

PRIVATE TOMPSON—HERO.

Tompson isn't a bit like other heroes—if the information published in the halfpenny dailies concerning these fine fellows is to be trusted. Tompson isn't the support of a widowed mother and her umpteen younger children—I couldn't imagine him supporting anything except, maybe, the counter of an estaminet: and Tompson's friends did not regard him from earliest infancy as a boy likely to perform noble and heroic deeds when he grew up. Neither is Tompson a “strong, silent man” :—from “Reveill  ” to “Lights Out” his tongue hardly rests for a moment, and his conversation is for the most part unmitigated nonsense. So you see, he is quite unlike any other hero you ever read about.

Before the war Tompson attended classes (sometimes) at Glasgow University, and when he enlisted he designated himself on the attestation form as “an Arts student” : I really don't know why, for I can conceive of no subject that Tompson is ever less likely to study than the Arts.

I asked Tompson one day what profession he purposed to adopt after finishing his College course,

and was told that he was uncertain yet whether he'd be a minister or a bookmaker on the turf.

“But it takes a lot of brains to make an accurate book—to keep it always on the right side,” he added: “so maybe I'll just have to feel myself ‘called to the ministry.’”

That's the sort of silly, irresponsible thing that Tompson is always saying.

During our preliminary training in Glasgow Tompson's voice was invariably raised above all others in those songs with which we used to inspire ourselves as we swung through the city streets: and he always introduced absurd variations at those passages which called for simple, dignified treatment, and ejaculated a loud “pom! pom!” or emitted a weird cat-call whenever there was a slight pause in the music or a sustained note.

Every male civilian that we passed—irrespective of age—Tompson insulted cheerfully by asking “What man's job have you pinched, slacker?” or by singing,

“Though we'll fight best without you,
Still, we think you ought to come.”

If any girl appeared in sight within a radius of three hundred yards he rent the air with shouts of “Coo-ee, Bella!” or “Hullo, Lizzie!” and waved his arms in extravagant gestures of

greeting and blew smacking kisses to her : while ladies close by he invited to come and hold his hand as he was afraid of the horrid Germans. And such was the temper of the people in those days that they smiled at and seemed to enjoy Tompson's buffoonery, and the girls reciprocated his make-believe windy kisses and laughed delightedly at his impertinences—or looked demure and embarrassed and characterised him inwardly as “ an awful boy !”

But those men of mild manners and quiet habits of mind who had to march beside Tompson could willingly have strafed him, because of the unwelcome attentions of officers and N.C.O.'s which his clownish exuberance attracted to their portion of the line. Certainly none of us then thought of this cheerful, irrepressible idiot as in any way heroic.

Long before his period of training was completed Tompson had earned the reputation of being the most hardened and incorrigible criminal in his company. His conduct sheet read like a Newgate calendar for the number and variety of the crimes which it capitulated. There was no heinous offence—except, perhaps, desertion—which the desperado Tompson had not committed.—
“ Absent from Tattoo until 10.17 o'clock—

17 minutes"—“Late for parade”—“Walking out improperly dressed—(shoulder straps unbuttoned)”—“Using disrespectful language to a N.C.O.”—“Appearing on parade with a cigarette behind his ear”—“Having a dirty rifle”—“Talking in Church while on Church parade”—“Shaving the upper lip in disobedience of a Battalion order”—and so on, and so on. A dreary, depressing catalogue of dastardly crime.

Even Erchie remonstrated with him on the enormity of his conduct, and pointed out that if he continued much longer on this depraved course the inevitable outcome would be the muster of a firing party at dawn on a grey, windy day—with Tompson playing the role of target.

Once it did seem as though Tompson were going to reform. On returning to the billet one night we found stuck over his bed a great placard, whereon was printed in black and red letters the following inscription:—

HEADQUARTERS

OF

THE LILY LEAGUE OF PURITY.

Founder and Chairman of the League—

Pte. P. Tompson.

Secretary of the League—Pte. P. Tompson.

Treasurer of the League—Pte. P. Tompson.

