

A Matter of Kindness

Gipsy Tales, #1

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I

ON Saturday afternoons there was peace in the Valley of Sweet Waters. Then the click and clack of pick and drill ceased, the grimy gangs went home and washed themselves, for the most part openly bewailing the fact that there were no licensed premises within five miles of the huge waterworks—works where eight

thousand men were slaving and moiling to bring the glittering liquid pure across the Midlands. There was the canteen, of course, but the canteen was conducted upon narrow-minded lines, and with an abbreviated notion of the proper amount of intoxicating liquor requisite to the capacity of a self-respecting navy. But there were ways of evading the authorities, as the said authorities sadly allowed.

The canteen was closed till dusk on Saturday, and thus eight thousand men, dotted in huts all along the lovely valley, were thrown upon their own resources. They played cricket with some vigour, they bathed in the mountain pools, there were foot races and long training walks—rambles frequently fatal to various poultry rambling thoughtlessly beyond the confines of the farmyards. Rabbits, too, were getting scarce, and Sir Myles Llangaren protested against the slaying of pheasants in August. He protested, too, against the poaching in Upper Guilt Brook, but this in a minor degree, seeing that the trout were small, albeit of excellent flavour.

As a matter of fact, three banksmen were poaching up above Guilt Bridge now. Two of them sat smoking and watching a third, who, prone on his stomach, was doing something in the stream with the aid of a stick and a fine copper wire. The thing looks impossible and absurdly insufficient, but there the captured fish lay.

“Got ‘im,” the fisherman grunted, lifting out a fat fish some six ounces in weight. “I dines at eight to-night in a dicky and black tie. Sort of family affair.”

The other men laughed internally. The speaker was a short, powerful man, with glittering black eyes and dark snaky hair that had earned him the title of “Gipsy.” The other two men were known as “Nobby” and “Dandy Dick,” the latter reminiscent of an old playbill and of the fact that he usually wore a tie and had his hair with that pleasing plastered curl over the forehead which is called a Newgate fringe. Dandy also had a great, if vague, reputation for gallantry of a certain order.

As they sat there, another man came swinging up the valley. He also was of the navy type, clean-limbed, with a suggestion of having seen service about him. He was dressed in black and wore a heavy pilot-coat, despite the heat of the day. He nodded none too familiarly.

“*How* do?” Gipsy shouted. The “*How* do?” of a navy can be made hearty or exceedingly offensive, as the case may be. With the accent derisive on the first syllable it lends itself to quarrel in the easiest manner possible. “*How* do?”

The other passed on without any personal allusion to Gipsy’s facial disadvantages, a fact that so astonished Nobby that he dropped his pipe and stared open-mouthed after the retreating figure.

“‘Oo’s’e?” he asked. “Call hisself a man! If Gipsy’d hollered arter me like that, I’d ha’ knocked his bloomin’ ‘ead orf. Straight.”

Gipsy rolled over on his back in exquisite enjoyment. He belonged to the order of man who laughs at everything. Nobby’s seriousness was a source of constant amusement to him.

“Calls hisself James Burton,” he explained. “Ganger over Dandy’s lot.”

“It’s a lie,” Nobby said with emotion. “It’s one of your lies, Gipsy.”

“It ain’t,” Dandy struck in with equal politeness. “It’s true. ‘E’s been about ‘ere six weeks. Used to be a corporal in the Army, they say. No use, neither. Don’t swear—*can’t*, in fact. And when he wants anything, says ‘Please. “

“Garn,” Nobby said with withering contempt. “Ou’er gettin’ at?”

Dandy reiterated his previous assertion, garnished with language that left no possible doubt of his absolute sincerity. Nobby had ceased to smoke for the moment. Mundane pleasures were as nothing in the contemplation of this phenomenon.

"Can't swear and says *Please*," he murmured. "Ow does 'e get the work done?"

"E's after old Cocky Benwell's girl," said Gipsy, with meaning. He glanced at Dandy as he spoke. The latter winced ever so slightly.

