3.15 The Ulster Solution

R. L. O'Mealy

Reed Making

The Ulster Solution

R. L. O'Mealy[1]

Be patient and don't expect too much until you get on a bit. Take the thing quietly and see that you have even little things that you require, or are as near as you can to such things. If you succeed at the rate of, say, one reed out of six trials you will be a wonderful man. But never get disheartened - if a reed "crows" like the thing by pulling or sucking through the staple keep it safely as it may suit something. Never put the blades in your mouth or allow to get wet. I hope to help you but we must know that it is hardly possible to explain every technical difficulty in writing. The handy man must apply his own understanding and ability with reeds.

We will take the methodical size of the staple first. The correct sizes for Irish pipes proper are:- 1/8" of staple to 1" of chanter is the length and means that for your 15" chanter the staple would be 1-7/8" (One inch and seven eighths). A 16" chanter would need a two inch staple and so on. The inside of the staple should not be wider but a shade smaller than the "crow" of the chanter which in your case (a "Taylor") would be 5/32" crow.[2] So when your mandrel is made of 1/8" steel wire, or nearest to it, you are on pretty safe lines. Brass is better than copper for sound. It is better to have the brass a light gauge - and not up to 1/32" thick. Copper, a dead metal, is malleable, but I always use thin hard brass for staples. The finishing mandrel should be just 1/8" thick and filed to a gradual flat on both sides at one end for, say, about 1-1/2" for the purpose of flattening one end of the staple, which is best done with pliers as hammering spreads the metal. The flat of the staple should graduate for, say, half its length to the end. Bend your strip for staple round a thicker mandrel first, then size up with the thinner one, and finally use the one for flattening. The mouth of the flat should be oval and free from corners.

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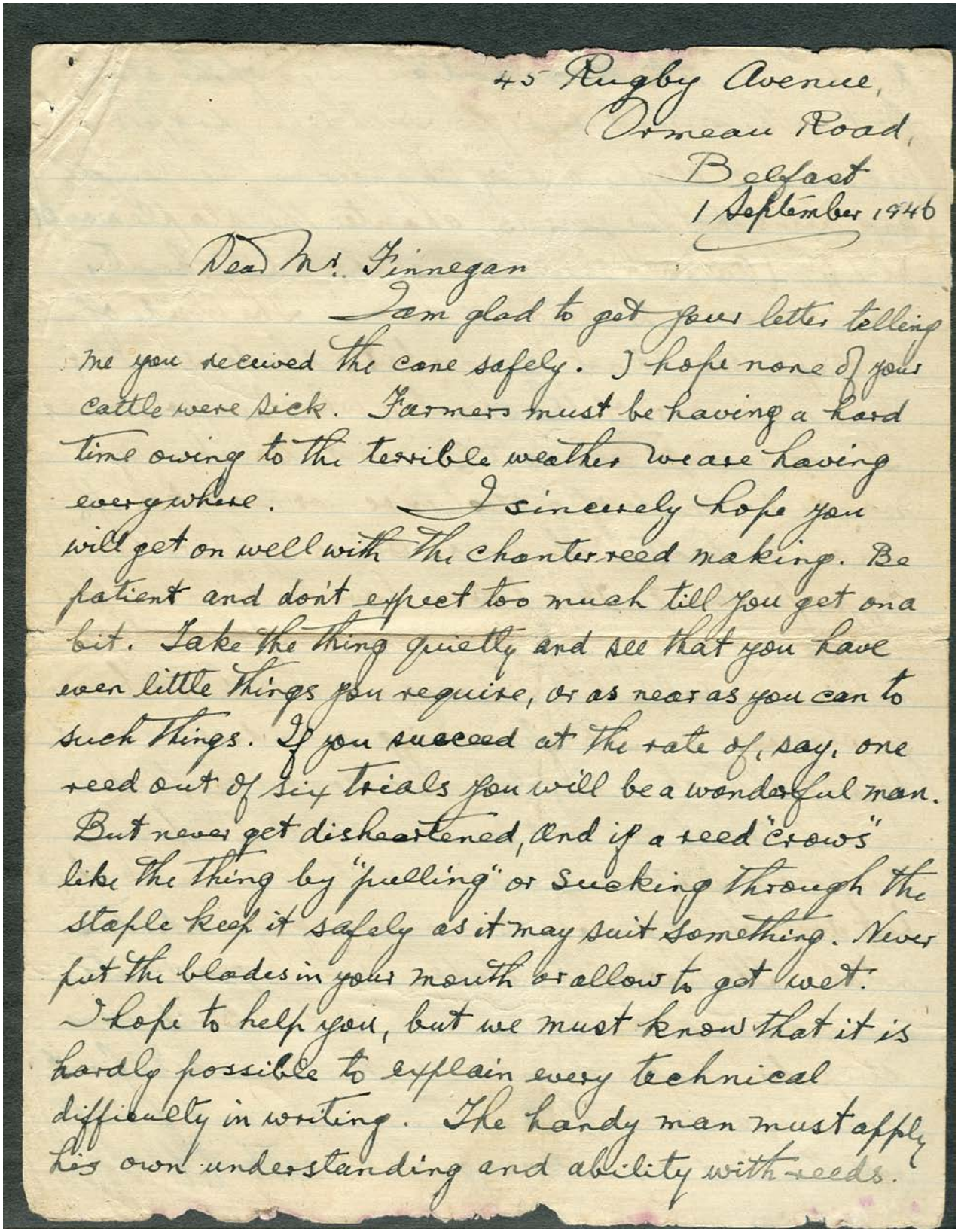
[1] Re-printed from An Píobaire Vol. 1 Nos. 2 & 3:
This reed making account was given in a letter dated September 1943, to an old man, Owen Finnegan, Killarue, Carrickmacross, County Monaghan, a great lover of the Uilleann pipes, although not a great piper. Thanks are due to Michael Padian, Monaghan, for kind permission to reproduce this account from the O'Mealy letter which he now possesses. Padraig Ó Conchuir, Dún Dealgan, kindly supplied the copy.

