

Skip's Victoria Cross.

CHAPTER I.

Such a pouring wet day there had not been all that summer, not even during St. Swithin's dismal reign. The young Wentworths had played at every game they knew, and they had sat as long over their dinner riddle-mareeing as Nurse Tweedy would suffer them. Then, there was the afternoon to get through, and long before tea-time the children were as tired out as though they had not been to bed for a week.

'Let's sit round the fire!' suggested one of the twins.

'Yes, let's sit round the fire!' echoed the other twin, the two never failing to prop each other up thus.

'Well done, little shavers!' cried Skip, the second of the Wentworths, whose real name was Reginald. 'Round the fire-place, I suppose you mean.'

'Oh, yeth!' lisped Bunchy, the little sister bustling forward with her own little wicker-chair on her back, to seat herself in front of the empty grate. 'Come and sit round, and let's clasp hands,' she added, when her six brothers pushing, laughing, pinching, took their seats, three on either side of the little maid facing the cheerless black grate.

When each of the circle obeyed by locking their own hands together it was found as usual that the only right thumb that overlapped the left belonged to Skip.

'"Born to rule!"' shrieked Bunchy, excitedly.

'"Born to rule!"' chorussed the boys, and the Skipper rose to make a low bow.

Well, it would never have done if all the Wentworth right thumbs had been uppermost. There could only be one skipper for the crew, and Reggie made a first-rate one. At Dene Hurst, the great house just outside of the village of Dene, there were seven children, six boys and one little sister, and from the beginning Reggie had always taken the lead.

'Just his father over again! He's born to lead, Master Reggie is. Some folk be!' declared Nurse Tweedy, the dignified old lady who had brought up every Wentworth in Dene Hurst, and their father before them, the late Sir James, whom Nurse Tweedy vividly recollected as the tiresomest baby she had ever 'raised.' But Sir James died soon after Bunchy's christening, and Oliver, the eldest boy, was now the baronet. Not that he ever got his title, for he was Noll by name and Noll by nature said his brothers; a dull heavy boy. All the Wentworths had nicknames which seemed likely to stick to them through life, even Bunchy, whose name was Blanche, earned hers by right of her round-about little person. But none of the nicknames seemed to fit like that of the Skipper, who was distinctly the ablest to guide the Wentworth crew. It seemed as if he were always in the way when any one wanted a thing done. Not that Skip was what you would call a girly-boy or a prig. Hardly! There was a story the young Wentworths were never tired of bringing up at their gossip-hour, between the lights, when 'Don't-you-remember,' were passed round, a story which proved the reverse.

Long ago, when Bunchy was in long clothes, there had been a great fight between Skip and Joe Bradley, the bad boy of the place. Joe had tied a homeless cat to the trunk of the Seven Sisters, the group of elms in the middle of the village-green. He and his comrades were engaged in stoning the poor helpless creature to death when the Dene Hurst carriage, with her ladyship and two of her boys in it, drove past.

'Mother,' quietly said Skip, whose keen-sighted blue eyes had detected that the target was a living one, 'I'd like to be set down please, if you don't mind. I've a little matter of business to do.'

'Certainly!' laughed Lady Wentworth, amused at her old-fashioned little son, and the carriage, after dropping Skip, drove home. It did not take long for the Skipper



SKIP MAKES A STAND.

to reach the midst of the group of young ruffians.

'You cowards!' he shouted furiously. 'Stop that!'

'Not for your orders, master!' insolently growled Joe Bradley.

Skip was a little chap and thin as a herring, while Joe was twice his size and fat. But tall and stout as he was, he suddenly found himself tripped, in the first place, and, before he could pick himself up, the cowardly bully had got such a violent pummelling from a pair of sturdy little fists that he could barely see to stagger home.

After this lesson the roughest of the little villagers realized that, though Master Reggie did live at the great house and wore kid gloves on Sunday, he could hold his own or the part of any helpless dumb thing with any of themselves.

As for the Vicar's boarder-pupils, whose studies the Wentworth boys shared, they went fairly wild over the victory, and pretty nearly clapped the breath out of Skip's little thin body.

