones about being sent out with mobile columns — the mere idea of our mellow majors going out with mobile columns seemed slightly ludicrous.

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His small light blue eyes met mine and he smiled. He looked an extraordinarily kind old chap, I thought. We stood there, and after a moment or two he said: "Harnett". Not knowing what he meant, I remained silent. It sounded like some sort of Irish interjection. Observing my mystification, he amplified it slightly: "I'm Harnett", he remarked serenely. So I knew that much about him. His name was Harnett. But how did he know who I was? But perhaps he didn't.

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stimulated, it was easy to persuade him that he would enjoy every minute of it, and it was obvious that a day in the country would do him no harm at all. I told him that I'd already hired a wild Irishman with a ramshackle Ford car to take me to the meet, so he could go in that. I assumed that Mr. Harnett and his horses would call at the Barracks, as he'd said nothing about any other arrangements. So the next morning I was waiting outside the gates in good time. After forty minutes I was still waiting and the situation looked serious when Kegworthy joined me — the Ford car being now just about due to arrive. Shortly

afterwards it did arrive, and Mr. Harnett was in it, wearing a perfectly cut pink hunting coat, with a bunch of violets in his buttonhole. He looked vaguely delighted to see us, but said nothing, so we climbed in, and the car lurched wildly away to the meet, the driver grinning ecstatically round at us when he missed a donkey and cart by inches when swerving round a sharp corner. Mr. Harnett did not trouble himself to tell us how he came to be sharing Kegworthy's conveyance. With top hat firmly on his head and a white apron over his knees to keep his breeches from getting dirty, he sat

there like a child that has been instructed to keep itself clean and tidy until it arrives at the party. And after all, what was there for him to explain? We were being bumped and jolted along a rough road at forty miles an hour, and this obviously implied that the horses had been sent on to the meet. We passed them just before we got there, and Mr. Harnett revealed their identity by leaning out of the car and shouting "I have me flask" to the groom, who grinned and touched his hat. The flask, which had been brandished as ocular proof, was very large, and looked like a silver-stoppered



The horse trough at Mrs. McDonell's house

truncheon.

It was a fine morning and there was quite a large crowd at the crossroads, where the hounds were clustering round the hunt servants on a strip of grass in front of an inn.

Having pulled up with a jerk which nearly shot us out of our seats, we alighted, and Mr. Harnett, looking rather as if he'd just emerged from a cold dip in the ocean, enquired "Am I acquainted with your officer friend?" A formal introduction followed. "My friend Kegworthy is riding one of Mike Sheehan's horses. He's having his first day's hunting". I explained, and then added, "His first day's hunting in Ireland"; hoping thereby to give Kegworthy a fictitious advantage over his total lack of experience.

Mr. Harnett, in a confidential undertone, now asked, "Will you take something before we start?" Powerless to intervene I followed them to the inn. Mr. Harnett's popularity became immediately apparent. Everyone greeted him like a long-lost brother, and I also became aware that he was universally known as "The Mister".

They all seemed overjoyed to see The Mister, though most of them had seen him out hunting three days the week before; and The Mister responded to their greetings with his usual smiling detachment. He took it for granted that everybody liked him, and seemed to attribute it to their good nature rather than to his own praiseworthiness.

But was it altogether advisable, I wondered, that he should confer such a large and ill-diluted glass of whisky on such a totally inexperienced man to hounds as Kegworthy? For the moment, however, his only wish seemed to be that the whole world should drink his health. And they did. And would have done so once again had time permitted. But the hounds were about to move off, and The Mister produced his purse with a lordly air, and the landlord kept the change, and we went out to find our horses.

Had I been by myself I should have been sitting on my hireling in a state of subdued excitement and eagerness, scrutinizing the hounds with a pseudo-knowing eye, and observing everyone around me with the detached interest of a visiting stranger. But I was with The Mister, and he made it all feel not quite serious and almost dreamlike. It couldn't have been the modicum of cherry brandy I'd sipped for politeness' sake which made the proceedings seem a sort of extravaganza of good-humoured absurdity.

There was The Mister, solemnly handing his immense flask to the groom, who inserted it in a leather receptacle attached to the saddle. And there was Kegworthy, untying the strings of The Mister's white apron; he looked happy and rather somnolent, with his cap on one side and his crop projecting from

one of his trench boots.

