

THE BIGGEST BATTLE

The sun shone brightly upon Saint Michael's church as Tom walked slowly up the massive steps towards the open doors. He hesitated for a moment before the door, then, passing through the arched threshold, he blessed himself and walked down the side aisle to a pew in the middle of the church, genuflected and knelt down. He had all the appearances of one hesitating before making a weighty decision as he knelt with his head bowed in the stream of tinted light that flooded the church from the long rows of stained-glass windows on either side of him. The doors of the confessionals behind him opened and closed with a sharp click as the penitents entered and came out. The click of the confessional doors seemed to be magnified to thunderous proportions by the solemn silence of the great Cathedral. Tom looked about him. Everything seemed so familiar. The large murals in the sanctuary—the pelican feeding its young with its own blood on the gospel side and the Sacred Heart pierced with a lance on the epistle side; the stately figure of Saint Michael, the angelic soldier, towering above the altar, the six tall candles which he had lit for High Mass so often as an altar boy, the crucifix, the tabernacle. The years had not changed these. It seemed as it had been only a few days instead of five years.

He drew aside his coat and, searching his pocket, brought out a small leather pouch with the almost unintelligible inscription in what was once gold-leaf, "My Rosary". He blessed himself and began: "I believe in God the" Then suddenly he stopped. He looked up at the altar before him and tears ran down his cheeks. I might have said Mass at that altar but for the war, he thought. It's no use. It's too late now. No one would understand. He looked down at the tattered rosary case in his rough hands. The sacred silence seemed to whisper to him and, as he listened, his mind drifted back through the mist of flown time.

Five years, he thought. I was only eighteen then; a sophomore, and I had the fullest intention of going to a seminary. Father O'Brien used to tell me all about the seminary. Father O'Brien was always my friend.

Then the war. All those men. They were so different. "Brown, Thomas Edward, TM 75972". It wasn't a bit like boarding college. Things seemed to change so quickly. It

didn't seem to be such a bad thing to swear, to miss Mass, to . . . to drink. Everyone did it. And then mother and dad. Why did they have to die like that? A car accident. And then I was all alone. No one to talk to. I never would have taken another drink if only there had been someone like Father O'Brien. Someone I could talk to. But there wasn't, so I drank my way through North Africa, Sicily, Italy . . . When it was all over I thought I'd give it up. But I didn't. I could always find some reason to "celebrate". I tried to stop. It was no use. I cursed liquor, myself, Father O'Brien, his Church, and everything both of them stood for. I resigned myself to the fact that I was just another bum. An alcoholic. I drank every cent I could manage to scrape together, lived in a cheap room in a cheaper flop-house and watched myself rot from day to day. I cared for no one and I knew no one cared for me. Who'd bother about a bum?

I never wanted to see Father O'Brien again. I tried to hide when I saw him on the street that night; but he saw me. I knew what was coming. He had a nice sermon all ready for me. Well I wasn't in any mood for a talk on temperance. I knew he couldn't understand. How could a priest understand? I resolved to tell him to mind his own business. But I didn't. When he spoke he sounded so friendly. The same old Father O'Brien. I felt like a boy again. "I've been looking forward to seeing you ever since I got back, Tom. I just got back from Rome — six years certainly makes a big difference. But things will be the same as ever now that the war is over." I couldn't say a word. I wondered, could it be that he doesn't know? I was unshaven and my clothes . . . "I suppose you're going back to college Tom — still going to be a priest?" I couldn't stand it any longer.

"You old fool," I shouted and ran down the street towards my boarding house, tears streaming down my face. I ran up the creaking steps and into the dingy room that had been my home for the past few months. I threw myself on the bed and cried like a child. I got up. The bottle on the table. I took a mouthful of the cheap whiskey. The question hammered in my mind, "Are you still going to be a priest?" I took another drink. "I just got back from Rome — six years certainly makes a big difference." I sent the bottle crashing against the wall. I tried to forget but I couldn't. "Still going to be a priest?" The fat old fool. Making fun of me. Well it was funny. A drunken

priest. I laughed hysterically. Then my eyes fell upon the frame I had knocked off the wall when I threw the bottle. It was my citation. "For bravery beyond the call of duty!" Bravery. I began to laugh again and again. I suddenly stopped. I remembered then. I knew what it was. I had framed my citation on top of a picture. It was the picture Father O'Brien had given me when I left for the army. I read the caption: "Come follow me". One time I could have nodded. I wasn't the same Tom Brown that left here six years ago. That Tom Brown died during the war.

I thought things might be the same as ever now that the war was over. It's too late. I fumbled in my pocket for some money. I needed a drink. I knew I had a dollar. Then I pulled it out. My Rosary. I always carried it with me. I don't know why. I thought of Father O'Brien again. He hadn't changed a bit. He was never cruel. He wouldn't poke fun at me. He doesn't know. I looked at the little leather case again. I couldn't explain the feeling I experienced. My mother gave me this rosary when I made my first Communion. "Always carry it with you Tommy. It's a brave man's shield." It's one thing to face bullets. Father O'Brien always understood. He thinks I'm the same Tom Brown that left six years ago with his blessing. He doesn't know. Perhaps if I got a steady job. He was always in the little confessional on Saturday afternoons. Perhaps if I went to see him. He doesn't know about me. But I'm not going to confession.

Tears were streaming down Thomas Brown's cheeks now. He was not the same man who had entered the church a half hour before. He sat staring at the altar. It was getting late and the church was growing dim. He looked behind him and there were no lines of people at the confessionals. All was dim in the back of the church except for the small light above the little confessional in the corner. Father O'Brien was still in there. He would wait for him and talk to him when he came out. He looked back at the altar. He tried to pray again. Then he suddenly jumped up and stalked down the aisle and out the front door. "It's no use," he lamented to himself as he descended the steps his hand fumbling in his pocket for a cigarette. Then he stopped suddenly. His rosary. He had forgotten it in the church. He hurried back up the steps and into the great cathedral. As he walked up the aisle he looked up at the statue of Saint Michael, and thought to

himself, "he was a soldier too." He stumbled into the seat and sat staring at the flickering sanctuary lamp. There's a limit. Five years is too much; even Father O'Brien wouldn't understand. I'd like to but I can't. He placed the little case in his pocket, got up and hurried down the aisle. The light was still on above the little confessional. As he approached the back of the church the door of the confessional opened and Father O'Brien leaned out. "Now is the acceptable time Tommy," he whispered, but his whisper seemed to Tom to shake the very foundation stones of the great church. He did know. He would understand. He was waiting.

A bright ray of light from the little bulb above the door of the confessional illuminated Tom's face as he began, "Bless me Father"

—ALLAN MacDONALD '54.

FIRST JOYOUS SPRING

First joyous Spring breaks out in leafy ferns,
 Then lightsome Summer sports her trappings green;
 Next dappled nature fades to bleaker scene;
 Yet all to vernal bloom again returns.
 In mode alike full many an empire feared,
 Which sprung up quickly from the smallest source,
 Declines and is o'erthrown by Trojan horse;
 Another just as great has soon appeared.
 Not so with man; for him no ceaseless round
 Of change from youth to youth, since he is born
 For death alone. Yet in his seeming end
 Is birth ecstatic which when once 'tis found
 Can ne'er be lost, tho the angelic horn
 Shall shake the earth and all creation rend.

—M. R. M. '51

If we never build castles in the air, we shall never
 build them anywhere.—J. G. Lawson.

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Be wise
 Soar not too high to fall
 But stoop to rise.

—Massinger.