"So I'm told," he said loftily. "But Lor'! what's the use? No chancer there."

Gipsy returned to the attack obliquely.

"I dunno," he said, with an air of profound philosophy. "Women's funny creatures. Goes in for flowers and all them things."

"Kate Benwell's very fond of flowers," said Dandy thoughtfully, "specially vi'lets. Stinking, I call 'em. 'Ad a bunch when I met 'er last night."

"Burton's got some fine vi'lets in his cottage garden," Gipsy observed. "Grows 'em under a frame in the cottage what he took from that Welshy bloke what's gone to Talgarth to live. Big blue 'uns with long storks, exactly the same as that Kate Benwell was wearin' in her boosum last night."

"I'd like to punch Burton's 'ead!" Dandy exclaimed with sudden passion.

Gipsy winked at himself with silent ecstasy. Nobby sucked at his pipe, regarding the sky with a rapt, stolid gaze. The humour of the situation was absolutely lost upon him, as the bright-eyed little man was perfectly well aware. His mental digestion was still seriously pained over the ganger who couldn't swear and said "Please" to his men.

"They'll be making me a ganger next," he said parenthetically. Nobody responded; the black-eyed man was waiting for developments.

Dandy broke out suddenly: "If a girl wants vi'lets," he said defiantly, "why, there's no reason why she shouldn't 'ave vi'lets. Come to think of it, they ain't much more offensive than bacca is to a pore bloke who can't stand smoke."

"Burton's are real beauties," said Gipsy. "Growed in a frame out o' doors where a man could 'elp himself after dark."

Dandy smiled. Gipsy's eyes conveyed nothing, though he began to see a pretty comedy opening out before his mental vision. Amusements were scarce in the Guilt Valley, and here was a fine way of adding to the gaiety of nations.

"No man could swear to a vi'let," Dandy said sententiously.

"Nor yet to a bunch of 'em, leaves an' all," Gipsy added softly. "You've got to put them all together and shove a bit of foliage round 'em."

Dandy took no heed of this original hint on the subject of floral decoration. He had gone off on his own train of thought.

"I dare say as other pore creatures up the valley—Welshies—grows vi'lets. Burton ain't got all the flowers in Wales, nor yet all the vi'lets neither. And if a man keeps them sort o' things out of doors nights, be deserves to lose 'em."

"Not as any of we 'ud take 'em," Gipsy grinned.

Nobby rose slowly, after drawing a ponderous silver watch from profound depths.

Gipsy took up his poaching apparatus again and adjusted the fine running wire.

"Just a few more," he said. "Where going, Nobby?"

"Ome," Nobby said, with deep contempt. "It's six o'clock."

“Well, what o’ that? We don’t often get a chance “

“Chances be blowed!” Nobby growled. “Ain’t it just six, and the canteen has been opened these ten minutes? And we wasting our time ‘ere over a lot of silly trout as ain’t to be named in the same day as a bloater. Come along.”

This appeal, being too powerful and too cogent to be ignored, had the desired effect, and the trio made their way silently and thirstily down the valley.

II

UP to a certain time Dandy’s feelings towards Miss Kate Benwell had been governed by a comfortable philosophy. He admired the girl, he had dallied with her on Sundays, but this had not prevented his liberal admiration of other women. He felt that as yet the easy swagger and the carefully oiled curl over his forehead ought not to be reserved for one of the opposite sex only.

Now things appeared to be different. That the Gipsy in his insidious way had brought about the change for his own wicked amusement. Dandy did not dream. Come what may, that poor creature of a Burton wasn’t to have Cocky Benwell’s girl. Besides, her eyes seemed to have grown brighter and her cheeks more ruddy of late. Critically examined, she was a prettier girl than Dandy had imagined. At the same time, she was a trifle more distant and cold than of yore. This fact landed Dandy in philosophic deeps, as it has often done in the case of cleverer men.

