

Jim Halket's Chum: A Soldier's Story

GRACE B. PAGE.

IT was a hot mid-summer's evening, and Jim Halket, a young recruit, sat on the edge of his barrack cot, thinking to himself that this first night in the Service was going to be an eventful one for him. His life came up before him. It was grey and dull enough. Brought up in a workhouse school, motherless, and with a father not worth the name—this had been his only home. He had never been really a wicked boy, but had always tried to get on, until a certain master had broken his spirit, and almost flung it in his face reproachfully that he was an unfortunate child. From that day he changed; he grew old, as it were, in a single night; the good in him was buried deeper down; he brooded over his misfortune and sorrow, and at times, while the other boys in the playground were laughing and enjoying rough games of play he would sit alone in a corner, perhaps hidden from view, thinking hard thoughts.

But there was one thing that they had done for him in that school. They had

TAUGHT HIM TO PRAY.

He had been such a wee, golden-haired mite when he was first admitted, that in the nursery a poor, homeless girl, who had had charge of him, remembering her own happier days, had somewhat got into the habit of softly whispering "Our Father" every night to him when she put him to bed, and, strange as it may seem, it became quite natural to him to repeat his prayer every night, in the after years of his life.

When he was about sixteen, he started to attend a mission hall, liking the bright singing. Bit by bit he was learning the way of salvation, and here felt the first stirrings of God's Spirit in his heart. Lodging with respectable people, he had never been tempted to drink or gamble. But hard times came, and for many months Jim was out of a job; he decided at last to enter the Service, and was duly enlisted, and walked into the Mission hall one Sunday night for the last time before going away to the depot.

Revival meetings were being held, and the evangelist came, and, placing his hand on Jim's shoulder said, "My lad, will you start to serve God to-night?"

The boy did not speak for a moment, out, acting upon a sudden impulse, he seized his cap, and walked straight up the aisle into the enquiry room.

But somehow what he really needed did not come to him that night—a personal salvation. It was the first groping of a soul after light and God. He tried to say he was all right, but the words would not come, and he went out, much as he came in.

An old lady, thinking he had got right, put out a wrinkled hand and caught his sleeve as he passed by. "Here liddle, they say you're going away to be a soldier to-morrow. My boy is in the Service—a real Christian he is. May the Lord help you, too! Will you promise me to put this little text over your cot to-morrow to remind you of what you have done to-night?"—Jim had but a shadowy idea of what a barrack-room was like; so that almost before he knew what he had done, the "Yes" was spoken.

Under the flickering light of four single gas burners a score of rough soldiers in various stages of uniform and undress were recounting

THEIR ADVENTURES "DOWN TOWN."

Jim, however, was thinking of the promise of the night before; and, as was

his wont, he acted on a sudden impulse; and just before "lights out," feeling it was now or never, he took the text out of his things, and, putting it on his shelf in front of his clothes, he hurried into bed.

His was a bad room, or what followed would never have occurred. Halket was half asleep when he felt a hot, drunken breath on his pillow, a heavy hand on his shoulder, and a voice whispered hoarsely in his ear, "Get up, 'Crutty!'—"

"—What's the matter?"

"—Never you mind," was the reply. "Get up!"

The room was almost dark; it was after midnight, and all the other men lay sound asleep. It was a weird scene, and the half-drunken bully waited until the lad had sat up in bed; then, pointing above his head, said in a hissing whisper,

"TAKE THAT TOMFOOLERY DOWN!"

Halket was wide awake now, and his heart sank. He turned round, and for the first time the text struck home to him, the firelight playing on the words, "Thou God seest me." He never felt a more wicked boy than he did at that moment, but there was pluck in him as he answered, "I won't take it down. Who are you?"

"I'll tell you," cried the other. "I'm Brown, the infidel of this room, and I won't have such trash here!" There was an instant's hush, and a cinder tumbled over the grate. "—And I won't take it down!"—"Ah! won't you?" muttered the other.

His great form stalked towards the fire, and in the shadow he returned with something Halket could not see. The next instant he felt what it was. Holding the lad's wrist in a grip of iron the bully held the hot poker, closer, closer, to the side of the strong young hand so tightly clenched.

