

“THE GHOST OF HEILBRON KOPJE”

NOBBY CLARK, by all showing, is a man of great humanity. I have known him to do things that would make him very angry did he know I knew.

I have seen him, on a certain march—which lasted some six weeks, and was the most fatuous, futile, and wicked operation of the whole war—share his scanty rations with a man he hated. I have seen him by sick-beds as tender as a woman. It is said that in a certain fight on the Vaal River, where the grass caught fire, and the wounded lay helplessly sizzling in the flames, he and Private Smith went again and again into this perfect hell of torment to carry their wounded fellows to safety.

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It is said, too, and, I do not doubt, with truth, that they lied their way out of a Victoria Cross, stoutly affirming that they took no part in the rescue, and persisting in the statement that those who thought they saw them were suffering from hallucinations, or, as Nobby put it coarsely, were drunk.

Knowing that deep down in the bottom of his heart Nobby Clark is a sentimentalist, and that away back in the base of his brain he is a shrewd, common-sense individual, the story of the ghost of the Hussar officer leaves me in an unsatisfactory condition of doubt. Is it Nobby's heart or Nobby's head that directs the recital? The facts, such as he gives me, I offer to the world in general, and the Psychological Research Society in particular.

"Me father," said Private Clark, by way of introduction, "was a feller who believed in ghosts. We used to have a

family ghost when we lived at Clark's Hall, Bermondsey, but it was seized for rent, along with our other valuables.

"It used to walk the picture-gallery in the east wing," said Nobby, with a far-away look in his eye, "an' father was very proud of it. Some said it was the ghost of Sir Guy de Clark, who was executed at Tower Hill; some said it was the ghost of Bill Clark, who was executed at Newgate; some said it was rats, an' I expect one of the three ideas was right.

"Nobody ever saw it but father, because it was one of them snobbish ghosts that never appeared to common people.

"Father used to see it on Christmas night, an' that was always a sign for mother to send for the doctor.

" 'Hello, Clark,' sez the doctor, 'been seein' that ghost of yours?'

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“ ‘ Yes, sir,’ sez father.

“ ‘ Hum!’ sez the doctor, feelin’ his pulse, ‘ did you see anythin’ else?’

“ ‘ Yes, sir,’ sez father. ‘ I saw a lot of pink beetles an’ a mouse with an elephant’s head.’

“ Then the doctor would write his prescription, an’ father would be a teetotaller for months an’ months.

“ If I said our family ghost was pinched for rent, I’m bein’ what you might call exaggeracious. What happened was that father got an execution in for rent, an’ him an’ the broker’s man got into a friendly argument as to how much whisky a man can drink without dyin’. Father went down to the grocer’s an’ swapped two coal tickets for two bottles, an’ the broker’s man obligingly sat down to prove his words. . . . It seems that he saw our ghost, an’ the ghost must have took a likin’ to him, for the broker’s man

wouldn't talk about anything but that ghost an' the other animals he saw for days an' days after. It was bad business for the broker's man, because whilst he was in his trance father an' mother got all the furniture out of the house an' disappeared.

" I never took much stock of ghosts meself, an' didn't believe in 'em till the South African war." Nobby was silent for a little while, and his face grew suddenly serious and old looking.

" If you think what I'm goin' to tell you is a lie, you needn't be frightened to tell me," he said. " I don't understand the rights of it meself, an' don't expect I ever shall.

" When we was in South Africa, durin' the second half of the war, we went down to a place called Heilbron in the O.R.C.' *

" There *had* been fightin' there, but

* Orange River Colony.

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the only fight we saw was between Darkie Williams an' Tom Sparrer of 'G,' for the championship of the Anchesters, Darkie winnin' in two rounds owin' to his havin' filled his boxin' glove with sand.

"But De Wet was in the neighbourhood, browsin' round, an' though we never got a shot at him, there was enough excitement in the possibility of his gettin' a shot at *us* that we were kept fairly busy. There was another regiment at Heilbron at the time—the Warwicks I think it was, or the '8th of Kings'—an' they'd been there long before we were.