It was Sunday afternoon, and the valley lay bathed in the peaceful sunlight. Outside the long lanes of wooden huts, stalwart men in shirt-sleeves were minding small droves of children. Somebody was playing an accordion close by. There was a suggestion of rank tobacco-smoke on the air. Overhead a lark poured out a flood of melody. The shadow of a hawk was cast like a moving blight across the bracken.

A little further up the valley was a loose tangle of younger men. From the easy uneasiness of their attitudes they could only have been doing one thing. They were waiting for the coming of the fair, and their Sunday clothes troubled them sorely. A navy in his working clothes is a fine sight, sometimes even an inspiring one; but the sombre raiment of the Sabbath is like a blight upon him. You can’t see the magnificent torso, the knotted length of arm, the hard, lean flanks—nothing but a bunch of humanity.

Between two grinning, slouching lanes Dandy came down. He had a golf cap—plaid, with a huge purple and red star in the centre—planted at the back of his head, so that the glory of the plastered curl might not be dimmed, a handkerchief of many colours adorned his short bull neck, he had no collar, and his body was swathed in an enormous double-breasted pea-jacket many sizes too large for him. The moleskin trousers were also too long, but a pair of straps round the knees obviated that difficulty. He carried a white paper parcel in his hand.

Here was something for lambent wit to play upon. The youths ceased to chaff one another uneasily and with one accord turned upon Dandy. To flee was impossible; silent contempi would only have been accepted as a weakness.

“Carry your parcel. Dandy?” one suggested with humility. “Proud to.”

Dandy turned with a smile. He was equal to the occasion.

“Couldn’t do it,” he said. “It’s a diamond necklace for the chief engineer’s wife. And you comes of a bad stock, Daniel. The last time as it was my painful dooty to give evidence agin’ your old man—”

A burst of strident laughter finished the sentence. Daniel grinned redly.

“It’s trotters,” he said, “or pickles, or somethink of that kind. Give it a name, Dandy.”

“It ain’t trotters, nor cockles, nor winkles,” Dandy said shortly. “It ain’t the title-deeds of my new estate, and it ain’t nothin’ to do with nobody.”

A weedy youth in an amazing check suit collapsed on the grass in a paroxysm of mirth. His comrades watched with affectionate anxiety.

“I’ve got it!” he gasped. “It’s flowers, that’s bloomin’-well what it is! A bookay with Dandy’s best love to Kitty Benwell. ‘Rose is red, the violet’s blue, carnation’s sweet, and so be you!’ Blest if I can’t sniff ‘em!”

A score of more or less blunt noses were elevated in the air daintily.

“Like tripe, only more tender-like,” said Daniel.

Before the roar of laughter that followed Dandy broke and fled. He was conscious of a hot, pricking sensation from head to foot. He would cheerfully have forfeited a week’s wages to have preserved his secret intact. It would be many days before he heard the last of it. Many blighting retorts rose to his mind now that it was too late. He gripped the violets in his hand and shook them savagely. There was a wild impulse to hurl the offending package into Guilt Brook, but wiser counsels prevailed. The mischief was done now, and nothing could bring Nepenthe to the amused valley.

The reward came presently, however. From a bypath between the hills a girl emerged—a girl with an enormous feathered hat and plaid shawl, a girl exceedingly red in the face and black as to her eyes. Poets and painters and such effete people would have demurred to the girl’s high colouring; another class of man would have summed her up as a fine woman. Dandy had made great sacrifice for her, and for the nonce in his eyes she was perfect.

“Who’d a-thought of seeing you, now?” he said breezily.

“Just what I was saying to myself, Mr. Dandy. Who, indeed?”

Dandy whistled with his eyes fixed steadily heavenwards.

“Going anywhere in particular?” he asked carelessly, yet with caution.

Miss Benwell simpered and looked down. Yet her eyes flashed alert and vigorous down the valley as if in search of somebody. She tittered. Under the circumstances she deemed it just as well to dissemble. Then

“Maybe I am and maybe Im not,” she said archly.

“Well, that’s just what Im going to do,” Dandy observed. “So I’ll walk part of the way there with you. Fond of flowers, eh?”

