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Title: Our Soldier Boy

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Release date: May 8, 2007 [eBook #21371]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OUR SOLDIER BOY ***

George Manville Fenn

"Our Soldier Boy"

Chapter One.

"You, Tom Jones, let that pot-lid alone."

It was a big brown-faced woman who said that crossly, and a big rough-looking bugler, in the uniform of the 200th Fusiliers, with belts, buttons and facings looking very clean and bright, but the scarlet cloth ragged and stained from the rain and mud, and sleeping in it anywhere, often without shelter, who dropped the lid as if it were hot and shut in the steam once more, as the iron pot bubbled away where it hung from three sticks, over a wood fire.

It was in a lovely part of Portugal, and the regiment was halting among the mountains after a long weary tramp; fires had been lit for cooking, and the men were lying and sitting about, sleeping, cleaning their firelocks, pipeclaying their belts, and trying to make themselves look as smart as they could considering that they were all more or less ragged and torn after a fortnight's tramp in all weathers in pursuit of a portion of the French army which had been always a few hours ahead.

But it was easy enough to follow their steps, for everywhere they had plundered, and destroyed; villages and pleasant homes were burned; and blackened ruins, cut-up gardens and vineyards met the soldiers' eyes wherever the enemy had been.

There had been a straggling little village by the side of the mountain stream, where the 200th had halted at midday after their long march under a burning sun, at a spot where there was plenty of fresh water, and it was the pot over one of these cooking fires whose lid Tom Jones had lifted off.

"On'y wanted to smell what was for dinner," he said. "What have you got, Mother Beane?"

"Never you mind. Rare ohs for meddlers, and pump-handle sauce, perhaps; and look here, you sir, you come when we halt to-night and I'll mend some of them rags. You're a disgrace."

"Ain't worse than the rest of the fellows," said Tom, grinning. "The Colonel's horse went down 's morn'."

"Oh, dear, dear!" cried the woman excitedly; "is he hurt?"

"Broke both his knees, and bled ever so."

"The Colonel?"

"Now-w-w! His horse. Colonel only went sliding down 'mong the stones, and ripped his jacket sleeve right up."

"Oh, that's a blessing," said the woman. "You go to him when we camp, and say Mrs Corp'ral Beane's dooty and she's got a needle and silk ready, and may she mend his jacket."

"All right, but you might tell us what's for dinner."

"Wait and see. And why don't you go and forage about and see if you can't find a bit o' fruit or some vegetables?"

"'Tarn't no good. Old Frog-soups clears everything."

"Yes," said the woman, with a sigh, as she re-arranged her battered old straw bonnet cocked up as if it were a hat, and took off the old scarlet uniform tail coat she wore over her very clean cotton gown, before going to the pot, wooden spoon in hand, to raise the lid and give the contents a stir round.

"Oh, I say, Mother Beane, it does smell good! What's in it?"

"Shoulder o' goat," said the woman.

"Yah! Don't care much for goat," said the boy. "Arn't half so good as mutton."

"You must take what you can get, Tom. Two chickens."

"Why, that they ain't. I see 'em: they was an old cock and hen as we chivied into that burnt house this mornin', and Corp'ral shot one, and Mick Toole run his bay'net through the other. Reg'lar stringies."

"Never mind. I'm cooking 'em to make 'em taste like chicken, and it's time they were all back to mess. Which way did my old man go?"

"Climbed up yonder. Said he knowed there'd be a house up somewheres there."

"And why didn't you go with him, sir?" said Mrs Corporal Beane. "Might have found a melon or some oranges."

"Not me," grumbled the boy. "Frenchies don't leave nothing: hungry beggars. Murd'rin' wermin. Wish we could ketch 'em."

"Ah, so do I, and it makes my heart bleed to see what we do."

"Ah, but you wait a bit. We shall ketch 'em one o' these days."

"You won't. You're too lazy."

"That I ain't. I'd ha' gone foraging 's morning, and there's an old boot nail made a hole in one foot, and t'other's all blisters."

"Oh, my poor boy! And I haven't finished that pair of stockings I was knitting for you. Look here, you go and sit down till the men come back, and bathe your feet in the stream."

"Did," said the boy, with a chuckle.

"Ah! Whereabouts? Not above where we get our drinking water?"

"Course I didn't," said the boy scornfully. "I ain't a Frenchy."

"Ahoy-y-y-y!"

The hail came from high up in a woody ravine far above their heads, and the boy shaded his eyes and said excitedly—"Here, look. It's Joe Beane, and he's found something good. Got it on his shoulder."

"What is it?" cried Mrs Beane. "A kid?"

"No, it's a bag o' something. It's—no, he's hid among the trees again. It was a bag, though—looked whitish."

"It's flour," cried Mrs Beane triumphantly. "Oh, Tom! We'll have cakes to-night, and you shall carry some to the officers' mess."

"Give us one if I do, Mother Beane?"

"Ah, pig! I never saw such a boy to eat."

"Well, how can I help it? I get so holler," grumbled the boy. "It's 'cause I'm growing."



Five minutes later a tall manly-looking soldier came down the rugged track, with his face and hands torn and bleeding, and dropped upon his knees before his astonished wife and a group of half a dozen men who hurried up.

"Oh, Joe," cried the woman, "what have you got there?"

"Young shaver," panted the man. "Found big house yonder, half burnt. Five dead folk, and this here."

"Oh, Joe!" cried the woman, taking her husband's burden from him, sinking upon her knees, and laying the head of a handsome little fellow of about eight against her breast, to begin rocking herself to and fro and sobbing bitterly. "Oh, the wicked cruel wretches! To go and murder a poor little boy like this! Look at his face! Look at his hair, half burned off, and the rest all blood. Oh! If you were men you'd ketch and kill some of 'em for this."

A low growl arose from the soldiers around, and Tom Jones sniffed, drew his bugle round from where it hung at his back, and dropped two silent tears in its mouth.

"You Tom," cried Mrs Beane, "don't stand sniffing and snivelling there like a great bull calf. Take the tin dipper and fetch it full of clean water. Oh, Joe, Joe! It's too late. The poor little darling's dead."

"Warn't when I fun' him," said the corporal. "He'd crep' away a bit, and he moved one hand."

"Yes, and he's warm still," cried the woman excitedly. "Here, you men, clear off. You go and serve out the mess, Joe. Never mind me."

"But you'll want a bit o' dinner, missus; and I found two ripe melons up in the garden there, but I left 'em behind."

"Don't talk to me about melons and dinners," cried the woman angrily. "Go and get your own, all of you; and how much longer's that boy going to be?"

Not many minutes before he appeared, not with the tin dipper but a whole bucketful of clear cold water, forgetting all about his sore feet; and while the men went and sat round the iron pot of savoury hotch-potch, Tom Jones stayed behind to help bathe and bandage the head of the handsome little fellow upon whose sunburned face more than one hot tear fell, as loving hands made him up a temporary bed of great-coats in the shade.

