

A Beastly Bit of Bother

D.S.O.'s Can be Won in Many Ways—The Rescue of the Honorable Freddie Won One for George: A Delightful Bit of Comedy

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EAR OLD PATER,

Well, here I am, you see, able to sit up, and all that. Of course, you have had official notice of my being wounded. It was an awfully silly affair. And I hear the papers have written up some rotten drivel or other about it. Sentimental chumps! Really, Pater, I'm frightfully cut up over the whole performance.

It was all a beastly bit of bother, and I'm not proud of my part in it. When you have read this, you will sympathise with my feelings. Please, Pater, hush it up as soon as you can.

I don't know what the bally papers have said about me, but I heard that they called me a "hero-lord," and that sort of rot. Some of the nurses here are rather gone on me, too. I'm about fed up with it all. And I feel I don't deserve it.

For it really happened like this:—

You remember the Honorable Freddie, don't you—a bit of an ass, you know? Was at Oxford when I was? Well, Freddie was drafted into my battalion two months ago, and what do you think was his rank? Why he was simply a bally Tommy! Now I maintain that, if a chap of decent family hasn't the brains or the ambition to serve his country in the capacity of an officer, he should stay at home, and let his sisters have a try at it, don't you know. Of course, a good many benighted members of the British aristocracy are enlisting as privates and non-coms. I confess their attitude puzzles me. You know, Pater, a Tommy is hardly respectable, really now! And it sets a deucedly bad example to those beneath us. To be sure, I believe in democracy, and all that sort of thing—in moderation—but still I can't help perceiving that, though all men are born equal, we English aristocrats are most certainly a cut above those beneath us. Jove! What a sentence! But I always was a miff at a pen.

Well, Freddie was drafted into my battalion, as I stated. The first suspicion I had of his presence was when I fell over his legs as I was hurrying along the trench. He is an awfully long sort of chap.

"Here, you!" I snapped, "Pick your feet up!" And I choked down my heart and a few other of my interior fittings, which seemed to have joggled into my mouth. (It was really indigestion I had—margarine, you know—but Freddie's legs aggravated it.)

Then I recognized Freddie's legs. I had seen them in hunting togs many a time, and could never forget them. One couldn't, you know. They are unique. Sort of long, and graceful, and what lady novelists used to call "shapely." Even in the beastly outfit a Tommy wears, they looked aristocratic. They rose above their surroundings, as it were. Possibly that was why I fell over them, for Freddie was lying on the back of his head, with his legs cocked up against the parapet. His upper half—or, in this case, lower half—was buried in an aged newspaper.

Of course, it didn't take this long for me to know that it was Freddie. I knew him as soon as I had overcome the beastly nausea caused by my taking a header across him. "Here, you! Pick your feet up!" I snarled—as if he could pick his feet up much higher—and then, presto! I recognized his legs.

Freddie didn't look up from his paper.

"Shall I wrap 'em round my neck, or put 'em in my pocket?" he enquired politely. Then he peered over the top of the sheet and saw me.

"Mornin', George," he drawled, jumping to his feet and saluting, "Beg pardon. I didn't know my officer was doin' me the honor of addressin' me—Where's your eye-glass, old top?"

Of course, I couldn't give him a jolly good rowing, as I would have liked, because, after all, he is an Honorable, and we are both Oxford men. Noblesse oblige, you understand.

Freddie didn't intrude on my eyesight a great deal. I think he was ashamed of being only a Tommy. As for me, I tried not to see him at all. I don't like the chap. I consider him an ass. And I have reason to believe that he considers me an ass. He used to at Oxford, you know. But, even if I do know that he is an ass, and he imagines that I am one, I couldn't see my way to ordering him around as if he were one of the other Tommies. My word, Pater! If we English aristocrats don't respect Family, who will?

Freddie didn't, at any rate. I used to hear him actually talking and singing with the men, and making no end of a row. They were always laughing—at him, I suppose, for forgetting his rank so completely. Pon my word, it sickened me! Personally, I would just as soon associate with my men as with a bally lot of little germs.