[2] O'Mealy's "crow" would appear to be what we now call the 'throat", the narrowest point of the internal chanter bore where the reed seat meets the highest point of the bore.

For the handy man in his own home the solid razor blades are more satisfactory than the hollow grounds [the old-fashioned "cut-throat" razor] for making reeds. Don't make your chanter reeds too wide in the head. When the strip of cane is ready for hollowing place it along your index (front) finger holding the end with your thumb so as to enable you to scrape with your hollowing knife from your thumb to almost the other end, and keep reversing until the hollowing is sufficient. If the strip is 5" long you will have 2-1/2" from middle to either end. Nick around the back in the middle and carefully nick the two thin edges. First point the two ends and clear off each end where hollowing knife could not come - a pen knife is useful here. When folding the strip it is well to place something like a blunt hollowing knife right in the middle so as to steady the fibre of the cane. If the strip breaks completely it won't matter.

Then tie with a single strand of unwaxed hemp and point [the ends of the blades] more completely. I find 2 strands of hemp nicely waxed and not twisted makes a better and more airtight tying than a thicker wax end. When the staple is in position, and when tying it, it have it fairly close, the cane I mean, to the staple till you come up a bit. But before you come near the end of the staple tie a strand of unwaxed hemp about 6" or 8" long about 1/4" above the end of the staple. Tie this in such a way that you see it bringing the edges of the blades together a little. This does good by helping the wax end [binding] and saving the blades from cracking up. Be careful at the end of the staple, give time, and don't pull too much. Sometimes it is necessary to go even more than 3/16" above the end of the staple. If there is a slight vacancy between the blades just above where you finish tying don't trouble as it will come alright later. When you remove the two dry tyings take [pare] some of each blade (bark) with a penknife before you start scraping the outside. For staunching the tying the best and easiest thing for you would be old brown soap, rubbed up and down and then rubbed over with a small smooth handle of a tool. Leave your blades fairly long at first and while scraping, crop a very little piece off the blades by placing the head of reed flat on hard wood and using your sharp blade. If there is much leakage at sides of blades take your flat mandrel and gently pull it down the sides and it will close a bit for you. If the blades are inclined to close too much at the mouth, place a strong ring shaped belt close to the wax end so to help in opening it while you scrape the blades. Remove this and put on a regular belt later. Scrape and crop and do your best. Clean the top of a finger and place it firmly so as to stop the end and then by sucking through the staple you will find what leakage you have, and test it by placing finger and thumb of other hand on the sides of the blades. But all down the ages, the best stauncher for leakages at sides of blades is the old brown soap and it lasts for all time. It must not be applied by rubbing up and down. Very slightly damped with your mouth is should be drawn gently across the side of the blades and then settled. From 4 to 5 inches is a good length for mandrels.