"Oh, Tom, Tom!" sobbed the big rough coarse woman, as she knelt there at last after doing all she could, "many's the time that I've prayed that I might have a little boy to call my own; but Heaven knows best, and he might have lived to die like this."

"He ain't a-going to die," said Tom, sniffing again.

"He is—he is; and no doctor near!"

"No," said Tom, with another sniff; "he's miles away, along o' them poor wounded chaps we left behind."

"I can do nothing, nothing more—and he's somebody's bairn!"

"Yes," said the boy hoarsely, "and the Frenchies killed 'em, for Joe Beane telled the men as the sight he see was

horrid.”

“Hush! Ah, look,” whispered the woman, and she bent over the poor little victim, who wailed faintly, “Oh, don’t—don’t—Ah!”

Then he lay silent and motionless, as his rough nurse softly laid her hand upon the fire-scorched forehead.

“Why, that there ain’t Portygeeze,” whispered Tom, staring.

“Well, old gal, what about him now?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Joe; I don’t know. He just spoke a little.”

“Poor little nipper. All right, my gal; you’ll bring him round.”

Tom had ceased sniffing and had turned to give a long stare at the men grouped round the pot, to see that they had done eating and were lighting their pipes.

“Might ha’ arxed a pore chap to have had a bit, corporal,” he said.

“Ay, we might, lad; but then you see we was all so hungry we mightn’t, and you’re only a boy.”

“Yes, that’s it,” grumbled Tom, wrenching his bugle round and giving it a vicious polish with his sleeve. “Allus the same; on’y a boy; just as if I could help that!”

“And such a hungry sort o’ boy; holler all through. It’s a waste to give you good food. That there stoo was evvinly.”

Joe turned away from Tom’s sour puckered face, to bend over the insensible little patient with a look full of pity, as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“I should just liked to have been there, missus, with my bay’net fixed when they cut that little fellow down. Here, I’ll sit and have a pipe and keep the flies off him, while you go and pick a bit. The boys wouldn’t touch a morsel till I’d put aside some for you and Tom.”

That night the 200th was still marching on where they were to camp in the mountains, while on a rough kind of litter formed of a long basket strapped upon the back of a mule, with a couple of great-coats and a blanket for bed, lay the poor child whose life Mrs Beane was trying to save.

It was a long and a weary forced march, for scouts had brought in news which made the officers hope to come in touch of the retreating army before morning, for the news had spread, and during the night the Colonel and officers found opportunities for coming and asking Mother Beane about her little patient.

But there was always the same reply, and Colonel Lavis did not have his uniform mended, neither were any stitches added to Tom Jones’s new worsted stockings, for the corporal’s wife had all her work to do to try and save her patient’s life, and the shake of the head she gave at daybreak told more forcibly than words or the bitter tears she shed, that she had given up all hope.

Chapter Two.

The 200th was in high glee to a man, which is including about twenty men who were wounded not so badly but that they could shout “Hurrah!” For there was a brush with the retreating French, who were driven from the strong camp they had formed, and the little patient had, to use Mrs Beane’s words, “begun to pick up a bit.”

During the next week of marching and counter-marching the wounded boy began to pick up a good many bits, for the doctor had rejoined the regiment, and he did something to the little fellow’s head where beneath the cruel cut he had received the bone was dented in, and from that hour the change was wonderful. In another week he delighted Mrs Corporal Beane by watching her constantly with wondering eyes, and suddenly asking her who she was.

In her motherly delight she told him “Mother Beane,” and he began calling her mother directly, while in another week Corporal Joe had taught the patient to call him Dad, and wondering began.

“Haven’t you asked him?” said Joe.

“Yes, as much as I dared, old man, but I’m afraid to do much, because it seems to muddle his poor dear head, and he wrinkles up and tries to think, but he can’t.”

“But don’t he remember who cut him down?” said Joe.

“No.”

“Nor yet about the house bein’ set a-fire?”

“No.”

“Well, did you ask him his name?”

“Yes, and he only shook his head.”

"Did you ask him who his father and mother was?"

"Yes, but he didn't know."

"Well, it's ama-a-azin'," said Joe.

But it was true. The boy's life had been saved just when it had been ebbing away, but that was all. With the cruel blow which struck him down all recollection of the past was cut away, and the boy had, as it were, to begin life all over again, not as a little child, for he could talk and chat merrily; but the dark cloud which came down so suddenly had shut everything else away.

"Well, it's ama-a-azin'," said Joe to his wife, "and it seems to me as we found him and saved him alive and all as belonged to him was killed dead, why, he must belong to us. What do you say to keeping him?"

"Oh, Joe, if we only could!" cried his wife.

"Ah, if we on'y could," said Joe thoughtfully.

"I know," cried Mrs Corporal; "I'll ask the Colonel next time I take him his washing back."

"You just don't," said Joe; "because if you do he'll say as you mustn't."

"Oh!" sighed Mrs Corporal; "that's just what I'm 'fraid of."

They were very silent as they sat by the camp-fire that night in an orange-grove, with the big stars peeping down at them, and Tom Jones, who took a great interest in what was said, sat and waited for ever so long, and then being tired out with the long day's tramp, lay down to listen, and dropped off fast asleep, just as Joe Beane said thoughtfully:—

"Look here, missus, if I was on'y a private instead of being an officer I should say something, but as I am full corporal, why, I can't."

"Just think you are a private, Joe, and say it," whispered his wife.

"Shall I?" he said slowly.

"Yes, Joe, dear, do. He's such a nice boy."

"Ay, he is, missus."

"And I love him a'ready."

"Well, I won't go so far as love him, 'cause I don't like boys, but I like him because he's such a good, happy-looking little chap, and how anyone as calls himself a man could have—"

"Yes, yes, you've said that before, Joe," whispered his wife pettishly. "Tell me what you'd say if you warn't a corporal."

"Why, I'd say nothing," said Joe.

"Oh, how can you be so stupid as to go on like that! I thought you'd got something sensible in your head."

"So I have," said Joe gruffly, "on'y you're in such a hurry. I should say nothing to nobody, and go on just as if he warn't here."

"Oh, Joe, dear, would you?"

"Yes, that's what I should say. We could manage right enough, and if at last the Colonel should come with: 'Hallo there! What boy's that?'—why, we could tell him then, and if he said: 'Send him away'—"

"Yes, and what then, Joe?" cried Mrs Corporal excitedly.

"Why then," said Joe, "we should have to obey orders."

"Ah, and he mightn't say that, Joe, as he's such a nice little fellow."

"Course, he mightn't," replied Joe.

"Hah!" ejaculated Mrs Corporal Beane, and she said no more. But at the next halting-place she began to think: and the result of her thinking was that she got hold of an old uniform suit and by working very hard every time the regiment halted she contrived to cut the suit down till it roughly fitted the little invalid, braiding it like the drum and bugle boys', and making a little military cap as well, so that by the time he was able to trot along in the rear of the regiment he did not seem out of place.