My conscience rather hurt me about Freddie, and I undertook to remonstrate with him one day about his behavior. I pointed out to him what his defunct Aunt Clarabel would think of him. (She, you recollect, had a very proper appreciation of the duties of Position.) I regret to say that Freddie consigned that most respectable old lady to a region she most certainly will never visit. She was far too good a Churchwoman to go there.

I found that Freddie was hopeless, and gave him up. And he continued to sing foolish and vulgar songs with the other Tommies.

On the day in question, we charged the German

trench. It was only a hundred yards from us, and the beggars had been showing marked ill-breeding for days. Frankly, I was in a beastly temper. I don't mind decent, clean bullets, but when it comes to red-hot, dirty fluid—well, it's not cricket, by Jove it isn't! It's not being done by us. Accordingly, we decided to visit the beasts and remonstrate with them, as it were.

WE fixed bayonets, and climbed out. The men were singing "We'll never let the old flag fall," as we charged. It sounded awfully jolly. Personally, I have no need of songs like that, because, of course, the old flag is set pretty firmly on its legs. There is no danger of its tumbling. That's a pretty rotten metaphor, but I haven't time to change it. Fancy flags having legs! I say, you know! That's rather good!

Still, though the song was quite unnecessary, it made us feel our oats, as the vulgar put it. We plunged on gaily. Several of us were dropped at the start. One young chap leaped high in the air and fell back against

"I blindly snatched up a rifle and ran towards Freddie"



me, dying all over my chest. He ruined my tunic, which was a fairly new one—poor beggar. We went sprawling to the ground together, and, when I got up, most of my men had passed me. That ass of a Freddie was well up at the head, and he was urging us to present the enemy with the same region to which he had previously consigned his Aunt Clarabel.

I had rather hard luck in this fight. Just after I saw Freddie, there came from the hills what the Tommies call a Black Maria, and she howled at us, and buried herself in the ground not more than five yards from me. She dug a hole you could have built a fair-sized natorium in, and killed about ten of my finest men. It was my first engagement in the open, and I felt deucedly uncomfortable for a moment. Rather sick, too. Black Marias kill in such a beastly fashion.

People have asked me my sensations when under fire—how I felt when the shell burst so close to me, and more silly-ass questions of that sort, don't you know. Well, I'm no end sorry to say this, but, really Pater, I didn't feel at all like a chap in a book. I only tasted margarine. It was my confounded stomach again. Upset, you know, and the Black Maria aggravated it. As the Dean of Theology used to say, "One cannot suppress the yelpings of an outraged Nature." I said that I was rather sick. Let it pass.

When I rose to my feet again, my men had got away from me, and were being badly beaten. To be brief about the rotten affair, the Germans had fooled us. They had sneaked reinforcements into their trench—the sly devils!—and, as they poured over the parapets, we could see that we were outnumbered three to one. We were ordered to retreat. There was no use in losing more good men in a forlorn hope; so we beat our way back in splendid order to the trench, leaving over one-quarter of our number dead or dying in No-Man's Land.

I can't talk about that, Pater. But I'll never forget it as long as I live—if I do live long. Tommies may be low and not our style, but to see men that were singing "We'll never let the old flag fall" just half an hour before lying so quiet, and mutilated—oh, it's horrible!

In revenge for that sight, I'm going to fight, fight, fight, until either Germany or myself haven't a leg to stand on. So help me God.

This is a simply rotten pen. Look at that beastly blot. And I have no knife or eraser.

LATER.

I haven't touched this letter for three days. Had a slight relapse—cold or something, you know. However, I'm feeling like a fighting-cock to-day.

I left off at our retreat to our trench. And that is really where my troubles started.

Our machine guns drove the Germans back. We began to breathe again, send off our wounded, and account for the missing. Then I spied that silly ass, Freddie. He was away over near the enemy's lines, punching and struggling with a big, strapping German in a most undignified fashion.

