BRAVEST OF ALL

He was eighteen years old, but he did not look more than fifteen, and the uniform of a West Point cadet made him look younger still, a mere child, in fact. On the trip across the continent he had spent most of the time gazing in a dull, apathetic way out of the car window. He seemed to need cheering up, and some of the passengers had tried to do so, but as their efforts had served only to embarrass the boy they let him alone, and he was glad of it. He had been at West Point for six months— six months which seemed to him like a hideous nightmare. Now it was all over and he was going home, or rather he was going to Magdala Bay on the coast of southern California, where his father and mother had rented a cottage for the winter.

When his mother had kissed him good-bye at the steamboat landing at the Point six months ago he was wrapped up in dreams, which culminated in a graduation dress parade and the receipt of a commission in the Engineers. But they did not last long, these dreams. They melted away day by day, until hope gave place to despair—and now he was going home in disgrace.

Cadet Francis Kern had been granted "sick leave" for three months, pending action on his case. All this was a matter of red tape, and he knew it. He was leaving the military academy, he knew, forever. The whole world knew his story, at least it seemed so to him. The passengers on the overland train seemed to have some inkling of it. The conductor, the Pullman porter, even the rough people who gathered at the stations where the train stopped seemed to have heard it. In the song sent up by the shining steel rails as the train sped over them to the Pacific he fancied he heard an accusing voice calling to him in derision, "Coward, coward!"

And still he had done what he thought was brave and right. He could not understand it at all. Something must be wrong, he thought, with him or with his ideals. The more he thought over the events of the past six months, the more puzzled he was. In fact, for weeks he had lived in a kind of trance, dazed at the injustice done him, for deep down in his heart he knew that he was not a coward.

The one consolation that he had was in the thought that his father would understand, and if his father —who had been a soldier himself, and who had shown his bravery more than once on the field of battle—approved of his conduct, then he felt that he could face the world unashamed.

As yet he had not written his parents anything of his troubles. They did not know of the persecutions to which he had been subjected by upper-class men, for he had borne everything in uncomplaining silence. But now he was going home, and he had to make some explanation. He intended to tell them of the challenge which he had received from an upper-class man to fight, and why he had refused that challenge, and how in consequence of his refusal he had been shunned, ostracised and proclaimed a coward by his fellow-cadets.

It had taken a good deal of moral courage to refuse to fight that upper-class man. The challenge was unprovoked—there was absolutely no reason why Cadet Kern should fight a battle with his fists with a cadet against whom he had no grievance and to whom he had not given the slightest offence. Of course, when he refused to fight, to supply a grievance, they had called him a coward, but still he declined to accept a challenge; and then the trouble began which ended in him leaving the academy. He had struggled along hopelessly under the stigma of cowardice, trying to bear his burden with the fortitude of a true soldier, but the end came at last; sleepless nights of worry broke down his health, he fell behind in his studies, and at last he was forced to give up the battle.

The cloud which hung over Cadet Kern when he left West Point followed him across the continent and settled over the little cottage at Magdala Bay like a pall.

A telegram had informed Captain Kern that his son was coming home, but the surprise which this news gave him was nothing in comparison with the shock he suffered when he read a letter from the superintendent of the military academy, which arrived the same day.

The letter was written in a kindly spirit, with a view to sparing the captain's feelings, but it was a cruel blow to him, for he could read between the lines. Although he had risen from the ranks, the captain knew something about the customs which prevail at West Point. His own military career had been brought to an untimely end by wounds which he had received in the Cuban campaign, and he had retired from the service crippled for life. All his hopes, all his ambitions were centred in this boy, of whom he was so proud. Mrs. Kern found the captain in an armchair on the porch looking out over the vast blue waters of the Pacific. The tears were trickling down his furrowed cheeks, and in his hand was the letter from the superintendent of the military academy. She took the letter and read it. Then she looked into the husband's face and said:

"But you, father, you do not doubt our boy, do you?"

The captain did not answer. He reached for his crutches, and, choking with grief, he hobbled silently into the house.

When the boy came home that night his mother received him with open arms. Her heart was unchanged in its love, and when, with his head on her shoulder, he told the story of the trouble which had led to his leaving West Point she only yearned the more to comfort him.

But with the captain it was different. He did not utter a single word of reproach, but he could not hide his feelings. Grief and mortification shone in his face, and the look in his eyes told plainly how he felt. That look hurt the boy more than all that had gone before. He knew that his father doubted him, but he did not attempt to vindicate himself. So between father and son there came a coldness, more painful for both than an open quarrel would have been.

Everything that a loving mother could do Mrs. Kern did to reconcile father and son, but the days slipped by and the breach between them only became wider. Mrs. Kern saw with despair that all the happiness was dying out of the lives of those she loved so dearly.