"Joe," said Mrs Corporal one morning, "look at him; don't he look splendid? He's our soldier boy now, and I shall call him Dick."

"All right," said the corporal; "Dick ain't bad, but you might ha' called him Joe the second."

Chapter Three.

It was quite six weeks after Dick had been found, and he was weak still, but that only troubled him by making him feel tired, and at such times there was always a ride ready for him on the top of a pack carried by a mule.

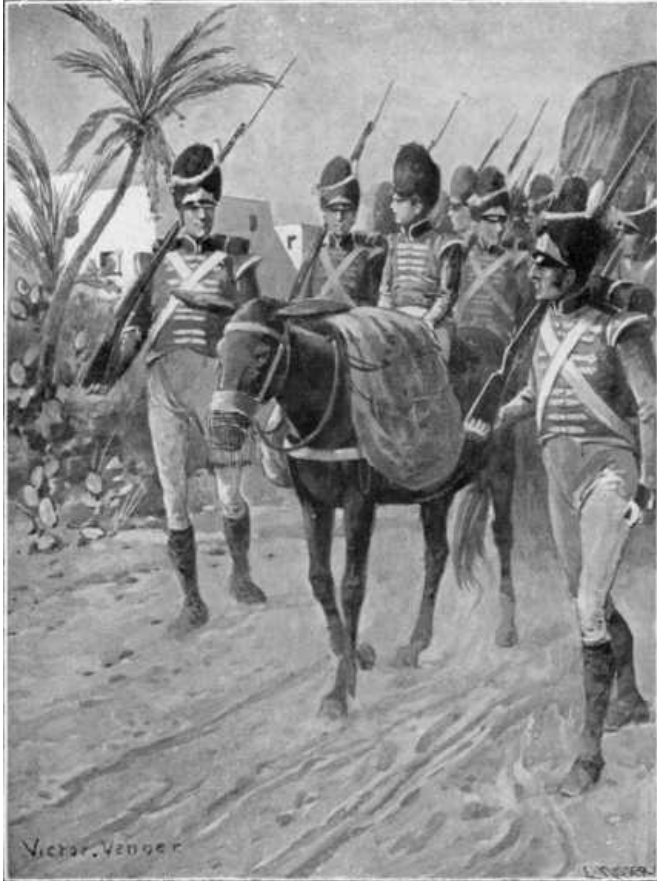
And there he was happy enough, for he was rapidly growing into being the pet of the regiment, and first one of the men brought him fruit, and some one thing and some another; but Mrs Corporal was always pretty close at hand to take care that he was not spoiled or made ill, and Corporal Joe said over and over again to his wife, that it was "ama-a-azin'."

"What's amazing, Joe?" she said one day. "What do you keep saying that for?"

"'Cause it is," he said.

"Yes, but why, Joe?"

"'Cause ever since I found that there boy you've been as proud as a peacock with two tails."



"And enough to make me," said Mrs Corporal tartly. "There never was such a boy before. Look at him!" and she pointed to where the little fellow, in full uniform, was perched on a mule-pack, and the baggage guard with fixed bayonets marched close beside.

"Yes," said Joe drily, as he screwed up his face; "I've been a-looking at him a deal. His coatee fits horrid."

"That it don't," said Mrs Corporal; "and it was the best I could do out of such old stuff."

"Well, it weer old," said her husband; "but it's all crinkles and creases, and that boy puzzles me."

"Why? How?"

"'Cause you'd think after he'd seen his people killed and the house burnt about his ears he'd ha' been frightened like; but he don't seem to mind nothing about it, not a bit."

"Ah, it is strange," said Mrs Corporal; "but there couldn't be a braver nor a better little chap."

"That there couldn't," said the Corporal proudly; "but I think I've found out what's the matter with him. That crack on the head made him an idjit."

"For shame, Joe!" cried his wife. "He's as clever and bright a little fellow as ever stepped."

"So he is, missus; but he puzzles me. It's ama-a-azin'."

The boy puzzled Tom Jones the bugler boy too, who whenever he got a chance came alongside of the mule or baggage wagon in the rear, and let the little invalid earn his bugle on condition that he did not try to blow it, and Tom made this an excuse for solemnly asking the same questions over and over again.

"I say, who's your father?"

"Corporal Joe Beane," said the boy promptly; "I say, Tom, mayn't I have a blow now?"

"What? No, of course not. You don't want to send the men at the double up a hill like this."

"Why not? I should like to run too, only I so soon get tired."

"You shall have a blow some day. But I say, who's your mother?"

"Mrs Corporal Joe Beane," was the prompt reply, and the boy drummed the mule's sides to make it go faster, but without effect.

"Well, where did you live before Joe Beane found you?"

"I don't know," said the boy, shaking his head, and Tom Jones stared hard with his mouth open before asking his next question.

"I say, how's your head?"

"Quite well, thank you," said the boy; "how's yours?"

Tom scratched his as if he did not know.

"Look here," he cried, after a pause, as a happy thought crossed his mind, and without pausing to state how his own head was, he fired off another question:—"I say, who did you live with before we found you?"

"I don't know," said the boy, looking at him wonderingly, and as if he felt amused by his companion's questions. "You ask mother."

"Here! Quick," whispered Tom. "Give me my bugle."

"Shan't. I want it," replied the boy coolly.

"But you must. Here's the Colonel and half the officers reined up at the side to see us go by."

He snatched the bugle away as he spoke and threw the cord over his shoulder, drawing himself up smartly, and keeping step with the guard.

Mrs Corporal Beane had caught sight of the group of officers they were approaching, and with her heart in her mouth as she called it, she hurried up to the side of the mule, catching up to it just as they came abreast of the Colonel, a quiet stern-looking officer whose hair was sprinkled with grey.

Nothing escaped his sharp eyes, and he pressed his horse's side and rode close to the baggage mule.

"What boy's that, my good woman?"

"Mine, sir," said Mrs Beane huskily.

"Indeed? Is that the little fellow who was found in the burned village?"

"Yes, sir," faltered the woman, as she gazed in the Colonel's stern frowning countenance.

"Humph!" he ejaculated, and drew rein for the rear of the regiment to file past.

"And now my poor boy will be sent away, Joe," said the agitated woman that night; but Joe said nothing, not even when he felt his wife get up and go to where the little fellow was sleeping soundly, and he heard her utter a curious sobbing sound before she came to lie down again.

But no orders were given next day for the boy to be sent to the rear, nor yet during the next week, during which the men were still hunting frogs, as they called it—frogs which took such big leaps that the toiling British soldiers could not come up to them.

"Oh, if they only would let us," Joe used to say every night when he pulled off his boots to rest his feet. "It's my one wish, for we must give 'em a drubbing, or we shall never have the face to go back to old England again."

Joe had his wish sooner than he expected.

It was in a wild mountainous part of the beautiful country, so full of forest and gorge that there was plenty of opportunity for the French to hide their force on the mountain slopes of a lovely valley and let the English regiment get well past them before they attacked.

