

## THE COCKROACH AND THE TORTOISE

‘WHEN Colin March, a younger son of the famous diplomatist, played in a British Embassy garden abroad, his foreign nurse gave him a tortoise. “A useful beast,” she explained, “it devours cockroaches; they are its passion.” Colin wanted to see this beneficent passion at work. So he captured one of the Embassy’s many cockroaches and put it down in front of the tortoise’s nose, like an early Christian presented to a lion. The tortoise eyed the offered feast, and mused deeply. The cockroach did not muse. It was a cockroach of action. Without any apparent need for reflection it bolted for cover, like a flash of blackness, right into the tortoise’s shell, and hid itself in that profounder thinker’s armpit.

‘The cadet of a dynasty of ambassadors was charmed with the cockroach’s wit. He filed the whole affair in a pigeon-hole of his ’cute little mind. As he grew up, he would often chuckle to think of it. Piquant parallels would occur to him. For a fox to go to earth under the kennels, for landsmen to put to sea to escape from a press-gang, for cannon-fodder to hide at the back of the cannon—this was the wisdom of life put into a kind of practical epigram, salt and impudent.’

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No apologies are offered for so lengthy a text. If the reader is interested to know more about Colin March, how he applied the lesson of the cockroach and the tortoise to his own private life and how he managed to evade the war by joining the army, the story will be found in the late C. E. Montague’s book, *Fiery Particles*. My present concern is not with Colin, but with the cockroach. Take the cockroach then as

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a symbol and as a sign and let his pretty little trick of taking cover stand as a parable elucidated, illustrated and interpreted by the following minute piece of history—truly no bigger than my finger nail—which I picked up during the war.

It is about a deserter. To the normal British soldier, who in a chaffing sort of way kept up a pretence of perpetual funk and sometimes affected to be an actual coward and a potential runaway, the deserter was usually an object of interest and pity. He was thought of with a mingling of wonder and sympathy and with the indulgent interest we sometimes attach to a person mildly and harmlessly insane. For the pathetic thing about the eccentric who deserted from the line was that he was really taking a greater risk than anyone else. From fear of a death which was purely problematical he chose to face a death which was practically certain. It is very much of an understatement to say that he dived from the frying pan into the fire. He did something much more foolish. In the strange gamble of war where the odds were equal between death, a cushy wound and scathelessness, he threw in his hand and madly plumped for death simply to escape from the immediate peril. It was entirely imbecile; and when from time to time the story of an execution at dawn was read out from General Routine Orders as an example and a warning, the hushed silence with which the grim news was received more often meant that the hearers were sickened with the futile waste rather than horror-stricken about the shameful end of a coward.

In fact, the deserter did not always seem to be by any means a complete coward. I well remember the extraordinary courage in the face of death of a young soldier who was shot for repeatedly deserting his post. He was offered a last chance before he was finally court-martialled and sentenced. If he would promise

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to return to the line and do his duty, he was told, no charge would be made against him; but he refused and declared that nothing would induce him to return to the line. If it meant sentence of death, then there was nothing to be done but submit to that. And he submitted very bravely indeed. He made his confession and received Holy Communion and came out to meet death, smartened up, polished to the last button and walking erect as if he were about to appear on parade for a general inspection: he seemed to be the only one present who was unmoved. A case for the psychologist, you may think: a more benevolent *régime* than the militaristic system would have dealt with him as a shell-shock case. No doubt. But then, your militarists would argue, that sort of benevolence would lead to a very serious outbreak of shell-shock in the army and a veritable plague of desertion among the troops.

Another deserter in our battalion was, through a sheer accident, given another chance and he made good use of it and proved himself a brave soldier. I discovered him—a mere babe in appearance—under close arrest in what would have been called the guard-room if we had not been amid the Flanders mud. The adjutant explained that he was only 'waiting for a couple of ounces of lead.' I had thoughts of offering myself to act as soldier's friend on the court martial and, with that purpose in view, inquired into the prisoner's previous history. He had, it seems, in a fit of war fever, joined up considerably under military age and been hauled out of the army by an anxious mother who had produced his birth certificate. On the very day on which he reached the requisite age he enlisted again and bore a good record until he was 'crimed' for running away. While I was meditating on the crime that would probably rest on me if he were allowed to be shot, it leaked out that the delay in ap-

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pointing his trial was due to the fact that the Brigade Staff had somehow mislaid the charge papers and forgotten all about him. A prisoner is a responsibility and an encumbrance to a war time battalion constantly on the move and the adjutant finally grew tired of providing a guard for so gentle and harmless a criminal and returned him to duty after receiving tearful promises and giving a paternal warning, and no more was said or asked about him.

But what about the parable of the cockroach and the tortoise? Patience! I will unfold the parable.

It was an everyday affair for men to be reported 'missing.' If there had been an attack or a raid, it was not unusual that one or more would afterwards be unaccounted for; but if a disappearance took place during a peaceful time or in a quiet sector, the alert sergeant or subaltern or company commander would perhaps become suspicious. But soldiers were always going to and fro, on leave, to the hospital, to special courses in musketry, bombing and what not. There was a constant ebb and flow, a very regular stream of casualties and new drafts of men always arriving and, amid all this change, it would require a very watchful officer to keep trace of everyone and always be sure of his own efficiency. A roll call was all very well on your parade grounds at Aldershot, but what is to be done when the nominal roll itself has to be numbered among the missing? And such mysterious things do happen in war.

It was in such conditions as these that while we were in the Ypres salient a certain private soldier disappeared. He was 'missing' for some time before he was actually missed and no one could say how or when he had left us: he might have been killed, or taken prisoner—or perhaps he had deserted. Now, as a matter of fact, none of these things had happened. Many months afterwards he was discovered very much

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alive and, strange to say, he had not deserted us, but we had deserted him. We were miles away down on the Somme and he was still in the Ypres salient safely embedded many feet below ground in an all but impregnable and certainly shell-proof dug-out. He had discovered this haven of safety and it was paradise enough for him. He had attached himself to a Brigade Headquarters and, with artful self-effacement, had merged himself into the nondescript crowd of officers' servants, clerks, runners and the rest of that privileged class of soldiers who, drawn from all sorts of units, were not expected to appear on parades. Brigades would come, and Brigades would go, but he went on for ever, manfully determined to stick to his dug-out.

It was only by an unfortunate accident that he finally betrayed himself. When he was sent back to his unit, the court martial that tried him was unable to charge him with deserting the line. On the contrary he had remained in the line after his comrades and officers had left it and stayed there without a break for months on end. The court was baffled and he was not given the supreme sentence. The cockroach had outwitted the tortoise.

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