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BEAUTIFUL JIM.

By JOHN STRANGE WINTER.

(Continued from last week.) It must be owned that the women had a good deal to do with it.

Not a day passed, if he was not on duty, that as soon as he was free from work he did not go flying off to some feminine charmer, and he neither could nor would understand that "the fellows" objected to going to tea parties where Tommy was the central figure, to dinners where Tommy monopolized the whole of the conversation, and to dances where Tommy's audacious flirtations made him the observed of all observers.

But, though Tommy did not become very popular in his regiment, he was popular in the town to satisfy any ordinary craving after the approval of the many. He became after the first few weeks, the intimate friend of all classes.

Beautiful Jim did his best, but his influence went a very short way, for his advice was anything but palatable to the last of the Earles, and it must indeed be a very strong and firm will which can follow the most excellent advice in the world if it is unpleasant, to the exclusion of all that makes life worth having, a much stronger will than Tommy was blessed with.

In truth, all Tommy's strength of purpose went in an opposite direction, that of serving his own ends and gratifying his own sense of pleasure.

"Look here, you young beggar," said Jim one day to him, being moved thereto not by any desire to do Tommy good, but by an uncomfortable feeling that she would be grieved if she could see all that went on in Blankhampton society, "if you go on like this, what do you mean to come to—hey?"

Tommy looked up with his own unabashed gaze. "What on earth have I been doing to upset you now?" he demanded.

"Well, I saw you myself kiss no fewer than three women last night," Beautiful Jim growled. "The greater fools they are to let you."

"Like to have been there yourself, eh?" remarked Tommy, flippantly.

Beautiful Jim felt as contemptuous as he looked at that moment he must have attained to the very furthest limits of disdain, for his ugly face seemed petrified with unutterable disgust.

"Why, you young idiot, do you suppose there's a single woman, married or maid, in the whole of Blankhampton, that would give you so much as a look if you took the trouble to be civil to her? Bless you, child, don't flatter yourself. Why, it's because these women think you're such a baby—such a nothing—such a non-dangerous scrap of humanity—that they let you make the young fellows do as you please, you do. But what I want to know is, what the devil do you mean to come to?"

"Well, really, Jim," Tommy replied, with a certain "last of the Earles" haughtiness in his tone, "it seems to me you're troubling yourself in a very unnecessary way about my private affairs, and—"

during all those months, the goose or a chance of furthering his position with Tommy, for almost immediately after Tommy joined the regiment Mr. Earle was seized with a somewhat severe attack of bronchitis, and by the orders of his medical advisers was on the very first opportunity ordered off to the sunny clime of the south coast.

It had been a bitter blow to him; but it was useless to fight against fate, and though he tried hard for foreign leave, he was, owing to various rumors of disturbance floating about the country at the time, unable to get it.

Just at first he was rather elated at the prospect of a change. There was a something jaunty and soldierly about marching out, colors flying, band playing, and a dozen broken hearts behind them, and for a few hours Tommy went airy round announcing that they were off to Walmesbury next week, with a "fresh field and pasture new" air about him that was irresistibly funny to those of his brother officers who knew what manner of place Walmesbury really was.

But the elation of this young Alexander, longing for more worlds to conquer, did not last long. From "the fellows" he learned nothing; indeed, for any information he would have had from them he would have remained in the ignorance which is bliss, doubly so in this case, until he reached Walmesbury itself, but in Blankhampton it was different.

"Going to Walmesbury," cried one lady to whom he told his news with a very "girl I leave behind me" sort of air. "Oh, you poor dear boy, what a shame! Why, you'll be buried alive in Walmesbury. There's nothing to do anywhere to go, and not a soul in the place that you can possibly know. No society whatever."

"What's that to you?" she said, with as much cheek as even Tommy himself could have shown.

"You get it out of Mr. Earle," said I. "And what if I did?" she returned, pertly.

"A good deal," said I, "in fact, just this: You're a good many years older than Mr. Earle—ten at least—you're anything but a reputable woman, and in fact, if you were as good as an angel out of heaven—which you are not—you're just about the last woman in the world that his family would ever receive if you bamboozled him into marrying you. I see you're wearing on your engaged finger, and I suppose that man has inveigled him into promising to replace it by a plain one. But he will do nothing of the sort, and you will just hand that ring over to me. We don't allow our young officers to go about marrying any one they like, particularly such a woman as you are."

