

SERGEANT-MAJOR DO-YOUR-BEST
OF DARKINGTON NO.1

CHAPTER XVI: THE OPEN-AIR MEETING

Now, you'll remember that I told you in my last that our Open-Air work was only in a very middling way; but, my word! Haven't we got a move up since then, and aren't things changed for the better outside as well as in! That they are, and no mistake. I don't think our Open-Air doings was ever much better – perhaps never as good, in the balmiest days of Darkington.

How has it all come about? Well, I'll tell you as far as I can; but such a-many things have had to do with it, that it would take a better scholar than your humble servant to make it plain.

The improvement began at the Local Officers' Meeting – which I'm glad to say the Captain keeps up every week. If he can't do a long meeting he does a short one – always long enough, however, to cheer us up, and show us that he has got his eye on all that is happening in the Corps.

Well, as you'll remember, several new things about our Open-Airs were settled upon that particular night – as I told you at the time – and the Captain, he's invented ever so many more since. But I can only tell you of one now; and that is, that every now and then he appoints particular Soldiers – whether Locals or no, he does not care much, if he thinks they can do the job – to lead special meetings at particular places. Sometimes the place will be a new one, and sometimes it will be the old one.

The first meeting of this kind was announced on a Sunday evening, and made a nice little sensation. In a quiet way, the Captain gave out that our Sarah would conduct an Open-Air on Thursday night, opposite "The Pig and Whistle."

I knew nothing about the matter beforehand, and the announcement nearly took my breath away. Everybody in the Hall looked at Sarah, and Sarah did not know which way to look herself, so she looked straight down at her shoes, that had been soled and heeled the week before. But it wasn't the shoes that was in her thoughts, you may depend upon it. Her mind had wandered away to "The Pig and Whistle," and was full



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of the new work that had come to her so unexpectedly.

As we walked home that night, we had quite a long conversation. "What do you mean to do, Sarah?" says I.

"Do?" says she. "Why, I mean to do my duty. What else would you have me do? The Captain says I am to lead a meeting next Thursday night opposite 'The Pig and Whistle'; and this I shall do, if God spares me. What is the good of having a Captain, if you don't obey his orders?"

"But how will you get through it?" says I. "Haven't you been ill lately, and isn't your father coming to see you in a day or two, and haven't you?"

"How shall I get through?" she broke in upon my speech. "Get through," says she, "as best I can. God will help me, as you say He helps you."

"But can you manage to control a crowd in the streets? There's sure to be some roughs, and some drunken men, and some."

"How can I tell," again Sarah interrupted me, "till I try?"

"But, Sarah," says I, "you have never led a meeting indoors, much more out of doors."

"More's the pity I" says she. "I should have done hundreds, and perhaps been a Sergeant-Major, like you, if I had been a man; but as I am only a woman, no one has thought it worthwhile trying to find out what I can do till now."

"But, then, remember the place the Captain has selected for you, opposite 'The Pig and Whistle' where the landlord hates us so, because of Boozham, and where they flung their filthy beer over my new uniform, and where they curse and groan at any Salvationist who goes near the door. Who knows what they will do to you?"

"Oh, God will take care of us," Sarah quietly answered, "as you say He takes care of you."



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"But you will be a lot of women!"

"Well, and if we are, I suppose that won't shut us out of His protection. But who told you, Sergeant-Major, that we should be all women? The women help the men generally; why not the men help the women in return?"

It was no use me saying any more about the difficulties; so we committed them to God, and prayed for His blessing on the meeting.

On Thursday night I was away at Outpost duty, but I heard full particulars on my return; for Sergeant Talky and his wife, and Sally and two or three other Soldiers, were in the house waiting to tell me the news.

It seems they'd had a nice lot of Soldiers and a good crowd. The people listened, the landlord of the pub lent them a chair – at least, his wife did – they had a capital collection, several people were deeply impressed, and a man and his wife sought salvation at the drum.

Of course, I could see how it all came about at a glance, and at once set to work to show them the reason for their success. First, I said, there was the novelty of the new stand; then there was the fact that it was the Sergeant-Major's wife; and then there was something else, and something else.

"No," says Sarah, "I don't think you are right this time, Sergeant-Major; you're a knowing kind of man, much cleverer than your poor little wife; but I don't think those were the reasons for our good meeting. I will tell you why I think we got on so well. Here they are: –

"A few of my comrades agreed with me to pray and believe for a good meeting. That was the first thing.

"Then I made my plans beforehand, just as I would for a washing, and talked them over with those who were going to help me.



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"I bargained with the Bandmaster to bring as many of his Bandsmen with him as he could, and to be there in time, and gave him two of the songs I wanted to sing.

"I got Will Boozham to promise that he would give us five minutes on the happiness of a Salvation life – and he could speak from experience.

"I got a promise from Mrs. Grumbleton, that she would tell us how God had brought her back from the borders of the grave, saved her soul, and made her into a Soldier.

"I took our girl Sally – who is a Corps Cadet, as you know – to read six verses out of the Bible.

"I got the Treasurer's daughter to sing my favourite solo: –

'The thorns they were pierced on His beautiful brow,
To pardon a rebel like me.'

"I only allowed five minutes for the collection, and told Treasurer Hold-it-tight that I was going to stick to Regulation.

"Of course I had a turn. I took off my cape, and tied my bonnet on tight, and went in for ten minutes with all my might for their souls, talking like a dying woman to dying people, and offered salvation on the spot.

"And, bless the Lord I the Holy Spirit succeeded us; and He will succeed everybody else, weak or strong, who do the same."

After Sarah was finished, we all knelt down, and she prayed, and I cried out: "O Lord, give me more faith for Darkington, and open my eyes to see that our dear old Army is only just beginning, after all!"