Illustration:

“Fond of flowers, eh?”

Miss Benwell remarked that she positively doted on flowers.

Dandy whistled again until the corners of his mouth relaxed into a broad grin.

"There's not many flowers as comes up to vi'lets," he said sententiously.

Miss Benwell agreed with enthusiasm. They were so sweet and so modest. Also she had read in the Society columns of a halfpenny novelette that they were such good taste.

"Especially blue 'uns," cried Dandy, catching her enthusiasm.

Yes, perhaps blue violets were on the whole preferable to the white variety. Their perfume was more pronounced and not too craftily subtle. All this Miss Benwell observed, averting her gaze most scrupulously from the paper parcel now getting unpleasantly warm in Dandy's powerful grip. As he stripped the paper away, the grin on his face broadened. He poked his fist rampantly under the girl's nose.

"For you," he said shortly. "A bookay. Wear 'em next your 'eart."

Miss Benwell couldn't have believed it. Anybody might have knocked her down with a feather. She placed the violets tenderly in the anatomical region suggested by Dandy.

"They are like some James Burton has," she said.

"*Had*," Dandy corrected. Then he recollected himself and proceeded craftily: "James Burton hasn't got any vi'lets like them. I got 'em up the valley; walked miles on purpose."

"Fancy that now!" Miss Benwell said sweetly.

"Walked my heels off almost, I did," said Dandy. "If James Burton, who's a poor creature and don't know the language—'ullo!"

The man in question stood before him. A man about his own build, with a pale, taciturn face and an eye that looked like power. His glance wandered from Dandy to the violets. His lips were parted, as if he had run far.

"You—you scoundrel!" he said. "I beg your pardon, Kate."

He turned on his heel with a slight suggestion of military salute and strode away up the valley.

Miss Benwell turned pale, flushed deep red, and tittered.

"Something disagreed with him," she laughed. "Better go this way, 'adn't we?"

Dandy gallantly replied that all ways were the same to him now. An hour or two later he returned to the huts with head erect and a sweet smile on his face. An acquaintance came down the road.

"Ullo, Bill!" said Dandy. "So long."

"Ullo!" the other responded. "Ow nice you look, Vi'lets!"

Dandy stopped, clenched his fist, swore with fluency, and passed on.

III

GIPSY watched the progress of affairs from under his shrewd brows. He had engineered the whole business for his own amusement, and on the whole it was coming out beyond his most sanguine expectations. In towns Gipsy was a regular theatrical Saturday nighter, and under happier educational advantages might have blossomed into a dramatist. His first act had been eminently successful; the whole rugged community were laughing at Dandy, who, however, had his consolation in the fact that he had put Burton's nose out of joint for all time.

Still, all great victories have their drawbacks. For instance, it was by no means pleasant to be sniffed at by everybody. The boys were all whistling one air now, and on Dandy innocently asking the name, he was greeted with a chorus of "Sweet Violets." This tune he traced to Gipsy, still without suspicion of his friend's *bona-fides*.

"Why did you go for to do it?" he asked reproachfully.

They were all at dinner, with basins and tins between their knees. A little way off Ganger Burton was smoking in sullen silence. Though his vocabulary was mean and limited during the last day or two, there was an air about him that Dandy by no means liked.

"I never thought about you," the Gipsy said feelingly. "I was leading up to a joke. They tell me they was fine vi'lets that you gave to Kitty Benwell."

"No finer grown in the valley," Dandy responded shortly.

"And they say Burton was no end took, too, when you done him so fine." Dandy quivered. "More vi'lets where those others come from, I suppose?"

"Lots, if you go about getting them at night in the proper way."

"Then I'll show you how you can put the joke on to Burton. You go and buy a lot more of them flowers, and bring 'em down 'ere early on the ground in the mornin' afore Burton gets 'ere. Let every man stick two or three in his 'at or button-'ole, and there you are! See, old pal?"