And then followed a recital of the aims and objects of the League. Its principal object was to abolish "the very prevalent and disgusting habit of swearing, and to encourage young soldiers to draw from the well of English pure and undefiled for the needs of their everyday conversation." And it was proposed to inflict a penalty of twopence on every man for each swear-word he used.

"I think it's a splendid idea," said the founder of the League: "it came to me to-night while I was sitting here alone meditating on my sins." (He was undergoing a term of C.B. then as usual.) "So I started to frame the constitution of the League, and printed this door-plate myself. It was a very difficult job—it cost me one and tenpence in fines before I got it done to my satisfaction."

He produced a box marked "Fines," and, even as he had said, there was a sum of one shilling and tenpence in it. Then someone asked what it was proposed to do with the money collected in fines, and Tompson gravely replied that that would go to pay the salaries of the management—*i.e.*, the Chairman, the Secretary, and the Treasurer. He said that he himself would probably suffer more financially from the operations of the League than any other man,

but he wouldn't grudge the money seeing that it all went for the great cause of purity in speech.

Then the Orderly Sergeant appeared and, catching sight of the placard on the wall, asked Tompson what blinketty-blank nonsense he was up to now—and Tompson repeated the Sergeant's speech, ticking off each word carefully on his fingers, and then informed the Sergeant that he had had one and tuppenceworth of language, and would he please pay over now ?

"I'll write you out a receipt, Sergeant," he added. "Hope you're satisfied with your selection. The goods are dirt cheap at the money."

The Sergeant then had three-and-fourpence-worth, and ordered the removal of the placard.

And that was the end of Tompson's Lily League of Purity.

The first time that Tompson was in the trenches he did what every man in similar circumstances feels he would like to do, and what every idiot does. He popped his head over the parapet and had a good long look at the German trenches—and a smile of intense satisfaction played over his features, as though he had achieved a long desired object. And while he still smiled he heard a puff! puff! puff! as from the exhaust

pipe of a motor car, and a hissing in the air around him; also, his Balmoral bonnet was jerked off his head. He descended hastily from the firing-step, and his face was paler than was its wont.

And he said just what every idiot says in the like circumstance—"Well, who'd have thought that would have happened!" in tones of aggrieved surprise.

When he picked up his cap he found that a bullet had passed through it and had taken the centre—the little figure of St. Andrew holding his cross—clean out of the cap-badge.

"Gad!" said he, "it might have been me instead of An'ra"—and he seemed rather tickled by the thought.

It was during his second four days' spell in the trenches that Tompson first really distinguished himself in France. For two days and nights things had been very quiet on our front—not a shell had come our way, and hardly a rifle shot had been fired.

"I do believe the Allemands have evacuated this part of their line," said Tompson.

And a Sergeant smiled in a slow, sarcastic way and said, "Yes, I do believe they have."

It was about a quarter of an hour after the rum issue—which was unusually liberal that

night—that Private Smith reported to a Corporal, who reported to the Platoon Sergeant, who reported to the Platoon Commander, who reported to the Officer Commanding Company, that Tompson had gone over the parapet and vanished into the darkness of No Man's Land.

Smith, the original informant, was sent for.

“Tompson said he was sure there were no Germans in the trenches,” he explained to the Company Commander, “and he said he was going out to see for himself. I told him not to be an idiot—and then before I knew what he was about, he had scrambled on to the top of the parapet and was off.”

About twenty minutes later those of us in the front line saw Tompson. A series of flares discovered him to us lying right up against the Germans' parapet, which was about fifty yards distant from our own. Then, after a spell of darkness, another flare revealed to us that he was no longer there—and some said that the enemy must have seen him and hauled him into their trench, and others said that he must be returning: and all of us were in a highly excited state of curiosity.

