

THE STORY OF BLINKY STUBB

"They Got Me, But I'm Glad" Said the Lad Who Was Called the Scum of the Regiment

By RICHARD V. BROWNE

HE had spent the preceding day, in the filthy lodging house, where he had heard a stray remark concerning a war. He wondered, as he trudged down the wind-swept alley, what war it could be. Ah, yes! If his memory served him, it was the puny war in the Balkan States. But it had been years ago, before he had been caught and sentenced to life in Stonehurst.

He shuddered violently, as an icy blast tore aside the dirty neck-cloth and burrowed into his skinny throat. It would have been better if he had waited. It was warm in prison but here—

He paused. In his path a blank wall rose abruptly and he found his eyes resting on a poster with luridly printed letters, a foot high. In the dim light from a distant street lamp, he could make out the words,

**YOUR KING AND COUNTRY
WANT YOU.**

"Lordy," he chuckled, in his first surprise. "They want ME." Into the vault of his memory rushed the vision of a band of warders darting through the night, in search of him, and he burst into a harsh laugh. Oh, yes! They wanted him. He turned to go, then the picture caught his eye.

It looked fine, that picture of a soldier, as he stood, bayonet in his clenched grasp, ready to do and die for his country. But his uniform was even better. It looked warm. A dim desire to wear clothes like these came into the man's mind.

His thin frame shook as the wind tore round an angle of the wall. He cast a last look at the picture soldier and shuffled down the cobbled way, his head shrunken in the worn collar of his tattered coat. Sluggishly a half-formed wish entered his mind.

HE drifted on, down streets, up alleys, across avenues, hiding in some dark recess as a constable plodded past, cowering in some shelter from the biting wind, until he had reached a familiar haunt.

It was a squalid court, muddy underfoot, musty, evil-smelling and dark. His groping hands, searching the darkness, clutched a broken stair-rail, that led upwards, on one side. Cautiously he made his way up the steps. A door confronted him, he tried it, to find it locked, so he knocked softly, then waited impatiently. Soon he heard footsteps, a rattle of a chain and the door was opened a trifle. The frowzy head, red-rimmed eyes and shrunken face of an ancient crone protruded. In one talon-like hand, she held a candle aloft.

The man greeted her with a snarl. "Mother, Wag Wilson in?"

The woman broke into cackling laughter.

"Well, well, if it ain't Blinky Stubb," she said.

The one addressed looked fearfully around, then, his glance returning to the hag, he growled harshly.

"Close yer blime mouth, ye fool, where's me pal?"

"Gone."

A curse broke from Stubb's lips. "Where, I said?" "He went an' joined th' sodgers," grunted the woman, briefly. "An' 'e's in France a fightin' th' bloomin' furriners."

The door slammed in his face and he could hear shrill laughter as she moved away. He had no reason to doubt her words, so he retraced his steps. He cursed his old pal, under his breath. So Wag was a soldier, eh? A blessed hero, maybe. Perhaps Wag, too, had thought the uniform looked warm. "Or, maybe," he muttered, as an afterthought. "He fell for that 'King and Country' stuff."

HE laughed tonelessly to himself as he continued on his way. He mused scornfully. "His King and Country." Was not the Country seeking him, watching for him with outstretched hands, to haul him back to the hell of Stonehurst.

But he always found himself reverting to his original thought. He wondered if the clothes were as warm as they looked. Indeed they would have to be very thin to match the rags he wore. He checked his slouching stride, while he tried to remember the place where recruits were asked to go.

His memory served him well, his feet better. In a half-hour he was standing before a sleepy sergeant, who, sizing him up, with a contemptuous frown, thought to himself, "He'll stop a bullet, anyway," and told him where to report.

For a time, the novelty of the warm clothes and the rough, but good meals, kept Stubb in a cheery frame of mind. He looked a queer figure in his uniform. It was many sizes too large for him and hung upon his body in bagging folds. Still he was satisfied, until he recognized Captain Blair.

