

" 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 house and stables, and I said to him, I said :

“ ‘ Bong soir,’ I said.

“ ‘ Cheese it,’ he answers. ‘ Who are you bong-soiring ? ’

“ When I heard him talking plain like that, I pulled up and looked at him. ‘ I thought you were a Frenchie,’ I said to him, ‘ till you opened your beer trap. Do you grow here, or are you touring the country for fun ? ’

“ ‘ I ride for the stable up yonder,’ he said, pointing with his thumb.

“ ‘ Bedad ! ’ I said, ‘ 'tis a training stable

you have,' for it had not struck me they had those things in France at all.

" ' Did you think it was a potted meat factory ? ' he said.

" ' I did not,' I said ; ' but unless you hop it pretty quickly it precious soon will be.'

" ' What are you meaning ? ' said the trainer, who had come out and overheard what I said.

" ' Unless you and your horses and your lads hop it smartly,' I said to him, ' it's hopping in another direction you'll be before the morning, for by that time the Germans will be upon you.'

" ' Are you sure ? ' he said, ' for I have some valuable horses with me, and I would not lose them.'

" ' Am I sure ? ' said I. ' Would I be riding for three days without ceasing, with a thirst like the morning after, if I were not sure ? '

" ' What will I do ? ' he said, ' for 'tis the first I have heard of it.'

" ' Do ! ' I said. ' The first thing you will do is to give me a drink, and my horse as well, and then you will gather your lads and you will ride south, and you will not stop

riding for a week or so ; for if you do not, 'tis little riding you'll any of you do again.'

"When he saw I was in earnest 'twas a terrible blather he got into, and the last I saw of him he was riding into the dusk with his boys behind him and his stud of twelve horses, while the old woman who cleaned his house was hopping along beside him in the road, hanging on to his stirrup leather—and she a martyr to the indigestion, as one of the lads told me. I know not what happened to him, but the next morning I saw his house fired, and 'twas a mercy I had the whisky removed. 'Tis the little things like that that make the people realise what war is ; and we have not had the like in England at all, and it perhaps would be a good thing if we had, I'm after thinking."

He paused to light another of my cigarettes.

"But it was of Mr. O'Rourke I would tell you, sir," he went on. "'Twas the morning after the little affair of which I have just told you, that we received the orders to go at once to a bridge near by and have it prepared for the demolition. Mr. O'Rourke was in charge,

and I was with him, and we had about a dozen of the lads. When we got there we found 'twas a big one over a river—a sort of suspension bridge, and 'twas evidently an important one. 'Twas another scorching day, and Mr. O'Rourke he says, 'Let's get it fixed up quick, boys.' he says, 'and it's a bathe we can have.' Well, there is not the necessity for me to tell you the details of the fixing—of how we placed the gun-cotton on the cables, and the leads were running to the exploder hidden behind a tree on our own side. We tested it all, and we had the bit of fuse and another detonator fixed up in case of any failure in the electricity. When we had it done, some of the lads had a bathe, and we lay in the shade of a few trees, most of us fast asleep—for you will mind that our orders were only to prepare it for the demolition, and not actually to blow it up. 'Twas still—'twas just peace: the heat haze shimmering in the blue, and the buzz of the little flies and things, to send one to sleep, for we were well behind our own men. Two hours later—well, we will come to that, sir, but it will give you an idea of how those fellows

came on. It seemed as if we had been there but a minute, but maybe it was half an hour, when with a crash one of the Horse Batteries galloped over the bridge. The dust rose in great choking clouds, and through it we could see the drivers—their collars open, their faces grey with it, some with hats and some without, themselves sitting down and riding like men possessed, while their horses swayed and galloped and the guns swayed behind. In a second they were gone, and only the dust remained.

“ Mr. O'Rourke he turned to me and he said, ' They were going fast even for the Horse,' he said, ' along a road ; and I would to Heaven it had been the other way they were galloping,' for I should tell you, sir, they were going south. Five minutes later we heard them come into action a quarter of a mile behind us. ' Covering the retreat again,' he muttered ; and barely had he spoken when an Infantry regiment came in sight—going the same way. Mr. O'Rourke and I we went into the centre of the bridge to keep our eye on the charge, and we watched them come by. Walking dogged they were, with a fixed sort of stare,

and some were asleep as they marched, and some were whistling through lips that made no noise. The sweat was caked on them, and they were grey from head to foot, and the officers were staggering up and down cheering them on—for those lads had been going without rest at all for ten days and more. And one of the sergeants said to me as he went by, he said, ‘There are thousands of them, and they’re close behind.’ When they had gone I went to Mr. O’Rourke and I said to him, ‘It’s close work it’s going to be, sir, I’m thinking, for they are near behind.’

