

A DAY OF VICTORY.

A Story for Boys.

(By Marjorie L. C. Pickshall.)

Ted stood dolefully by the window, thumping his clinched fists on the sill. There was a black mark under his eye, and once he rubbed his coatsleeve absent-mindedly upon his nose to see if it would remove the cold, numbed feeling that lingered about that upturned feature. "I'm no better than a coward," he repeated huskily.

His mother was watching him; there was a smile in her eyes, but her face was grave. "Tell me again what happened," she said quietly.

"It was such a warm day for the 24th of May that we went in swimming in the pool in front of the bathing houses," said Ted sadly. "You know you said I could, mother, 'n' it was swell. The water was as warm as anything. 'N' I was the only one who could stick his head under water and keep his eyes open, though Tubby Parsons can float better. Then someone said, 'I bet you fellows can't jump off the old steamer wharf.' You know, mother, since the Marvin dam was built up river, the old wharf's about fourteen feet above the water—oh, ever so high! And there's a great, deep hole in front of it, no one knows how deep. Well, 'we all went there and climbed out on the old piles. Tubby Parsons went first, and when he was diving down he yelled awful, and we thought he was never coming up. And then Fred Walker went, and when he came out he was all blue and shivery. And then Tubby pushed Chicky Butler in, and Chicky squealed so that it pricked all up my back. And then it was my turn. I took a run down the piles, and I was going to jump, though I can't dive very well. But just at the edge I stopped, as if a board has been put up. I looked down, down, down, and I could see the water all black in the hole, and the horrid weeds round the edge waving like spiders' legs—ugh! And I couldn't jump—I just couldn't jump, mother. I tried three times, and each time my legs stopped of their own accord at the edge, and I felt sort o' seasick inside. And then Tubby began saying, 'Cowardly, Cowardly, Custard!' and—and all that stuff."

"And then?" said his mother, glancing at Ted's nose.

"And then I climbed off the piles," said Ted, "and—made him stop. But—but I didn't jump, mother. I'm no better than a coward." He turned his flushed, honest face towards her. They were chums, these two, as well as mother and son.

"You're not a coward, Ted," said his mother. "The greatest and bravest men in the world have often been afraid of things—quite silly things. Courage doesn't lie in never feeling fear or weakness; it lies in overcoming those things."

"And I didn't overcome mine," said Ted sturdily.

"No," said his mother quietly, "you didn't overcome your weakness that time. It didn't matter very much then

except to Theodore Parsons,"—her lips twitched—"but some day it might matter very much indeed. If you don't overcome these things, they'll overcome you. Now, don't worry any more about it. What are the boys going to do this afternoon and this evening?"

"Crackers and fireworks and a bonfire," said Ted, brightening suddenly, "up at Marvin's. Guess they'll be waiting for me now, mother. I had no idea it was so late."

Ten minutes later he was bounding down the stairs, comforted but thoughtful, his pockets bulging with squibs and cannon crackers. Around him hovered an odor of gunpowder and sulphur matches most cheering to his soul. At the foot of the stairs he felt obliged to give three cheers for Victoria Day.

He went down the street at a run, crossed two fields, and came out on a bank of the river through a tangle of young poplars and berry bushes. His way led him up the bank for half a mile, past the bathing sheds and the old steamer wharf. He went on at a jog-trot. The words "Victory—Victoria," danced in his mind. He felt it was a good idea of his father's to keep Victoria Day by a victory over something. Personally he would have preferred a victory over Theodore Parsons.

The sheds and the bathing places were deserted. But as Ted approached the old wharf, he saw a lot of small boys clustered like sparrows on the slippery piles. The thought of his own failure that morning stung him afresh. He turned his head towards the fields, gripped the crackers in his pockets, and trotted on faster. He would not look at these boys—mere kids of nine or ten—perhaps succeeding in doing what he had vainly attempted.