The result was a desperate fight which lasted a couple of hours before the 200th managed to extricate themselves with the loss of many killed and wounded, and in spite of every man fighting like a hero, they were beaten and had to suffer the miseries of a retreat as well as a defeat.

But the 200th did not fall back many miles before the major of the regiment halted the main body of the men on the slopes of a rocky mount which he determined to hold and to give the scattered and wounded a chance to return, so a stand was made. For there was no hiding the fact; the poor 200th had been badly beaten, as an English regiment

might reasonably be when every man was surprised and called upon to fight six, mostly hidden from him by rocks and trees.

The enemy did not follow their advantage, so that the English had the whole of that night to rest and refresh, though there was not much of either, for upon the roll of the companies being called a hundred brave men did not answer; many were wounded; and, worst misfortune of all, the Colonel was among the missing, and had been seen last fighting like a hero as he tried with a small company of men to save the baggage and ammunition.

“And our poor boy, Joe,” sobbed Mrs Corporal that night, as she sat by the watch-fire, “trampled down and killed, just as I had begun to love him as much as if he had been my own.”

“Cheer up, old lass,” said Joe, wincing as he spoke, for a bullet had ploughed a nasty furrow in one arm; “we don’t know yet that he isn’t all right. Prisoner, perhaps. Let’s wait till morning, and see.”

Mrs Corporal sobbed, and of course waited, with the men under arms all night and expecting an attack.

But the night passed away without any alarm, and soon after sunrise in the beautiful chestnut wood, about fifty of the missing crawled back into camp, but there was no news of the Colonel, none of Dick, and poor Mrs Corporal Beane had another terrible trouble on her mind as she nursed and held water to her husband’s feverish lips, for in the terrible fight at the surprise brave stout-hearted Joe Beane had been shot close to the Colonel’s side, and he remembered seeing that officer wave his sword, and hearing him cry, “Forward, my lads; this way,” but he could recollect no more.

Chapter Four.

Dick could remember every thing that took place then, though all that had occurred before he was hurt still remained blank. He remembered the crashing volleys fired from both sides of the gorge, and the way in which the long line of the marching regiment faced both ways and fired again, before making a brave charge forward, led by their officers, to fight their way through the enemy in front, but only to be beaten back, withered as their formation was by the terrible fire on all sides. He remembered this, and how all of a sudden, as the mule he rode was carried along in the crowd, and he clung tightly to the bundle with which it was loaded, the poor beast suddenly stood still, uttered a strange squeal, and then reared up so that Dick was nearly jerked off. But the poor animal, which had been pierced through the lungs by a bullet, came down again on all-fours, and then dashed off at full gallop towards the clouds of smoke in front, bore off to the left as some dimly-seen men stabbed at it with their bayonets, and tore on over rock and bush, higher and higher up the side of the gorge, with Dick still clinging tightly to the ropes of the bundle, till all at once it uttered a shrill cry, reared up again, and then fell, throwing the boy down among the tangled growth, rolled over, once kicked out its legs for a few moments, and then lay perfectly still.

Dick lay as still for a few minutes, feeling too much startled to move. Then he managed to crawl out of the rocky rift into which he had been thrown, and stood up, all ragged, with his red coatee split up the back, and one sleeve torn out at the shoulder.

For a few minutes he stood listening to the shouting and firing far below and watched the smoke curling up; his face was all puckered up, and he rubbed himself where he was pricked and scratched. Then he examined his damaged clothes, and lastly he climbed up to where the mule lay, on its side with its heels higher up the slope than its stretched-out neck and head.

“Poor old fellow!” he said. “Did the shooting frighten you? Come on, get up.”

But the mule did not stir, and the boy knelt down by it to raise its head a little, but only to let it sink back, and shrink away, in horror—the poor animal, who had always been ready to eat grass or pieces of unripe melon from his hand, lay dead, pierced by the bullet, and bayoneted in three places by the French.

And now the tears which the little fellow had manfully kept back began to flow fast, and he knelt down by the poor beast’s side, feeling stunned.

And as he knelt there the firing went on, but in a scattered way, as the 200th fell back with the enemy in full pursuit, the boy turning at last to watch the progress of the fight far below and seeing the scarlet coats of his friends growing more and more distant in the smoke, and the blue uniforms of the French as they crowded after them, till the reports of the muskets grew faint; and the echoes from high up on either side of the gorge more soft till they died away.

Dick’s first idea was to hurry off, but there was only one way, and that was down the wooded ravine; but he could not go that way, for the place between him and his friends was swarming with the French soldiers, and he shuddered at the thought of trying to get through them. He had of late seen and heard so much of their cruel acts.

What should he do?

He had hardly asked himself this question when he heard a shout, and his heart leaped—it was his friends coming back.

No; he could see below him the uniforms of the French soldiers, and their bayonets flashing in the golden light of the sinking sun, and in fear he shrank back among the thick bushes and hid below the place where he had been thrown, to lie listening as the voices came nearer, a peep or two that he stole showing that the enemy were spread out low down by the rugged track, evidently very busy, and it seemed to the boy that they were hunting for him to kill him.

He grew more and more sure of this as the voices came nearer, but at last he realised the truth—that the men were

searching amongst the bushes for the wounded and dead.

This went on for an hour, and Dick's courage rose as he saw them carrying man after man down to the track, men in red and men in blue, and bearing them away, with the voices growing fewer and fewer.

"And it will soon be dark," the boy said to himself, "and then I can go back and find mother and father."

Just then he heard shouts again, and he shrank back beneath the bushes, to listen, not understanding a word; but the voices came nearer and nearer and Dick's heart sank, for there was a shout and two men ran up to within a dozen yards of where the boy lay.

"They can see me, and are going to shoot," he thought, and he shut his eyes and shivered, and thought of the corporal and his wife.

But no shot was fired; no bright keen bayonet plunged through the bushes; and taking courage the boy raised his head and peered upward towards where two French soldiers were busy doing something, and another came and joined them, to stand talking and laughing.

Then the boy grasped the fact that they had seen the mule, and were cutting the ropes and opening the pack to see if there was anything worth taking.

At last the notes of a bugle came echoing up the ravine from side to side.

The soldiers immediately rose from where they were busy, shouldered their muskets, and began to descend the slope, while Dick lay listening to the crackling and brushing sounds as they forced their way through the bushes. There was another bugle call, and some time after another, sounding quite faint, and as the boy crept out of his hiding-place at last, to find the contents of the mule's pack, the belongings of the corporal's mess for the most part scattered about the ground, he looked keenly in search of danger!

And how still it was! Not a sound—even the cry of a bird; only a faint silvery rippling tinkle somewhere near; a sound which set the boy creeping, to find it low down between some rocks slippery with green moss which grew all about a tiny pool, into which after lying flat upon his chest he plunged his lips, and drank again and again to quench his thirst.

Chapter Five.

