

MASS IN MACEDONIA

(By K. J. in the *Universe*.)

"Reville just gone, sir."

Lieutenant John Ignatius Massington blinked drowsily at the face thrust in at the end of his tiny bivouac tent. A hand and arm followed it, seized a mud-caked pair of boots, and the flap fell again, leaving him alone.

For a few moments he lay pondering on the events of the past week. Days of cowering in holes under a rain of bursting shells, followed by nights of hard work and anxious patrolling, had at last ended in a withdrawal for welcome rest "in reserve." The first night in blankets without boots had been grateful to the tired regiment, and this was Sunday morning.

He crawled reluctantly out of his valise into the open air. To his left stretched lines of shelters similar to his own, a couple of ground sheets supported by sticks and cords. In front a steep bank sloped down to a little river, where several hundred men were already splashing in the shallow water. Beyond this stretched a green plain, bounded some three miles distant by a chain of rugged hills. On the slopes of these appeared occasional puffs of white smoke, and the distant sound of guns filled the clear morning air. Overhead an aeroplane droned high among the light clouds, rosy with the tints of sunrise.

A keen wind did not encourage a lengthy toilet on the bare river bank, and presently the lieutenant made his way through the lines of bivouacs to a spot where some thirty men had formed up. A grizzled old sergeant rapidly called the roll, and, wheeling sharply about as the officer approached, saluted and reported. "Roman Catholics present and correct, sir." The two then passed down the ranks. Lieutenant Massington inspecting carefully his score and a-half of co-religionists, which included some of the best of the N.C.O.'s. in the battalion.

The inspection completed, the party was marched some three hundred yards up-stream. Here the river bed broadened out, and between the bank and the water's edge was a strip of sandy ground overgrown with bushes and tall reeds. Against the bank a couple of men were arranging several boxes to form a rough altar. Near it a horse was tied to a bush, and a "padre" was engaged in extracting from the saddle-bags somewhat crumpled vestments.

A plucky little man this same padre. Small, slight, and spectacled, no longer young, he had left his quiet Franciscan convent in old Ireland to don the King's uniform and to brave the risks of war. None of these perturbed him, however, and he had a habit of appearing in the most unexpected places during an attack or a heavy bombardment, to keep an eye on his flock.

After greeting the lieutenant, the priest put on his stole and sat down on the bank a few yards from the party. "Any men for confession?" shouted the sergeant. There was a moment of hesitation. Then a man stepped forward and knelt beside the priest. Others followed him. Then the priest arranged the tiny altar and vested for Mass.

Since early morning the wind had gradually increased in strength. It was now impossible to light the candles, and the priest hesitated as he gazed at the crazy altar, fearing that a gust might carry away its sacred burden. Seeing the difficulty, the lieutenant ordered the men to stand close round the altar, packing them shoulder to shoulder to form a screen against

the wind. Then he himself knelt as server, and the Mass began.

Some one commenced the Rosary, and the men answered lustily. Troopers leading horses to water or carrying cooking pots to be filled at the stream gazed curiously at the scene as they passed. The wind whistled shrilly across the open plain. The distant rumble of guns, the sounds of camp life from the lines hard by, mingled with the low voice of the priest and the hearty "Hail Marys" of the men. Wistful thoughts of Sunday in the Old Country, of the decent little parish church, of the well-known figure at the altar, and the faces of family and friends in their accustomed places, passed through more than one mind. It was many months since they had seen that pleasant picture. It would be many more before they would see it again, and for some this was their last Mass on earth.

The bell tinkled faintly at the Sanctus. The Rosary was finished, and a hush fell upon the little congregation. The priest bent forward, and as one man the whole group knelt for the solemn moment of the Consecration.

To the lieutenant and the men with whom he had so recently braved death daily, it seemed that never before had they sounded the depths of the great Mystery of their religion. Sunday after Sunday since childhood most of them had knelt before the altar, until the well-known words and phrases had become almost a mechanical routine. Here, under the sky, in this wild and primitive solitude, the great Sacrifice, though shorn of every rite and circumstance, save the barest and most meagre essentials, had for them a meaning deeper and more poignant than they had ever before realised. Every face was turned to the altar with an expression of reverence rare even in the most devout civilian congregation.

Domine, non sum dignus. Again the bell sounded, and the priest, turning, gave Holy Communion to the men who pressed closely round him. The Mass came rapidly to an end. A few simple prayers followed, and a word or two of short, straight counsel from the priest. Then the party fell in and marched back to the lines, the officer lingering behind to accompany the padre to his bivouac.

An orderly awaited them with steaming coffee and bacon. Crouched out of the wind in the tiny shelter, the two took breakfast, smoked their pipes, and discussed the affairs of the regiment, the nations, and the Church. Then the little Franciscan mounted his horse, waved a cheery farewell, and disappeared over the rising ground behind the camp.

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