"Now will you take it down?—now!" and every time the hot iron scorched the flesh.

Then came the moment of triumph. "Yes," cried the lad in an agony; "see!" But there was a dangerous flash in his eyes, as, spring up to the text, he carried it in his smarting hand to the fireplace.

"Do you see this text?" the lad's voice was low and clear. "Well, God sees to-night that you have tried to burn my religion out of me. Perhaps I never should have tried to have any, but here goes—at your responsibility!"

YOU'RE TO BLAME!"

A bright spurt of flame, and a charred fragment dropped on to the hearth. The voice of a waking sergeant ordered both back to their cots, and there was silence once more. In the morning, passing the bed, Brown glanced with a superstitious feeling up at Halket's shelf, almost expecting to see the text still there. It was gone, and during the first week of his service Halket's life fully testified to this.

For a time he hated the man who had so brutally forced his hand, but by that strange comradeship in evil paths so often seen, by the time Jim had finished his recruit days, Brown, the infidel bully, had no more promising pupil than he.

Months had passed, and along the badly-lighted military road the pickets chosen for that evening marched, their footfalls sounding loud and clear on the hard, frosty ground.

A bend in the road brought the un-

formed group into a view of a public-house, and they

SAW A FAIR-HEADED DISHEVELLED FIGURE

in blue overalls and grey shirt, decidedly getting the worst of it from a big, burly countryman with muscles of iron, and a bold face and square jaw.

"Jim Halket at it ag'in!" passed from one mouth to another. The young soldier in question was very drunk, and showed some resistance at first, but eventually was marched off quietly enough, somebody kindly finding his tunic from a distant taproom in the rear. His language was very abusive, and called forth sharp reproach from the sergeant in charge. On reaching barracks Halket was put in safe quarters for the night.

As the sergeant was walking down the corridor he met a corporal whom he knew. "Look here, Jenson," he said; "that lad we brought in to-night is not worth his uniform now; he's the worst recruit we've got! The fellow doesn't seem to care. The fact is, I suppose, he's sold, body and soul, to that ne'er-do-well Brown—not the first chap he's ruined, either."

And away in the dark of the guard-room, a broken figure, with tumbled uniform, lay on the cold stone floor, not so drunk now; not asleep, but sobbing as if his heart would break.

"No letters, no prayers, nobody to care what becomes of me!" There was a gasp who cared. Halket had forgotten that.

Six years passed away, and in a fever-camp out in India Jim Halket and Pte. Brown lay side by side. They had been together ever since Halket had enlisted, but now they had come to the parting of the ways. Jim Halket was young, and had pulled up a bit in his life since he had been abroad, but Brown, who lay beside him, had played the game, and was going under.

As the younger grew stronger, the older man weakened, and the orderly was glad when Jim was well enough to look after the prostrate bully, for whom no one cared. Days came and went under that hot Indian sky, men were brought into the hospital by their comrades, others in time were discharged. But these two remained. Brown silent, and suffering, but always following the figure of Halket with bright, feverish eyes.

In the middle of one silent night, Halket felt a hand, hot and dry, touch his. It recalled that other time and touch in the years gone by. He sprang up. The other whispered, "Don't be afraid, Jim. I want to speak to you."

"Shall I fetch the orderly?" Jim asked gently, for by the faint light in the room he saw Brown was dying.—"No," cried the other. "It's you I want; you, Jim Halket. Listen to every word. I shall not be alive in the morning."

Jim shivered a trifle. His comrade's clutch was convulsive, and he seemed to be struggling for breath. But by a supreme effort the words came clear and slow: "Jim, comrade, I'm not what I said I was; I'm not really an infidel, but

I'M A PRODIGAL

—a backslider. All my people were good. I've had every chance—but chosen the wrong. You haven't, but you are not so far from getting right now. I've watched you, and I can see you just do care for all the chaplain says, and when he asked you yesterday if you'd serve Christ, and give up sin, you'd have said 'Yes' if you hadn't seen me looking at you."—"Ah, Brown!" cried the other, "cannot we both ask God to forgive us our sins?"

"Yes, Jim, perhaps we can but listen! The mission hall you told me you used