

BOYS AND GIRLS

My Old Colonel

(C. N. Carvalho, in 'Sunday at Home.')

I have a sore heart to-day. In the telegrams this morning I see the death of my dear old friend and master, General Bowater. Well, he died in the service of his Queen and country as a man should, and as he wished to do, but none the less do we grieve at the loss of so true a heart, so brave a soldier.

I served General Bowater ten years—he was Colonel then—and might be in his service still, were it not for this disabled leg of mine that prevents my being of use to any one. And as in those ten years I learned to know him better than any other man in the regiment could do, it is fitting that I should be the one to describe him to you.

I need not tell you he was tall and of soldierly bearing, or that he had clear-cut features and stern grey eyes—that could look tender enough if their owner were so minded. That sort of thing you will find in any newspaper you pick up at a street corner. Perhaps they will say he was one who exacted prompt and unquestioning obedience; who invariably punished an accident, and rarely forgave an offence. For all that is no more than the truth. They may say, too, that he has been known on occasion to require impossibilities, or what seemed to be such, but no one will assert that he ever willingly exposed his men to a danger he would not face himself. And all must admit that his unceasing care for the comfort, morals, and well-being of those under him showed a heart full of sympathy and kindness.

I never got into trouble with Colonel Bowater but once. I had been with him then about two years, and he had learned to place great confidence in me. Of course I had had many a brush with him in that time, if I may use such an expression, for like most young fellows, I was given to slur over things in a way that must have been excessively irritating to so punctilious an officer. Point-Device was his name in the regiment, you must know, and it suited him down to the ground. But careless as I was, I had one redeeming quality in his eyes—I never tried to hoodwink him. He would have excused impertinence itself sooner, and any one who has the slightest knowledge of my master will know what that is to say.

But at length a day came when I could no longer make that boast. The deception was innocent enough, goodness knows, and not calculated to bring any advantage on myself, but deceit it was, and as such the Colonel regarded it. The tone in which he accused me of having tried to take him in, rings in my ears still, in spite of the many years that have passed since I heard it, and I am thankful to remember my fault has been long forgiven.

Colonel Bowater was a widower. Almost the first thing I heard when I joined the regiment was that his young wife was dead and had left him a little son between three and four years old. The child lived with its aunts, the Misses Bowater, some ten miles off, but he used to come to the camp now and then, and all the men knew and loved the bright, high-spirited little fellow. Our eyes always turned towards

the father and son with affection and respect when the Colonel passed down our lines on his white horse with little Cyril seated in front of him. As his body-servant I had a good deal to do with the boy, and we soon grew very fond of one another.

One day my master told me the child was coming to the camp for a long visit.

'It is to be an experiment, Barton,' said he. 'Cyril will be seven years old very soon, and he will hardly know me for his father if we continue to live apart. In a few months, too, I may have to go on active service, and then, who knows, if I shall ever see him again?'

I was surprised to hear him speak in this strain, for it was unlike him to be despondent. To change the subject I hastened to ask what he required of me.

He would be glad, he said, if I would give an eye to the boy, that was all. Cyril would have a tutor, of course, but there were many little things I could do, and he believed the child would be safer with me than with any one else.

I was delighted at the idea. I was always fond of children, and Cyril was the sweetest little fellow I had ever seen. Mr. Hayes, his tutor, turned out to be a very pleasant, gentlemanly young man, and an excellent teacher—so the Colonel informed me—but out of school hours, I soon found that his pupil preferred my society, and all my leisure time went in playing with the boy, and taking him and his great collie Bran for rambles over the downs. And in this way the summer went by very pleasantly.

One very wet afternoon when Mr. Hayes chanced to be absent, Colonel Bowater and his little son were sitting together—he writing out some military despatch, and master Cyril reading. The child was rather restless that day. He did not like having to remain indoors, and, unluckily, I had no time to play with him. Getting tired of his book at last, he cast about for something better to do, and his eyes soon lighted on a new pop-gun one of the men had made for him. Now, as he was by no means a mischievous child, I am at a loss to conceive why he should have fixed on his father's ink-stand for a target, but that was what he did. At first his shots fell short, and the Colonel, who would have gone on writing had real bullets been flying about him, paid no heed. But at length one of them hit the mark, and up came a splutter of ink into the Colonel's face.

'Don't do that again, Cyril,' he said as he wiped his forehead. 'My papers are of importance and must not be soiled.'

The boy wheeled round and cast his pellets through the open window. Then growing weary of the silence, he aimed a shot at his father. Colonel Bowater stood fire as if he had been in the trenches, and little Cyril, with a merry laugh let off another round—this time, unfortunately, scattering the ink all over his father's papers.

'Ring for Barton, Cyril,' the Colonel said rising hastily, 'and do you keep out of the way yourself, there's a good child. You have done more mischief than you have any idea of.'

It took some time to restore order. Meanwhile, Cyril watched us from the hearth-rug. He looked a little frightened,

I fancied, and no wonder, for the Colonel's face was as stern as you please, and he never uttered a word. Any other child would have shrunk away, but instead of that, he edged himself closer and closer to his father's side and at length tried to climb on to his knee.

The Colonel put him down gently. 'Not now, my dear,' he said, without moving a muscle of his face. 'You have given me many hours of hard work, and I have not even time to scold you. You must run away now and not come in again to-night.'

'I am so sorry, papa,' the child pleaded. 'I will never do it any more.'

'I hope not,' said his father grimly. 'I only wish you were old enough to repair the damage you have done. You would have it to do, I can assure you. Barton,' he added, turning to me, 'you will put Master Cyril to bed at once, if you please, and he will go without his tea to-night. Perhaps that will help him to remember not to disobey me in future.'

Cyril made no remonstrance, but on reaching his bedroom he burst out crying. I was sorry for the little chap. He had not intended to do any mischief, and I really thought his father was hard on him. Moreover, the punishment was more severe than the Colonel knew, for the boy had eaten little or nothing that day. He had taken some childish dislike to the boiled mutton at dinner, and would not touch it.

I put him to bed according to his father's orders and then went about my work. Presently I went in again and found him sitting up in bed with a book in his hand—one of his lesson-books it was. As the Colonel had not given him a task, I saw no reason he should work, and I said so.

'You see, I left my story-book in papa's room,' he said, deprecatingly, 'and I could not go in to fetch it, could I? But I haven't read much of this, Barty,' he added, wistfully, 'for—do you know, I am so dreadfully hungry.'

'Ah,' said I, 'that is because you were so dainty this morning, Master Cyril. The mutton was really very good. I don't know why you wouldn't eat it.'

'Well, it can't be helped now,' the brave little fellow said with a most winning smile. 'I wouldn't mind it much if papa wasn't vexed with me. That is the worst of it.'

'I don't believe,' I went on meditatively, 'that your father ever meant you to go so long without food. Why, it will be twenty-four hours by breakfast time tomorrow. I think I will get you a snack to serve instead of dinner, Master Cyril, and then perhaps you will feel better.'

'Oh, do you think you may?' he asked eagerly. 'Go and ask papa, Barty.'

'No need,' I rejoined confidently. 'It is better not to disturb him just now. But this is only some dinner you are going to have. You can make yourself easy.'

So off I went and got some sandwiches and a rosy apple such as I knew the dear child liked, and set them before him. He snatched the plate from me and began to eat as if he were half famished. Then suddenly he stopped, and stroking my hand, said pensively:

'You are quite sure papa won't mind, Barty? Quite, quite sure?'

'Yes, dear,' I said kissing him. 'Besides, he will never know anything about it.'