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THE DRUMS OF THE FORE AND AFT

(Continued.)

"Then let's go on make Tom Kidd so bloomin' sick 'e can't bugle no more. You 'old 'is 'ands an I'll kick him," said Lew, wriggling on the branch.

"That ain't no good, neither. We ain't the sort o' characters to pressoon on our reputations. They're bad. If they have the band at the depot, we don't go, an no error there. If they take the band, we may get cast for medical unfitness. Are you medical fit, Piggy?" said Jakin, digging Lew in the ribs with force.

"Yus," said Lew, with an oath. "The doctor says your 'eart's weak through smokin on an empty stum-tick. Throw a chest, an I'll try yer."

Jakin threw out his chest, which Lew smote with all his might. Jakin turned very pale, gasped, crowded, screwed up his eyes and said, "That's all right."

"You'll do," said Lew. "I've 'eard o' men dyin when you 'it 'em fair on the breastbone."

"Don't bring us no nearer goin, though," said Jakin. "Do you know where we're ordered?"

"Gawd knows, an 'e won't split on a pal. Somewheres up to the front to kill Paythans—hairly big beggars that turn you inside out if they get 'old o' you. They say their women are good lookin too."

"Any loot?" asked the abandoned Jakin.

"Not a bloomin' anna, they say, unless you dig up the ground an see what the niggers 'ave 'id. They're a poor lot." Jakin stood upright on the branch and gazed across the plain.

"Lew," said he, "there's the colonel comin. Colonel's a good old beggar. Let's go on talk to 'im."

Lew nearly fell out of the tree at the audacity of the suggestion. Like Jakin, he feared not God, neither regarded he man, but there are limits even to the audacity of drummer boys, and to speak to a colonel was—

But Jakin had slid down the trunk and doubled in the direction of the colonel. That officer was walking, wrapped in thought and visions of a C. B.—yes, even K. C. B., for had he not at command one of the best regiments of the line—the Fore and Aft? And he was aware of two small boys charging down upon him. Once before it had been solemnly reported to him that "the drums were in a state of mutiny," Jakin and Lew being the ringleaders. This looked like an organized conspiracy.

The boys halted at 20 yards, walked to the regulation four paces and saluted together, each as well set up as a ramrod and little taller.

The colonel was in a genial mood, the boys appeared very forlorn and unprotected on the desolate plain, and one of them was handsome.

"Well!" said the colonel, recognizing them. "Are you going to pull me down in the open? I'm sure I never interfere with you, even though"—he sniffed suspiciously—"you have been smoking."

It was time to strike while the iron was hot. Their hearts beat tumultuously.

"Beg your pardon, sir," began Jakin. "The reg'ment's ordered on active service, sir?"

"So I believe," said the colonel courteously.

"Is the band goin, sir?" said both together.

Every thoughtful man whether he be an artist or a business man, a mechanic or farmer, feels that he has a certain work to do in this world, and he wants to complete it. A brave man's principal fear of death is because it compels him to leave his life-work unfinished.

He fears sickness for the same reason. He feels that he might as well break his neck and done with, as to have his best working powers hampered and wasted away by disease.

To have the brain dulled and the body enfeebled by impure bile-poisoned blood, is no better than a living death, with all its horrible accompaniments of dyspepsia, nervousness and melancholy.

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It fills the blood with the red life-giving elements which nourish every organ and tissue. It replaces wasted tissue with healthy flesh and solid muscular strength. By feeding the brain and nerves with vital energy, it banishes neuralgia and nervous weakness and sleeplessness.

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gether. Then, without pause, "We're goin, sir, ain't we?"

"You!" said the colonel, stepping back the more fully to take in the two small figures. "You! You'd die in the first march."

"No, we wouldn't, sir. We can march with the regiment anywheres—p'rade an anywhere else," said Jakin.

"If Tom Kidd goes, 'e'll shut up like a clasp knife," said Lew. "Tom 'as very close veins in both 'is legs, sir."

"Very how much?"

"Very close veins, sir. That's why they swells after long p'rade, sir. If 'e can go, we can go, sir."

Again the colonel looked at them long and intently.

"Yes, the band is going," he said as gravely as though he had been addressing a brother officer. "Have you any parents, either of you two?"

"No, sir," rejoicingly from Lew and Jakin. "We're both orphans, sir. There's no one to be considered of on our account, sir."

"You poor little sprats. And you want to go up to the front with the regiment, do you? Why?"

"I've wore the queen's uniform for two years," said Jakin. "It's very 'ard, sir, that a man don't get no recompense for doin 'is dooty, sir."