To do him justice. Dandy "saw" immediately. The whole village had divined exactly what was going on, and if this thing were done, every shred of ridicule would be shifted from Dandy's shoulders to those of Burton.

"Most likely drive him out of the shop," Dandy said joyfully.

"Do him brown altogether," the Gipsy responded. "If you ain't got the pluck to do it at the last minute, I'll show you a way "

"Ain't got the pluck! You see. Lor'! I'm laughing at it now."

So was the Gipsy. Only a close observer might have had a shrewd suspicion that he was laughing at his companion at the same time. Then he winked darkly and went his way.

Not one of the gang needed to be told the next morning that something was in the air. They were going to have some fun with their deservedly unpopular ganger, and that sufficed for them. Therefore when Dandy proffered all and several a few violets each next morning, the gift was accepted with a solemnity worthy of the occasion. Altogether it was a strange and moving sight, albeit correctly aesthetic.

"Not as we've any real use for them," said Dandy.

"No use at all," a big Cornishman usually called "Jigger" put in. Jigger was justly famed for his metaphors. "No more use'n side pockets to a toad."

Immediately upon this brilliant effort James Burton arrived upon the scene. He was more taciturn and deathly pale than usual. His eyes glittered strangely with the glint one sees in those of a newly-caged animal. It has been seen before now in the eyes of British troops when driven into a tight corner and orders are given to hold fire. They were the eyes of a man who was going to be dangerous when his time came. And the time was very near.

Nobody saw this save Gipsy. He began to understand that Dandy was going to get a warm quarter of an hour presently. He stripped to his grey shirt and peeled his black, powerful arms. Burton's quick gaze flashed along the slouching, smiling

line of the gang. No need to tell him what had happened. Behind the anger blazing in his eyes there lurked the ghost of a smile. Mad as Burton was, he was not quite blind to the humour of the situation.

“What does all this tomfoolery mean?” he asked.

Somebody pushed the gigantic Jigger forward. He advanced with a wide, expanding smile.

“It’s a sort of a club,” he explained. “Don’t you talk of your Primrose League no longer. This ‘ere Violet League’s the thing. It’s all agin’ drinkin’ and swearin’—”

The speaker paused, blunderingly conscious that he had given the enemy an opening. Before he could recover himself, Burton shot in.

“I’m glad of that,” he said. “Anything calculated to stop swearing will have my hearty support. You are a foul-mouthed set of blackguards, and there’s a rascally thief now amongst you. And if you don’t all get to work at once, I’ll dock you a quarter of a day, certain.”

For once Burton left off with the better of the argument. The whistle had gone and there was no time for reply. Moreover, if a man arrived a minute late, a ganger could put him back a quarter of a day, and repartee at something like threepence a word was too much like luxury.

Still, the gang could watch their leader under bent brows. He appeared to be taking less notice of them than usual, he seemed to be straining his eyes ever down the valley; he stood up erect and soldierly, like a sorely pressed outpost waiting for relief. There was more than one man in the Reserves in the gang who recognised the sergeant in that still figure.

Dandy alone was not satisfied; he shirked his work, he whistled offensively. Finally he took the stump of a cigarette from his pocket and lighted it with ostentatious care. A moment later and the cigarette was jerked into a puddle of clay, and Burton’s heel upon it.

“You insolent scoundrel!” Burton said hoarsely. “I’ll reckon with you presently. Move those bricks up to the head of the gully; get them done by dinner-time, or I report you for skulking. I’ll teach you a lesson yet, my fine fellow!”

Dandy went limply about his task. He felt that he had a grievance against Providence. Moreover, he was properly impressed with the gleam in Burton’s eye. Well, there were more violets in Burton’s garden, and those violets had roots attached to them.

Where was Burton’s gratitude, seeing that Dandy had thoughtfully spared a fine cluster of blooms under one of the glass lights? There was no chance of consulting Gipsy, who bent over his work in exemplary fashion.