They were both unarmed, and were pummeling each other in such an energetic style that they were completely mixed up together, don't you know. One could hardly determine which was which; so of course we didn't dare to fire for fear of hitting Freddie—the silly ass. He was getting the worst of it, too. He never could fight worth a penny. He always used to lose his head, wave his arms like Don Quixote's windmill, and all that sort of thing at school. If Freddie hit his opponent as hard as he stirred the atmosphere, he would be a world's champion by now. The German chap he was fanning was a bit of an adept. We could see that, and he was driving Freddie steadily towards the enemy.

I suppose the Huns were too busy picking themselves up inside their trench to examine the outside scenery just then, for it wasn't until I had blindly snatched up a rifle with a broken bayonet, and had run half way to Freddie that they began to pot at me. Then they missed me—or practically did. A bullet scratched my forehead, and another went through the fleshy part of my leg, but I hardly felt it at the time.

Still, though they made a fairly decent try at loading me with lead, they didn't fire at Freddie. Afraid of killing their own man, I suppose, as we were. But presently a little fat beggar stole from their lines, and wormed his way towards Freddie with a big, devilish-looking knife between his teeth, like Don Jose, the chap in Carmen, don't you know. I saw carmine myself then, I can tell you. An Englishman doesn't object to being finished off by a bullet, or even blown off by a shell, if necessary, but to be polished off by a bally knife, as if he were a sort of silly sheep—it's a bit thin. 'Pon honor, Pater! It is a bit thin. What?

I declare I was in such a rage that the blood rushed to my eyes, and the earth, the sky, and even a few dinky little clouds near the zenith turned quite red for a moment. The bullets were fairly caressing the air about me now. I ran as fast as I could, and made myself as small as possible. Once, I stumbled and nearly fell over the body of Sergeant Leslie. He was a Canadian, and well-liked. He had been bayoneted, and lay there staring up at the sky, with a tired, sort of enquiring look on his face.

Then came the last straw—if one may give so insignificant a name to so serious an occurrence. For I recognized Freddie's opponent. And he was a waiter—a beastly waiter, who used to sell me bad Huns.

Fancy an Honorable fighting with a common waiter, and being beaten by him at that! Frightfully bad form. What?

Something clicked in my head, and I went mad. I must have gone mad. I can't account for it in any other way. I seemed to be two men; one of me was cool and level headed, and rather disgusted with the other chap, who frothed at the mouth, and screamed oaths, and, when he came to the end of his vocabulary, made up a few, and screamed them all over again.

"George! George!" said the level-headed one, "Be calm."

I'm horribly ashamed of all this, and I can't account for it at all, but whenever I look back at that day, I always see two of me, out there in No-Man's Land.

The level-headed chap had the wicket first. He took careful aim at Don Jose, the beggar with the knife, you know, and let fly. But the rifle just clicked at him. It was empty! — — — — —

I PUT this bally lot of little lines here because I can't find words to express my feelings past, present, and, I fear, to come. The English language is infernally inadequate at times.

The cool Johnny was bowled out, and stood aside for the rest of the game, sneering a little, and coaching me along.

The mad part of me howled outrageously, threw down the rifle, jumped on it, and spied a Tommy's knife lying on the ground.

It wasn't much of a knife—not quite as large as a small hunting knife; but it was jolly sharp, with a decently long blade. When I shut my eyes, I can see the beastly thing hanging in the air, like Damocles' sword or Macbeth's dagger.

I think either my guardian angel or someone else left that knife gleaming on the ground. I pounced on it, howling steadily, and started in.

"Don Jose first," sneered the level-headed one.

I made for the chap with the knife. He had reached Freddie by now, and, in the most unconcerned sort of way, was selecting a good spot in the poor beggar's back. Freddie was terribly pale. He was just about finished. The German waiter was turned away from me, and didn't know I was coming at all. Don Jose was too interested to notice me, even

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