

Beautiful Jim.

By John Strange Winter.

CHAPTER IX.

A FIRST FLIGHT.

Taken on the whole the bazaar was a brilliant success, and the funds of the hospital were considerably increased by the proceeds thereof. A great deal of pleasure and fun had been got out of it, too, by many persons, and if there had been some pain attending it—why, nobody knew much about it.

Polly Antrobus, for instance, in spite of her brave attire and the lavish gifts of Mr. Mandarin, which had made her out and out the best dressed Swiss peasant in all the show, had suffered a very martyrdom of pain—but after all nobody was any the wiser, and only one or two people suspected what Polly never spoke of to a living soul.

And Lord Charterhouse, whom Mrs. Antrobus had once eulogized as being "so frank and open," to him also that Swiss Fair and Mask of Flowers was an ordeal, a period of such exquisite anguish that on the second day, when my lady spoke of going again, he found out, in sheer self defense, that his leg was bad again, and he would rather keep quietly at home.

So Lady Charterhouse, not unwillingly, went off by herself and had an uncommonly good time, much better than if "Mr. Winks" who was, she made no secret of saying, a dear old boy, but as slow as a toad, had been with her. But when she came home and enlivened him with a full description of everything, and of how that beautiful fair-haired girl with the fat fussy mother, and the lovely silver ornaments, had looked more beautiful that day than she had done on the day before, Lord Charterhouse found himself wishing that he had gone too, and made up his mind that he would go on the morrow. And sure enough on the morrow he did go, and finding his way to the stall at which Polly was helping, stayed there, his game log giving him an excuse for a chair, and the chair giving him an excuse for remaining where he would be out of the way.

I think "Mr. Winks" hardly knew that he was inflicting positive agony on the girl he had once called his "Mayflower." Polly was very quiet, making no effort to get rid of the various wares which she had come there to sell, and neither be nor any one else guessed that there were times when she could have covered her eyes with her hands and shrieked aloud for the very anguish in her heart. Poor Polly!

I say poor Polly advisedly, for it was hard that after Blankhampton had seen her as the possible, eye and probable bride of such men as had worshipped at her shrine in the days gone by, she should have to appear before her world acting Hermia to this Bottom—this monster—this Caliban. Nor was this all! She was in utter ignorance that Charterhouse had engaged himself to his cousin after he had known her, and had done his best to make her like him. She believed that the marriage had been some family arrangement to which he had committed himself before he had entered the army. She believed that he would have got out of it if he could, and that in his heart he was just as desperately in love with her as he had ever been! Yes, it must be owned that it was a very trying time for poor Polly!

Perhaps the two persons who enjoyed the affair most were Mrs. Antrobus and Mr. Mandarin. To Mr. Mandarin it was joy unspeakable to flounce round buying anything that took his fancy, with a loud voiced remark to his mother-in-law-elect that "Polly will be sure to like this," and to Mrs. Antrobus it was a delight beyond the expression of words to waddle from one stall to another, making a great show of patronage out of Mr. Mandarin's fat purse.

And it had the desired effect. Blankhampton had laughed at the unutterable pretentiousness of poor little To To's marriage, but Blankhampton this time could not but believe that Mr. Mandarin was as rich as Cresus.

And how dear that was to Mrs. Antrobus! It would be hard for me adequately to convey. She loved money and all the pomp and display and flattery and adulation which the possession of money enables you to enjoy. If Mrs. Antrobus had thought it necessary to start a new religion she would certainly have set up the worship of Cresus; and I don't suppose if her golden image had only been big enough, that she would have had her joss-house empty or even ill filled.

But there was yet another person who enjoyed the week thoroughly—that was young Stuart, the last of the Earles.