At the first sight of real authority displayed by Burton, a moiety of the violets had disappeared. This was grovelling, and Dandy resented it accordingly. But Burton seemed to see nothing of the impression he had created, standing still and motionless, with his restless eyes strained down the valley. It was near dinner-time when a lad came up and handed an orange-coloured envelope to Burton.

He took it slowly and tore the cover. He read the lengthy telegraphic message with a blank, expressionless face, then he tore the flimsy into tiny shreds. Suddenly, without the slightest warning, he gave a yell that rang along the valley, after which he danced a hornpipe step deliriously. Before the astounded gang had grasped the situation. Burton was himself again.

“D.T.,” said Jigger feelingly. There was a link between ganger and men at last. “I’ve seen poor beggars taken like it afore.”

“It’s j’y,” said Gipsy, “that’s what it is—j’y. And when the j’y passes away, pore old Dandy’s goin’ to cop a cold, see if he don’t.”

Burton walked through the gang unconcernedly until the whistle sounded for dinner. Then he darted vigorously down the valley, where presently a feminine figure joined him. It was only the keen eyes of Gipsy that discovered this, and amidst the babel of tongues Gipsy was strangely silent. The comedy had taken an unexpected turn, and his mind was busy scheming out a new *dénouement*.

IV

DANDY stalked out of the canteen at an abnormally early hour considering that it was only Monday, and consequently there was no strain on the exchequer. But there are times when the cheerful cup does not cheer, and this was one of them. In the first place, Dandy’s joke at the expense of Burton had lamentably missed fire, and all the afternoon Burton had handled the men with a vigour and fire that fairly dazed them.

Again, on the way to the canteen Dandy had met Miss Benwell. On attempting to take up love’s dalliance at the interesting stage where it had stopped the previous Sunday, Dandy had been met with a chilling reception. Evidently something more than violets would be needed to heal the breach. At any rate, Kate Benwell should have no more of Burton’s flowers. Dandy was enough of a horticulturist to know that flowers without roots were impossible. And he was going to take his measures accordingly.

Burton’s trim little cottage was in darkness. His old housekeeper was gone, and Burton was away on pleasure somewhere, perhaps at Benwell’s cottage. The thought filled Dandy with melancholy. His broad chest heaved with emotion.

It was getting quiet by this time, the canteen had closed, and the long lane of lights where the huts stood was picked out here and there with increasing gaps of darkness; presently the glow of Dandy’s pipe was the only light to be seen.

Then he made his way cautiously into Burton’s garden. He slipped the lights from the frames where the violets grew, and tugged at the roots. It was by no means easy work, and he lacked the necessary celerity for this kind of marauding. A score of yards away stood a hut, where tools and boxes and some cases of dynamite cartridges were stored. The dynamite had no business to be there, it was contrary to all kind of regulations, but there it was. And the lock was capable of easy picking.

Dandy crept over to the hut. The lock presented no great difficulties. Locks don’t as a rule to gentlemen who wear Newgate fringes and are modestly silent as to their past. Inside the hut it was dark, but by the aid of his pipe Dandy found a draining spade—a long, narrow shovel, the very thing for his work. As he stumbled, the pipe fell from Dandy’s lips and disappeared under a broad ledge. To find it now without striking a light was impossible. Well, one pipe was like another, and Dandy decided to risk it. Moreover, Burton might come home at any moment.

He was getting on with his work famously. Another moment or two and the last patch of fragrant blossoms would be no more. Dandy chuckled with the air of a man who has not toiled in vain. Then a nervous grip was laid on his shoulder.

“I want you, my friend,” a voice said softly. “I’ve been waiting for this.”

Dandy rose swiftly. It was pitch dark and as yet he had not been recognised. If it came to a fight, Dandy had no clinging doubts as to his chances of success. He could knock Burton down and make assurance doubly sure by flight. The plan of campaign flashed lightning-like through his brain. Unfortunately a counter-attack flashed through Burton’s brain simultaneously. As Dandy lunged for him, he stepped aside, and down went the other with a smashing blow on the jaw.