That long, deep draught of sweet, cool water seemed to send fresh life through Dick, and he rose up, thinking that it would be easy now to get down to the track and find his way back to his friends, but he shook his head.

No, he said, the Frenchmen would be about, and he might lose his way in the dark. Better wait a bit.

But it was so horribly lonely, and the stillness made him shiver as if he were cold, and obeying a natural instinct to be near something, he climbed back to where the dead mule lay, dragged a blanket from where the French soldiers had tossed it, and threw it over him. Then he crept close to the mule's side, to sit watching the light die out on the tops of the mountains and the stars begin to come out. His head began to sink sidewise, nodded once or twice, and in spite of the darkness and the horror of his situation he fell fast asleep, to begin dreaming of Mother Beane, of the camp-fire and the cooking, and Tom Jones the bugle boy making a horrible noise on his copper horn, as he would sometimes in play: and then he started into wakefulness, to crouch there listening, for the hoarse sound sounded again from somewhere below.

The boy shuddered, for he knew it was not the note of the bugle, but a horrible long-drawn cry, faint and strange, and the cold drops began to gather on his forehead, for it sounded like the howling of a wolf, such a cry as he had heard Mother Beane talk about when telling him and Tom Jones about her adventures over the camp-fire. He listened and shuddered as the cry came again out of the darkness: and then the frightened feeling passed away.

"'Tisn't a wolf," he said, and he started to his feet. "Where are you?" he shouted, wishing that he had not spoken in his excitement, for he felt that it might be a French soldier. Then he began to feel his way slowly through the bushes, for it was no enemy who replied, but someone English calling out from the thick darkness of the night that terribly stirring word,—Help.

Dick had only one thought then, a thought which overmastered fear. Someone was in trouble and wanted help. It must be a wounded soldier, some one of his many friends who had chatted to him as he rode, for everyone in the regiment had a kind word to say.

"Hoi! Where are you?" he shouted, and the voice answered from very near: but the bushes were thick, the rocks many, and the darkness deep, so that it was some time before Dick could reach the spot and pass his hands over someone lying there.

"Water."

That was the only answer to his question, "Who is it?"

Dick remembered the terrible thirst brought on by his own excitement, and the delicious draught of water from the little pool, as he eagerly turned away, wondering whether he could find the water again in the dark.

"Of course I can," he said to himself the next minute, for he had only to listen to the musical trickling sound, and find the way by his ears. But the next trouble was not so easy to get over. What was he to fetch the water in?

He laughed softly to himself. The mule had been loaded with things belonging to the corporal's mess, and he felt certain that he could find a tin.

But he had first of all to find out where the dead mule lay, no easy task in a strange place, and in the dark: but he tried and tried again, twice over finding himself near the pool, and it was not until he had passed near it over and over again that he kicked against something thrown away by the French soldiers, and the rest was easy. The next minute he was upon his knees searching about among the tumbled-together things, till to his great joy he touched the very article he wanted, and armed with this he sought for and found the little pool, filled the tin, and started upon the difficult task of carrying the water down a slope amongst rocks and trees and roots and creepers which seemed to be frying to trip him up.

At last after trying for long enough he stopped short in despair, feeling completely lost. Half the water had been spilt, and he had called again—"Where are you?" but there was no reply. And now a terrible feeling of dread came over him again, as the thought took possession of his mind that the wounded man was dead. So strong was this that it took away all the courage which had helped him so far, and in the poor fellow's misery and despair he felt that the only thing to do now was to sit down and let the tears run while he waited till it was morning.

But that was not to be, for just when his courage was at its lowest ebb he started and nearly dropped the tin, for from out of the darkness close by there was a piteous moan, and as he sought cautiously for the place from whence it came, he was helped by a low muttering as of someone saying a prayer very slowly. And it was, for he heard the words, "Thy will be done," and sank upon his knees by the sufferer's head without spilling another drop.

Dick did not speak, but waited for the prayer to be finished: but there was no farther sound, and he whispered gently: "I've brought the water."

Still there was no sound, and the boy began to think that he had come too late.

He spoke again and again, but there was no reply, and after feeling about a little he dipped his fingers in the tin and let a few drops fall upon the poor fellow's dry lips. Then more and more, as he found they moved. Then he scooped up as much as his little hand would hold, guided it carefully and held it there so that a few drops trickled between the man's lips and the others ran over his face and neck, with a strangely reviving effect. For there was a low sigh or two, and he could hear the sound repeated of his patient trying to swallow, after which his mouth opened widely, so that he was able to pour in more water, which now was swallowed with avidity.

All this had such a reviving effect that suddenly to Dick's great delight there was a hoarse whisper—

"More—more. Water—water."

This was responded to at once, and after a few more tiny portions had been poured between the sufferer's lips a hoarse voice said:—

"Heaven bless you, it has saved my life."

"Can you sit up a little and drink?" said Dick eagerly.

"I don't know—I'll try."

There was a faint rustling, a piteous groan of pain, and then:—

"Now quick. I can do no more. Water."

By touch Dick found that his companion had raised himself on one elbow, and he guided the tin to his lips with one hand, passing the other round the poor fellow's head to try and support him, as he drank eagerly till the last drops were drained from the tin.

"Like life—like life," was sighed, and Dick felt his patient sink down again with a sigh of content.

"Shall I fetch some more?" said the boy.

"Not yet. Tell me. Who are you? Is it a woman?"

Dick laughed in his great joy at hearing the words.

"No," he said: "it's only me."

"You? Who are you?"

"Dick. Mrs Corporal Beane's Dick."

"Oh, my boy, my boy, you have saved my life," moaned the sufferer, catching the little fellow's hand and pressing it to his fevered lips.

"But who are you?" said the boy. "I don't know your voice."

"Don't you, my brave little fellow? Yes, you do—the Colonel, Colonel Lavis."

"Oh," said Dick wonderingly, "and did somebody shoot you?"

"Yes. I was hit twice. I crawled away among the bushes and rocks after I fell, and then all was dark, and I was trying

to creep to where I could hear water. But tell me, my brave lad. They drove the Frenchmen off?"

"No," said Dick sadly, and as he told all he knew the Colonel groaned again and again and to Dick's horror he heard him mutter to himself:—

"Better that I had died—better that I had died than suffer this. The defeat—the shame."

Then all was still in the darkness, the fear began to creep into Dick's breast again, and he gently stretched out his hand to touch the Colonel's, when to his great joy his hand was seized: then another hand touched it, and he felt it kissed and then held fast, drawing him forward so that he half lay across the wounded man's breast, and could feel the beating of his heart, lying thinking there till he heard a low sigh or two, followed by a steady regular breathing as if he slept.

And at last, utterly wearied out, sleep came to the boy as well, and he lay dreaming there, keeping what might have been the chill of death from a brave man's breast, till the sun rose again and was beating down warmly upon the back of Dick's head, when he opened his eyes to stare wonderingly at the stained and blackened face so close to his.