On the whole, the young gentleman had a famous time of it; from the five blithe and bonny Leslie girls he was passed on to the acquaintance of almost every decent looking girl in the town; his happy, good form impudence stood him in good stead and proved as fascinating as if he had been of a marriageable age instead of, as he was, a mere slip of a lad eighteen years old. And one evening he went up to a mess when he greatly edified Beautiful Jim, whose ghost he was, and all the other officers of his new regiment and laid up a goodly store of suffering for himself in the days to come by his frank and easy comments on men and manners alike, by the careless and friendly ease with which he took the lead as befitted him who had been born the last of the Earles.

But, unfortunately for him, he was also the last of the Blankshire regiment and his future comrades were only able to check their disgust by remembering that he was as yet a guest, when, having perhaps had a trifle more wine than his young and unseasoned head could carry (I do not mean to say that the boy was drunk, far from it), he gayly undertook to chaff Urquhart, the commanding officer of the Black Horse, who was also dining there.

"Of course, I don't remember the stage as far back as yourself, colonel," he began, in the tone of a man of the world. "I dare say you'll remember Macready."

"I never saw Macready," said Col. Urquhart, giving the youngster credit for being a good deal more nearly drunk than he was.

"Not—ah—I should have thought you'd be quite up in all that period," returned Tommy, flippantly. "But you'll have heard what an irritable chap he was."

"Heard what?" asked Urquhart.

"You'll have heard what an irritable chap he was," Tommy repeated, tipping the wink to one or two of the less disgusted of the officers of the Blankshire regiment, who were grinning with expectation.

Whether he had some joke or catch about Macready's peculiarity of temper or not it would be hard to say, but if he had, Urquhart nipped him in the bud after a fashion quite his own. He looked

up as courteously as if Tommy had been a field officer instead of an unfledged subaltern, and fixed him with a pair of keen and clear gray eyes that seemed able to look right through him and out at the other side. "Yes," he said, gravely. "I believe Macready was an irritable man. Some men are born bad tempered—they can't help it, and, in fact, it is really not their fault. They are born so, he went on, mildly, so mildly that Marcus Orford, who was dining there that night, looked sharply up to hear if anything more subtle and smart than usual was coming—'they are born so, and silly people irritate them by asking foolish questions.'

To the surprise of the lad, who was not just then clear enough in his head, nor at any time clever enough, to understand a shaft of quiet sarcasm, every man round the table burst into a roar of laughter.

They would have laughed to a man at any joke of Urquhart's, whether they had seen it or not; in this case, however, they did see it clearly enough, and the officers of the Blankshire regiment would each and all have thoroughly enjoyed "punching" the lad's head for being such a young fool as to bring so severe a snub upon himself.

Finally, when still highly pleased with his performance and on the best terms with himself, he said adieu to Urquhart, that gentleman paid him a somewhat doubtful compliment.

"Good night, youngster. Your new regiment ought to be very proud of having you come among them."

"Thanks," replied Tommy, accepting the words and not understanding the spirit. "I hope I shall always."

"Be a credit to them," ended Urquhart with perfect gravity. "My dear lad, you've only to go on as you've begun, to find yourself hobnobbing with Lord Wolsley and the commander-in-chief in next to time."

In the midst of the roar of laughter Beautiful Jim, none too gently, hustled his precious young charge out to the cab which was awaiting him at the anteroom door.

"Get in, you young ass," he muttered, "before you do any more mischief."

But the last of the Earles, on whom the keen night breeze began to tell instantly, was too much occupied in steady him self to catch the words which his host only spoke under his breath.

"Then what did I do?" Tommy was beginning to get alarmed, and showed it.

"I didn't shy the knives about, or anything of that sort, surely?"

Beautiful Jim burst out laughing.

"Look here, young 'un," he remarked. "You've got a very fair notion of your own qualities, your position, your appearance, your—your everything. You're the last of the Earles!"

"D—n the Earles," put in Tommy, who had no sort of respect for his position as the last of a proud race, than he liked others to have, none better.

"With all my heart," said Col. Urquhart, "will do you no good in the British few."

