

BROTHERS

I MYSELF would be the last man in the world to suspect Nobby Clark of justifying or attempting to justify the questionable conduct of his father. He had a clear appreciation both of his parent's genius and shortcomings, and valued both at their worth. That is how I read his attitude of mind. I think Private Clark is possessed of a large charity of mind. I imagine that he is generous and lenient in some degree when he finds himself reviewing his father's acts, but if, in his filial respect, he cannot condemn, there is a certain irony in his tone when he tells these stories which makes it quite apparent that he does not condone.

“Me father was highly respected by

his family," explained Nobby once. "Uncle Jim, Uncle George, an' Uncle Alf couldn't say enough about father an' the way he was looked up to by all his relations.

"Uncle Alf wouldn't have anybody but father to bail him out, an' the way Uncle Jim's family used to come and live with us when Uncle Jim was doin' four months for jumpin' on a policeman, was very touchin'.

"Then in the summer time, when there was no unemployed work goin' on, Uncle George used to come an' pay us a visit, an' once I remember all three uncles with their families came at once.

"'You're a true brother,' sez Uncle George; 'an' if you can ever make a bit out of me or Alf or Jim, you're free to do so.'

"'Hear, hear,' sez me other uncles.

"Father kept the advice in his mind,

an' the first time there was a reward offered for Uncle Jim ('believed to be concerned with others in breakin' an' enterin'). father stepped in an' took the prize.

"'It ain't much that I can do to get back the money they've cost me,' sez me father; 'but what I can do I will do with a cheerful heart.'

"Father went to see Uncle Jim in Wormwood Scrubbs.

"'I didn't think you'd put me away for six months,' sez Uncle Jim.

"'I didn't think I would meself,' sez father. 'I thought you'd get two years.'

"Relations are best apart, especially poor relations, if you don't happen to be so poor as them, an' I've never known, so far as the army goes, any brothers who lived together in harmony longer than four months.

"It stands to reason, in a way, that

brothers get on badly. They know each other too well, an' half the secret of keepin' friends with another feller is not to know anythin' about him, except the side he cares to show.

"Brothers are fairly common in the army, because soldierin' runs in some families like measles, an' crooked noses, but the two strangest brothers I ever know'd was the Joneses—B. Jones an' H. Jones. It was a long time before we knew they was brothers, because one of 'em was in 'B' Company an' the other in 'H'—that's how they got their initials.

"The first time I ever thought they was brothers was when H. Jones came into B. Jones's room an' borrowed his blackin' brushes without askin'. That was a pretty sure sign they was related. They never walked out in town together, never drank together, an' one took as

much notice of the other as if he'd been a fly on the wall.

“ I sez to one of 'em—to ' B'—

“ ‘ You're a funny sort of feller,' sez I, ' not to have anythin' to do with your own brother—it don't seem natural.'

“ ‘ What don't seem natural to me,' he sez, politely, ' is for you to see anybody else's business goin' on without wantin' to stick your long ugly nose in !'

“ ‘ B. Jones,' I sez, sternly, ' I'm actin' for the best, as man to man, for the sake of peace an' harmony, an' for two pins I'd swipe the head off you.'

“ I left 'em alone after that, but me an' the other chaps used to wonder what it was that'd, so to speak, come between two brotherly hearts.

“ ‘ I shouldn't be surprised,' sez Spud Murphy, ' if one of 'em hasn't done the other out of the family property ; I've read cases like it in books.'

" Spud always was a bit romantic, an' that was the sort of book he read.

" ' Perhaps B.'s the real heir to the property, an' H. is a changeling,' he sez, ' perhaps the wicked earl done 'em both out——'

" ' To be continued in our next,' sez Smithy, very nasty, ' perhaps they're only ordinary brothers who are fed up with one another, just as me an' Nobby are fed up with you.'

" It wasn't long after this that Mr. Kroojer began pilin' his burjers on the border, an' the Anchester Regiment, bein'—though I say it as shouldn't—one of the best regiments in the army, was sent out.

" It was tough work in South Africa, the toughest work that most soldiers have done, an' somehow the Anchesters always got in the hot an' hungry places.

" We hadn't been in the country three

months before we had a casualty list as long as the Rowley Mile, an' what with the closin' up of the ranks, an' the reconstruction of companies, B. Jones an' H. Jones got into the same company.

"Considerin' we was fightin' every day, an' livin' on half rations most of the time, you'd have thought that these two chaps would have shown a more companionable spirit, but not they. Somehow war, an' the dangers of war, made no difference. They was on noddin' terms, borrowed little things from one another, but each went his own way.

"If they'd been people in books they'd been fallin' on one another's necks after every fight, but they was just ordinary folks an' did nothin'.

"This went on all through the war, an' toward the end our battalion was ordered out to march with a convoy through the Western Transvaal.

“ Our job was to guard it, an’ it needed a bit of guardin’.

“ We’d hardly got ten miles out of Klerksdorp when Dela Rey come down on us, an’ it took us four hours to fight his commando off. Next day De Wet, who was in that neighbourhood, saw us an’ came along to pick us up. But it was our early closin’ day, an’ De Wet went away sick an’ sorry. Then when we was half-way on our journey, three commandoes combined to settle us for good, an’ at dawn one mornin’ began a fight which lasted till sunset. We held a little hill to the right of the convoy, an’ this position bore the whole of the attack.

“ It was the only time durin’ the war that I ever saw the Boers charge a position, an’ twice that day we had to give way before their attacks. When night came, one out of every four men had been hit.

“ We posted strong guards that night expectin’ an attack, an’ we got all we expected.

“ Firin’ began before sun-up. Some of the Boers took up a position on a ridge where they could shoot from good cover, an’ two companies were ordered to clear the ridge. A an’ B companies went an’ did it. We took the position with the bayonet, an’ then found that it wasn’t worth holdin’.