"In a station like Heilbron all sorts an' kinds of duty had to be done; there were guards, pickets an' outlyin' pickets, flyin' sentries an' patrols, an' if a chap wasn't on one, he was on another, but I did every one of 'em before it came to me duty to do flyin' sentry. Me beat was

two miles long, from the base guard to 'Hussars Kopje.'

"It was called 'Hussars Kopje' because in one of the early fights of the war the Hussars took this little hill after a fight in which they lost an officer."

"Flyin' sentry isn't such a bad job, partly because a feller was on his own. He could have a smoke, an' so long as he covered the ground, an' kept his eyes open, he was doin' all that was expected of him."

"It was a lonely walk over a deserted bit of country, but the night I went on flyin' sentry duty there was a full moon."

"Three men an' a corporal, that was the flyin' guard, an' we took over duty from the other regiment."

"Just before the old guard marched off, one of the fellows sez :

"'Don't any of you fellers go up 'Hussars Kop.'"

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“ ‘ For why ? ’ I sez.

“ ‘ Because of the ghost,’ sez the feller, ‘ it’ll probably scare you chaps, bein’ new to the game.’

“ ‘ If it don’t scare a woolly-headed Warwickshire cow-chaser,’ I sez politely, ‘ it won’t scare a feller of the Dashin’ Anchesters.’

“ ‘ You’ll dash all right,’ sez the Warwick, ‘ when that ghost comes after you.’

“ Soon after this the Warwicks marched off.

“ ‘ Don’t go up that kopje—keep to the road,’ sings out the Warwick as he left, an’ havin’ shouted a few insultin’ remarks after him, we settled down to the guard.

“ I was first relief, an’ went straight out on me two-mile walk. I had me rifle loaded an’ slung, with the safety catch down, an’ with me hands in me overcoat

pockets, the night bein' rather cold, I loafed along.

"Half-way to the kopje, I came up to a mounted patrol of the Imperial Yeomanry, an' after I'd given him me opinion of yeomen in general, an' he'd been very candid about foot-sloggers, we parted bad friends.

" 'Look out for the ghost,' he sez.

" 'Mind you don't fall off that horse,' I sez.

" 'I'd gone a little way when I heard him come canterin' after me.

" 'Hi, Tommy,' he called, an' I turned round.

" 'Not so much of the Tommy,' I sez, 'or I'll stick a pin in your gallant charger!

" 'No offence,' sez the yeoman, an' then went on to tell me about the ghost. I hadn't took much notice of the yarn till then, an' I got a bit interested.

" 'I've never seen it,' sez the yeoman,

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'but one of our sergeants did. Let's go up the kopje together an' see what it's like.'

" 'Catch me climbin' a hill,' I sez, 'when I can walk on the nice level road.'

" 'You're afraid,' he sez.

" 'I am,' I sez. 'I'm afraid of tirin' me feet.'

" We continued discussin' the matter till we came up to the hill, an' all the time I was gettin' more an' more curious. When he put his horse at the kopje, I sez :

" 'All right, I'll come up with you—I ain't seen a ghost for years.'

" It was a kopje as like as two pins any other kopje I've seen.

" There were thousands similar to it in South Africa. A gentle rise covered with boulders an' stunted bush, with big stones underfoot to make the goin' worse.

"SMITHY"

"It was, as I've told you, a bright, moonlight night, a clear sky an' not a breath of wind stirrin', an' as we got farther an' farther up the side of the hill, the country sort of unrolled itself beneath. Over to the north, an' seemin'ly under our feet, was the lights of Heilbron. You could hear sentries challengin' in the town, an' even the tramp of their feet as they marched up an' down.

"I was warm enough by the time I reached the top, an' me an' the yeoman stopped an' looked round.

" 'Where's your ghost?' I sez.

"I'd hardly got the words out of me mouth when I had a queer sensation. I didn't hear anythin', or see anythin', but I *knew* that there was somebody behind me, an' I spun round, slippin' my rifle from me shoulder.

"An' then I saw.

"Comin' up the hill, the same way we

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had come, was an officer. He was in full kit, with his helmet tilted over his eyes, an' he was walkin' slowly.

"Me heart was in me mouth at first, but when I saw it was an officer I recovered.