In a little while a dark figure appeared above our parapet, and vaulted down on to the firing-step—and lo! it was Tompson. Almost the

first man he met was his Company Commander. And to him Tompson blurted out at once in tones of the greatest surprise—

“Gad, sir! it’s right enough. The trench is full of the blighters—absolutely bung-full of ’em. I heard them gassing away in their own lingo. Pity I don’t know shorthand—and German. I could have filled a book with their jawing. And there was one blighter kept poppin’ his head up and down within three feet of me—he must have been on look-out duty. I wanted like blazes to chuck a turf at him, but——”

Then the O.C. company broke in, and there was laughter underlying his sternness. “Tompson, you’re a silly ass—you’ve exposed the life of one of my men to the greatest danger, when there was no earthly necessity for it. Mind, Tompson, I don’t say that I don’t admire your pluck, for I do: but you’re a silly ass all the same. I’m sorry, but I’ve no other course than to report you to the Commanding Officer.”

The upshot was that Tompson was awarded 21 days’ F.P. No. 2 for that little escapade—and he was lucky to get off so easily.

It is firmly believed in our battalion that Tompson was the original “lonely soldier” of

the British Expeditionary Force. When he had been in France only four days he wrote to the editor of "The Daily Looking-Glass" explaining that he was friendless and pining away for lack of intellectual nourishment, and that he would be glad to receive letters from "those of the opposite sex (young and pretty preferred)." His letter was printed, and he received forty-three letters and nineteen parcels in response. Thereafter he made it his recreation to answer all advertisements of ladies willing to correspond with lonely soldiers. Unless consignments of eatables and cigarettes were also forthcoming from the kind-hearted advertisers the correspondence speedily languished. "If they're too stingy to send material comforts," said Tompson, "they don't deserve to get letters from a real, live hero in the trenches."

The quantity of mail which he received daily was prodigious, and it has to be said of him that he was most generous in sharing his spoils with the other members of his platoon, who, in consequence, waxed ever fitter and fatter and jollier. Every man had a pair of socks, with the toes cut off, secured around the bolt of his rifle to protect it from dust and rain, had handkerchiefs to serve as oily rags, and a sleeping helmet for removing dirt from boots, and mufflers to

wind around his puttees when the trenches were muddy. There was simply no end to the beneficence of Tompson.

“I’m conducting this literary bureau from purely altruistic and patriotic motives,” he explained every day; “it’s all for the good of the boys, and is thus a blow struck at the very heart of the German Empire.”

So voluminous was his correspondence that he had to acquire the habit of writing his letters in triplicate by the use of carbon papers, and before enclosing the letters in the green official envelopes—for which he bartered cigarettes with the other men in order to give himself the necessary supply—he was wont to read them aloud for the edification of the platoon. He drew harrowing pictures of his sufferings by reason of the coarseness of the Army victuals, gave long historical accounts of the progressive delicacy of his stomach from infant days, and invariably explained that he was entirely dependent for his nourishment on the choice viands sent by his correspondent. He weaved heart-burning tales of his loneliness—of his yearning for the solace of companionship, of how his fellows in arms, brave and heroic though they might be, were yet uncultured and uncouth, and had no affinity with him in things intellectual

or spiritual. And with a supreme modesty, yet withal a cinematographic realism, he would tell the story of how he brought down three enemy aeroplanes with three consecutive rifle shots, or how he captured single-handed a half-dozen starving Germans by the simple expedient of hanging a bunch of sausages over the parapet and then grabbing the Allemands and hauling them into the British trench when they were within arm's-length of the tempting bait.

Once he wrote:—"To-day I have killed my thirty-seventh German; I threw three bombs at him and then bayoneted what remained. I know you will think that thirty-seven is not a very big 'bag,' considering that I have been at the Front nearly five months. I recognise myself that it is a very little 'bit' that I have been able to do so far, but perhaps I shall have better luck in future. It is with a deep sense of humility that I lay my little offering of thirty-seven Allemands on the altar of patriotism, knowing that my King and country will not spurn it nor cast it lightly aside. . . . One insuperable obstacle to my achievement of greater things is the almost womanly tenderness of my heart. I would not willingly hurt a louse—and I know it pained me far more to do my duty to each of those thirty-seven Germans than it pained

them. Merciful heavens! what I have suffered in my feelings no one can ever know."

