H.M.S. ————

c/o G.P.O., LONDON.

June 30th, 1916.

MY DEAR DANIEL,

You ask me for a more elaborate account of a certain little affair which took place some time ago. It was merely an episode of a few light cruisers, anything up to a score of destroyers, and some seaplanes; quite a minor and a comparatively unimportant little business which elicited a brief announcement from the Secretary of the Admiralty, and must have proved rather a Godsend to those newspapers whose readers were anxious for naval news in any shape or form.

They made a certain amount of fuss about it, and the naval correspondents were soon hard at work elaborating the simple statement according to their usual habit. Indeed, the nautical expert of Earth and Sea, with the very best intentions in the world, even went so far as to devote the greater part of a column to the business. It is to be hoped that his readers were duly edified; but we, who had taken part in the affair, were merely rather amused.

And so, for perhaps a week, and before being banished to the limbo of forgotten and unconsidered trifles, the business was a subject for intermittent conversation and a certain amount of conjecture. Then it was forgotten, and it is doubtful if it will ever be resurrected in any naval history of the war.

We had quite a good passage across the North Sea, and at dawn on the day of the operation we arrived in the vicinity of the Danish coast not far from the German frontier. The weather was good for the time of year. Bitterly cold, of course, besides which there were frequent low-lying snow flurries which came sweeping down across the sea and made it barely possible to see more than a quarter of a mile; while our decks, except where the heat of the engine and boiler rooms melted the snow as it fell, were soon covered. But in between the squalls the sky was blue, the sea was flat calm, and there was hardly any wind. Moreover, there was not a sign or a vestige of a Hun anywhere, not even a Zeppelin; nothing in sight except a few Danish fishing craft.

The seaplanes were soon hoisted out and started off on their job. They all seemed to

get away without the slightest hitch, and it was a fine sight watching them taxi-ing along the calm water to get up speed, and then rising in the air one by one to disappear in the faint haze towards the horizon. What they were to do, exactly, I cannot say, but within ten minutes they had all disappeared and the squadron steamed to and fro waiting for their return. They were expected back in about an hour.

The full hour passed, and nothing happened. Another quarter of an hour; but still no signs of the 'planes. On board the ships people began to get rather anxious, thinking that they had been brought down by the Huns, and everybody with glasses was looking to the south-eastward for signs of them. But at last, when they had almost been given up, the first one suddenly reappeared in the midst of a snow squall. He was hoisted in, and within the next ten minutes the whole covey, except two, had returned.

How their business had gone off was never divulged. A story did get about afterwards,—I saw it mentioned in some of the newspapers,—to the effect that one of them had arrived within two hundred feet immediately over the object he wanted to drop his bombs on, and then found he could not let them go because the releasing gear was clogged up with frozen snow. Whether or not the yarn is true it is impossible to say, but imagine the fellow's feelings when, after planing down to two hundred feet with all the anti-aircraft guns in the place going full blast, he found he could not drop a single egg! Poor devil!

The seaplanes that did return were soon hoisted in, but in the meanwhile eight destroyers and a couple of other craft had been sent on to steam down the coast in line abreast to see if by any chance the two missing ones had come down on the water. We were with this lot, and after an hour's steaming at 20 knots, by which time the island of Sylt was plainly visible about nine or ten miles dead ahead and no trace of the lost sheep had been seen, the search had to be abandoned.

It was then that the three destroyers to seaward sighted two steam trawlers some way off to the south-westward. They were flying no colours so far as we could see, but seemed to be in single line ahead, and as they were going straight for Sylt it was pretty obvious that they were mine-sweepers or patrol boats, and not mere fishermen.

The three outer destroyers,—we happened to be one of them,—promptly altered course to cut them off from the coast, and before very long we were buzzing along at something like 30 knots with an enormous mountain of water piled up in our wake, the water being rather shallow.

The trawlers, poor chaps, hadn't a dog's chance of getting away or of doing anything; but I must say we all admired them for their pluck. They had got into line abreast, and soon, when we were within about 5,000 yards, our leading craft hoisted some signal. We had no time to look it up in the book, but took it to be a signal asking if they would surrender. But not a bit of it. They were patrol boats, and each of them had a small

gun, and presently there came a flash and a little cloud of brown smoke from the nearer one of the two. The shell fell some distance short.