Dick did not dare to stir for fear of awakening the Colonel again: but he was not asleep, for after a time he opened his eyes and smiled pleasantly.

"The fortune of war, little comrade," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Dick, and he stared at him, wondering that the stern, fierce officer who ordered the men about so could look so pleasant.

"That's right," said the Colonel: "we have been successful many times. But let's see, Dick, you were brought into camp wounded."

"Yes," said Dick. "My head was very bad."

"Of course. I remember all about it. How was it you were injured?"

Dick shook the head that had been hurt.

"You don't know? But you speak well. Who are your father and mother?"

"Corporal Beane and Mrs Corporal."

The Colonel looked at the boy curiously.

"Yes," he said at last: "so I remember hearing. Well, Dick, you were wounded, and we helped you: now it is my turn and you have helped me."

"Yes," said Dick.

"I am thirsty, my boy: will you fetch me some water?"

"Yes," said Dick, seizing the tin.

"But look carefully round: the enemy may be holding the ground."

"Would they kill us if they saw us, sir?"

"I hope not, boy: but if I can bear my wounds I'll keep in hiding, for my brave lads must make an effort to find us soon."

"I'll mind," said Dick, and he took a long look round, and then crept on hands and knees to the spring, looked at it longingly, but forebore to drink, and filling the tin he bore it to the Colonel, who lay just as he had left him.

"Can you lift my head, boy?" he said. "Set down the tin."

Not an easy thing to do without spilling the water, but Dick succeeded, and then managed with the Colonel's help to raise him a little so that he could reach the water, of which he drank with avidity and was once more lowered back, to lie faint and giddy for a few minutes, but he recovered soon and said he was better, speaking so freely and kindly to the boy that Dick took courage.

"I say," he said: "you've got such a dirty face."

"Have I, Dick?" said the Colonel, smiling. "Yes, it's all over gunpowder, and all bloody. Shall I wash it?"



"Please, Dick, my boy," said the Colonel, and Dick took the tin to the spring as carefully as before, after looking up and down the great ravine, filled it, and this time had a good draught himself, and felt hungry as he took the refilled tin back, set it down by the Colonel's head, and then began to purse up his lips and think what he should do.

He was not long making up his mind, and tearing the lining out of his damaged sleeve to soak in the water and use for a sponge.

"But I haven't a towel," he said.

"There's a clean handkerchief in the breast pocket of my coat," said the Colonel, smiling. "Take it out."

"That hurt you?" said Dick, after unbuttoning the uniform and taking out the carefully folded handkerchief just as Mrs Corporal Beane had brought it to him from the wash.

"Yes, but not very much," said the Colonel. "Go on, it will be cool and refreshing."

He was in great pain, but he lay smiling with a very kindly, fatherly look at the clever little fellow, as Dick carefully washed away the stains, having to go over the officer's face twice before it was quite clean, after which he dried it, and knelt there looking at the bright sword which was hanging by its golden knot to the Colonel's right arm.

"Shall I take that off before I wash your hands?" The Colonel nodded and smiled in the same fatherly way as the boy unloosed the sword-knot, laid the weapon close by and then washed and dried the wounded man's hands.

"I say," said Dick then, "I can tear this handkerchief when it's dry. Shall I tie up your cuts?"

"No," said the Colonel sadly: "they must wait till the Doctor comes, Dick, if he ever does. They are not cuts, my boy, but bullet-holes, and they have ceased to bleed. Now what is to be done next?"

"Get up, and let's find the men."

"No, boy," said the Colonel sadly. "I could not move. We must wait. But you are hungry. Were there any rations on the mule?"

"No," said Dick, shaking his head: "they were on the other mule. We must wait: but I am so hungry. Aren't you?"

"No," said the Colonel sadly, and his eyes wandered round, but he looked in vain. They were in a wild ravine, and not so much as a berry was in sight.

"We must wait, Dick," he said at last. "Surely they will come in search of us soon."

Chapter Six.

The sun shone down hotter and hotter, and all was still but the twittering of a bird at times. Dick took the blanket he had wrapped about him overnight and spread it over two pieces of rock so as to form a screen, propping it a little with a broken bough or two. So long as he was busy doing little things for the Colonel, Dick did not seem to mind so

much, but just when the sun was highest and it was hotter than ever in the valley, the poor Colonel grew more feverish. He asked for water often, and then all at once the boy felt frightened, for the wounded man began to talk and mutter wildly: then he began to shout to his men to come on and charge, and at last poor Dick broke down. Hunger, misery, loneliness and the heat, were too much for him: the wild nature of the Colonel's words, and his fierce look when he felt for and waved his sword, making the little fellow shrink away and go and sit behind a stone, his head aching, and the terrible solitude there amongst the mountains seeming more than he could bear.

But as the evening came on and a soft breeze sprang up, a change came over the wounded man, and Dick heard himself called.

He crept back to the Colonel's side, and the wounded man took his hand, and he said, "Can you be brave and strong?"

"No, sir," faltered the boy, with his lip quivering, "but I'll try to be."

"That is being brave, my boy. Now look here, I have been asleep, and dreaming wild things, but I am cool and calm now. Listen to me. You are faint and hungry, and you must not stay here any longer. You must go."

"But I can't leave you all alone, sir."

"You must, my boy. Here is what I want you to do. Throw the blanket over me and fill the tin with water."

The boy did this and felt better, for it kept off the feeling of misery.

"That is good," said the Colonel. "Now start off at once down the valley, and if you see any of the French soldiers before you, strike off to left or right and try and get by them, and don't go down to the track again till they are left behind."

"And then find our men, sir?" cried the boy excitedly.

"Yes."

"And tell them where you are, and bring some back to carry you to your tent?"

"Yes," said the Colonel, smiling.

"But suppose I can't find them, sir?"

"Then—" said the Colonel, looking sadly at the boy, before closing his eyes, "then—we won't talk about that, my boy: a brave little fellow like you must find them."

"Yes, I'll try," said Dick eagerly. "When shall I go?"

"Now," said the Colonel, and the boy dashed off at once among the rocks and bushes, but in five minutes he was back again.

"What, boy, do you give it up?"

"No," said Dick stoutly. "I was in such a hurry I didn't say good-bye, sir—and—and—"

"Well, what?" said the Colonel, smiling, for the little fellow stopped.

"I was afraid!"

"Afraid?"

"You'd think I didn't mind, and wanted to get away and leave you."

"But you do not, my boy?"

"Only to find someone to help you."

The Colonel caught his hand and drew him down closer and closer till he could kiss him, when the tears started to Dick's eyes and he flung his arms round the wounded man's neck and clung to him and kissed him in return.

"Now go, Dick," said the Colonel. "I have just such a little fellow at home in England, and I want to see him again."

"Have you?" cried Dick eagerly: "then I will find our men so that you shall."

"Hah," sighed the Colonel as Dick started off, and he watched the boy till he disappeared. Then he sighed again, drew the blanket more over him and closed his eyes, and as the sun went down and the darkness fell he sank into a deep sleep.

