

The Servant Man Turned Soldier; Or, The Fair-Weather Christian

Hannah More

William was a lively young servant, who worked and lived in a great, but very irregular family. His place was on the whole agreeable to him, and suited to his mirthful and thoughtless temper. He found a plentiful table and a good room in the cellar. There was, indeed, a great deal of work to be done, though it was performed with much disorder and confusion.

The family in the main were not unkind to him, though they often contradicted and crossed him, especially when things went ill with themselves. This, William never much liked, for he was always fond of having his own way. There was a merry, or rather a noisy and riotous servants' hall; for disorder and quarrels are indeed the usual effects of plenty and unrestrained indulgence. The men were smart, but idle; the maids were showy but undisciplined, and all did pretty much as they liked for a time, but the time was commonly short. The wages were reckoned high, but they were seldom paid, and it was even said by other people, that the family was insolvent, and never fulfilled any of their flattering engagements, or their most positive promises. But still, notwithstanding their real poverty, things went on with just the same thoughtlessness and splendor, and neither master nor servants looked beyond the jollity of the present hour.

In this unruly family there was little church-going, and still less praying at home. They pretended, indeed, in a general way, to believe in the Bible, but it was only an outward profession; few of them read it at all, and even of those who did read still fewer were governed by it. There was indeed a Bible lying on the table in the great hall, which was kept for the purpose of administering an oath.

William, who was fond of novelty and pleasure, was apt to be negligent of the duties of the house. He used to stay out on his errands, and one of his favorite amusements was going to the parade to see the soldiers exercise. He saw with envy how smartly they were dressed, listened with rapture to the music, and imagined that a soldier had nothing to do but to walk to and fro in a certain regular order, to go through a little easy exercise, in short, to live without fighting, fatigue, or danger.

O, said he, whenever he was affronted at home, what a fine thing it must be to be a soldier! To be so well dressed, to have nothing to do but to move to the pleasant sound of fife and drum, and to have so many people come to look at one, and admire one. O it must be a fine thing to be a soldier!

Yet when the vexation of the moment was over, he found so much ease and diversion in the great family, it was so suited to his base taste and sensual appetites, that he thought no more of the matter. He forgot the glories of a soldier, and eagerly returned to all the base gratifications of the kitchen. His evil habits were but little attended to by those with whom he lived; his faults, among which were lying and swearing, were not often corrected by the family, who had little objections to those sins, which only offended God and did not much affect their own interest or property. And except that William was obliged to work rather more than he liked, he found little, while he was young and healthy, that was very disagreeable in this service.

So he went on, still thinking, however, when things went a little cross, what a fine thing it was to be a soldier! At last one day as he was waiting at dinner, he had the misfortune to let fall a china dish, and broke it all to pieces. It was a intricate dish, much valued by the family, as they pretended; this family were indeed apt to set a false fantastic value on things — and not to estimate them by their real worth. The heads of the family, who had generally been rather patient and good-humored with William, as I said before, for those vices, which though offensive to God did not touch their own pocket — now flew out into a violent passion with him, called him a thousand hard names, and even threatened to horsewhip him for his shameful negligence.

William in a great fright, for he was a sad coward at bottom, ran directly out of the house to avoid the threatened punishment; and happening just at that very time to pass by the parade where the soldiers chanced to be then exercising, his resolution was taken in a moment. He instantly determined to be no more a *slave*, as he called it; he would return no more to be subject to the humors of a tyrannic family: no, he was resolved to be free; or at least, if he must serve, he would serve no master but the king.

William, who had now and then happened to hear from the accidental talk of the soldiers that those who served the great family he had lived with, were slaves to their tyranny and vices, had also heard in the same casual manner, that the service of the king was perfect freedom. Now he had taken it into his head to hope that this might be a freedom to do *evil*, or at least to do *nothing*, so he thought it was the only place in the world to suit him.

A fine likely young man as William was, had no great difficulty to get enlisted. The few forms were soon settled, he received the bounty money as eagerly as it was offered, took the oaths of allegiance, was joined to the regiment and heartily welcomed by his new comrades. He was the happiest fellow alive. All was smooth and calm. The day happened

to be very fine — and therefore William always reckoned upon a fine day. The scene was mirthful and lively, the music cheerful, he found the exercise very easy — and he thought there was little more expected from him.

He soon began to flourish in his talk; and when he met with any of his old servants, he fell a prating about marches and counter-marches, and blockades, and battles, and sieges, and blood, and death, and triumphs, and victories, all at random, for these were words and phrases he had picked up without at all understanding what he said. He had no knowledge, and therefore he had no modesty; he had no experience, and therefore he had no fears.

All seemed to go on smoothly, for he had as yet no trial. He began to think with triumph what a mean life he had escaped from in the old quarrelsome family, and what a happy, honorable life he should have in the army. O there was no life like the life of a soldier!