"I suppose I ought to feel immensely flattered, but I must say I'm very glad you are going to have thelicking of that young gentleman into shape instead of any of us."

"That young cub, you mean, colonel?" broke out Beautiful Jim, who had but little patience with shortcomings of that kind, and was thinking, too, what she would say.

Col. Urquhart, however, only laughed, and with another "good night," passed on.

CHAPTER X.

TOMMY EATS HUMBLE PIE.

Happy for the credit of the Earles in general, and the last of the race in particular, the household at the Deanery was habitually an early one, and if no entertainment was afoot, the family were in the habit of disappearing at half past 10 o'clock.

Therefore, when Tommy had pulled himself together, paid the cabman and straightened his somewhat unmanageable person and his decidedly refractory arms and legs, which somehow wouldn't keep in their proper places, he gave a pull at the bell.

The door was opened, not by the staid and respectable family butler, by a young footman, who knew that the young gentleman had been dining at the Infantry

Barracks, and was perhaps sympathetic, knowing what singular effects night air sometimes has upon a person who has come out of a hot and noisy room.

Any way, be shut the door and immediately lighted a candle, with a remark that "the family have retired for the night, sir, all but the dean, who I expect every minute."

Now, this was enough to send Tommy off to his room as fast as his unsteady legs could climb the stairs; for, although he had felt perfectly equal to chaffing one of the keenest witted men in the service, in the person of Col. Urquhart, he did not feel equal, after a twenty minutes' ride in a jolting, springless cab over the villainously quaint cobble stones which paved the streets of Blankhampton, making him feel as if he had eaten ten times too much dinner, and as if, when he got settled in the Blankshire regiment, he should have something not perhaps altogether to his liking to say to the president of the mess committee about the quality of the wines, to encountering the very reverend the dean of Blankhampton; in fact, he had more than a suspicion that that gentleman would tell him in blunt, overcooked words that he was drunk!

Not that he was drunk, mind you! He pulled up short on the first landing, and glared at himself in a big square of looking glass which was set against the wall, as if his other self in the glass had charged him with being drunk, and he meant to knock him down for the insult!

So there for a minute he and his reflection stood, with one white face staring at another, with hair rumpled on end like a sulphur crested cockatoo, and with candlestick held with elegant negligence on one side, so that the hot wax ran down in a stream upon the handsome Axminster carpet beneath.

"D—d bad wine that," he muttered. "I believe it's got into my head, or upset my digestion, or something," and then he heard a quick, firm footstep on the flag of the portico, followed by the rattle of the key in the door.

"Oh no, he was not at all drunk! He blew out his candle and crept off to his room, only lurching once or twice against the wall on the way—that, of course, was because he could not see. Anyway, he gained his room in safety, and sat down upon the first chair he could find to recover his breath. It happened to be an easy chair, and his breath took a long time to recover; and, somehow, he dropped

off to sleep, and slept like a top until the daylight was streaming into the room, and the bells high up in the great tower of the parish were ringing for a saint's day celebration.

Thus Tommy got uncommonly well over the episode of the dinner at the mess of his new regiment. But he thought he ought to go up and call, so that if he had in the faintest degree upset his commanding officer that was to be, he would be able to set it straight, and not start as it were, with a black mark against his name.

So he went up to the infantry barracks and asked for Mr. Beresford, who was, he found, in his own room, whether he went in search of him.

Beautiful Jim was lying in a big chair with a novel and a pipe, enjoying the first half hour of rest he had had that day. He looked up and laughed as Tommy entered.

"Hello, youngster, is that you? 'ow are you?" he remarked, speaking in a more friendly and civil tone than his feelings would have indicated had they been on the surface.

Tommy sat himself down on the edge of the cot and informed Beautiful Jim, with a man about town air, that he felt "a bit chippy."

"And I don't wonder at it," returned the other, curiously. "You made a regular splash here last night."

It might have been the accent of rebuke in Beresford's tone, I know not, but certain it is that Tommy turned brazen all at once.

