

“The Gates of Pearl” ~ General Hardsess

It was during my Indian service - stirring times, too, ripe with mutiny and murder. At that time I had in my regiment a little bugler. I had often noticed him as being too fragile and delicate for the life he had to lead: but he was born in the regiment, and we were bound to make the best of him. His father, as brave a man as ever lived, had been killed in action; his mother, broken-hearted, had dropped, and died six months after.

About two years later, when Willie Holt was fourteen, the regiment was bivouacking some miles from the camp. One morning an act of grave indiscipline was reported to me. On investigation, the rascally act was traced to the men in the very tent where Willie Holt was billeted, two of them being the worst characters in the regiment. The whole lot was instantly put under arrest, and tried by court martial, when enough evidence was produced that one of the prisoners was guilty of the crime.

None would own up to being the guilty one; and at last I spoke: "We have all heard the evidence that proves the perpetrator of last night's dastardly act to be one of the men before us." Then, turning to the prisoners, added, "If any one of you who slept in No. 4 tent last night will come forward and take his punishment like a man, the rest will get off free; but, if not, there remains no other alternative but to punish you all, each in turn to receive ten strokes of the cat."

For the space of a couple of minutes dead silence followed; then, from the midst of the prisoners, where his slight form had been almost hidden, Willie Holt came forward. He advanced to within a couple of yards from where I sat; his face was pale; a fixed intensity of purpose stamped on every line of it, and his steadfast eyes met mine clear and full. "Colonel," said he, "you have passed your word that if any one of those who slept in No. 4 tent last night comes forward to take the punishment, the rest shall get off scot-free. I am ready, sir; and may I take it now?"

For a moment I was speechless, so utterly was I taken by surprise; then, in a fury of anger and disgust, I turned upon the prisoners. "Is there no man among you worthy of the name? Are you all cowards enough to let this lad suffer for your wrong acts? For, that he is guiltless you must know, as well as I." But sullen and silent they stood.

Then I turned to the boy whose patient, pleading eyes were fixed on my face and never in all my life have I found myself so painfully situated. I knew my word must stand: and the lad

knew it too, as he repeated once more, "I am ready, sir." Sick at heart, I gave the order, and he was led away for punishment.

Bravely he stood, with back bare, as one - two - three - strokes descended. At the fourth a faint moan escaped from his lips, and ere the fifth fell, a hoarse cry burst from the group of prisoners who had been forced to witness the scene. And with one bound, Jim Sykes, the black sheep of the regiment, seized the cat, as with choking, gasping utterance he shouted, "Stop it, Colonel, stop it, and tie me up instead. He didn't do it, I did!" and with convulsed and anguished face he swung his arms around the boy.

Fainting and almost speechless, Holt lifted his eyes to the man's face and smiled - yes, a smile. "No, Jim," he whispered, "you are safe now; the Colonel's word will stand." His head fell forward - he had fainted.

The next day, as I was making for the hospital tent where the boy lay, I met the doctor. "How is the lad?" I asked. "Sinking, Colonel," he said quickly. "What!" I ejaculated, horrified beyond words. "Yes, the shock of yesterday has been too much for his strength. I have known for some months it was only a question of time," he added, "and this affair has hastened matters." Then, gruffly, he exclaimed, "He's more fit for Heaven than earth."

A subdued murmur came from the farther corner of the tent, and the sight that met my eyes I shall never forget. The dying lad lay propped up on pillows, and half-kneeling, half-crouching, at his side was Jim Sykes. The change in the boy's face startled me; it was deathly white, but his great eyes were shining with a wonderful strange light.

At that moment the kneeling man lifted his head, and I saw drops of sweat standing on his brow as he muttered brokenly, "Why did you do it, lad? Why did you?" "Because I wanted to take it for you, Jim," the weak voice answered. "I thought if I did, it might help you to understand a little bit why Christ died for you." "Why Christ died for me?" "Yes, He died for you because He loved you as I do, Jim; only He loves you more. I only suffered for one sin, but the Lord Jesus Christ took the punishment of all the sins you have ever committed. This punishment of all your sins was death Jim, and He died for you." "Christ has naught to do with such as me, lad. I'm one of the bad 'uns; you ought to know that." "But He died to save 'bad ones' - just them. He said, 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.'" "Jim," the voice pleaded, "shall He have died in vain? He has poured out His precious life-blood for you. He is knocking; won't you let Him in? Oh! You must - then we shall meet again." The lad's voice failed him, but he laid his hand on the man's bowed head. A choking sob was the only answer, and then for several minutes there was silence.

I felt stirred. I had heard such things once - long ago. Thoughts of the mother I had idolized came floating back out of the dead past, and the words seemed a faint echo of hers. How

long I stood there I know not, but I was roused by a hoarse cry from the man, and then I saw that the boy had fallen back on his pillows, faint. A few drops of cordial revived him. He opened his eyes, but they were dim, almost sightless. "Sing to me, Mother," he whispered, "The Gates of Pearl.' I am so tired."

Curious, in a flash, the words came back to me; I had heard them often in that shadowy past and I found myself repeating them softly to the dying boy:

*Though the path be never so steep,
And rough to walk on and hard to keep,
It will lead, when the weary road is trod,
To the Gates of Pearl - the City of God*

As the last words fell from my lips, his eyes brightened and met mine gratefully. "Thank you, Colonel," he whispered slowly, "I shall soon be there." His tone of glad confidence seemed so strange, I said involuntarily, "Where?" With a smile he answered, "Why, in Heaven, Colonel. The roll-call has sounded for me, and the gates are open; the price paid." Then softly, dreamily, he repeated:

*Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!*

Sykes came, I came; will you come?