" 'Visitin' rounds,' I sez to the yeoman; but the yeoman said nothin', an' his horse started snortin' an' rearin'.

"The officer was comin' very slowly, with his head bent down as though he was lookin' for somethin' on the ground. Now an' again he'd stop, an' look left an' right, but always on the ground.

" 'What's he lost?' I sez in a low voice.

"He didn't seem to notice us, though we stood out clear enough in the moonlight, an' I brought my rifle to the port.

" 'Halt! Who comes there?' I sez, but he took no notice.

"Nearer an' nearer he came, his eyes

bent on the ground, an' I challenged again.

" 'Halt! who comes there?'

" Then he looked up, an' I saw that I was talkin' to a dead man!

" It was the face of a man who was dead: a grey face with a little red mark just above his right eye.

" I staggered back; then, as the yeoman put spurs to his horse, an' went clatterin' an' blunderin' down the other side of the hill, I caught hold of his stirrup-leather an' run with him. . . .

" The other fellers of the guard said I'd been moonstruck, an' the corporal of the guard smelt me breath, but none of 'em took the trouble to go up the kopje and investigate.

" Next mornin', when the guard was relieved, I was sent for to orderly room.

" 'I understand you saw a ghost, Clark,' sez the Colonel.

“ ‘ Yes, sir,’ I sez, an’ told ’im all about it.

“ Now the rum thing was that the Colonel didn’t laugh. He listened very quietly, noddin’ his head, an’ sayin’ nothin’. When I finished he sez :

“ ‘ This is all true, you have been tellin’ me ?’

“ ‘ Yes, sir,’ I sez, ‘ I’m willin’ to take me oath.’

“ He said no more, an’ I went back to me tent.

“ The fellers didn’t half roast me. Even Smithy called me a liar, an’ ‘ Nobby’s ghost ’ was the talk of the camp for weeks.

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“ After the war was over, we was ordered home.

“ I forget the name of the ship we came home on, but I think it was the ‘ Drayton Grange.’ We brought home

a lot of 'details,' Engineers, Army Service Corps, an' two squadrons of the 22nd Hussars.

"After we'd all settled down an' got to know one another, we used to have little pow-wows on the fo'c'sle head, an' spent a lot of time tellin' one another what gallant fellers we'd been.

"There was a Hussar chap named Paul.

" 'The most curious thing I've ever seen,' he sez one afternoon, when we were all gassin', 'was the taking of Hussar Kop—any of you chaps know it, it's near Heilbron?'

"There was a bit of a laugh when he said this, an' the chaps all looked at me.

" 'We had a young officer,' sez the Hussar, 'Lieutenant Enden, his name was,—a regular boy. He was engaged to a young lady in Canterbury, an' I've

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never seen a feller so much in love in me life. Used to carry her picture in a little gold locket round his neck. I've seen him, when he thought nobody was lookin', take it out, an' have a dekko.

“ ‘ Well, about this fight I was speakin' of. The Boers held the kopje, an' two squadrons of ours was sent to dislodge 'em. There wasn't such a number of the enemy on the kop that we couldn't tackle 'em.

“ ‘ We galloped up to the foot of the hill an' dismounted under the cover of a little ridge, an' then we began to go up, takin' cover as best we could.

“ ‘ Lieutenant Enden was leadin' us, crouchin' behind such rocks as he could find, an' dodgin' from boulder to boulder.

“ ‘ Suddenly I see him stand up an' clasp his hand to his breast. I thought at first he was shot, but as he began lookin' around, left an' right searchin'

the ground, I knew he'd lost somethin'—an' guessed it was the locket.

“ ‘ He stood up with the bullets whistlin' round him, his eyes travellin' over the ground—an' then he collapsed !

“ ‘ Shot stone dead, he was . . .

“ ‘ We buried him at the foot of the hill . . . an' we never found the locket.' ”

Nobby stopped here and blew his nose vigorously.

“ There are times,” he said, “ when I think of Heilbron, an' the kopje outside the town, an' a grey-faced young officer, searchin', searchin', searchin' for ever an' ever for that locket he lost. An' when I think of him I want to cry.”