"And if I don't?" she asked, insolently.

"If you don't? Well, I happen to be Mr. Earle's commanding officer just now, and unless you at once give me that ring and your solemn promise to make no further attempt to get him to marry you, I shall simply put him under arrest and keep him there until his father comes, and his father will very soon straighten him up, I promise you. Remember, he is not 19 yet—that he's an infant—a minor—and can't even sign a contract without his father's consent until he is one-and-twenty. He is absolutely dependent upon his father, too, for every farthing he has or ever will have; so just hand me over that ring, and I will settle the matter with his father."

"And you would, that she gave me the ring and her solemn pledge to have done with the young fool for good and all. Of course it was pretty nearly all bounce that I said, and would not have borne a moment's reflection if she had been a better educated woman; but it has served its turn, and it seems to me that anything is justifiable to save a young fool from coming such a cropper as that."

"Yes, that's so," murmured Jim, turning the ring over, and thinking what she would say if she knew about it.

It was a valuable and very beautiful ring, the finest one of metal possessed by the object of Owen's righteous indignation. In the center was a large sapphire of great price, on which was engraved the crest and motto of the Earles. Surrounding this were diamonds of much beauty, which flashed and sparkled as the freckled fellow turned it.

"Have you seen him?" Jim asked at last, looking up from the ring.

"No, I went into his room, but he has not come back from Blankhampton yet; he is due to-night, though. Owen answered, "I think I'll make any fuss about the matter I had better write to the colonel and tell him about it, and get him to send one of the other fellows here and let the young ass go back to the regiment."

"What do you think of the devil's own mischief wherever he is," Jim replied, his faith in Tommy having been shattered long before.

"Perhaps; still there are plenty of ladies in Blankhampton to keep him out of harm's way, and it is no wonder he got engaged to one of the Leslie girls; her father would soon choke him off, or, if he wouldn't be choked off, old Earle couldn't possibly object to anything in the engagement; but his son's youth and general idleness, well, I suppose I must be off to dress; it only wants ten minutes to meet now—then, without waiting for a reply, Owen went out, shutting the door with a bang, and leaving Beautiful Jim with Tommy Earle's ring still in his hand.

He had a sort of guest night that evening, for it is the custom of the officers of the Blankshire regiment and the doctor, who messes with them, they had a young fellow staying a mile or two away who was not of the millionaire type, but a commoner to the Walmesbury neighborhood, the officer in charge of the commissariat department, the clergyman who acted as chaplain and the Roman Catholic priest of the district.

Thus it was quite a dinner party; and although Beautiful Jim looked once or twice across the table at Owen to see whether he had got over his annoyance, he very soon entered into a discussion on a more interesting subject than Tommy's delinquencies, with his neighbor, the priest, and speedily forgot all about the matter.

How did he remember it till Tommy himself came on to the scene some hours later, apparently utterly tired out with the day's journey from Blankhampton, when he had been spending a two days' leave. It struck him more than once that the lad looked very white and fagged, and he put it down to his having tried to catch the train late the few hours he had had to spend in the old city.

"Any news from Blankhampton, Tommy?" he inquired, civilly.

"None in particular," returned Tommy, then got up and moved away as if he had heard enough on the subject of Blankhampton, and did not want to be questioned about it.

"For-lead," said Beautiful Jim to himself, "he has evidently had an awakening to the real value of the charms and fascinations at the Duke's Hall. What a good fellow! Poor old Owen will find the business easier to manage than he thought."

He looked across the room at his friend, and found his thoughts running away to his little cousin, Nell Marchmont. Jim had never said a word, and Nell had never said a word either—yet he knew that Owen had spent the greater part of his leave in London, and guessed that he had tried his fate and that Nell had said no.

Suspecting this, he had purposely spoken to her of Owen more than once, and she had smiled up a little at the mention of his name, and a certain dewy tenderness had come into her eyes, a tenderness so tinged with sorrow that Jim gleaned all the information that he wanted from it.