In a short time, however, *war* broke out; his regiment was one of the first which was called out to actual and hard service. As William was the most raw of all the recruits, he was the first to murmur at the difficulties and hardships, the cold, the hunger, the fatigue and danger of being a soldier. O what watchings, and perils, and trials, and hardships, and difficulties, he now thought attended a military life! Surely, said he, I could never have suspected all this misery when I used to see the men on the parade in our town.

He now found, when it was too late, that all the field-days he used to attend, all the exercises which he had observed the soldiers to go through in the calm times of peace and safety, were only meant to fit, train and qualify them for the actual service which they were now sent out to perform by the command of the king.

The truth is, William often complained when there was no real hardship to complain of; for the common troubles of life fell out pretty much alike to the great family which William had left, and also to the soldiers in the king's army. But the spirit of obedience, discipline, and self-denial of the latter seemed hardships to one of William's loose turn of mind. When he began to murmur, some good old soldier clapped him on the back, saying, "Cheer up lad, it is a kingdom you are to strive for, if we faint not, henceforth there is laid up for us a great reward; we have the king's word for it, man."

William observed, that to those who truly believed this, their labors were as nothing, but he himself did not at the bottom believe it; and it was observed, of all the soldiers who failed, the true cause was that they did not really believe the king's promise. He was surprised to see that those soldiers, who used to bluster and boast, and deride the assaults of the enemy, now began to fall away; while such as had faithfully obeyed the king's orders, and believed in his word, were sustained in the hour of trial. Those who had trusted in their own strength all fainted on the slightest attack, while those who had put on the armor of the king's providing, the sword, and the shield, and the helmet, and the breast-plate, and whose feet were shod according to order, now endured hardship as good soldiers, and were enabled to fight the good fight.

An engagement was expected immediately. The men were ordered to prepare for battle. While the rest of the corps were so preparing, William's whole thoughts were bent on contriving how he might *desert*. But alas! he was watched on all sides, he could not possibly devise any means to escape. The danger increased every moment, the battle came on.

William, who had been so sure and confident before he entered, flinched in the moment of trial, while his more quiet and less boastful comrades prepared boldly to do their duty. William looked about on all sides, and saw that there was no eye upon him, for he did not know that *the king's eye* was everywhere at once. He at last thought he spied a chance of escaping, not from the enemy, but from his own army. While he was endeavoring to escape, a cannon-ball from the opposite camp took off his leg. As he fell, the first words which broke from him were, "While I was in my duty I was preserved; in the very act of deserting I am wounded." He lay expecting every moment to be trampled to death, but as the confusion was a little over, he was taken off the field by some of his own party, laid in a place of safety, and left to himself after his wound was dressed.

The skirmish, for it proved nothing more, was soon over. The greater part of the regiment escaped in safety. William in the mean time suffered cruelly both in mind and body. To the pains of a wounded soldier, he added the disgrace of a coward, and the infamy of a deserter.

"O," cried he, "why was I such a fool as to leave the great family I lived in, where there was food and drink enough and to spare, only on account of a little quarrel? I might have made up that with them as we had done our former quarrels. Why did I leave a life of ease and pleasure, where I had only a little rub now and then, for a life of daily discipline and constant danger? Why did I turn soldier? O what a miserable creature is a soldier!"

As he was sitting in this weak and disabled condition, uttering the above complaints, he observed a venerable old officer, with thin gray locks on his head, and on his face, deep wrinkles engraved by time, and many an honest scar inflicted by war. William had heard this old officer highly commended for his extraordinary courage and conduct in battle, and in peace he used to see him cool and collected, devoutly employed in reading and praying in the interval of more active duties. He could not help comparing this officer with himself.

"I," said he, "flinched and drew back, and would even have deserted in the moment of peril, and now in return, I have no consolation in the hour of repose and safety. I would not fight then, I cannot pray now. O why would I ever think of being a soldier?"

He then began afresh to weep and lament, and he groaned so loud that he drew the notice of the officer, who came up to him, kindly sat down by him, took him by the hand, and inquired with as much affection as if he had been his brother, what was the matter with him, and what particular distress, more than the common fortune of war it was which drew from him such bitter groans?

“I know something of surgery,” added he, “let me examine your wound, and assist you with such little comfort as I can.”

William at once saw the difference between the soldiers in the king’s army, and the people in the great family; the latter commonly withdrew their kindness in sickness and trouble, when most needed, which was just the very time when the others came forward to assist. He told the officer his little history, the manner of his living in the great family, the trifling cause of his quarreling with it, the slight ground of his entering into the king’s service.

“Sir,” said he, “I quarreled with the family and I thought I was at once fit for the army. I did not know the qualifications it required. I had not reckoned on discipline, and hardships, and self-denial. I liked well enough to sing a loyal song, or drink to the king’s health, but I find I do not relish working and fighting for him, though I rashly promised even to lay down my life for his service if called upon, when I took the bounty money and the oath of allegiance. In short, sir, I find that I long for the ease and sloth, the merriment and the feasting of my old service; I find I cannot be a soldier, and, to speak truth, I was in the very act of deserting when I was stopped short by the cannon-ball. So that I feel the guilt of desertion, and the misery of having lost my leg into the bargain.”