It was with guff like that that Tompson assured himself of a large and regular supply of parcels from foolishly susceptible females.

When he had been "hogging it" in the trenches for six months Tompson became "fed up" to intolerance; he felt he had had enough of the war, and his heart yearned for the peace of old Blighty. So he did what vast numbers of men suffering from mental repletion have done. He applied for a commission.

Gussie laughed loud and long when Tompson first made him aware of his intention.

"Oh, that's dem good," said Gussie, "dem good! Imagine old Tompson a Colonel an' leadin' his men to death or glory over the parapet! Haw! haw! haw!"

"Glory be hanged!" said Tompson. "I want to get back to Blighty and put up my star in a 3rd Line Battalion, and watch a squad of men doin' spittoon drill till the end of the war. That will be glory—be glory for me!"

Which is what other men have said, too, on like occasions.

So Tompson filled up a form with particulars of his name, age, nationality, etc., etc., and a

College professor declared that he had attained to a high standard of general education, and a clergyman certified that he was a most upright, honourable, and trustworthy young man, of unimpeachable character and high moral gifts; while a Justice of the Peace further testified that he was a youth of amiable manners and address, of good social standing, and having undoubted qualities of leadership!

Tompson blinked and blushed when he read these tributes to his worth. "My giddy aunt!" he exclaimed. "Is this me? Or have my papers got mixed up with those of St. Francis of Assisi? Pudd'n, bring me my halo forthwith, *tout de suite* and *immédiatement!*" Then, after a pause—"I'll waste no more admiration on Baron Munchausen and Wolff's Bureau now—not while Britain possesses three such consummate liars as the writers of these certificates."

But Tompson's application for a commission was doomed to failure. The Commanding Officer refused to recommend him, and also lectured Tompson on his impudent presumption in daring to put forward commission papers, he whose field conduct sheet contained the record of as many crimes as a bound volume of the "Police Gazette."

Then Tompson tried to "work his ticket" through the Medical Officer. He began system-

atically to attend "sick parade," and complained to the doctor, in low tones that spoke of suffering stoically borne, of having stabbing pains in his back; and when the medical orderly essayed to rub the afflicted part Tompson gave vent to agonising gasps and long-drawn-out awful moans. For eight days this continued, by the end of which time Tompson had swallowed as many Number Nine pills as would have sufficed to keep a battalion in health for a year. Yet Tompson's back was decidedly worse; it was painful to see him hobbling down the trench to the Medical Officer's dug-out, and his moans when the doctor touched him or when he was detailed for a digging fatigue were heartrending. Tompson was fast becoming a veritable wreck, and daily he expressed his wonder that the M.O. did not send him to hospital, so that he might be invalided home ere he was an incurable cripple.

When we had retired from the trenches and were resting in Bethune, the Medical Officer relented and excused Tompson from duty. He was supposed to be too ill even to act as billet orderly. Yet that night he was making merry with the red-haired damozel who dispensed (surreptitiously) "Citron Ecossais," otherwise Scotch whisky, at the estaminet "*Au Bon*

Fumeur," and he returned to his billet forty-five minutes after roll-call.

"Fourteen days' Field Punishment Number One," said the C.O. next morning.

Yes, Tompson is an ass—I've told him so to his face many and many a time, so it really doesn't matter if I say it publicly now; *he* won't mind: but I'd also like to say that I'd gladly doff my hat to Tompson, for Tompson is a hero. I hope he reads this; I'd like him to know that his pals are proud of him.

A small mine was to be exploded near the German lines, and we were to prepare to occupy the crater. A party of bombers would go over first to clear the way, and Tompson was one of them.

At the appointed minute there was a sickening heave of the ground, a terrific roar, and then the thud-thud and patter of falling stones and earth.

"Come on, men!" sounded the voice of the officer in charge of the bombing party, and from the dug-outs where they had been sheltering the bombers burst forth. They ran up a sap extending towards the enemy lines for forty yards or so, and the short remaining distance to the crater had to be traversed in the open. Despite

the celerity with which the movement was executed the enemy was first in possession of the crater, and a shower of bombs and some rifle shots greeted our men as they approached, but the bombs fell short and the rifle shots went wide.

