

"A Straggler of '15."

It was a dull October morning, and heavy, rolling fog-wreaths lay low over the wet, grey roofs of the Woolwich houses. Down in the long, straight, brick-lined streets all was sodden and greasy and cheerless. From the high, dark buildings of the arsenal came the whirr of many wheels, the thudding of huge weights, and the myriad buzz and babel of human toil. Beyond, the sordid dwellings of the working men, smoke-stained and unlovely, radiated away in a lessening perspective of narrowing road and dwindling wall.

There were few folk in the streets, for the toilers had all been absorbed since break of day by the huge smoke-spouting monster, which sucked in the manhood of the town, to helch it forth, weary and workstained, every night. Little groups of children straggled to school, or loitered to peep through the single front windows at the hypertrophied Bibles, balanced upon three-legged tables, which were their usual adornment. Stout women, with thick, red arms and dirty aprons stood upon the whitened door-steps, leaning upon their brooms, and shrieking their morning greetings across the road. One, stouter, redder and dirtier than the rest, had gathered a small knot of cronies around her, and was talking energetically, with little shrill titters from her audience to punctuate her remarks.

"Old enough to know better?" she cried, in answer to an exclamation from one of the listeners. "If he hain't no sense now, I 'specs he won't learn much on this side o' Jordan. Why, 'ow old is he at all? Blessed if I could ever make out."

"Well, it ain't so hard to reckon;" said a sharp-featured, pale-faced woman with watery blue eyes. "He's been at the battle of Waterloo, and has the pension and medal to prove it."

"That were a ter'ble long time ago;" remarked a little fat person, with her skirt tucked up and a pair of list slippers, very much down at the heels. "It were afore I were born."

"Afore your mother were born or thought of," cried the first speaker. "I believe it were a hundred year ago."

"It were fifteen year after the beginnin' of the century," cried a younger woman, who had stood leaning against the wall, with a smile of superior knowlege upon her face; "My Bill was a-saying so last Sabbath, when I spoke to him o' Old Daddy Brewster, here."

"To hear you talk, one 'ud think your Bill was the only Bill there was," exclaimed the pallid woman snappishly. "And suppose he spoke truth, Missus Simpson, 'ow long ago do that make it?"

"It's eighty-one now," said the original speaker, checking off the years upon her coarse, red fingers, "and that were fifteen. Ten, and ten, and ten, and ten, and ten—why, it's only sixty and six year, so he ain't so old after all."

"But he weren't a new born babe at the battle, silly," cried the fat woman with a chuckle. "S'pose he was only twenty, then he couldn't be less than six-and-eighty now, at the lowest."

"Aye, he's that—every day of it," cried several.

"I've had 'bout enough of it," remarked the large woman, gloomily. "Unless his young niece, or grand niece, or whatever she is, come to-day, I'm off; and he can find some one else to do his work. Why, my old man is only just pickin' up from the tripod fever, and Sammy come home from school with the bronchitis. Your own 'ome first, says I."

"Ain't he quiet, then, Missus Simpson?" asked the youngest of the group.

"Listen to him now," she answered, with her hand half raised, and her head turned slantwise. From the upper floor there came a shuffling, sliding sound with a sharp tapping of a stick. "There he go back and forrards, doing what he call his sentry go. 'Arf the night through he's at that game, the silly old juggins. At six o'clock this very mornin' here he was beatin' with a stick at my door."

"Turn out guard!" he cried, and a lot of jargon that I could make nothing of. Than what with his coughin'

and 'awkin' and spittin', there ain't no gettin' a wink o' sleep. Hark to him now!"

"Missus Simpson! Missus Simpson!" cried a cracked and querulous voice from above.

"That's him," she cried, nodding her head with an air of triumph. "He do go on somethin' scandalous. Yes, Mister Brewster, sir."

"I want my morning ration, Missus Simpson."

"It's just ready, Mister Brewster, sir."

"Blessed if he ain't like a baby cryin' for its pap," said the fat woman.

"A baby! He's more trouble than twins," cried Mrs. Simpson, viciously. "I feel as if I could shake his old bones up sometimes. But who's for a 'arf pint of four-penny?"

The whole company were about to shuffle off to the public-house, when a young girl stepped across the road and touched the housekeeper timidly upon the arm. "I think that is No. 56 Arsenal View," she said. "Can you tell me if Mr. Brewster lives here?"

The housekeeper looked critically at the new comer. She was a girl of about twenty, broad faced and comely, with a turned-up nose and large, honest grey eyes. Her print dress, her straw hat, with a bunch of glaring poppies, and the bundle which she carried had all a smack of the country.

"You're Norah Brewster, I s'pose," said Mrs. Simpson, eyeing her up and down with no friendly gaze.

"Yes; I've come to look after my grand uncle Gregory." "And a good job, too," cried the fat house-keeper, with a toss of her head. "It's about time that some of his own folk took a turn at it, for I've had about enough of it. There you are, young woman! in you go, and make yourself at home. There's tea in the caddy, and bacon on the dresser, and the old man will be about if you don't fetch him his breakfast. I'll send for my things in the evenin'." With a nod she caught up her tattered bonnet from a peg, and strolled off with her attendant gossips in the direction of the public-house.