We had all held our fire up till then, for it was mere baby killing and we did not want to do the dirty on them if it could be avoided, but as they started the game of firing on us, we had no alternative but to reply. The sea round about the nearer craft was soon spouting with shell splashes, and between the fountains of spray and clouds of dense smoke in which she tried to hide herself, we could see the red flashes of some of our shell as they hit and burst, and the spurt of flame from her own little gun as she fired at us. Only three or four of her projectiles came anywhere near, while the havoc on board her must have been indescribable. It was a hateful business to have to fire at her at all, but what else could we do as she would not surrender?

It was all over very soon. The nearer trawler was almost hidden in smoke, and presently, when we got ahead of her and to windward at a range of about 1,500 yards, we noticed a white thing fluttering in her mizzen rigging. It was a shirt, as we discovered afterwards, and a signal of surrender, so we ceased firing at once and ran down to her to pick up the survivors.

The further trawler, meanwhile, had been sunk by the destroyer ahead of us, the crew having abandoned her beforehand in two boats.

We steamed fairly close to our fellow and lowered a boat, for we could see all the survivors standing up with their hands above their heads. The ship herself was in a deplorable state. Shell seemed to have burst everywhere, and one of the first which struck her had cut a steam pipe in the engine-room and had stopped the engines. Clouds of steam were coming from aft, her upper deck was a shambles, and she was badly holed and on fire. She was still afloat, though sinking fast.

Our boat went across and brought back those that remained of her crew. There were thirteen of them all told, including the skipper, and of the men one was badly, and four more slightly, wounded. Nine had been killed outright.

Then occurred rather a pleasing incident. Our men, a long time before, were going to do all sorts of desperate things to any Germans they got hold of. They were full of the Lusitania business, bomb dropping from Zeppelins, and the treatment of our prisoners. But when the time came there was a complete revulsion of feeling. They were kindness itself, and when the prisoners came on board the seamen met the seamen and escorted them forward like honoured guests, while our stokers did the same for their opposite numbers.

We took all necessary precautions, of course, but the Germans were very well behaved and gave us no trouble at all. They were a particularly fine and intelligent-looking lot of men, and presently, when the wounded had been attended to, our fellows were

filling them up with food and cocoa on the mess-deck. They seemed very pleased to get it, and judging from what one heard afterwards, they had evidently expected to be manacled, leg-ironed, and fed on biscuit and water. But our men did the best they could for them; gave them food, clothes, and cigarettes. The Germans were profoundly grateful, but couldn't quite understand it.

Their skipper, a reserve officer who spoke English like a native, had served as an officer in British ships, and seemed a good fellow. He was pleased to be congratulated on his plucky fight; but it was rather pathetic all the same, for he had been cut off practically at his own front door.

"You came upon us so suddenly and so near home," he said, looking at Sylt which was only six or seven miles away. "We had not a chance to do anything."

He told us that he had been in the wheelhouse of his trawler when the show started. One of our first shell passed through the glass windows within a foot of his head without bursting, and the very next did the damage in the engine-room. He ran down there to see what could be done, and this must have saved his life, for while he was away another shell burst in the wheelhouse and put about twenty holes in his greatcoat which was lying on the settee. I saw the coat and the holes when he came on board, and noticed it had the ribbon of the Iron Cross and that of some other decoration in the button-hole. He showed me his Iron Cross and was very proud of it, but what he got it for I did not gather. He seemed rather secretive about it. The other decoration, with a red-and-white ribbon, was the "Hamburg Cross," which is given to all officers and men belonging to the town who get the Iron Cross. I believe the other Hansa towns follow the same custom with their braves.

One thing about the skipper which struck me favourably was that he seemed very keen on the welfare of his men. The poor fellow who was badly wounded had been hit in the back, and three or four pieces of shell were still inside him. He must have been in terrible agony, but was very brave and did not utter a sound. An operation was quite out of the question, and as the poor chap was obviously in great pain our Surgeon-Probationer put him in a hammock on the mess-deck and gave him morphia. Soon afterwards the skipper asked to be allowed to visit him, and when the Doc. next went forward he found him swabbing the patient's brow with icy cold water to bring him to! The Doc. was rather peevish about it.

But to get on with the story of what happened. The trawler was sinking, but not quite fast enough, so we finished her off with a couple of lyddite shell on the waterline. In the meanwhile, as you probably know, for it was officially announced at the time, two destroyers had been in collision. The rammer crumpled her bows up a bit, but could still steam, but the ship rammed was rather badly damaged, and had to be taken in tow. It was in the middle of this operation that many hostile seaplanes, stirred up like a wasps' nest by our 'planes earlier in the morning, came out and started dropping

bombs. None of them came very close to us,—the bombs, I mean,—but we saw a string of five fall and explode practically alongside one destroyer, and heard afterwards that there had been a free fight on her upper deck to secure as trophies the splinters which dropped on board. We were all using our A.-A. guns, and though we did not actually hit any of them so far as we could see, we made them keep up to a height from which accurate bomb-dropping was an impossibility, so nobody was hit. But nevertheless it was unpleasant, for no sooner had they let go one consignment than they went home again, filled up afresh, and came back for another go. They were bombing us off and on for four or five hours, so far as I can remember, and we counted seven or eight of the blighters in sight at once, so it was "embarras de richesse" so far as targets went.