It was just beginning to get dusk the next evening and the sentries about the little hill where the 200th lay had been doubled. For the French regiments not many hundred yards away had crept in closer, and were so placed that the English were surrounded, and their case was very desperate, for though they had plenty of water their provender was getting low, and the scouts sent out had reported to the Major that it looked as if an attack was going to be made.

So the wounded had been placed together behind a rough wall built of pieces of rock, and the men stationed, all hungry and desperate, ready to meet the enemy when they came and drive them back.

"And oh, dear! It's weary work," said Mrs Corporal, who had had nothing to cook for the men, but made up for it by acting as nurse and helping the wounded.

She was kneeling down by Corporal Beane when she spoke, and had been trying to comfort him, for he had done nothing but growl because the doctor said he must not think of getting up, and as she talked to him she said suddenly: "Oh, if I could only know what has become of my boy."

She stopped short, for at that moment a shot was fired, and Corporal Beane sat up and reached for his musket.

"Here they come," he cried. "I don't care what the doctor says—I won't lie here. Give me my cartridge-box, old woman: I'm going to fight."

There was another shot, close at hand, and then a shrill voice rang out:—"Oh, don't shoot—don't shoot!"



"*My boy Dick!*" shouted Mrs Beane, and she rushed out, as torn and bleeding, the boy staggered up between two of the men, and the next minute was surrounded by the officers, but could not speak for exhaustion: but he made signs for water, drank some thirstily, and one of the sentries stated to the Major that he had seen something crawling up towards his post and fired.

"And then I see it, and fired too, sir," said the other.

"Poor boy," cried the Major. "Where are you hurt?"

"I don't know—everywhere. I'm scratched, and I tumbled, and my knees are sore. But do go directly, oh! Do go, or he'll be dead."

It was some time before in his weak, half-starved state the poor boy could make them understand, for he had completely broken down: and it was not until he had swallowed a little biscuit soaked in wine, as he lay with his head in Mrs Beane's lap, that he at last told hysterically of how he had managed to crawl by the French outposts and reached his friends.

His last words were, "Why don't you go?—the Colonel—you'll be too late."

There was silence for a few minutes, all present watching the little messenger as he lay back insensible in Mrs Beane's arms.

Then the Major walked away: the men were formed up in a hollow square: and he addressed them and told them that their Colonel was lying wounded and dying away yonder, on the slope of the ravine, and he called for volunteers to fetch him in.

They stepped forward to a man, and a strong company was told off under one of the captains, the doctor being of the party, and the men carrying a litter ready for their load.

"But we must have the boy for a guide," said the Major.

There were difficulties in the way, and Mrs Corporal Beane was consulted, for it was evident that Dick was in too exhausted a state to be moved, and she said so as she paused for a few moments in the task of giving him food, a little at a time.

"No, I'm not, sir," said the boy, to the great surprise of all present. "I can't walk, but if father came too he could carry me on his back, and I'll show you the way."

There was a moment's silence, and Mrs Corporal sobbed.

"He's wounded badly, my dear," she said, kissing him: "but I'm as stout and strong as father is, and I'll go and carry you."

"With every man of us to help you," cried the Captain, and in half an hour's time, aided by the darkness, the little party stole out of the fortified camp, and by great good fortune passed with Dick's guidance beyond the enemy's lines. Then every effort was made, and soon after daybreak the spot where the disastrous fight had been was reached.

It was a sad group which surrounded the motionless figure lying covered with a blanket, which the doctor removed and knelt down; Dick struggling to the other side, while the Captain and his men waited to hear the worst.

"We are not too late," said the doctor, rising: and after administering stimulants, the words proved true, for the Colonel opened his eyes, looked wildly round, and then smiled as his gaze rested upon Dick, who was holding his hand.

"Thank you, Dick, boy," he said, in a faint whisper. "I knew you would."

The cheer which rose from the men made the rocks echo again, and the Captain turned from grasping his old friend's hand, and said sharply:—

"Silence in the ranks—no, I mean, another cheer, my lads."

And it was given.

A short halt was made by the pool, while stimulants were administered again to the Colonel, and Mrs Beane insisted on Dick having more, the men eating their scanty rations by the pool. Then the wounded man was carefully laid in the litter so that Dick could lie there too, with his head the opposite way: the men raised their poles, and the march back was begun.

It was just after dark that evening that they were proceeding very cautiously, when there was a sudden outburst of firing.

The Captain needed no telling what was going on, for the long expected attack was being made upon the weakened regiment upon the hill. He did not hesitate, but pressed on with his little band, quite unnoticed by the attacking force, coming upon their rear in the darkness just as they were receiving a check from the brave defenders of the camp, and the Captain poured in volley after volley so unexpectedly that the French broke, and began to retreat before their foes. The Major, grasping what had occurred, turned his defence into a brave attack, and the result was that in a few minutes the enemy was in full retreat, and soon after, this in their confusion became a rout.

Chapter Seven.

In a month's time, in spite of weakness, the Colonel had sufficiently recovered to resume the command of his regiment, and Dick was the hero and idol of the men.

But poor Mrs Corporal Beane was jealous and unhappy—jealous because the Colonel made so much of Dick; unhappy on account of the Corporal, whose recovery was very slow. But the Colonel, she owned, behaved very well to her. He said that he would not interfere much, as he looked upon herself as the boy's mother, but sooner or later they would find out who Dick's parents were, and that he should stay with the regiment, but he must be looked after well.

"As if he could be looked after better," Mrs Corporal said to her invalid husband. "I do look after you well, Dick, don't I?"

"Yes, mother; of course you do," said the boy.

"And love you too; and you love me and father, don't you?"

"Why, you know I do," said the boy, laughing, "and Colonel Lavis sent for the tailor this morning, and I was measured for a new uniform like the men in the band."

"Bless us and save us!" cried Mrs Beane. "Well, that is handsome of him, but like a drummer, Dick, not with gold lace?"

"Yes, scarlet and gold," said the little fellow proudly; "and I'm to learn to play."

It would be a long story to tell of the terrible fights the 200th were in all through that terrible Peninsular War: but Dick was with the regiment and through it all, not fighting, but with the doctor and the men whose duty it was to look after

the wounded, and many were the blessings called down upon the head of the brave boy, who seemed to bear a charmed life, as he ran here and there with water to hold to the lips of the poor fellows who were stricken down.

But all things have an end, the bad like the good, and in the days of peace the 200th were being feasted at one of the towns by the Portuguese gentry and some of the English merchants who had been nearly ruined by the war.

Dick was in it all, for he was strong and well as could be—happy too as a boy, but his memory was still a perfect blank about the past. He could recall everything which had happened since he was nursed back to health and strength, but nothing more; and poor Corporal Joe, who was never likely to be able to join the ranks again, and only too grateful at being allowed to act as the Colonel's servant, never mentioned to the boy the day when he found him up at the burning house.