Thus left to her own devices, the country girl walked into the front room and took off her hat and jacket. It was a low-roofed apartment with a sputtering fire, upon which a small brass kettle was singing cheerily. A stained cloth lay over half the table with an empty brown teapot, a loaf of bread and some coarse crockery. Norah Brewster looked rapidly about her, and in an instant took over her new duties. Ere five minutes had passed the tea was made, two slices of bacon were frizzling on the pan, the table was re-arranged, the antimacassars straightened over the sombre brown furniture, and the whole room had taken a new air of comfort and neatness. This done she looked round curiously at the prints which hung upon the walls. Over the fireplace, in a small, square case, a brown medal caught her eye, with a strip of purple ribbon. Beneath was a small piece of newspaper cutting. She stood on her tiptoes, with her fingers on the edge of the mantelpiece, and craned her neck up to see it, glancing down from time to time at the bacon which simmered and hissed beneath her. The cutting was yellow with age, and ran in this way:—

"On Tuesday an interesting ceremony was performed at the barracks of the third regiment of guards, when in the presence of the Prince Regent, Lord Hill, Lord Saltoun, and an assemblage which comprised beauty as well as valour, a special medal was presented to Corporal Gregory Brewster, of Captain Haldane's flank company, in recognition of his gallantry in the recent great battle in the Lowlands. It appears that on the ever-memorable 18th of June, four companies of the third guards and of the Cold-streams, under the command of Colonels Maitland and Byng, held the important farmhouse of Hougoumont at the right of the British position. At a critical point of the action these troops found themselves short of powder. Seeing that Generals Foy and Jerome Buonaparte were again massing their infantry for an attack on the position, Colonel Byng despatched Corporal Brewster to the rear to hasten up the reserve ammunition. Brewster came upon

two powder tumbrils of the Nassau division, and succeeded, after menacing the drivers with his musket, in inducing them to convey their powder to Hougoumont. In his absence, however, the hedges surrounding the position had been set on fire by a howitzer battery of the French, and the passage of the carts full of powder became a most hazardous matter. The first tumbril exploded, blowing the driver to fragments. Daunted by the fate of his comrade, the second driver turned his horses, but Corporal Brewster, springing upon his seat, hurled the man down, and, urging the powder cart through the flames, succeeded in forcing a way to his companions. To this gallant deed may be directly attributed the success of the British arms, for without powder it would have been impossible to have held their ground. Long may the heroic Brewster live to treasure the medal which he has so bravely won, and to look back with pride to the day when in the presence of his comrades in arms he received this tribute to his valour from the august hands of the first gentleman of the realm."

The reading of this old yellow cutting increased in Norah's mind the deep reverence with which she had always regarded her warrior relative. From her infancy he had been her ideal, her hero, and hence she had begged to be sent to his aid when the death of his housekeeper had made it necessary that some one should be with him, True, she had never yet seen him in the flesh, but a rude and faded painting at home which depicted a square-faced, clean-shaven, stalwart man, with an enormous bearskin cap, rose ever before her memory when she thought of him.

She was still gazing at the brown medal, and wondering what the "*dulce et decorum est*" might mean, which was inscribed upon the edge, when there came a sudden tapping and shuffling on the stair, and there at the door was standing the very man who had been so often in her thoughts.

But could this, indeed, be he? Where was the martial air, the flashing eye, the warrior face which she had pictured? There, framed in the doorway, was a stooping, twisted old man, gaunt and thin, with trembling hands and shuffling, purposeless gait. A cloud of fluffy white hair a red-veined nose, two projecting tufts of eyebrow and a pair of dimly questioning blue eyes—these were what met her gaze. He leaned forward upon a stick, while his shoulders rose and fell as he breathed, with a crackling, rasping sound.

"I want my morning rations," he cried, as he stumped forward to his chair. "The cold nips me without 'em. See to my fingers." He held out his hand all blue at the tips, wrinkled and gnarled, with huge projecting knuckles.

"It's nigh ready," answered the girl, gazing at him with great wondering eyes, "Don't you know who I am, grand-uncle? I am Norah Brewster, from Leyton."

"Rum is warm," crooned the old man, rocking himself to and fro in his chair, "and schnapps is warm and there's 'eat in soup—but a dish o' tea—a dish o' tea. What did you say your name was?"

"Norah Brewster."

"Speak out, lass, for my 'earin' ain't what it was. Nora Brewster, eh? Then you'll be brother Jarge's girl? Lor', to think of little Jarge havin' a girl." He chuckled hoarsely to himself, and the long stringy sinews of his throat jerked and quivered.

"I am the daughter of your brother Jarge's son," said she, as she deftly turned the bacon on the dish.

"Lor', but little Jarge was a rare 'un," he went on. "Eh, by Jimini, there was no chousing Jarge. 'He's got a bull pup o' mine that I lent him when I took the shilling. Likely it's dead now. He didn't give it to ye to bring?"

"Why, Grandpa Jarge has been dead this twenty years," cried Norah, pouring out the old man's tea.

"Eh, but it were a beautiful pup—by Jimini, a beautiful pup. And I am cold for the lack o' my rations. Rum is good and schnapps, but I'd as lief have tea as either."

"I've got two pounds of butter, and some eggs in the bundle," cried Norah. "Mother said as I was to give you her respec's and love, and that she'd ha' sent a tin o' Leyton cream, but it 'ud have turned on the way."

"Eh, it's a middlin' goodish way," said he, supping loudly at his tea. "Likely the stage left yesternight."

"The what, uncle?"

"The coach that brought ye."

"Nay, I came by the mornin' train."

"Lor' now, think o' that! You ain't afeared, then, o' those new-fangled things? By Jimini, to think of you