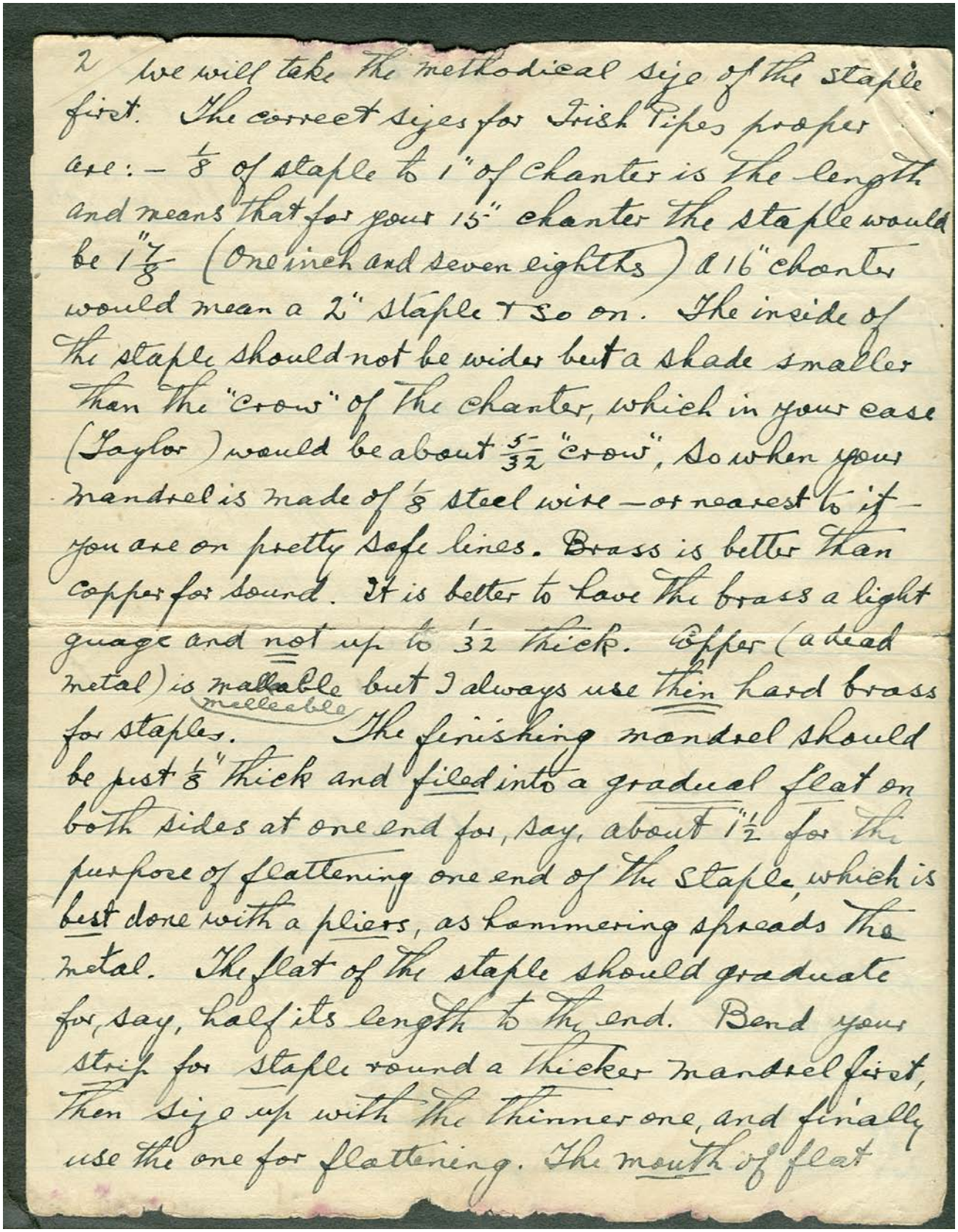
R. L. O'Mealy



45 Rugby Avenue,
Ormeau Road,
Belfast
1 September 1946

Dear Mr. Finnegan

I am glad to get your letter telling me you received the cane safely. I hope none of your cattle were sick. Farmers must be having a hard time owing to the terrible weather we are having everywhere. I sincerely hope you will get on well with the chanter reed making. Be patient and don't expect too much till you get on a bit. Take the thing quietly and see that you have even little things you require, or as near as you can to such things. If you succeed at the rate of, say, one reed out of six trials you will be a wonderful man. But never get disheartened, and if a reed "crows" like the thing by "pulling" or sucking through the staple keep it safely as it may suit something. Never put the blades in your mouth or allow to get wet. I hope to help you, but we must know that it is hardly possible to explain every technical difficulty in writing. The handy man must apply his own understanding and ability with reeds.



