

ANZAC'S STRANGE STORY.

Port Pirie to London via Archangel.

The Melbourne Herald on Monday published a sensational narrative, dated September 17, from Mr. Keith Murdoch, a war correspondent on the western front, dealing with the adventures of Pte. Alexander Sast, a young Russian, formerly employed at Port Pirie. Summarized, the story is that Sast went to Broken Hill and joined Col. Weir's "Tenth," one of the most famous and glorious of Australian battalions. He was in the first company to land at Gallipoli. Wounded on the second day, he was sent to Mena Hospital, but five weeks saw him back again on the peninsula. At Courtney's Post volunteers were called for to locate a Turkish sniper, and Sast one night found himself several hundred yards in front of our line with a bullet in his leg. He scooped out a hole, and rolled helplessly into it. Three Turks, stealing forth to find their lamed quarry, surrounded him with bayonets. The foremost Turk lunged in the dark, and his bayonet came to Sast's very skin. With despairing efforts he seized it, tore bayonet and rifle from the Turk's hands, and sank bleeding and exhausted into his lair.

—Scars as Evidence.—

When he appeared before doubting boards of officers at Salisbury Plains this month, Sast showed hands where the cuts of the knife were still deep and rough. Doctors say the bullet is still in the hip. Apart from these scars, Sast has little against the Turks. They carried him to their lines, where he had good attention and much kindness for a fortnight. He was visited by three intelligence officers, one a German. He refused information. He was threatened with immediate death, with torture, with flogging. Still he refused. The German, who wore Turkish uniform,

but was fair as Sast himself, offered to let him off without punishment if he would but tell the numbers on the Australian front and the distribution of the battalions. Sast pleaded ignorance, and told them he would rather die than betray his comrades.

"You will die," said the German, "as soon as you come from this hospital. You will see me again."

—Singled Out for Torment.—

When sent from hospital to the Scutari camp for war prisoners, Sast with horror saw again this ill-omened German inquisitor. For a full day he was harangued and examined by the German. At length he was strung up to an iron ring by his thumbs, which were brought under his armpits to the middle of his back, so that his head was thrust forward and his toes were just off the ground. The agony was intense. After four hours he fainted through pain and fatigue, and remembered nothing until he found himself lying in bed with doctors over him. For four days Sast was put through this moral and physical torture. Sast insists that no other Australian was tortured, but he never varies his story that the Turks regarded the Australians as men apart. Their rations were black bread, which sometimes had to be soaked for 30 minutes, bad meat, and copious supplies of tea. Poor stuff, but it seemed no worse than ordinary Turkish army fare. Relief came from the Germans, who wanted the prisoners to be "lent" to Bulgaria. They were herded in cattle trucks without windows or sanitary appliances for 36 hours, while the train crept along the Balkan railway to Sofia, and thence to Rustchuk, where they found themselves in barracks under Bulgarian soldiers and with Bulgarian taskmasters setting them daily labours in road making. Sast's knowledge of Russian gave him enough common words for conversation with the Bulgarian sentries, and he found them sympathetic toward his own countrymen. One sentry in particular brought him tobacco and wine. He talked much of his hatred of Germans and his respect for the Russian

Germans and his respect for the Russian liberators of his country. Sast managed to keep a skin belt he had brought from Australia with 23 sovereigns. One sovereign went a long way in stimulating friendship. At length one brought Sast a Bulgarian uniform, and sketched a plan for escape. Sast walked boldly out with him on a dark night and passed through Rustchuk, unchallenged, to the outskirts, where horse and vehicle were seized. The runaways put 18 miles between them and Rustchuk before they discarded their horse, stole food from a farmhouse, and crept into a stack of hay to sleep throughout daylight. It was January 4 of this year. Days were short; cold was bitter. Sast and his mate walked on that night 18 miles. And then came the difficulty of passing the sentries on the frozen Danube.

—Sentry's Shots Rang Out.—

Sast and his friend reached the ice, strode out boldly, and got some yards from the bank. Then a sentry's shots rang out. Sast says that as they ran across with desperate speed 30 shots whizzed past them, but none hit. The men pushed on to a farm, where Sast lay ill for a fortnight, feeding on hot Roumanian milk and cakes. His Bulgarian friend went off after three days to surrender himself to the authorities and be interned with 15,000 of his countrymen who had crossed the frontier. Sast was in nearly as much peril from Russian as from Bulgarian authorities. He had left Russia in his late 'teens without permission or passports, and was liable to severe punishment for escaping from military service. His whole resources were bent to the task of getting to an English port, and thence to the Australian force. He secured Roumanian peasant clothes, and made his way to Bucharest, where he fell in with a Russian former naval officer, whom he found full of fellow feeling. The Russian sketched his easiest course to Archangel. By expending all his money, by travelling in military trains, and by avoiding civil officials, Sast passed safely through Kieff, Moscow, Petrograd, and Voludja, and reached Archangel, where he told his story

reached Archangel, where he told his story to the British Consul. The Consul agreed to pass him to Hull. And Sast found himself signed on as a deck hand on the Wilson liner Toro, which landed him on June 14 at Hull, after two months and 14 days' voyaging amid icebergs and in fear of submarines. Sast's main duty was as for'ard watch, and during long hours he kept the lookout, first for bergs, and then for submarines—work which brought him more than £55 when he was paid off at Hull. The M.L.O. at Hull passed the traveller to London, where an Australian sergeant awaited him. And Sast was sent to the Australian base on Salisbury Plains, and there cast into military prison. For 22 days he was under arrest, for his story seemed incredible. Boards of enquiry sat

upon the case. Sast's story was ultimately fully endorsed and believed. The Courts judged him as sincere as he had been adventurous and daring. To-day he drives the motor car of the assistant provost-marshal of the Australian forces—the head of that military police system which had received him with cold suspicion. I have had an hour with Sast (says Mr. Keith Murdoch) and have read the Court's notes and reports. The story cannot be faulted in detail and has been corroborated at points. But to meet Sast is to be convinced. He has the simple-heartedness of his race, and cross-examination serves only to brighten the shining quality of his nature—the quality of sincere feeling, which made any place other than in the ranks of fighters against his enemies distasteful to him.