Blair had been a guard at Stonehurst, and the best hated man in the prison. Stubb had often felt the raw edge of his tongue, and had often sworn that he would "get him" for it. Now that he was in the army he had not changed. His men looked at him with hatred in their glance, and many were the muttered curses that were flung at his retreating back. But Stubb went around with fear in his heart, waiting, ever waiting, for the dreaded moment when

Blair would recognize him.

He began hating it all, the life, his comrades, and most of all, Blair. Indeed he had a half-formed plan to shoot the captain, in the thick of some battle. He vaguely began to realize that he had gone from bad to worse. True, the prison folk could scarcely find him here, but then a German bayonet might, and he would be laying as still as the man he had—

A MONTH passed by, and he found himself at the front, a recruit no longer, but a seasoned soldier. He still retained an air of uncouthness and he had lost none of his taciturnity. His comrades dubbed him "Silent Stubb," and he took their chaff, to all appearances, in good humour, but inwardly it rankled.

At last the night arrived when they were ordered to move on the enemy. The fear of death crept into his heart and gnawed its way to his craven brain. He must desert, was his uppermost thought. It was the only way to be free again. He pondered vaguely how it could be done.

He edged to the end of the moving line, slowly, carefully. The night was velvet in its blackness and he was unseen. In the distance a glare of fire tinted the sky a crimson. The enemy's trenches lay in that direction, so he must go the other way.

He walked past the last man, he was a few yards away. He expected a shout or maybe a bullet, but none came. Then he ran and the darkness swallowed him. He fancied he heard a hail, but it made him only run the faster. He realized he must not turn back now. Besides, he knew there was no reason to do so. He had mapped his way in the last few minutes, cleverly, indeed. As shrewdly as when he had broken through the iron bonds of Stonehurst.

He knew what lies to tell, what battle tales to weave. He would make them believe him. He had heard the Colonel say it was "certain death." He hated death, hated them all, the prison, his comrades and the bully Blair.

"They look upon me as the scum of the regiment," he snarled to himself. "I was only in it to fill a better man's place."

He stumbled and half fell to his knees, even as he spoke. A wire stretched in his path had thrown him. A grey figure seemed to rise out of the ground beside him and the stock of a rifle fell with crushing force on his head. He had a faint vision of other men in grey, a misty impression of guttural voices, then all was blank.

THE eery light of a wan moon was filtering through the trees, when with a low moan, he rolled to one side and raised his head. What length of time had passed he did not know, but he reasoned that it could not have been long, for it was still night. In the distance he heard a throbbing hubbub of rifle

shots, then even they died into silence.

He staggered to his feet and lurched across the sward and into the shadows cast by the trees. He was disheveled and bloody. His head was bursting with pain. He cursed volubly and mingled his curses with groans. But somehow his curses were directed against the men who had laid him low, not his friends. He longed to grasp, to choke, to crush them.

He moved away, as the daze passed from his brain and tottered down a leaf-strewn path. Above the moon cast strange shadows as it threw its reflection through the branches of the trees. He emerged into a little glade. In front of him lay a distorted form. He grinned weakly. It recalled the way the man he had "outed" had lain. The figure stirred as he gazed at it and a white face was turned to the light. It was the face of Captain Blair. "Gawd," spoke Stubb, in wonder. "They got 'im, too."

He chuckled, Blair had got his. But no, he was not dead. He pondered dully, what was to be done. He turned it over and over in his mind. Then he remembered. The grey devils had struck Blair down, even as they had struck him. He bent down and assayed to lift the other, and after a heart-breaking effort, did so.