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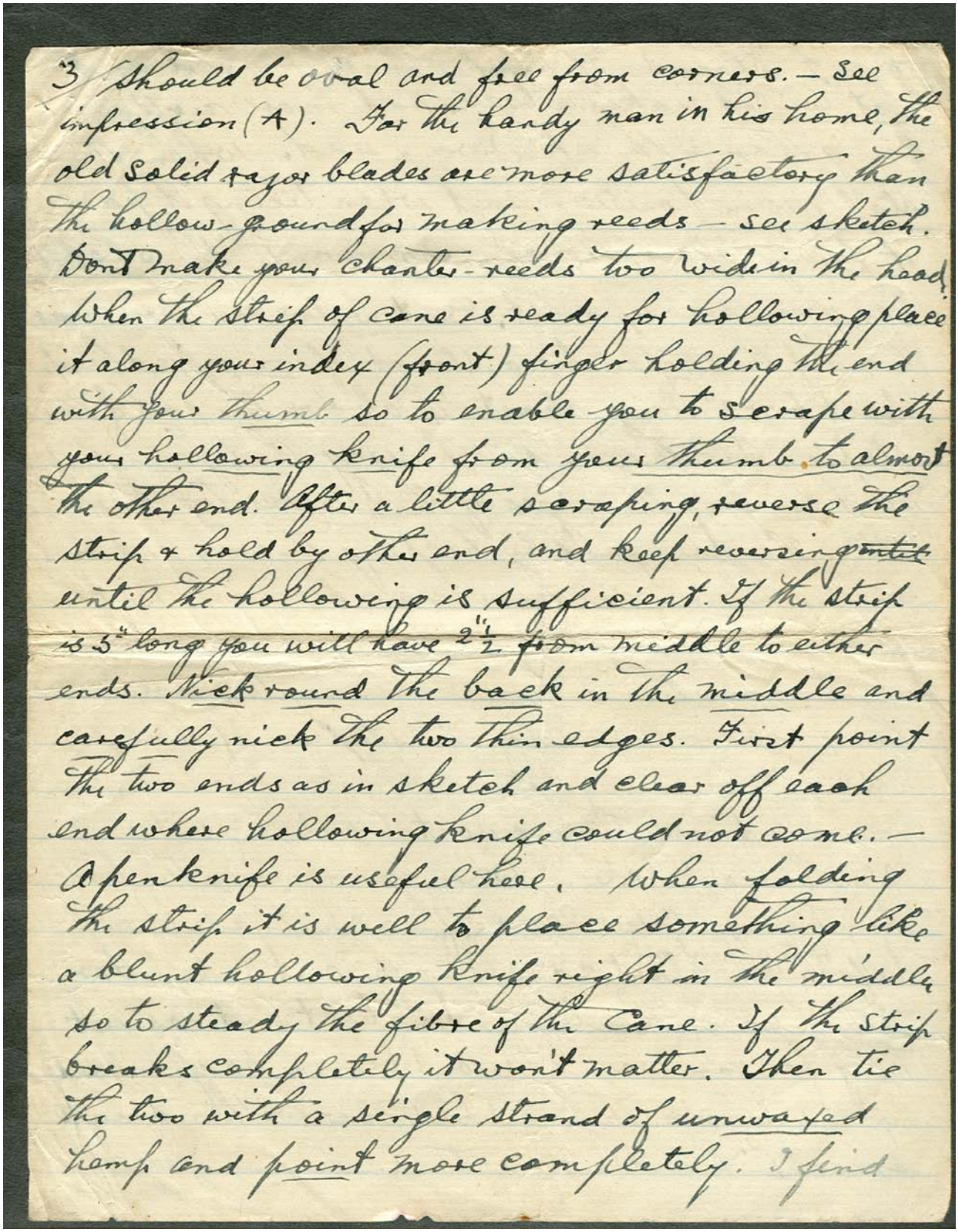
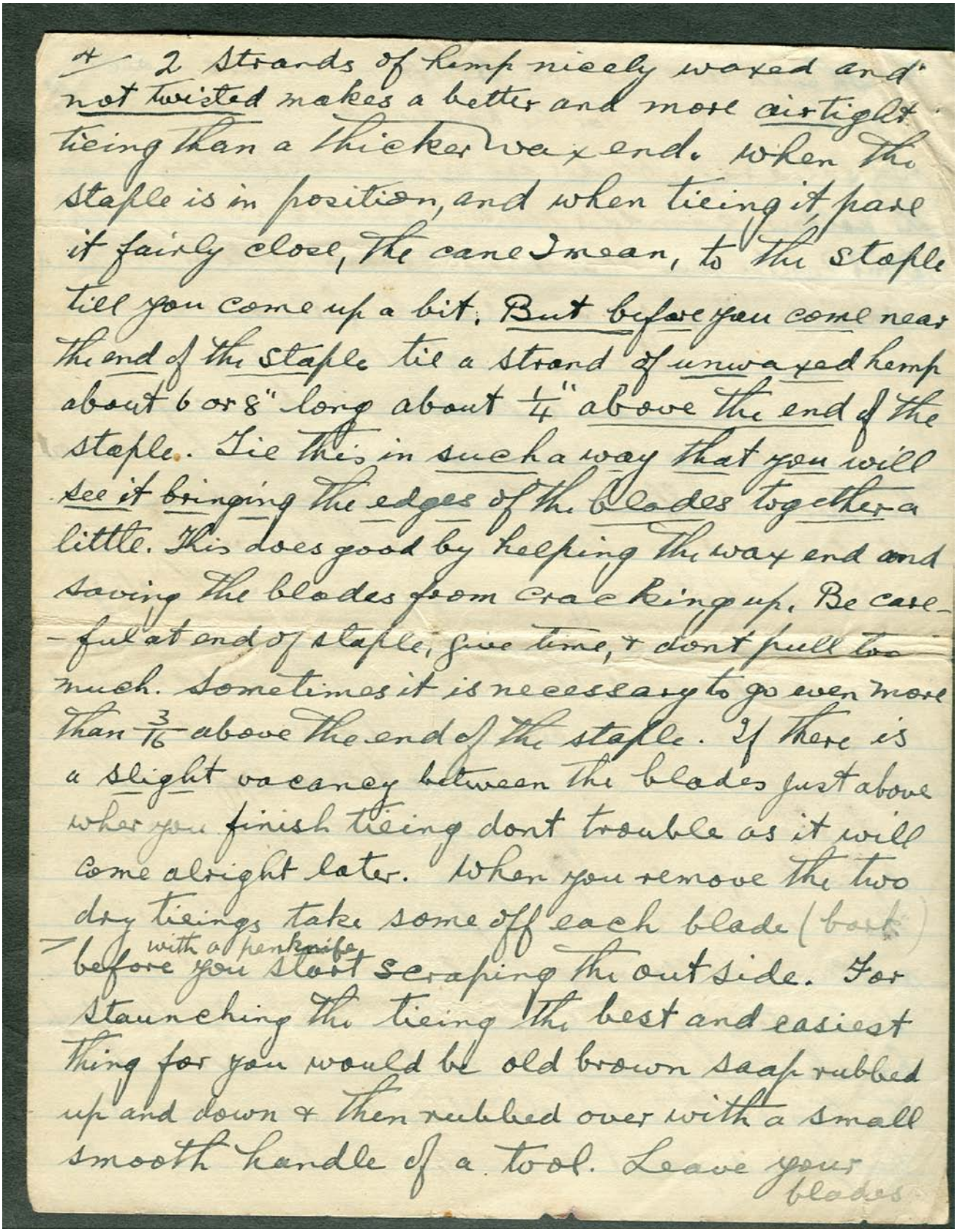