Well, it was a pity, and Jim wished to be otherwise; but still, if Nell did not see it in that light it was no use his thinking any more about it.

And by and by their guests went away and the four officers went off to their rooms. Owen going into Jim's for a last pipe instead of turning to the left toward his own. And for an hour or so they sat together smoking and chatting, and Jim told his friend his suspicions about Tommy's disengagement, to his extreme satisfaction, it need hardly be said.

"And by the way, Owen, you left the young fool's ring with me. I'll give it to you. Now, what the deuce can Leader have done with my keys? On my soul, Leader's infernal tidiness is the very curse of my existence. I don't know how he has put up with it."

"Never mind, old chap, you can give it to me to-morrow," answered Owen, who was getting tired. "Good-night, old fellow."

"Good-night, old chap," returned Jim, cheerily.

It is safe to say that he was not five minutes in throwing off his clothes and tumbling into bed, and in less than a minute after that he was sound asleep and dreaming—dreaming that he had committed some terrible misdemeanor, and that Owen—old Owen—his own expected uncle—ended with "Consider yourself under close arrest. Go to your room at once, and I will send for your sword."

The dream was so real that he awoke trembling from head to foot, to find the full blazing cheerfully, and the sound of footsteps going along the corridor outside.

"Gad, what rot a fellow can dream," he said, and turning over fell asleep once more.

CHAPTER XV. MURDER. Not once again did Beautiful Jim stir or move during the rest of that night; but soon after 7 in the morning he was roused by Leader coming into the room—Leader with a face like chalk and ashes, and hands shaking like aspen leaves in a gale of wind, who shook him up with less ceremony than he had ever done before during all the time he had served him.

"Beresford—sir—for God's sake wake up!" the man panted. "The awfullest thing has happened, sir—for God's sake wake up!"

"Eh—what?" muttered Jim, sleepily.

"Mr. Manners is on duty today."

"It's not duty, sir—it's a murder!" cried Leader, desperately, shaking him harder than ever.

How did he remember it till Tommy himself came on to the scene some hours later, apparently utterly tired out with the day's journey from Blankhampton, when he had been spending a two days' leave. It struck him more than once that the lad looked very white and fagged, and he put it down to his having tried to catch the train late the few hours he had had to spend in the old city.

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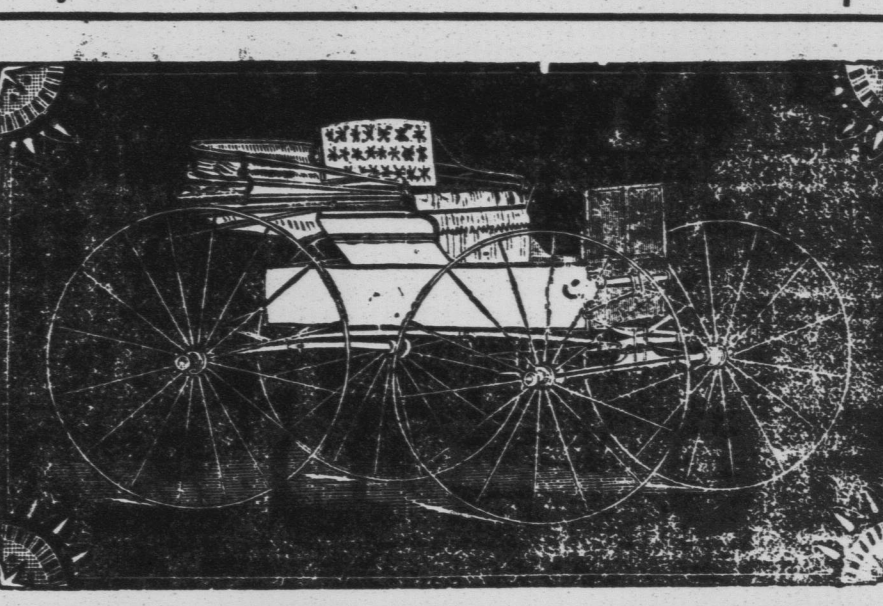
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TOP BUGGIES. I have still a number of TOP BUGGIES and PHÆTONS on hand, and will run them off CHEAP in order to make room for my Winter Work. CALL AND SEE THEM.



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