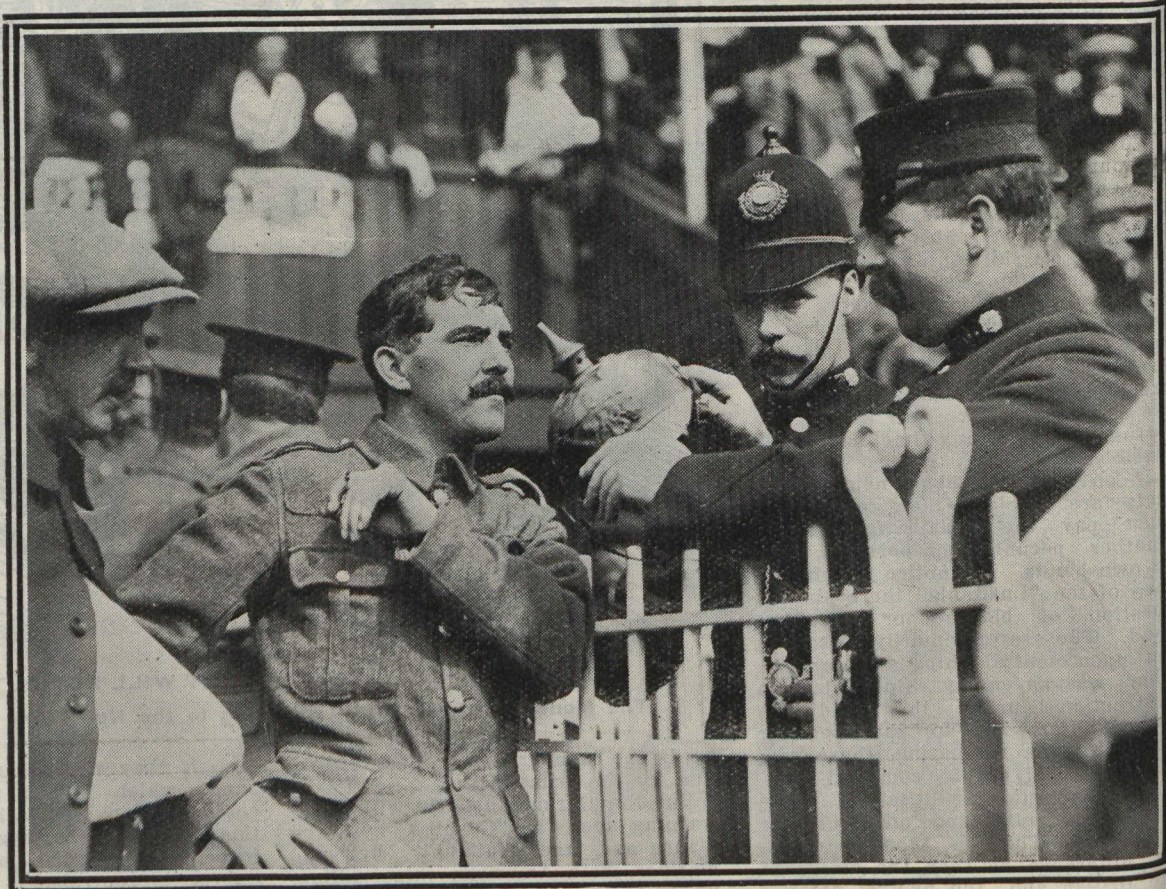
He managed to raise him to his shoulder, where he hung like a sack of meal, and with this burden he staggered on. He must find his regiment. Overhead a shell burst and he felt a searing pain in his shoulder. His brain seemed in a chaos and he shouted in an insane manner and yelled to his charge "to see the rocket." Here and there he almost tripped over a motionless form lying asprawl in his path and to each and all he screamed a merry greeting. The firing grew out of the distance ahead, and he fancied he could hear the sputter of his regiment's Maxims. Bullets whined around him, clipped their way through the trees, dropped across the grass, but he still went on. He had begun to dance, a queer swaying and a quivering chant of some nursery rhyme rose to his lips.

A stray shot found rest in his body somewhere as he shrilled a music hall ditty. Another struck him and his song ended in a scream.

He was in the open at last. He could hear, above the roar of battle, the sounds of shouts, but he heeded them not. Why didn't they let him alone. He wanted to find his regiment, that's all. He wanted to bring back their captain.

He fell, a few yards from his destination. Friendly hands dragged him to the shelter he did not want, or need. A vast silence was creeping over him, a mist dimming his eyes. He tried to continue his song, but a voice interposed with the words, "Your King and Country are proud of you." His eyes twitched open and he recognized his Colonel's face peering into his own. His hand moved to the salute, feebly he replied, his voice heavy, "Well, they got me, but I'm glad." Then the engulfing silence swept on, and for him, the battle was over.

A TROPHY OF WAR



A wounded Britisher showing police officers a German helmet got in battle.