"An—an if I don't go, sir," interrupted Lew. "The bandmaster 'e says 'e'll catch an make a bloo—a blessed musician o' me, sir. Before I've seen any service, sir."

The colonel made no answer for a long time. Then he said quietly: "If you're passed by the doctor, I dare say you can go. I shouldn't smoke if I were you."

The boys saluted and disappeared. The colonel walked home and told the story to his wife, who nearly cried over it. The colonel was well pleased. If that was the temper of the children, what would not the men do?

Jakin and Lew entered the boys' barrack room with great staidness and refused to hold any conversation with their comrades for at least ten minutes. Then, bursting with pride, Jakin drawled: "I've bin interveoin the colonel. Good old beggar 'is the colonel. Says I to 'im, 'Colonel,' says I, 'let me go to the front along o' the regiment.' 'To the front you shall go,' says 'e, 'an I only wish there was mere like you among the dirty little devils that bang the bloomin' drums." Kidd, if you throw your 'counterments at me for tellin 'on the truth to your own advantage your legs'll swell."

None the less, there was a battle royal in the barrack room, for the boys were consumed with envy and late, and neither Jakin nor Lew behaved in conciliatory wise.

"I'm goin out to say adoo to my girl," said Lew to cap the climax. "Don't none o' you touch my kit, because it's wanted for active service, me bein specially invited to go by the colonel."

He strolled forth and whistled in the clump of trees at the back of the married quarters till Cris came to him, and the preliminary kisses being given and taken, Lew began to explain the situation.

"I'm goin to the front with the regiment," he said valiantly.

"Piggy, you're a little liar," said Cris, but her heart misgave her, for Lew was not in the habit of lying.

"Liar yourself, Cris," said Lew slipping an arm round her. "I'm goin. When the reg'ment marches out, you'll see me with 'em, all gallant an gay. Give us another kiss, Cris, on the strength of it."

"If you'd on'y a-staid at the depot, where you ought to ha' bin, you could get as many of 'em as—as you dam please," whimpered Cris, putting up her mouth.

"It's 'ard, Cris. I grant you it's 'ard. But what's a man to do? If I'd a-staid at the depot, you wouldn't think anything o' me."

"Like as not, but I'd 'ave you with me, Piggy. An all the thinkin' in the world isn't like kissin'."

"An all the kissin in the world isn't like 'avin a medal to wear on the front o' your coat."

"You won't get no medal."

"Oh, yus, I shall, though. Me an Jakin are the only acting drummers that'll be took along. All the rest is full men, an we'll get our medals with them."

"They might ha' taken anybody but you, Piggy. You'll get killed—you're so venturesome. Stay with me, Piggy, darlin, down at the depot, an I'll love you true forever."

"Ain't you goin to do that now, Cris? You said you was."

"O' course I am, but the other's more comfortable. Wait till you've growed a bit, Piggy. You aren't no taller than me now."

"I've bin in the army for two years, an I'm not goin to get out of a chanst o' seein service, an don't you try to make me do so. I'll come back, Cris, an when I take on as a man I'll marry you—marry you when I'm a lance."

"Promise, Piggy?"

Lew reflected on the future as arranged by Jakin a short time previously, but Cris' mouth was very near to his own.

"I promise, s'elp me Gawd!" said he.

Cris slid an arm round his neck. "I won't 'old you back no more, Piggy. Go away an get your medal, an I'll make you a new button bag as nice as I know how," she whispered.

"Put some o' your 'air into it, Cris,

an I'll keep it in my pocket so long's I'm alive."

Then Cris wept anew, and the interview ended. Public feeling among the drummer boys rose to fever pitch, and the lives of Jakin and Lew became unenviable. Not only had they been permitted to enlist two years before the regulation boy's age—14—but, by virtue, it seemed, of their extreme youth, they were allowed to go to the front—which thing had not happened to acting drummers within the knowledge of boy. The band which was to accompany the regiment had been cut down to the regulation 20 men, the surplus returning to the ranks. Jakin and Lew were attached to the band as supernumeraries, though they would much have preferred being company buglers.

"Don't matter much," said Jakin after the medical inspection. "Be thankful that we're 'lowed to go at all. The doctor 'e said that if we could stand what we took from the bazaar sergeant's son we'd stand pretty nigh anything."

"Which we will," said Lew, looking tenderly at the ragged and ill made housewife that Cris had given him with a lock of her hair worked into a sprawling "L" upon the cover.

"It was the best I could," she sobbed. "I wouldn't let mother nor the sergeant's tailor 'elp me. Keep it always—Piggy, an remember I love you true."

(To be Continued.)

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