The force of the blow fairly staggered the marauder. Dandy was no novice at the game, and he realised that he had met a master. Ere he recovered from the painful surprise, he was dragged by the heels into Burton’s cottage and the door closed behind him. Every stick of furniture had been cleared from the room—it formed an ideal boxing-ring.

“Get up,” Burton said pithily. “You’ll take it fighting, I suppose?”

Illustration:

“Get up,” Burton said pithily

Dandy thought that on the whole he would. The sportsman would be content to give him a sound thrashing; if he shirked it, unpleasant magisterial proceedings might follow, and Dandy’s feet had been too recently planted in the paths of virtue to risk that.

Taking it altogether. Dandy made a good fight of it. There was a huge swelling behind the ear, and his eyes were fast closing, also he was painfully short of breath. Finally, he lay on the floor with the haziest idea of his surroundings.

“Pretty fair for one out of training,” Burton said quite cheerfully. “It’s the canteen that does the mischief, my friend. Where did you get that spade from?”

“From the shed yonder,” Dandy blurted out. “I picked the lock. I know you won’t give a pore bloke away, but I dropped my pipe—”

“Dropped your *what? Lighted?*”

Dandy nodded. He was still too hazy to recollect the dynamite. With a cry. Burton dashed for the door. He stood there still as a statue for a moment.

“You madman!” he cried. “You careless, criminal fool! See what your pipe has done!”

The iron-framed windows were illuminated by a faint, unsteady glow. Down the breeze came the pungent odour of burning wood. The hut was on fire, and there was enough dynamite in it to destroy the neighbouring shanties like so many packs of cards. If the fire could be extinguished, and the cases of dynamite removed, nobody need be any the wiser, and no blame need attach to anybody.

“Come along!” Burton yelled. “There’s water in the gully behind, and a couple of buckets in the kitchen. Get a move on you, and don’t make any noise; if we can manage without disturbing the women and children, so much the better.”

Dandy sat fettered by a sudden and all-conquering fear. Burton eyed him scornfully.

"A coward!" he said. "I didn't expect that of you."

Dandy would have protested, but his voice failed him. He was conscious of a certain grievance against Burton. He had just taken a severe punishment manfully and well, so that the accusation was in poor taste.

All the same, he was a coward. But for Burton, standing like a contemptuous sentinel in the way, he would have bolted. His idea was to have rushed yelling down the valley that a dynamite shed was on fire, and then placed a space as wide as possible between himself and the danger,

"You've got to come with me," Burton said grimly. "You cur! I'm just as frightened as yourself, only I'm not going to give way to it. I'm a soldier, an Engineer, and I know what the feeling is when the enemy are waiting for you behind cover, and you've got to advance whether you like it or not. Every man is more or less of a coward then. And if I'd given way to it, I should have been kicked out of the Army. But I didn't give way to it, and in a few weeks I shall have my commission. I came here on two months' furlough because there was a cloud hanging over me. But, thank God! my name is clear now, and the blackguard who tried to ruin me is found out. You thought I was a soft kind of fellow. I could have drilled you all. I'll drill *you* my lad! Come along with me. March!"

Burton spoke rapidly and clearly. There was the real ring of command in his voice; his eye was the eye of a born leader of men. Dandy obeyed mechanically. He could not have helped himself. He wondered vaguely what had come over this man. What a fool Gipsy had been!

By this time the fire had a good grip of the hut. There was water in the gully behind, and buckets. Burton threw open the door and entered. A fierce blast of heat and a pungent wrack of smoke drove him back. It would be impossible to do anything till the flames were driven back. After all, it might be necessary to rouse the people in the huts.

But not if Burton could help it. He and Dandy were working grimly now, hustling backwards and forwards with buckets, fighting the flames back inch by inch, taking their lives in their hands at the same time. As the smoke lifted sullenly, a big case of dynamite at the back was seen to burn furiously. Burton groaned to himself, his teeth close shut.

"How do you feel now?" he asked hoarsely.

Dandy wiped his streaming face. He was running wet, the beautiful Newgate curl was no more than a damp clout now. There was a queer, grey pallor under the tan of his cheeks. He laughed unsteadily.