The officer thus replied: “Your state is that of every worldly irreligious man. The great family you served is a just *picture* of the world. The wages the world promises to those who are willing to do its work are high — but the payment is attended with much disappointment. Nay, the world, like your great family, is in itself insolvent, and in its very nature incapable of making good the promises and of paying the high rewards which it holds out to tempt its credulous followers. The ungodly world, like your family, cares little for church, and still less for prayer; and considers the Bible rather as an instrument to make an oath binding, than as containing in itself a perfect rule of faith and practice, and as a title-deed to Heaven. The generality of men love the world as you did your service, while it *smiles* upon them, and gives them easy work and plenty of food and drink. But as soon as it begins to cross and contradict them, they get out of humor with it, just as you did with your service. They then think its drudgery hard, its rewards low. They find out that it is high in its expectations from them, and slack in its payments to them. And they begin to imagine (because they do not hear religious people murmur as they do) that there must be some happiness in religion. The world, which takes no account of their deeper sins, at length brings them into discredit for some act of imprudence, just as your family overlooked your lying and swearing, but threatened to whip you for breaking a china dish. Such is the judgment of the world! It patiently bears with those who only break the laws of God, but severely punishes the smallest negligence by which they themselves are injured. The world sooner pardons the breaking ten commandments of God, than even a china dish of its own.

“After some cross or opposition, worldly men, as I said before, begin to think how much contentment and cheerfulness they remember to have seen in religious people. They therefore begin to imagine that religion must be an easy and delightful, as well as a good thing. They have heard that her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace; and they persuade themselves, that by this is meant *worldly* pleasantness and sensual peace. They resolve at length to try it, to turn their back upon the world, to engage in the service of God and turn Christians — just as you resolved to leave your old service, to enter into the service of the king and turn soldier. But as you left your place in a passion, so they leave the world in a huff. They do not *count the cost*. They do not calculate upon the darling sin, the habitual pleasures, the ease, and vanities, which they undertake by their new engagements to renounce, no more than you counted what indulgences you were going to give up when you left the luxuries and idleness of your place to enlist in the soldier’s warfare.

“They have, as I said, seen Christians cheerful, and they mistook the *ground* of their cheerfulness; they imagined it arose, not because through grace they had conquered difficulties, but because they had no difficulties in their passage. They imagined that religion found the road smooth, whereas it only helps to bear with a rough road without complaint. They do not know that these Christians are of good cheer, not because the world is free from tribulation, but because Christ, their captain, has overcome the world. But the irreligious man, who has only seen the outside of a Christian, knows little of his secret conflicts, his trials, his self-denials, his warfare with the world without; and with his own corrupt desires within.

“The irreligious man quarrels with the world on some such occasion as you did with your place. He now puts on the outward forms and ceremonies of religion, and assumes the *badge* of Christianity, just as you were struck with the show of a field-day; just as you were pleased with the music and the marching, and put on the uniform and red coat. All seems smooth for a little while. He goes through the outward exercise of a Christian, a degree of credit attends his new profession, but he never suspects there is either difficulty or discipline attending it. He imagines that religion is a thing for talking about, and not a thing of the heart and the life. He never suspects that all the psalm-singing he joins in, and the sermons he hears, and the other means he is using, are only as the *exercise* and training of the soldiers — to fit and

prepare him for actual service; and that these means are no more religion itself, than the exercises and training of the soldiers, to fit and prepare him for actual service; and that these means are no more religion itself, than the exercises and training of your parade were real warfare.

“At length some trial arises: this *nominal* Christian is called to differ from the world in some great point; something happens which may strike at his comfort, or his credit, or security. This cools his zeal for religion, just as the view of a war cooled your courage as a soldier. He finds he was only angry with the world — he was not tired of it. He was out of humor with the world, not because he had seen through its vanity and emptiness — but because the world was out of humor with him. He finds that it is an easy thing to be a *fair-weather Christian*, bold where there is nothing to be done, and confident where there is nothing to be feared. Difficulties *unmask* him to others; temptations unmask him to himself; he discovers, that though he is a high professor, he is no Christian; just as you found out that your red coat and your uniform, and your musket, did not prevent you from being a coward.

“Your misery in the military life, like that of the nominal Christian, arose from your love of ease, your cowardice, and your self-ignorance. You rushed into a new way of life without counting the cost for it. A total change of heart and temper were necessary for your new calling. With new views and principles, the soldier’s life would have been not only easy, but delightful to you. But while with a new *profession* you retained your *old nature*, it is no wonder if all discipline seemed intolerable to you.

“The *true* Christian, like the brave soldier, is supported under dangers by a strong faith — and the fruits of that victory for which he fights will be safety and peace. The pleasures of this world are present and visible — the rewards for which he strives are remote.

“The nominal Christian therefore fails, because nothing short of a living faith can ever outweigh a strong present temptation, and lead a man to prefer the joys of conquest to the pleasures of indulgence.”