“ We got the order to retire on our main post, an’ started to march away. Half-way down the slope lay a wounded Boer. He wasn’t a real Boer, bein’ a half-breed nigger, but as we passed he raised himself up an’ shouted ‘ Water !’

“ ‘ Fall out, Jones,’ sez the officer, ‘ an’ give that man a drink.’

“ What happened exactly I don’t know. We went marchin’ on, leavin’ Jones behind, an’ suddenly I heard the crack

of a rifle, an' looked round. The half breed was runnin' like mad toward the Boer lines, a rifle in his hand, an' poor B. Jones lay very quiet on the hillside.

" 'Shoot that man!' shouts the officer, an' a dozen men dropped on their knees an' fired at the flyin' murderer, but he dropped over the crest of the rise as quick as a flash.

" We doubled back an' carried the poor chap into camp, but it was all up with him, we could see that much. He was shot through the chest, an' we carried him carefully to the rear.

" Soon after this, the Boers returned to the attack, an' we was so busily engaged wonderin' when we'd be wounded ourselves that we had no time to think of B. Jones.

" At one o'clock that afternoon the Boer firin' went suddenly quiet, an' half an hour later we heard a far-away

pom-pom come into action, an' knew a relief force was on its way.

"Methuen it was, with his column, an' most of us, were very glad to see him. We had time now to count heads, an' see who was up an' who was down.

"That," said Nobby sadly, "is always the worse part of war. It's the part where a corporal an' twelve men go off with spades, an' another party sews men up in blankets—men you've spoke to that mornin'; men you've larked with, an' drank with.

"I was fixin' up me kit an' givin' me rifle a clean, when H. Jones strolled up.

"He nodded to me an' Smithy.

"I hear me young brother's down," he sez, very quiet.

"Yes, H.," I sez.

"How did it happen?" sez H. Jones. So I told him.

" 'What like was this nigger?' he asked after I finished.

" As well as I could I described him. He was easy to describe, because he had a big yeller face an' a crop of woolly hair.

" 'Come along,' he sez, after a bit, ' an' see me brother—he's a pal of yours, ain't he? '

" We found poor B. lyin' on the ground, on the shady side of an ox-wagon. The doctor was there, an' when he saw H. he took him aside.

" I suppose you know your brother is dyin'?' he sez, an' H. nodded, then turned to his brother.

" 'How goes it, Jack?' he sez gentle, an' poor B. grinned.

" 'So so,' he sez, weakly, ' me number's up.'

" 'So they was tellin' me,' sez H. ' Well, we've all got to go through it, sooner or later.'

“The dyin’ man nodded, an’ for a little while neither of ’em spoke.

“‘Got any message to mother?’ sez H., an’ the poor chap on the ground nodded again.

“‘Give her my kind regards,’ he sez. ‘Take care of yourself, Fred.’

“It seemed strange to me,” said Nobby, thoughtfully, “that these two brothers, one of them dyin’, should talk so calm one with the other, an’ I never realized till then how little a feller like me knows about the big things of life, an’ death.

“Poor old B. died an hour later, an’ his brother was with him to the last. After it was all over he came to me.

“‘Nobby,’ he sez, ‘which way did the Boers go?’

“As it happened I’d heard one of Methuen’s staff officers describin’ the line of march the Boers were takin’, so I was able to tell him.

" 'Thanks,' he sez. That night he deserted.

" What happened afterwards I heard from a Boer prisoner who told one of our sergeants.

" H. Jones left the camp soon after midnight, an' dodgin' the sentries, an' the outposts, he made his way in the direction of the Boers. For two days he tramped, sleepin' at night on the open veldt an' with nothin' to eat but a biscuit he took away with him.

" He was found by a Boer patrol, an' as luck would have it, was taken to the very commando that held the ridge.

" By all accounts, the chap in charge was a young lawyer who'd been educated in England an' spoke English better than H. Jones ever could hope to speak it.

" 'Hullo!' he sez, when H. was marched before him, 'an what the devil do you want?'

“ ‘ I’m lookin’ for the feller that killed me young brother,’ say H.

“ The young commandant shook his head with a little smile.

“ ‘ I’m afraid,’ he sez very gently, ‘ there are many people in this unfortunate country who are lookin’ for the man who killed their brothers.’

“ ‘ My brother was murdered,’ say H. doggedly, an’ told the tale.

“ ‘ I don’t believe any of me men would have done such a thing,’ he sez, ‘ What sort of a man was it ? ’

“ So H. described him, an’ the young lawyer frowned.

“ ‘ Bring Van Huis here,’ he sez to a Boer, an’ by an’ bye the man he sent for came—a half-bred Dutchman with a dash of Hottentot in him.

“ ‘ Oh, Van Huis,’ sez the Commandant careless, ‘ they tell me you killed an English soldier at Valtspruit the other day ? ’

"The man grinned.

"'Ja,' he sez, 'I shot him dead.'

"'Tell me how you did it,' sez the Commandant, pickin' his teeth with a splinter of wood.

"'Hear,' sez the half-breed, 'I called him to bring me water, then I shot him.'

"The Commandant nodded.

"'That was very clever,' he sez, 'so clever that I am goin' to hang you to that tree, an' this soldier shall be your executioner.'

"H. Jones came back with an escort of Boers, an' was placed under arrest, until the C.O. read the letter that the Boer Commandant sent, then he was released.

"'What I can't understand,' sez Smithy to me afterwards, 'is, how is it that these two chaps, who never took any notice of one another——'

“ But I stopped old Smithy because I knew what he was goin’ to say.

“ ‘ Friends are friends,’ I sez, ‘ an’ brothers are brothers——,’ then I stopped too, for what more can you say than that ? ”