'Let's have a tuck in to celebrate the occasion!' they proposed. There was an instantaneous rush to the village shop where Willow Wells had just slipped a tray of hot jam-tarts into the window as if on purpose.

'But we haven't a copper among the lot of us!' cried a rueful voice.

'I'll tell you,' suggested another. 'Let's cram the widow that the Vicar says she can put the tarts down in the bill. We're bound to treat Skip!'

'But did the Vicar say so?' asked Skip, whose nose was amongst those pressed against the window.

'Did the Vicar!' mimicked Blake, the eldest pupil. 'You ninny, is that likely!'

'But you couldn't say he did, if he didn't!' said Skip simply, with wide-open eyes, before which those of the other boys wavered.

'Why,' muttered Blake, 'it would only be a whack after all.'

'I call a whack by its proper name—a lie!' said Skip turning on his heel.

'I wonder he wasn't afraid to say that. Why, Blake could lick him in five minutes!' whispered the pupils, smarting under his open scorn. But somehow Blake did not offer to try, and from that hour the Skipper

took his stand as a 'hero in the fight of life.'

'But, sonny, never let your championship of others slip into vainglory of self!' was his mother's gentle whisper when she added her meed of praise to the rest. 'Let your battle-cry be "The love of Christ constrains us!"'

Skip, young as he was, understood, and shut away in his heart the boy hid a promise that he would enlist in the ranks of 'Christian soldiers.'

'But what ilt Skip born to rule over?' demanded Bunchy, when the joyful sound of the tea-bell made the company assembled round the cheerless empty grate spring to their feet.

'Himself, I hope, for one!' said a voice, and Lady Wentworth, inviting herself to the school-room tea took her place opposite Nurse Tweedy's tea-tray.

CHAPTER II.

'Master Reggie, you're the very person I want!' said Nurse Tweedy, the morning after the dismal long day the Wentworths had spent indoors.

'Well, what is it?' asked Skip, who had dashed upstairs to the nursery quarters. It was a sunny, warm afternoon, and everybody had forgotten there could be such thing as the dreary drip of an out-and-cut pouring day such as yesterday.

'Why,' went on Nurse Tweedy, 'it's time somebody went to Mrs. Steen's for Miss Bunchy. You know she is spending the day at the Home Farm. I can't spare Susan to go, and the downstairs servants are all busy for the dinner-party this evening.'

'Oh, I'll go, nurse!' Throwing his cap up in the air and catching it deftly, Skip put it on, then he set off, whistling his loudest.

Nurse Tweedy stood watching her favorite scampering down the long avenue of chestnuts. 'He's that cheery and ready to oblige as never was. And the only one of the six I could ask to go and fetch Miss Bunchy.' There was little doubt but Skip was the apple of old Tweedy's eye.

'Oh, I say, here's a rare lark, Blake!' cried one of the vicarage boys, half-an-hour later. 'Come and see the Skipper carrying his doll through the village!'

Blake raised his head from the stiff bit of Latin he was construing, and looked eagerly out of the study-window of the vicarage which stood back from the one straggling street of Dene village. Sure enough, there was Reggie Wentworth coming leisurely along, leading by the hand his roundabout small sister, and adapting his step to her unsteady trudge, while, on his arm, he carried a large wax doll. His face was flushed, for it was a considerable trial, and Skip, when he caught sight of the bobbing heads within the ivy-encircled vicarage window, felt tempted to throw away his horrible burden, with its idiotic, simpering pink-and-whiteness, and run. Only a boy can picture the struggle between shame, dread of ridicule and the brave effort to do the right thing. But the fight was over, and the victory was Skip's. The doll he carried was Bunchy's dearest waxen child, Dulcibelle, which had accompanied its owner to spend the summer day at the Home Farm, and devoutly enough Skip wished he had driven in the donkey-cart to fetch Bunchy, for the wretched doll could have been sat upon.

On the way back, as his little sister and Skip stood looking at the attractions of the village duck-pond, Bunchy had, unfortunately, let Dulcibelle slip into the water. The hapless waxen body was easily rescued, but