"Only set him thinking about them murdering camp-followers, missus, and make him unhappy, and we don't want that, do us?"

"No, Joe, dear," she cried; "I should think we don't."

And so the time had nearly come for the remnant to march to the port and embark for England, when a farewell party was given to the officers by a Mr and Mrs Trevor, the principal merchant and his lady, and out of compliment the Colonel and officers sent the band up to the mansion to play in the garden during dinner, Dick being told that he might go with the musicians to see the sight.

Everyone of note was there, and the sight was grand in the lit-up grounds. There was feasting and speech-making and thanks given to the brave men who had saved the country from the oppressor, and the Colonel returned thanks.

It was just then that the band-master turned to Dick and said:—

"Go up to the Colonel and ask him if we shall play the dance music now."

The band was stationed by one of the open windows, and Dick, in his best uniform, had only to step in and go round behind the Colonel's chair to whisper to him.

"Ah, Dick, my boy," he said. "Dance music? Yes. Stop; I'll ask our hostess. By the way, Mrs Trevor," he said, turning to the tall, sad-looking lady at whose side he was sitting, "let me introduce to you the greatest man in our corps, the brave little fellow who saved my life."

Mrs Trevor turned smilingly round, when a sunburned gentleman on her other side gave utterance to a gasp and sprang from his chair.

"My dear madam," cried the Colonel, "are you ill?"



For Mrs Trevor uttered a wild cry, as, to the astonishment of all, the little fellow in scarlet and gold sprang to her side and threw his arms about her neck.

"Oh, mother! Why, father," he cried, "do you live here?"

The boy's memory of the past had come back like a flash of light, and as he caught at Mr Trevor's hand he suddenly turned pale, shivered, and clapped his hands to the scar upon his head, for the horror of the scene before he was struck down by one of a gang of French camp-followers came back to him with terrible vividness.

The banquet was nearly at an end when this scene took place and after warm congratulations from the visitors, they had the good taste to hurry away, and the band was dismissed, the Colonel only stopping with the boy to help him relate how he was retained in the regiment.

He heard in return an explanation from Mr Trevor, who told how it was that the burned house was their country villa among the mountains, where in ignorance of danger being near, the boy was left with the servants for a few hours, the father and mother returning to find only smoking ruins and the traces of a horrible massacre having taken place. So convinced were they that their son had perished in the fire with the servants that no search was made, and the Trevors fled, glad to escape with their lives, Mr Trevor having a hard task to restore his wife to reason after the terrible shock.

To them their child was dead, and they had felt that they would never thoroughly recover from the dreadful blow.

"But you see, Colonel, one never knows what is in store, and it is not right to despair. Now, how can we thank you enough for all that you have done?"

"I don't want thanks," said the Colonel. "I ought to thank you for all that he so bravely did for me; and besides, Dick, boy, there was someone else who—"

He stopped, for a servant entered the room.

"I beg pardon, sir, but there's a woman and a soldier outside. I told them you were engaged, but the woman said she would see you."

"A woman and a soldier?" cried Mr Trevor—"will see me?"

"I know," cried Dick excitedly, "it's mother and father—I mean—I—"

He too stopped short, and looked from one to the other. "I mean," he cried bravely, "my other father and mother, who saved me and brought me back to life."

"Where is he?" cried an angry voice in the hall. "I will see him. Dick, my darling Dick!"

Mrs Trevor turned white, and a pang shot through her, as she saw her newly-recovered son rush to the door, throw it open and call out loudly:—"Here I am, mother: this way."

"Oh, my darling!" cried Mrs Corporal: "I've just heard—Oh, what does it mean? I—I beg your pardon, my lady, and you too, sir, and Colonel, but—but they've been telling me—"

"Yes, it's all true," cried Dick, interrupting her. "Mother dear, this is my other mother, and father dear, this is Corporal Joe."

"Oh—oh—oh!" sobbed Mrs Corporal wildly; "after all this time, and me getting to love him and look upon him as my own! Oh, my lady, my lady, you never would be so cruel as to take him away? It would be so wicked, so hard upon us now."

"My own boy?" said Mrs Trevor gently, as Dick stood gazing wildly from one to the other.

"But for us never to see him again," cried Mrs Corporal fiercely, and she caught the boy by the arm. "Don't say you won't love us still, Dick dear!"

"Why should he say such cruel words to one who has been a second mother to him,—to one who brought him back to life? And why should you never see him again? We are going to England too, and while we have a home it shall be yours as well."

Mrs Trevor took the rough woman's hand, leaned towards her, and kissed her cheek.

"For saving my darling's life," she said softly, and then burst into tears.

Poor Mrs Corporal's anger melted at this, and she caught Mrs Trevor's hand in hers and kissed it again and again.

"Oh, my dear lady," she sobbed; "I'm a wicked, selfish woman, and he is your own flesh and blood. Come with you to be where I could always see the dear, brave, darling boy? Oh, I'd go down on my knees and be thankful, but I can't leave my poor man. I wouldn't if he was strong and well, and now he's wounded and broken and got to leave the regiment—no, not if we had to beg our bread from door to door. Kiss me, my darling boy, once more, and then—oh Joe, my man, I can't bear it! Take me away, take me away."

Joe, who had stood back stiffly in the background near where Dick's father was whispering with Colonel Lavis, took two steps to the front with a painful limp, saluted the company, and caught his half-blind wife in his arms.

"It's quite right, my lass," he said huskily, "and—from my heart, my lady, I say thank God the dear lad's coming to his own. Don't mind what the missus said—she—she, you see, loved him, and—good-bye, Master Dick, my lad—good—"

"Stop," said Mr Trevor, stepping towards him with his eyes moist, and clapping the invalided soldier on the shoulder. "Corporal, your Colonel says that you are as brave and true a man as ever stepped. I feel that it must be so. While I

live the wounded soldier to whom we owe so much shall never want a home. Dick, as they call you—Frank, my boy, what do you say to this?”

“Say?” faltered the boy, as he stood trembling, and then he could not speak. The next moment he had rushed to his mother to kiss her passionately, giving her a look that seemed to say, “Don’t think I shall not love you more than ever;” and then he ran and caught Joe’s hand, holding it fast for a moment, before flinging his arms about poor Mrs Corporal’s neck, to whisper something in her ear which made the poor woman wipe away her tears.

“Hah!” cried the Colonel huskily, “this is peace indeed.”

That night mother and father stole hand in hand into the room next their own, where their son lay sleeping peacefully. They did not bend down to kiss him lest he should start awake, but they knelt by his side in thankfulness for the great joy which filled their hearts, before thinking sadly of those to whom they owed so much.

Strangely enough, just about the same time Mrs Corporal rose from her knees and said:—

“There, Joe, old man, I won’t cry another drop, for I feel now that it’s right and what should be. But just in here somewhere there’s a little place where he’ll always seem to be—our soldier boy to the very end.”

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OUR SOLDIER BOY ***

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