One day, hoping that if they were left alone in each other's company for some time they might come to a reconcilliation, Mrs. Kern had, by artful manoeuvring, induced them to go out fishing in a row-boat on the bay.

The captain and his son started early in the morning, taking luncheon with them. A dense sea fog that hung over the bay did not deter them, as it was propitious weather for fishing.

After pulling about for several hours and trying various deep water-holes for rock bass, they came upon the stranded hulk of a sailing vessel, and as they pulled nearer the hulk they caught a glimpse of what looked like the steam launch of a warship, but it quickly disappeared in the fog.

The captain proposed that they board the hulk and fish over her sides; so they made their rowboat fast to some wreckage that hung over the stern, and the boy assisted his crippled father to climb to the deck, where they made themselves comfortable, and dropped their fishlines into the green water which swirled below them.

When Cadet Kern left the military academy it was expected that he would resign. In fact, the superintendent had intimated as much to the captain in his letter, but as yet the boy had not sent his resignation. It seemed to him that to resign would be to confess that he had been guilty of cowardice. He intended to ask his father what course he should pursue, and while they were all alone, buried in the fog, out there on the stranded hulk, it seemed a favorable time to bring the matter up, but he hardly knew how to begin. He had never told his father why he had refused that challenge to fight. He had never tried to explain his conduct or to excuse himself, but now he felt that the time had come when he must present his case, and he did so awkwardly, in a manner which was as embarrassing to his father as it was to him.

"Father, I want to ask you something," he blurted out.

The captain looked up from his fishing surprised, with a vague dread of facing an ordeal.

"If a man you had never seen before came up to you on the street and asked you to fight, what would you do?" asked the boy.

"That depends—" replied the captain, hesitatingly.

"Well, suppose that you had not given the man any cause to feel offended," the boy went on, mercilessly; "suppose that you had never injured him in any way—that you had not done anything, then?"

"I would tell him to go about his business," said the captain, grimly. But the boy was determined to have it out. He asked:

"If he called you a name which you did not deserve, a thief, for instance, what would you do?"

"If a man insulted me, I would thrash him," the captain answered decisively.

There was a silence which lasted several minutes, and both father and son seemed to be much occupied with their fishlines. At last the boy said, brokenly:

"My leave of absence is nearly up, father. Do you think that I ought to send in my resignation?"

The captain looked away so that his son could not see his face, and said in a voice trembling with emotion:

"Yes, you must resign."

The fog began to lift, the sunbeams shot through the blanket of mist that enveloped land and sea, the world began to smile again—but not for Cadet Francis Kern, because he could not see it through his tears.

As the sea breeze swept the banks of fog away the captain and his son found to their surprise that the stranded hulk on which they had taken refuge lay in a cradle between two reefs jutting out from the promontory that formed the northern end of the horseshoe that enclosed Magdala Bay. The great ocean stretched away to the north and west, while a few hundred yards to the south were the towering brown cliffs of the promontory with a line of white breakers foaming at their base. Magdala Bay was hidden from view by the promontory.

In the offing, oceanward, a beautiful sight met the eyes of the captain and his son. About three miles away was a magnificent battleship, its white sides glistening in the morning sunlight.

"One of our new battleships, the Montana, I think," remarked the captain, looking at the great warship in admiration.

The smoke was curling lazily out of her funnels, but the ship remained stationary in a position just abreast of the stranded hulk. She was so far away that it was impossible to see even the officer on the bridge.

While the captain and his son were looking at the battleship they saw a steam launch put off from her and head towards the stranded hulk, but suddenly, after proceeding about half the distance between the battleship and the wreck, the launch veered towards the north, and looking in that direction the captain and his son saw a sailing vessel bearing down between the battleship and the stranded hulk. The launch steamed up to the sailing vessel, and the officer in command gave some orders to the captain of the sailer which caused him to come about and alter his course, standing out to sea. Then the launch, after cruising up and down for a few minutes, returned to the battleship.

The actions of the launch, which were at the time incomprehensible to the captain and his son, were soon explained. The launch had been sent to clear a range for target practice, and to warn away all vessels; but those on board her had failed to see the captain and his son on the stranded hulk, because the wreckage which littered the deck hid them from view.

Suddenly a tongue of flame leaped from the mouth of one of the after turret guns; a dull "boom" rolled across the water, a shell came screaming over the hulk and burst with startling concussion against the rocky cliffs of the promontory a few hundred yards away.

Instantly father and son realized their terrible position. In that moment of awful danger it was the boy and not the war-scarred veteran who was first to act.