He did not see that the little cluster of boys perched on the piles was suddenly shaken and scattered by some immediate fear. He did not see some of them wading into the shallow water, and others running helplessly about on the bank. But he heard a chorus of shrill calls for help, and stopped in a second, his heart jumping at the sound.

A little boy detached himself from one of the confused groups and ran towards him, waving his hands frantically, and pointing to the river. Ted wheeled about and dashed towards the old wharf, running as he had never before known he could run.

He tore off his coat and let it fall, regardless utterly of Victoria Day celebrations. "One of those crazy kids has fell into the hole," he muttered to himself, regardless, also, of grammar. His mouth was firmly set, and his freckled cheeks were white. He remembered that years ago a child had been drowned from the old wharf.

At the edge of the wharf he paused only to tear off his running shoes—how thankful he was he had not worn boots—and push aside two of the terrified children who ran and clutched his hands.

"He's down there!" screamed little Alec Parsons. "He's down there! Oh, Ted, he's been down there ever so long!

Oh, he's dead, he's dead! Oh, I'm so frightened! He's dead!"

"Shut up that noise!" said Ted savagely. "You and Tommy run to Marvin's as fast as ever you can, and get help. Yell all you know how. I'm going to try and dive for him."

He was at the end of the rickety piles in a flash, poised for the dive. The sun struck clearly on the black water of the deep hole, showing it apparently bottomless; the slimy, furred weeds about its sharp brink waved in the shallow water as if they were alive. Suddenly, an intense physical horror of the touch of that black water and those soft, wriggling weeds, seized hold of him. In reality he only hesitated an instant; but he thought he stood shamefully on the edge of the wharf for many minutes, struggling with the thoughts and feelings that rushed through his mind while the younger boy drowned below. He felt for a flash that he could not face that bottomless black pit of water. Then he seemed to hear his mother's voice—"Some day it will matter very much. If you don't overcome these weaknesses, they will overcome you." He set his teeth and jumped out and down.

He was not a very expert diver, and he struck the water with a goodly splash. But, once under, he could swim with his eyes open. It seemed to him that he was sinking down a fathomless funnel, filled with gloom and greenish, murky shafts of light, and the wavering shadows of monstrous weeds. The water roared in his ears, and stung his eyeballs agonizingly. But he held on to his breath, and went down, down, down.

Once, the slimy weeds reached out and clung to him, and little thrills of dislike and fear tingled along his nerves. Then he remembered that a horse had fallen into this hole and been drowned three years ago. He dreaded that he might touch its bones, all overgrown with soft water plants, in the deepening greenish gloom. He began to feel an iron band around his chest, and little sparks danced and swirled before his eyes.

And then, just underneath him, he felt a child's head with long, floating hair. He knew it was little Sidney Butler, with the long curls that the other boys made fun of and pulled. Once he had put burrs into those curls. Now he gripped hold of them mightily, and struck upwards with all his wavering strength, towards the blessed air and light. Fortunately, Sydney was beyond struggling and panic, or it might have fared badly with them both.

Ted's endurance was almost at an end. That iron band round his chest was tightening to the point of torment. Showers of stars and leaping ripples of light flared in his eyes. Up, up, up—would he never reach the air? A boy once told him that drowning didn't hurt. He longed to live, chiefly that he might seek out that boy and punch him. Oh, air, air, air! Would he never reach it?

The ripples of light grew dazzling. Suddenly his head shot clear of the

water, and he breathed. He could not see, for everything was spinning in vast circles of green and blue and crimson. Shouts and cries rang in his ears. Someone took Sydney from his arms. And then everything slid away to blackness.

When he awoke, he was in bed at Marvin's, and his mother was leaning over him.

"I jumped, mother," he said, drowsily.

"Yes, I know, dear," she said, softly. "Sydney's all right. Go to sleep again, Ted."

"I missed the fireworks," muttered Ted, "but I jumped."

"You celebrated the day with a nobler deed than setting off crackers," said his mother.

At the pride in her voice Ted smiled and went to sleep again. For him, Victoria Day had been a day of victory indeed.

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