3 Should be oval and free from corners. — See impression (A). For the handy man in his home, the old solid razor blades are more satisfactory than the hollow-ground for making reeds — see sketch. Dont make your chanter-reeds too wide in the head. When the strip of cane is ready for hollowing place it along your index (front) finger holding the end with your thumb so to enable you to scrape with your hollowing knife from your thumb to almost the other end. After a little scraping, reverse the strip & hold by other end, and keep reversing until the hollowing is sufficient. If the strip is 3" long you will have 2½" from middle to either ends. Nick round the back in the middle and carefully nick the two thin edges. First point the two ends as in sketch and clear off each end where hollowing knife could not come. — A penknife is useful here. When folding the strip it is well to place something like a blunt hollowing knife right in the middle so to steady the fibre of the cane. If the strip breaks completely it won't matter. Then tie the two with a single strand of unwaxed hemp and point more completely. I find



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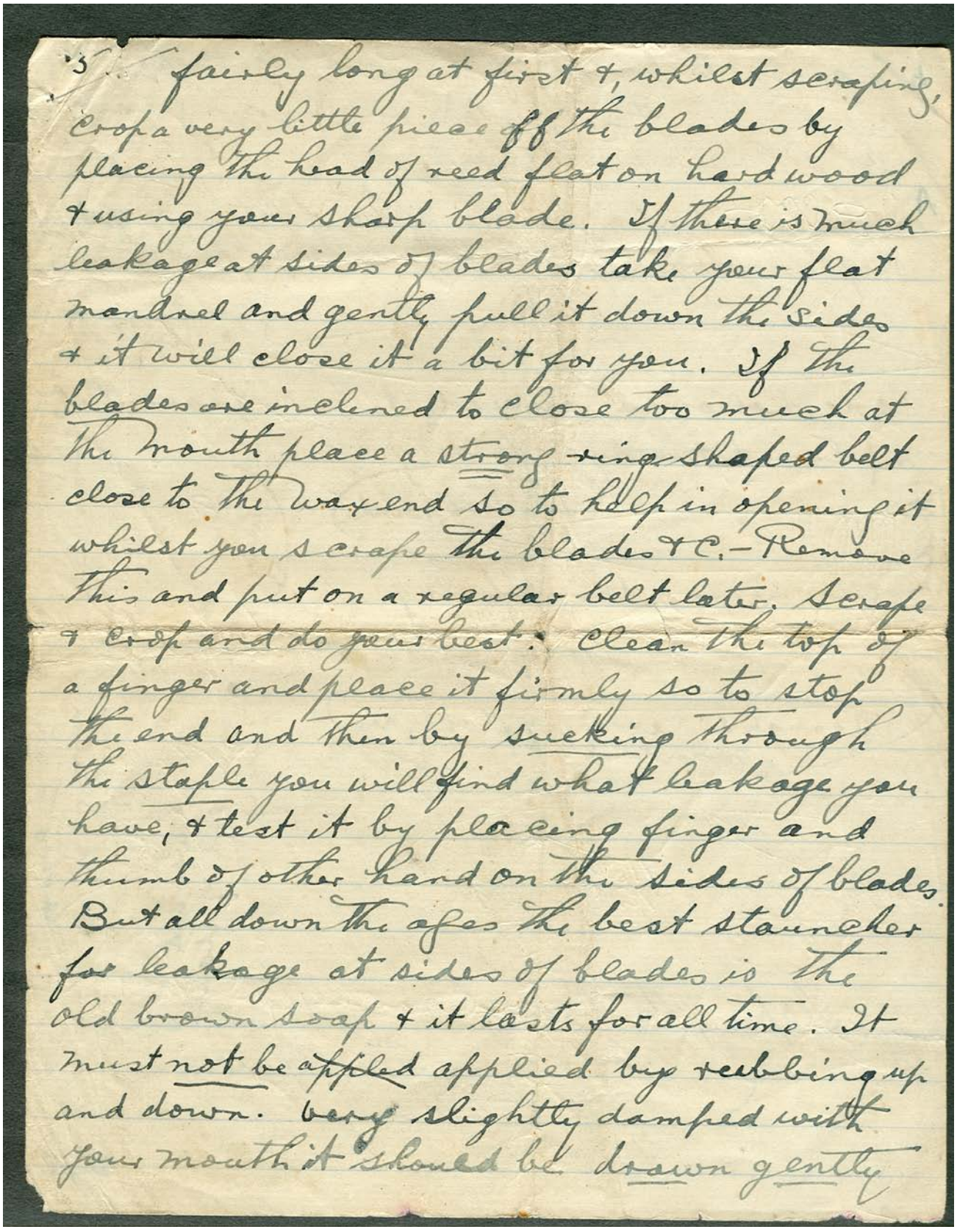
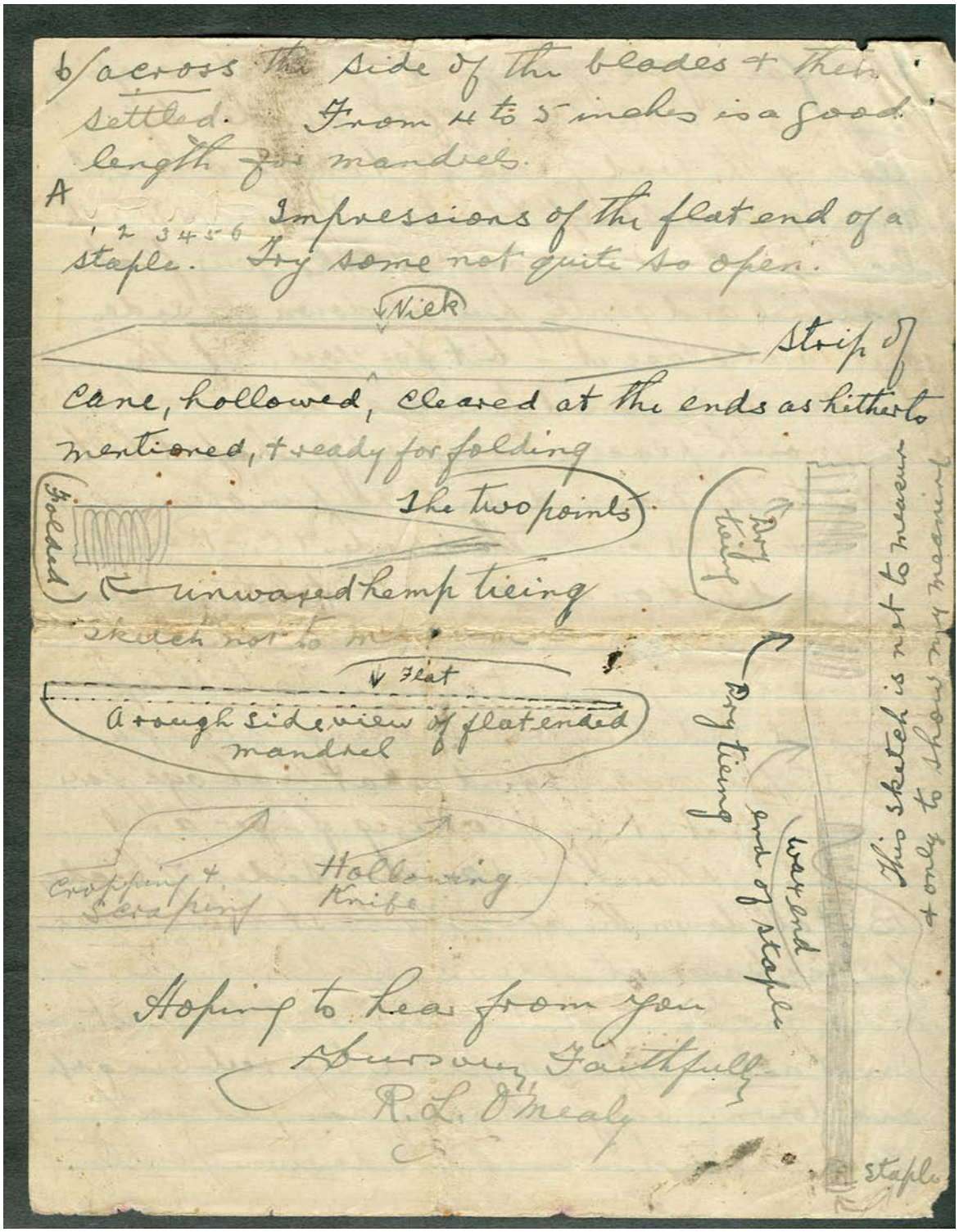