“And then up galloped a staff officer.

“‘Are you the Engineer officer in charge?’ he said.

“‘I am that,’ said Mr. O’Rourke.

“‘There are still two squadrons of Lancers between you and the Germans,’ he said, ‘and they will be across soon, for they are only covering the Infantry who have just gone over. When they are over blow up the bridge, and do not linger to admire the view, for it will be unhealthy.’

“‘Very good, sir,’ says Mr. O’Rourke.

“‘And,’ says he, ‘let there be no mistake,

for the love of Heaven ; for should the charge fail we are undone. This bridge is the most important of any there are to be destroyed. and they must not get it.'

“ ‘ They will not get it,’ says Mr. O'Rourke ; and with that he galloped away. When he had gone we walked off the bridge. ‘ Pray Heaven, Cassidy,’ he said, ‘ that all is well, for we will not have much time, if there is a fault, to adjust it.’

“ ‘ It will be all right, sir,’ said I, ‘ for we have it tested.’

“ And then the Cavalry started coming back.

“ ‘ Clear out, you boys,’ shouted an officer ; ‘ they are in touch with us, and we cannot hold them longer.’

“ ‘ Cassidy,’ said Mr. O'Rourke, ‘ take the men back, for it is no good them stopping here.’

“ ‘ Would we be leaving you, sir ? ’ I cried.
“ ‘ You would not,’ he said ; ‘ but what good can you do ? for if the charge fails there will be no time to relay it, and if it succeeds 'twill be easier for me to get away alone than if you are all here.’

“ I saw his point, and I knew he was right—though it went against the grain to leave him in the lurch, as it were. But he would not alter, and so I took them away—muttering and cursing they were. I took them to a little rise under cover two or three hundred yards away, where it was easy to clear from when the bridge was down without being fired on. Before I went I said to him, I said, ‘ We will be yonder, and it’s there we will wait for you. If you go that way round you can get there easily.’ Just after we got there we saw a major gallop over the bridge with his orderly behind him, and he shouted something to Mr. O’Rourke. We saw him running to the exploder and fixing the leads, and then he paused and straightened himself up behind the tree. From where we were we could see two Uhlans coming near the bridge, with more of them, hundreds of them, behind. And then he forced down the handle of the exploder. ‘ Mother of Heaven ! ’ I screamed. for nothing happened. He did it again, and it failed again. You will mind, sir, that from where he was he could not see the Uhlans and they could not see him—but we could see

both of them from the rise. The men were sobbing and cursing. A corporal caught my arm, and he muttered, 'It was not to fail,' he said, 'and it has. What will we do?' 'What can we?' I said, 'for they are on the bridge.' And then of a sudden we saw the lad creeping along under cover of the trees, and he reached the bridge and ran like a hare to the charge. The Uhlans saw him too, and rode at him; and the men started screaming and cheering, for they were off their heads, and they thought he would be able to do something. 'But what can he do?' I groaned, 'for the fuse will not burn quick enough. They are too close.' He reached the charge first, and his revolver was drawn. It was drawn, I say, but it was not at the Uhlans it pointed. For a second he stood there, with his head thrown back, and it seemed to us as if he laughed at them. And the lads saw what was in his mind, and they were silent—saving only one, and he threw himself on the ground sobbing. And the Uhlans saw what was in his mind, and one pulled his horse over backwards trying to get off the bridge, while the other rode at

him. And then he fired. From the range of an inch he fired into the gun-cotton, and the roar of the detonation shook the heaven. And he and the Uhlans disappeared. They were there one minute and the next they were not. And then, with a great sort of rending crash, the whole thing fell into the river below.

"We looked for a moment and then we stumbled away—and the most of us could not see with ease, for the lads had loved him well."

Cassidy paused and looked into the fire.

"So it was not a failure," I said softly as I left him.