Even The Mister's horses seemed in a trance-like condition, although the bustle and fluster of departure was in full swing around them. The Mister having hoisted himself into the saddle, I concentrated on launching Kegworthy into the unforeseeable. I had ridden the hireling before and knew it to be quiet and reliable. But before I had time to offer any advice or assistance, he had mounted heavily, caught the horse by the head, and was bumping full-trot down the road after the rest of the field. His only comment had been: "Tell Mother I died bravely".

"You'll be following to bring him home", said The Mister to our motor-driver, who replied that sure to God it was the grandest hunt we'd be having from the Gorse. We then jogged sedately away.

"Will you be staying long in Limerick?" he asked. I told him that I might be ordered off to Egypt any day — perhaps to-morrow, perhaps not for a couple of weeks. This seemed to surprise him. "To Egypt? Will you be fighting the Egyptians then?" No, it was the Turks, I told him. "Ah, the Turks, bad luck to them! It crossed me mind when I said it that I had it wrong about the Egyptians".

A quarter of a mile away the tail end of the field could be seen cantering up a green slope to the Gorse. It was a beautiful still morning and the air smelt of the earth.

"Ark!" exclaimed The Mister, pulling up suddenly. (Dropped aitches were with him a sure sign of cerebral excitement). From the far side of the covert came a long-drawn view-halloa, which effectively set The Mister in motion. "Go on, boy, go on! Don't be waiting about for me. Holy Mother, you'll be getting no hunting with them Egyptians!" So I went off like a shot out of a gun, leaving him to ride the hunt in his own time. My horse was a grand mover; luckily the hounds turned toward me, and soon I was in the same field with them. Of the next forty minutes I can only say that it was all on grass and the banks weren't too formidable, and the pace just good enough to make it exciting. There was only one short check, and when they had marked their fox to ground I became aware that he had run a big ring and we were quite near the Gorse where we found him. I had forgotten all about Kegworthy, but he now reappeared, perspiring freely and considerably elated. "How did you manage it?" I asked. He assured me that he'd shut his eyes and hung on to the back of the saddle at every bank and the horse had done the rest. The Mister was now in a glow of enthusiasm and quite garrulous. "Sure that mare you're riding is worth five hundred guineas if she's worth a penny bun", he ejaculated, and proceeded to drink the mare's health from that very large flask of his.

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As I have already suggested, there was something mysterious about The Mister — a kind of innocence which made people love him and treat him as a perennial joke. But, so far, I knew next to nothing about him, since he took it for granted that one knew everything that he knew; and the numerous hunting people to whom he'd introduced me during a rather dull and uneventful afternoon's sport took everything about The Mister for granted; so on the whole very little definite information about anything had emerged.

"How the hell did he make his money?" asked Kegworthy, as we sat after dinner comparing our impressions of the day's sport and social experience. "Men like The Mister get rid of their money quick enough, but they don't usually make any", he added.

"He certainly gives one the impression of being 'self-made'," I remarked. "Perhaps he won fifty thousand in a sweepstake. But if he'd done that he'd still be telling everyone about it, and would probably have given most of it away by now".

"Perhaps he's in the hands of trustees", suggested Kegworthy. I agreed that it might be so, and nominated Mrs. McDonnell as one of them. Of Mrs. McDonnell at any rate, we knew for certain that she had given us a "high-tea" after hunting which had made dining in the mess seem almost unthinkable. It had been a banquet. Cold salmon and snipe and unsurpassable home-made bread and honey had indeed caused us to forget that there was a war on; while as for Mrs. McD. herself, in five minutes she made me feel that I'd known her all my life and could rely on her assistance in any emergency. It may have been only her Irish exuberance, but it all seemed so natural and homely in that solid plainly-furnished dining-room where everything was for use and comfort more than for ornament.

The house was a large villa, about a mile from the barracks — just outside the town. There I sat, laughing and joking, and puffing my pipe, and feeling fond of the old Mister who had reached an advanced stage of cronydom with Kegworthy, while between them they diminished a decanter of whisky. And then Mrs. McDonnell asked me whether I played golf; but before I could reply the maid called her out of the room to the telephone, which enabled the word "golf" to transport me from Ireland to Scotland and see myself cleaning my clubs in my room at the hydro, and deciding that the only thing to do was to go back to the War again. How serious that decision had been, and how blithely life was obliterating it until this visualized memory evoked by the mention of "golf" had startled me into awareness of the oddity of my surroundings!

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