"Funk!" he said—"blooming funk ain't no word for it. If I was by myself, I'd just 'ook it and 'owl. But I don't like to leave you."

The shamefaced Dandy would have been astounded to hear that this was courage of the highest order. But Burton's Egyptian experience had told him all about that. He patted the palsied Dandy on the back approvingly.

"We've got to get those back cases out," he said. "If we can manage those without a blow-up, the rest is plain sailing. Come along. Men have annexed the Victoria Cross for less than this."

Dandy moved forward. There was a queer choking in his throat, and he could hear his heart beating like a drum. But he was not going to be bested by Burton. They fought desperately up to the burning cases; they worked at them until their hands were covered with white blisters. But they had got them out at last. Blackened and blistered and bleeding, wet as rags from head to foot, Burton let off a yell that rang all down the valley. They had won.

"The other two—quick!" he said. "Now the water. We're safe, my lad."

A bucket or two of water and the thing was done. Dandy dropped upon a pile of clay, limp and exhausted. He was trembling like one after a long, weakening illness.

"I ain't coddin'," he said, "I ain't jokin'. Far from it. But I'm goin' to faint—*me! me!* Rummy, ain't it?"

Illustration:

"I'm going to faint—*me! me!*"

He spoke half with a sob, half with a defiant growl. Burton produced brandy and poured a little down Dandy's throat. The burly, deep-chested navy staggered to his feet. For some little time he seemed unable to speak. "You won't give me away?" he asked. "You're a man all through, that's what you are, and I'm a fool to doubt it. But seeing as I did my best bloomin' coward or no bloomin' coward—you won't let on as I showed the white feather?"

"Rot!" said Burton. "Give me your hand."

"What for?" Dandy asked suspiciously.

"To shake, of course. Because it is the hand of a hero. My good fellow, the man who conquers fear as you did is a hero. I never saw a braver thing done, and I've seen some plucky things in my time."

"If you hadn't been here," Dandy began, "I should've 'ooked it straight."

"I say you are a hero," Burton persisted.

Dandy graciously allowed it to pass. Way up the Valley of Sweet Waters they are still inclined to make much of Dandy, but he resolutely declines to be lionised.

But for Burton he would "a' took and 'ooked it," and to this Dandy steadily adheres. But he *didn't* "ook it," and Burton was *there*; and this is the history of a little of the British Army.

"All right, matey," he said, "ave your own way. So long."

"She'd never 'ave 'ad aught to do with yer, Dandy," Jigger remarked to a select circle in the canteen. "Why, she's been engaged to Burton for four years. Eddicated better'n you think. And Burton's gotten his commission. There was a lot of trouble at Salisbury over some missing stores, and Kate Benwell got 'im a job here. Women's funny things. Dandy."

"Yes," Dandy said laconically, "they be. So's men, come to that."

There was a long silence, filled by the puffing of pipes and the tilting of tankards. Gipsy lay back smoking his cigarette.

"I never could see much fun in that vi'let business of yours, Dandy," he said.

Dandy looked up suspiciously. His mind was travelhng swiftly over recent events. Then he began to discern patches of light in dark places.

“Perhaps not,” he said indifferently. “Happen as you know’d something about Burton before?”

Gipsy fell into the trap.

“Old Benwell telled me,” he said. “Only it was a secret.”

Dandy rose slowly to his feet and pointed to the door. A fine, flashing scorn was in his eye; anger filled his heart.

“If you’ll come outside,” he said slowly and ponderously, “just step outside for a few minutes, I’ll make you as your own mother won’t know you. I ain’t a vindictive man—far from it—but I’d esteem the punchin’ of your ‘ead as real luxury.”

But Gipsy was equal to the occasion. He hailed a passing potman.

“Fill all those cans,” he said. “Boys, ‘ere’s the ‘ealth of the bride and bride-groom! And if they don’t make Dandy best man, they ought to be ashamed of themselves.”