3 fairly long at first &, whilst scraping, crop a very little piece off the blades by placing the head of reed flat on hard wood & using your sharp blade. If there is much leakage at sides of blades take your flat mandrel and gently pull it down the sides & it will close it a bit for you. If the blades are inclined to close too much at the mouth place a strong ring shaped belt close to the wax end so to help in opening it whilst you scrape the blades &c. – Remove this and put on a regular belt later. Scrape & crop and do your best. Clean the top of a finger and place it firmly so to stop the end and then by sucking through the staple you will find what leakage you have, & test it by placing finger and thumb of other hand on the sides of blades. But all down the ages the best staunches for leakage at sides of blades is the old brown soap & it lasts for all time. It must not be appled applied by rubbing up and down. very slightly damped with your mouth it should be drawn gently


b/across the side of the blades & then
settled. From 4 to 5 inches is a good
length for mandrels.
A
1 2 3 4 5 6
Impressions of the flat end of a
staple. Try some not quite so open.
Nick
Strip of
Cane, hollowed, cleared at the ends as hitherto
mentioned, & ready for folding
The two points
Folded
unwaxed hemp tieing
Dry tieing
sketch not to
Flat
A rough side view of flat ended
mandrel
Dry tieing
waxed end of staple
This sketch is not to measure
only to show the manner
Cropping & Scraping
Hollowing Knife
Hoping to hear from you
Yours very Faithfully
R. L. O'Mealy
staple