"That's a good thing," he remarked, airily. "I never like putting myself forward, but anything's better than mediocrity;" and with that he got up and shook himself out as it were, swaggering to the glass above the fireplace, and standing there just in front of Beautiful Jim's disgusted nose, preening himself as you may see a peacock preening his feathers in the sun.

It is safe to say that at that moment he fairly stank in Beautiful Jim's nostrils.

"It's all very fine, youngster," he said, in a tone which he tried hard to make fairly civil; "but the sort of splash you made last night won't do any good in the regiment—not any good, but a good deal of harm."

"Why, — it, mediocrity will stand you in good stead long after that kind of splash has sent you to the devil."

Tommy turned round with an innocent face.

"What did I do?" he asked. "I didn't stand on the table, did I?"

"Worse than that," returned Jim.

"I didn't call any one a — cad, did I?"

"No; but you might have got over that in time if you had owned that your head only spoke under his breath."

"Then what did I do?" Tommy was beginning to get alarmed, and showed it.

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CHAPTER XI.

PROGRESS UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

As soon as he was free to get out of the barracks that afternoon Beautiful Jim took himself off to the bazar, which was open for the last day. He found a great crowd there, for it was market day, and nearly all the country people had contrived to go to it for an hour or so before they went home.

The ladies were all very busy; for, in spite of a week's good sale, there was still a large quantity of things to be disposed of, and they were taking almost any price they could get for them so as to effect a clearance. Miss Earle was especially busy, her pleasant winning manner and fair, bright face bringing her many and many a customer who otherwise would not have cared to spend a farthing.

Beautiful Jim, however, suffered by this popularity, for he could not manage to get a word with her, or hardly one. He knew that she and Tommy were going home on the Monday morning, and he knew, too, that he could not hope by any chance to get even a two days leave on this side of the 1st of September.

So Beautiful Jim, despite the gay and giddy throng of which he made one, was as nearly miserable as he could be while

would not melt in his mouth.

"Oh! good morning, good morning," returned the colonel, in a series of snorts, and in a tone which conveyed to Tommy that, if anything, Beresford had understated rather than overstated the gravity of his offense.

He felt that his time was come, that if he did not speak then he would be, as it were, socially damned in the Blankshire regiment forever; but it was not without the ice within which Col. Barnes had frozen himself.

He looked at the big, fierce, red-faced, burly man, with his haughty red nose and his long, bristling mustache, each end of which was waxed—soaped, if the truth be told—to a formidable spike, and his heart, yes, even his brazen heart, failed him! Still he felt that delay was dangerous, and at last he spoke! And if only his sister Nancy could have heard the last of the proud race of Earles eating humble pie with that shrinking air, she would have declared that her dear boy's degradation could go no further and sink no lower.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm on duty to-morrow, and I can't get any of the other fellows to do it for me," he returned, mournfully.

"Oh!" she cried in dismay, "and Mrs. Trafalgar is having a tea after the parish."

"Yes, I know," said he wretchedly. Then after a moment he exclaimed in a brighter tone: "There's one fellow I haven't asked, so there's just a chance yet for me."

"Then I shall not say good-by today," said Miss Earle, with decision. "I hate saying good-by. Don't you?"

"It depends," said Jim, guardedly. "It depends a good deal on the other person. Now, if I was saying good-by to you, he said, in a desperate tone—and just as Miss Earle was beginning to show the prettiest of danger signals in her cheeks and a droop in her sweet eyes, some—some idiot, Jim said to himself, savagely, came clumsily along and knocked a heavy tea tray against her arm, making her shriek out in unmistakable pain.

"Now, then! Where are you going?" Jim thundered, looking daggers at the luckless individual.

After many apologies and regrets the poor wretch went away forgiven; and then, just as Jim was going to be tender and lover like over the poor arm, a great stream of people came in, among whom were two of the Leslie girls and Tommy Earle.