

TOO YOUNG TO FIGHT

By H. WOLFF SALZ

Young Tommy Was Military-Minded—and How!

“**T**OMMY!”
“Yes, Mom?”
“You hike yourself out of that booth and go on and play outside with the kids.”

“After a while, Mom. Gosh, I’m right in the middle of reading this article on the Z-gun. That’s the British rocket-gun. And did you know, Mom, that it don’t need a heavy steel barrel or breech or firing mechanism?”

Well, what was a woman to do about a twelve-year-old boy who would rather pore over books and war maps than go swimming? A boy who would rather read soldier manuals than comic books and could reel off technical information about B-24’s and P-40’s by the hour?

It was so hard to be both mother and father to a boy like that. Even harder with Tommy’s eighteen-year-old brother, Harry, overseas now. It left Tommy without any masculine influence whatever, save for the Camp Blaine soldiers who made Ma Jordan’s restaurant in Hatville their nightly headquarters.

That, Ma Jordan suspected, was one of the troubles. Too much soldier influence for an impressionable youngster. She had brought her worries to Tommy’s teacher, Miss Buchanan, just before school let out for the summer two weeks ago. But Miss Buchanan had laughingly assured Ma Jordan that Tommy’s interests were quite normal for boys these days.

“Especially,” she had said, “with Tommy’s brother in the Army. I suspect Tommy feels frustrated because he is too young to be in the Service, too. His preoccupation with military matters is a

sort of vicarious compensation for it.”

Tommy put his magazine down and squirmed out of the booth when the M.P. came in. Ma Jordan knew Tommy liked to wait on soldiers.

The M.P. stood in the doorway for a moment, accustoming his eyes to the interior dimness after the glaring sunlight outside.



“Hi, soldier,” Tommy called eagerly. “What’ll you have?”

The M.P. came slowly down the aisle, his eyes roving restlessly toward the booths opposite the long counter. He was a little fellow, hardly bigger than Tommy, and the holstered gun on his right hip seemed to weigh him down.

HE PICKED out a stool at the middle of the counter and sat down. His eyes searched the glass-doored pantry shelves behind Mrs. Jordan. Tommy stood at the M.P.’s side, watching him with that embarrassingly frank stare of little boys.

"You're new at Camp Blaine, ain't you?" Tommy said.

Camp Blaine was a small post, with only a few hundred Signal Corps trainees. Tommy had made it his business to become acquainted with most of the camp personnel.

The M.P. scowled at Tommy. "Yeah, bub, I'm new in this camp." He turned to Mrs. Jordan. "I'll have ham and eggs."

"Was mess that awful?" Tommy piped up.

The M.P. frowned. "Huh?"

"It's only eight-thirty," Tommy said. "The chow must have been awful if you didn't eat your breakfast in camp."

"Yeah, it was awful, all right. Now scram, kid. I ain't in the mood for chummy gab."

Tommy's face was suddenly strained and there was a tense look in his eyes.

"Mom, can I go now? The kids are going swimming over to the creek and I'd like to go with 'em."

"Well, land's sake, child, that's what I've been trying to tell you to do."

But Tommy was already disappearing through the door. Ma Jordan smiled at the M.P.

"Boys," she said. "I've raised two of them and they're still an everlasting mystery to me."

"Two?" the M.P. said, frowning. "Where's the other?"

"I wish I knew. Somewhere in the Pacific, his letters say."

"Oh." The M.P. smiled for the first time since he had entered.

"I'll go fix your ham and eggs," Ma Jordan said, turning toward the kitchen door behind the counter.

"Never mind."

Ma Jordan was startled by the strange snarling tone. She turned quickly and gasped, her eyes widening. The M.P. had drawn his revolver and was holding the

muzzle just over the edge of the marble-topped counter.

"You do nice business here, nights," he said, the corners of his lips quirking in an unpleasant smile. "I cased your joint Saturday night. You wouldn't remember, because I wasn't wearing this monkey suit then."

"You're not a soldier!" Ma Jordan gasped in sudden, mounting apprehension.

"That's a laugh!" His grin widened.

"What do you want?"

"You musta done five hundred bucks' business Saturday night," the little man declared. "And it's too early for you to have taken the dough to the bank this morning. Don't give me a stall. I know you and the kid live back there behind the kitchen in a couple of rooms, so the dough is somewhere in this joint."

That was true. She lived in back of the cafe with Tommy because they could save money that way, money for the farm Harry had always wanted and that she had planned for him when he came home. And the receipts from Saturday night—they were back there, too, hidden in the old trunk. Money that was to have helped pay off a pile of bills.

She glanced with a vague, futile hope toward the open door. No one was in sight on the street. Hatville was a sleepy little town. Not many people would be about at this time of morning.

The little dark-eyed man followed her glance.

"No stalling I said!"

Ma Jordan turned to the kitchen door. She knew it would be futile to resist. Hard, cruel determination glinted in the little man's eyes.

"It's back there," she said.

She heard the scrape of shoe leather as the little man stood up.

"I'll go with you," he said.

Then, almost in that same instant, the

shot rang out, and she heard a cry of pain behind her. Her heart somersaulted as she swung around.

The little man had dropped his gun and was clutching at his blood-crimsoned right wrist. Behind him, Constable Jim Tobey advanced rapidly from the doorway. He picked up the fallen revolver, pushed the little man onto a stool and turned anxiously to Ma Jordan.

"He didn't harm you none, Ma?" he asked.

MA JORDAN shook her head. She saw Tommy move forward from the doorway, his eyes large and serious. Constable Tobey patted Tommy's shoulder and grinned.

"That was a right smart hunch you had, Tommy."

Ma Jordan stared unbelievably. "You mean Tommy called you, Jim?"

The constable nodded. "Yep. Said there was a feller here masquerading around like an M.P. and Tommy reckoned he wasn't up to no good." He scowled at the injured crook. "I hightailed on over fast as I could. Figured maybe this was the feller the F.B.I. sent out a circular on. Feller that's been masquerading like an M.P. and robbing stores all up and down the state, and like a dirty lowdown cuss

making people think it was a soldier robbed 'em!"

Ma Jordan was still bewildered. "But how did you know he wasn't an M.P., Tommy?"

Tommy's gesture implied the explanation was self-evident.

"Why, Mom, didn't you see he wasn't hardly no taller than me?"

"Well, land's sake, Tommy, what has that to do with it!"

"Gosh, Mom," Tommy explained with infinite patience, "I'm only five-feet-two, and everybody knows that an M.P. has to be at least five feet, nine inches tall. So then when I suspected he wasn't an M.P. and said to him that the breakfast at Camp Blaine must have been awful, he said it was, so I knew he wasn't even stationed at Camp Blaine."

"Well, how in tarnation would you know that, Tommy?"

"Golly, Mom, you know they don't have an M.P.'s mess at Camp Blaine. M.P.'s aren't supposed to eat with the other men in a camp, and at Camp Blaine there aren't enough M.P.'s to have a separate mess for them, so they get an allowance to eat in town. Golly, Mom, anybody coulda told you he was a phony."

Ma Jordan kept mum. She decided it wasn't necessary to correct him on that last point.