We weren't going very fast, for the damaged destroyer could not be towed at a respectable speed on account of her injuries, and at about five o'clock in the afternoon the glass had gone down a lot, and the wind and sea started to get up from the westward. The prospect was not altogether joyful. We had heard the two trawlers shouting for help by wireless before we sank them, and knew that the German seaplanes had probably seen and reported an injured ship being taken in tow. (This afterwards turned out to be the case, though, according to their communiqué, the seaplanes claimed to have bagged her with a bomb, which was not so.) Moreover, Heligoland was a bare sixty miles away under our lee, so the chances were £100 to 1/2d. that the Huns would come out during the night and try to scupper the lot of us. It was with some joy, then, that we found there was a pretty strong supporting force within easy distance. In fact, we actually sighted them at about 6 p.m.

The weather grew steadily worse, and by sunset there was a pretty big sea and a fresh breeze, both of which were increasing every minute. The poor old ship in tow was making very heavy weather of it, while even we were pretty lively. But things got worse, for by ten o'clock, and a pitch dark night it was, it was blowing nearly a full gale. The sea, too, had got up to such an extent that there was nothing for it but to abandon the damaged destroyer. It was easier said than done, for the sea was too big for lowering boats, and the only other alternative was for some other craft to go alongside her and to take the men on. I did not see the business myself, but believe another destroyer put her stem up against the side of the one sinking and kept it there by going slow ahead, while the men hopped out one by one over the bows.

It was a most excellent bit of work on the part of the salvor, for with the two ships rolling, pitching, and grinding in the sea, and in utter darkness, it required a very good head and cool judgment to know how much speed was necessary to keep the bows just touching, and no more. If they had come into violent contact the rescuing ship might have been very badly damaged. I believe they had to have several shots at it, before they got every man away, but though two fell overboard in jumping across, they pulled it off all right without losing a single life. The only damage to the rescuing ship was a little bit of a bulge on the stem just below the forecastle, but this did not make a leak or impair her efficiency in any way, and she went about for months afterwards without

having it straightened. They had every right to be proud of their honourable scar!

The poor old ship which had to be abandoned was then left to her fate, and nobody saw the end of her.

It must have been at about this time, though we did not see it, that some hostile destroyers came upon our light cruisers, or rather, our cruisers happened upon them. What took place I don't quite know, but the Huns were apparently sighted quite close, and our leading ship, jamming her helm over and increasing speed, rammed one full in the middle and cut her in halves. It must have been an awful moment for the poor wretches, for the stern portion of the destroyer sank one side, and the bow part went rushing on into the darkness at about thirty knots. The men on board her could be heard yelling, but it was quite impossible to do anything to save them as other enemy destroyers were in the neighbourhood and the sea was far too bad for lowering boats.

Nothing else of interest took place during the night, except that the weather got worse and worse. The next morning, when we were steaming against it, we were having a terrible doing, and it lasted for about twenty-four hours, until we got under the lee of the coast. The sea was one of the worst we had ever experienced, short and very steep, and we couldn't steam more than about eight knots against it. The motion was very bad, the ship crashing and bumping about in a most unholy manner, and we were all wet through and rather miserable. No hot food, either, for the galley fire had been put out.

The prisoner who had been badly wounded died early next morning. The Doctor said he might have lived if the weather had been good, but the motion finished him, poor fellow. He was buried at sea, the German officer reading the burial service.

We eventually got back into harbour and disembarked the prisoners, and never was I more pleased to get a decent meal and a little sleep. Aunt Maria, having so many nephews, has just sent me another fountain pen, the third since the war started. Also a pair of crimson socks knitted by her cook. The pen will be useful.

Do you want any more cigarettes? You never acknowledged the last lot I sent, you ungrateful blighter, and at any rate I think it's high time you wrote me a letter. Your last one was a postcard.

Forgive this letter of mine if it is a bit disconnected, but it's the best I can do at present.

Well, the best of luck and may you not stop a Hun bullet or a bit of shrapnel.

Yours always,

T.