

THE BROTHER OF JIM.

By WILLIAM HENRY SHELTON.

[Copyright, 1899, by the Author.]

The roar of nearby battle and the hissing of flying missiles overhead rendered the voices of the men indistinct and mercifully swallowed up some uncalled for oaths and ribald jests. Suddenly the darkness in the sunken road was softened and illumined by a red reflection from burning stacks and farm buildings on the invisible field.

The groups of men under the shelving banks, the long artillery train and the trees overhead took on the lurid hue of a dragon's grotto in a play, while the bank which shut off the view of the fire was lighted by a more than noonday brilliance against the fierce conflagration. The brightest light streamed across the very apex of the hill through which the road had been cut. The jagged stone wall was nearly leveled with the earth. Not a tree or bush broke the lighted expanse, in the very midst of which appeared the silhouetted figure of a man with head bent forward and hands clasped. His broken cap strap trembled below his chin, and his haversack, crowned by an inverted tin cup, was hitched up into an absurd hump on his back. At the man's feet, a bare earthen mound rose against the line of the broken wall, and something that looked from below like a crooked root growing out of the side of the mound seemed to grasp the red light of the flaming stacks. Around the dark figure the minie balls and fragments of shell whirled like a jerky harp.

"There ain't no flies on Henry," mumbled a wheel driver through a mouthful of hard tack.

"Come down from there, Price," cried the captain, who had walked back on the road, attracted by the light.

There was not the slightest movement in the bent figure.

"Price!" roared the captain.

Henry Price sank slowly to his knees and pressed his face to the red twisted root. The action of the man crouching

up the bank and clutch the clothing of the oblivious man and drag him over the declivity. The two came down together out of the glare into the dull red light of the cut, followed by a drift of pebbles and dirt.

Henry Price scrambled to his feet without resenting the action of the sergeant or so much as noticing the presence of the captain. He took off his old cap and drew his hand across his damp forehead. His words were not addressed to the crowd about him, but rather to his own guilty conscience.

"It's my work. I did it."

"Did what, Henry?" asked the captain, laying his hand kindly on Price's shoulder.

The stricken man appreciated the friendliness of the action and recognized the presence of his commanding officer. He was eager to speak.

"It's my brother up there. I killed him. I've been waiting a year to find out for certain. I did it." Price threw up his arms with a gesture of despair. The light streamed down on to his ghastly upturned face and marked it with the color of blood.

In an instant he recovered himself.

"Listen, captain!" he exclaimed eagerly. "It was this way: He was in the southern army, Jim was. My regiment formed in this cut in the other battle. We were ordered up to the top of this very bank. As I came to the top—right there, captain—a soldier rushed in above me. Our guns went off together. That soldier was Jim. I saw his face as he fell. My God, I can never forget his look, captain. I was near enough to catch him in my arms, but my foot slipped, and I fell back into the road. I was mad to climb up again, but the rebels charged with a yell through the cut and swept us out. I hoped it was only a wound, but now I know the truth, Captain Sanderson—I did it." Poor Price was an abject picture of misery as he uttered the final three words, standing dry eyed in the red road. "You see," he continued, pointing upward, "Jim lay just there where he fell, until the burial party found him—and they didn't half do their work. Look, captain, that's his skeleton hand thrust out of his grave—Jim's hand, with the gray sleeve beaten into the dirt by the rain."

"My dear fellow," said the captain, "there is no certainty that it is your brother."

"Don't I know?" said Price, with a hopeless expression of conviction. "Jim lost his forefinger fooling with a gun when we were boys together. The very same finger is gone from that hand up there."

"I killed my brother!"

Price resented almost angrily the sort of sympathy that tried to throw doubt upon the identity of the remains. Several of the men who climbed up under the shelter of the bank to where they could get a near view of the mound in the fierce light of the conflagration reported the exact condition of the skeleton hand. The index finger was certainly wanting, and a rag of gray sleeve, beaten down and rotted by the rain, lay about the opening in the soil.

The only consolation that remained to the stricken and contrite brother was the sad duty of reburial and the erection of some object to mark the place. But for the restraint put upon him Price would have gone instantly about this work regardless of the scathing fire that swept the strangely lighted and exposed mound on the crest of the hill. He unhooked a shovel from one of the caissons and leaned impatiently on it awaiting his opportunity, but the final desperate struggle in the light of the

burning buildings necessitated the hasty withdrawal of the battery from its cramped and defenseless position, and when quiet settled at last over the field Henry Price was separated from the sunken road by two lines of pickets, and morning found the battery a long distance from Groveton crossroads.

Soon after dawn Price presented himself before the captain at the roadside. His face was haggard and his appearance indicated that he had passed a sleepless night. He was received with all the respect and sympathy due to the brother of Jim.

"This is my last battle," he said. "I have had a warning. There's Jim back on the hill, half buried, and I shan't live to reach him. Promise me one thing, captain—after the fighting is over have him decently buried."

"Don't be silly," said the captain.

"Promise me, sir," said Price.

"If we hold the ground," said the captain, "I'll have everything done that you wish; but pluck up heart, my man. You'll live to grow gray hairs yet."