It is difficult to describe what followed. A rapid fire was opened from each of the opposing trenches, and our guns started immediately to bombard the German front line. Within a minute the enemy guns were speaking too. The scream of the hurtling shells and the roar of their explosion filled all the air.

And over at the crater, in the midst of all this hell, two groups of figures struggled for the mastery. Our men had bombed the enemy out, and were in occupation of the crater; reinforcements were urgently required, but the enemy was bombarding heavily the sap along which these must come or cross in the open and be mown down by machine gun fire. The enemy advanced again to the attack, reinforced and with a fresh supply of bombs, whereas those of our men were depleted by nearly a half. One of the first bombs which the Germans threw put three of our men out of action, including the subaltern in charge and a sergeant. Four other men were incapacitated within the next minute, and then——!

Then Tompson, for perhaps the first time in his life, took himself seriously. Tompson took charge of things.

“Come on, chaps!” he cried to the six remaining men, “we’re not going to be ‘na-poooh’d’ by these blighters. Give ’em socks! How’s that, umpire!” he yelled a moment later as one of his bombs, accurately timed and accurately thrown, laid out two men of the opposing party.

He got one of the wounded men to collect bombs from the others who were *hors de combat*, and, standing half-exposed above the brink of the crater, himself hurled defiance and insult and bombs at the enemy. The greater number of the German missiles fell short, but five times did Tompson “field” them—catch them in the air as though they had been cricket balls, and with a lightning delivery return them from whence they came ere they burst. But there was no bomb left his hand with more than three seconds of passivity in it.

The Germans were forced to retire, and ere they could return to the attack our reinforcements had arrived—at a heavy cost, it is true, but in time to hold the crater.

Nor was Tompson’s work finished then. One of the wounded men was in serious straits, and it seemed imperative that he should have skilled

medical attention immediately. The others, having received "first aid," might wait until the coming of darkness, when they could return in comparative safety to the trenches, or it might even be that the sap reaching out from the front line would be extended to the crater within a few hours.

Tompson looked a moment at the man who lay in agony.

"Well, here goes, chaps!" said he, and, having got the wounded man on his back, left the crater and made off across the open towards our own line. Instantly German machine guns rattled and rifles cracked; the air hissed with the flight of bullets—"sprayed around me, they did," he described it afterwards, "like water from the rose of a watering-can," but he stumbled on with his burden. He was within a yard or two of the sap-head and safety when he fell. Hands were reached out from the trench and his companion hauled in, and a few minutes later he too was pulled over the edge. But there were three bullets in his leg; and though his face was white and drawn, he did not moan nearly so loudly or frequently as he did when he had a "sore back."

"Guess I've got a 'Blighty hit' this time," he said, as the stretcher-bearers were carrying

him down the trench to the dressing station. "Just my rotten luck—I was only just beginning to enjoy myself."

In "The Daily Looking-Glass" the other day there was a paragraph about Private Tompson, D.C.M., and a photograph which purported to be of him. It may have been—but all one could distinguish was a smile.

Tompson, it seems, has only one leg now. "With a modesty as charming as it is rare," wrote the reporter who interviewed him in hospital, "Private Tompson declined to say anything at all about the act of heroism for which he has been decorated by the King. But in a plaintive voice he asked me, 'Do you think there's any chance of the Compulsion Bill being extended to include one-legged men? I do hope so. I want to get out to the Front again—out among the boys. I loved the life—it's such glorious sport slaying Allemands day after day. It's a gorgeous picnic, and I'm simply amazed that any man should want to stay away from it. You put it in big type that the greatest desire of my heart is to be sent out to the Front again. The boys in the trenches will understand, if nobody else does.'"

I'm wondering if Tompson really said that : it's the sort of thing he *would* say to a gullible pressman.

Tompson, I am afraid, will always be an ass as well as a hero.