The lad started to wave his cap, that he might make their presence on the hulk known to those on board the battleship. The next moment another shot echoed across the water. This time the aim was better. There was a frightful explosion under the stern of the wreck, and father and son were half buried under falling debris and splinters. The boy assisted his father to rise; both were unhurt, but for a few seconds they were too dazed to speak. The smoke cleared away from the wreck for an instant, and they saw that part of the stern of the hulk had been carried away. The rowboat, which had been moored under the lee of the stern, had been smashed into kindling wood, and fragments were floating on the water. The shell had also set fire to the dry timber, and the stern was soon enveloped in flames and smoke.

The captain turned and gazed towards the shore with a look of despair. It was but a few hundred yards to the promotory, but even a powerful swimmer would find it difficult to swim through the surf that thundered against the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. His boy might be able to do it, but for him, crippled as he was, the feat was impossible. He must stay on board the hulk and take the chances.

With the authority of one accustomed to command in times of peril, the captain said to his son:

"Jump overboard and swim to the shore."

The boy knew that his father must remain behind on the burning hulk. He knew that little village of Magdala Bay was five miles distant, and that long before he could reach it and summon assistance the flames would consume the hulk, if, indeed, it was not shot to pieces by the guns of the battleship. But the boy, whose courage had been doubted, although face to face with what seemed certain death, did not flinch or hesitate in his choice.

"No, father, I shall stay here with you," he said, with quiet determination.

When the captain looked into that undaunted boyish face he flushed to think that he had ever doubted his son's courage; but there was no time for reflection. The desperate situation demanded action; action which the captain, disabled as he was, could not perform.

The battleship began firing the guns of her secondary battery at the doomed hulk. Twelve-pound, six-pound, and three-pound shells began to crash and burst around, while the flames crept steadily forward from the stern. The two men sought refuge behind a pile of wreckage in the bow. Again the captain urged his son to swim ashore and leave him, telling the boy that it was useless for him to remain any longer, but the boy took a different view of the situation.

A stump of the foremast still remained on the wreck, and amid a storm of bursting shell Cadet Francis Kern started to climb it, with his coat in his mouth. It was a miracle that the boy was not struck by some of the fragments of the shells which the battleship continued to pour in a hail about the burning hulk.

When he reached the top of the mast he began to signal frantically, waving his coat to and fro. Had not thick clouds of smoke so completely hidden the wreck from sight, the signals would certainly have been seen by the battleship, for they had telescopes levelled at the hulk to ascertain the efforts of the shelling.

Down below, from behind the pile of wreckage, the captain looked up at his boy with prayers on his lips for the safety of the brave lad. It seemed an age that the boy was up there amid bursting shot and shell. Once the captain caught sight of the boy's face. It was the face of a hero, resolute, unflinching, fearless.

It happened that a sudden gust of wind blew the dense black clouds of smoke away for an instant, and an officer on the bridge of the battleship, who was watching the burning hulk, saw the frantic signals of the boy.

"Cease firing!" yelled the officer through the telephone to the lieutenant in command of the second battery.

"Cease firing!" was the sharp command that went up to the marines in the fighting-tops, to the forward and after turrets, to the men at the rapid fire guns on the superstructure, to everybody on board the Montana; and hardly had the order been received before another order was given, and a steam launch was racing toward the burning wreck.

It seemed as if the flames would consume the hulk before the launch reached it; at least it seemed so to the captain and his son; but the boat arrived in the nick of time, for as they were lifted into it the flames enveloped what was left of the stranded ship.

The captain of the battleship, who was in the launch, told how dumfounded he had been when the boy was seen signalling, for shortly before the firing began a boat had been sent to the wreck, and had made sure, he thought, that there was no one in the vicinity of their target. In the wardroom of the battleship there were more explanations, and the executive officer asked why it was that they did not jump overboard and swim ashore when the firing began.

Then Captain Kern, looking all the time straight at his son, told the naval officers what had happened, and Cadet Kern blushed to the roots of his hair. The captain told the same story to Mrs. Kern that afternoon, and she cried with joy and thanksgiving and kissed her boy and said she always knew he was a hero.

Cadet Kern did not resign from West Point, but a few weeks later he made a journey to Washington with his father, and there they saw the President of the United States. And the President caused an order to be sent to the superintendent at West Point giving an account of Cadet Kern's heroism. Then he placed his hand on the boy's shoulder in a kind, fatherly way, and said:

"Go back to West Point, my boy. The country needs boys like you to fight its battles—you have proved yourself the bravest of all."

THE REAL PLUMBER

The haughty plumber has been satirized in song and story for many years, and a subordinate tells in the New York Sun of his experience with one such who had "science," but no gumption. After waiting in vain all morning, he at last found relief:

About noon things looked no better and there wasn't a sign of a frozen pipe thawing, so I hustled over to the plumber shop again. There was the studious young man, alone. All the other men were out at work. I realized that his big brother kept him to 'tend store, and the big boss went up two or three pegs in my estimation.