"My hours are numbered," said Price. "I am resigned to my fate now that I have your promise that you will look after Jim."

The captain was a kind hearted man, and the despondency of Jim's brother touched him. "Go back to the forge," he said, "and stop there. We'll cheat fate of its victim."

"That's not my style!" exclaimed Price, and he turned away from the interview with the indignation of a man whose courage had been impugned.

Before another night every extra duty man had taken a number at the guns. In the ragged garden of a burning house Henry Price stepped eagerly into a vacant place alongside a hot gun and put out his left hand to have the buckskin thongs of the blackened thumbstall knotted about his wrist.

"I reckon my time has come," he said, looking across at the man with the lanyard and glancing down at the boy whose place he had taken. "It might better have been me than Dick."

There was little time for talk in the midst of the fierce work that ensued in the neglected garden until the opposing battery was silent. When the firing did cease, the sooty cannoneers threw themselves down on the trampled weeds, except Henry Price, who walked about on the blackened and smoking turf before the muzzle of the gun, every movement of his nervous figure uttering the dumb accusation, "I did it." Every comrade knew that he was in the desperate mood which impels men eagerly to court death in some forlorn hope.

Henry Price was impatient of inaction and incapable of rest. When the battery blazed away again, puncturing the dun smoke with red flashes, and the return shells plowed the old garden between the hot guns, the tense excitement and the hard work filled him with grim satisfaction. When the man in front of him fell, he caught the grimy sponge and wielded it fiercely, glad to be uncovered, as if he had come that much nearer his fate. Once he fell himself as he sprang backward to give the gun an opportunity to bark, but it was only a tangle of trampled rosebushes that caught his heel instead of a message of forgetfulness.

In front of the tangled garden the fields sloped away for a mile into a broad valley, made up of pasture and grainfield and fenceless roads, away to the dark woods beyond the red railroad embankment. In the early darkness of that wild night Henry Price was half mad to shoulder a musket and get down

into the line of his old regiment somewhere in the thunder of rifles that rolled over the valley.

The lines of stars pursuing each other fascinated him. His old regiment was somewhere in the action.

There was forgetfulness down there, and, for him, back on the hill, only the torture of memory. The long battle might end in that fierce conflict. He counted himself as a dead man. Why not have it over at once? He could wrench a gun from stiffened fingers and help himself to a cartridge box without asking. An irrepressible impulse impelled him to plunge into that fiery vortex as a moth flies into a lighted candle. He ran down the hill through the pasture. Nobody noticed the passing of a shadow into the darkness. The men in the battery were too intent on the vast display of pyrotechnics.

By 9 o'clock the roar of musketry had slackened to an occasional volley which was prolonged by a few scattering shots, a little flurry of stars, a spark here, a flash there, until silence and darkness settled on the valley.

Some time in the night Henry Price came back up the hill in the mood of a man on whom a slight has been put. In his heart he envied the dead and dying lying between the pickets in the dark valley. Because he had come out unscathed he knew that there was another day of the battle before him. In his highly wrought condition he was unable to rest. Others slept as if nothing had happened. Even the patient horses dozed in swaying lines against the film of smoke that overhung the charred timbers of the house and started in their dreams to breathe heavily, creaking a saddle here and rattling a headstall there.

Henry Price was neither glad nor sorry to see the rosy light of morning. Perhaps even then he saw only the red gloom of the sunken road as he stretched his stiffened limbs and muttered: "It was my work. I did it."

His physical strength sustained him wonderfully in the rough work of the day that followed, during which the stubborn lines were forced back from ridge to ridge until the third evening found the whole army in orderly retreat. Through it all Henry had kept his post at the muzzle of the gun. He showed no sign of weariness. He seemed dazed rather than tired. After two sleepless nights and two such eventful days it may reasonably be doubted if he was capable of subdividing the time that had passed since the dawn of his horrible self conviction in the glare of the burning farm buildings.

He had lost nothing of the presentiment that he was fighting his last battle, and when the battery made its final stand in the afterglow of the sunset, before leaving the field that was already lost, he sponged and rammed in a mechanical way and sprang outside the wheel like a well drilled automaton.

The hour was upon him. Every inch of his body was numb with the expectation of a blow. His scalp and his extremities were cold. He was a doomed man set against a wall, awaiting the sure volley, only the file of riflemen was not yet told off and there remained to him the merciful relief of activity.

When his quick eye caught the dribble of gray figures running and dodging through the hollows of the next field, multiplying among the scrubby cedars and swarming behind the stone wall, he recognized his grim executioners. He heard the cries for double canister, and laughed as he drove the two tin cylinders into the black throat of the gun. A little patter of bullets peppered the wheels, and some muffs of dust lead-

(Continued on page 22.)



The silhouetted figure of a man, over the mound was so strange and his position so perilous that the captain's anger gave way to a feeling of pity which was half admiration for the fellow's insensibility to danger. He looked on for one irresolute moment, and then ordered a sergeant to bring Price down. This was not such a hazardous duty as might at first seem, for the man commissioned officer had but to land-