The young man looked gloomy when he saw me, but he said he would come or send some one within two hours. I told him he needn't trouble to come himself if he could send one of his men, and I'm afraid the fervor with which I urged him not to put himself out showed my desire for some one else, At all events, one of the men appeared about 5 o'clock.

He was a big brawny chap, covered with grime and with icicles on his mustache. He was cross and tired, for he said he's been busy since daybreak and saw no end to the work cut out for him. But there was something about the way he stalked into the kitchen and threw his eye around the corners down around the range and the boiler that gave us confidence at once.

We poured our tale of woe into his ears, but he didn't say a word except to grunt once in a while. He kept on looking at the pipes, and then, right in the middle of our story, he walked to the cellar and went down. He was gone about five minutes and we stood there, my wife, her mother and I, looking at each other and not knowing what to do.

My wife was for ordering him out of the house for his insolence, but her mother and I both said we liked his looks. We felt he knew his business. When he came upstairs I said:

"Well, do you think you can thaw out the frozen place in the main cellar?"

"Ain't any froze place," he said. "Thawed it out with a match and a handful of this oily cotton waste I have in me pocket."

We caught our breath, and I had to sit down, draw out my handkerchief and wipe my brow—it was so sudden. Then I said:

"Now, would you mind attending to the frozen pipe over the tubs in the laundry?"

"That'll be all right in a minute, I guess," was the answer. "Couldn't burn the waste against the laundry pipe leak, for the frozen place was up against the woodwork. So I took the waste that was left from the little bonfire I made and wrapped it around the frozen laundry pipe, and then wrapped paper around that to keep the heat in. You'll hear the water squietin' out of the open faucet into them tubs in a minute. There it is now!"

He had left the door to the cellar open and we heard the splashing of the water, just as he stopped talking. My wife said it sounded like music. But the plumber only puckered up his face as he smelled something bad and said:

"What more's the matter wit ye?"

We told him about the bathroom, and he walked off up the stairs, his big snowy boots scattering icy particles over our fine carpet in the front hall, although we didn't mind it a bit.

We followed after him silently and I think respectfully. In the bathroom he looked at the pipes, felt of them, took out a tool, a sort of wrench it happened to be, and began tapping. Every time he made a tap on a pipe he would say: "No freeze there," "No freeze there," and you could see he knew perfectly well by the sounds.

It was very much as the doctor pounds your chest when he thinks you've got pneumonia; indeed, it was a plumber tapping a sick pipe, for much the same reason. All of a sudden he grunted:

"Here 't is; bring me a candle; no, bring me a kerosene lamp."

My wife and her mother fairly tumbled down the stairs to get him a lamp. They were so excited that they never thought of sending one of the servants who were hovering a little distance off, watching the wonderful feats of this man. When the lamp was brought he shoved it into my wife's hands and said: "Now, you hold this right there (pointing to the spot) while I go downstairs and look over the pipes."

"Can't I set it down under the spot in the pipe?" she said.

The man had marked an x on the pipe on which he wanted the heat from the lamp directed.

"No, you can't," replied the plumber, "not unless you give it to your husband to hold, and I want you to hold it, anyway, for he's more nervous than you are, and I'm afraid he might set the house afire."

It was a rough one on me, but I admit I was rather agitated, for I had been very much scared. It tickled my wife, though, and she'll never stop talking about it.

In about three minutes there was a crackling and the third frozen spot was thawed. We stood, a happy trio, watching the water gushing into the bathtub, when we heard the plumber stamping up the back stairs.

"The waste pipe in the kitchen wasn't frozen at all. Any fool of a plumber could have told that, and a little proddin' with wire fixed it. Tell your servants to be more careful in handlin' that sink."

We had forgotten all about the wastepipe, the fatal wastepipe, as the college bred plumber had led us to think it was. We thanked the plumber man and got a grunt for our politeness. We told him how we had been worried for fear if we turned the water off the house the boiler would burst.

"Who told you such nonsense as that?" he snapped.

We said the young man at the shop had.

"Aw, him." And his disgust was beautiful to see. "I knowed it was not the head boss. That little jackanapes don't know a thing. It sounds just like him."

Then he gave us a five-minute talk on how to care for pipes in cold weather. It contained a lot of very bad grammar, but there was more horse sense in it than I've heard in any talk of the same length in many a day. After the man was gone my wife wrote it down to keep it for hints in the future.

He was in the house about fifteen minutes. His studious assistant boss had pondered over our troubles for nearly two hours, had had the job on his hands three-quarters of a day and had done nothing worth mentioning. After all this I have about come to the conclusion that plumbers are born and not made.