Sapper

Word of Honour and Other Stories

Sapper

Word of Honour and Other Stories

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338095879

Table of Contents

I. — WORD OF HONOUR

Table of Contents

§ I

Table of Contents

JIMMY STAUNTON’s soldier servant smiled tolerantly behind a large hand as he produced the fourth evening collar for his master’s inspection. Three had already been hurled into a corner, with oaths and curses, as unfit for a chimney-sweep to wear, and he waited patiently for the verdict on the last.

“What do they do with ’em, Wilton?” cried his master despairingly. “The blamed thing looks like a pleated skirt.”

His servant preserved a discreet silence as Staunton put it on; then he handed him a black tie. Few things are hidden from a man’s personal batman, and Wilton realised the solemnity of the occasion.

So much so, in fact, that when Jimmy, complete with overcoat and hat, was ready to leave his room, he permitted himself with a perfectly inscrutable face to say: “Good luck, sir.”

For a moment his master stared him; then a slow grin spread over his face.

“Damn your eyes, Wilton. Go to blazes.”

“Very good, sir. Tea the same time to-morrow morning, sir?”

But the door had already slammed behind the departing Jimmy. Should he, or should he not? That was the question. Point for: he loved her, and he felt tolerably sure that she

rather more than liked him. Points against: he had exactly one hundred and fifty pounds a year beside his pay, and she couldn't expect any more than that, even if she got as much, from her father. For Tiny Tim—the nickname by which the said father was known wherever soldiers were gathered together—was notoriously not blessed with an overflow of this world's goods.

Tiny Tim—or, to be more formal, Lieut.-Col. John Mayhew, C.M.G., D.S.O. and bar, *etc*.—was Jimmy's commanding officer. And Jimmy, in company with every other officer and man of the 1st battalion of the King's Royal Loamshires, would have cheerfully lain down and let the Colonel walk over them, if it would have afforded him any pleasure. And the trifling fact that the men felt the same about Jimmy is beside the point. All that occupied the mind of that worthy as he strode towards the C.O.'s quarters was should he, or should he not? He knew there was no one else dining—Tiny Tim had told him so. He also knew that his host had some work to do after dinner which would take him about an hour. And as he stood on the door-step waiting for the servant to answer his ring, he admitted to himself the futility of his mental argument. If he had an hour alone with Peggy there wasn't a hope.

She was alone when he went into the drawing-room, and his heart gave a quick bound forward as he saw her. What an utterly adorable girl she was; no wonder she was the apple of her father's eye. Especially since her mother had died....

"Come back from leave at last, Peggy," he said as he took her hand. "I'm thinking you've overstayed it badly."

“Three months, Jimmy,” she answered. “And I’m off again the day after to-morrow.”

In spite of himself his face fell.

“The dickens you are!” he said. “We’ll have to get the C.O. to confine you to barracks.”

And then Tiny Tim came in, and they went in to dinner. It was an informal meal, such as the Colonel generally gave when he asked any of his unmarried officers in, and the conversation was of that intimate type—half shop, half sport, and wholly regiment—which seemed to come natural when Tiny Tim was present. Boring to an outsider perhaps, but there were no outsiders there. And it was when the fish was being cleared away that it struck Jimmy that the girl was unusually silent. At first he thought it must be his imagination, until he saw her father glance at her once or twice with a worried look in his eyes.

The port was put on the table, and after it had been round once Tiny Tim turned to her with a smile.

“Look here, Kitten,” he said, “you run along, will you? I want to talk to Staunton for a few minutes. Very confidential shop.”

Slightly surprised, Jimmy opened the door for her. What on earth could the C.O. want to say confidentially to him at such a time?

And when he’d sat down again and said, “Yes, sir,” politely, he got still more surprised. For Tiny Tim, who was usually the most direct of human beings, seemed to have considerable difficulty in beginning.

“What do you think of Peggy?” he blurted out suddenly. “Do you think she’s happy?”

Jimmy Staunton stared at him open-eyed.

“Good Lord, sir!” he stammered. “I—er—hope so. She seemed a bit silent at dinner.”

In silence Tiny Tim pushed the port towards him.

“Jimmy—I’m worried,” he said. “She’s all I’ve got, and—she’s changed. She’s been away, as you know—staying most of the time with a cousin of mine, Lady Badderley. I wanted her to have a good time and all that. I went and stopped there for a couple of weekends and, I dunno’, but it struck me there was a pretty putrid crowd in the house. I’m not particularly old-fashioned: I can stomach all sorts and conditions of men—and women; but I’m not Peggy. I don’t want her to get unsettled.”

He broke off, and Jimmy sat silent, hardly knowing what he was expected to say.

“How’s the work getting on for the Staff College?” said the Colonel suddenly.

“Pretty well, sir. I’m sweating like blazes.”

“For your ears alone, Jimmy,” said Tiny Tim: “I gather I’m going to get a brigade.”

“I should damned well hope so,” cried Jimmy.

“Brigade-Major is not a bad stepping-stone,” remarked Tiny Tim thoughtfully, and Jimmy grew red in the face. At last, incredible though it was, he began to see what his host was driving at.

“Don’t forget I married on practically nothing beside my pay,” went on Tiny Tim.

“Good Lord, sir!” stammered Jimmy. “You mean that I—why—Great Scott! I just worship the ground she walks on.”

Tiny Tim smiled.

“You surprise me, Jimmy. Er—why not tell her so?”

“But do you think—I mean—is there a chance for me?”

“Damnation!” exploded the Colonel. “You don’t expect me to find out for you, do you?”

He rose and put his hand on Jimmy’s shoulder.

“I want her to be happy, old man,” he said gruffly. “They’re a rotten lot—some of those men she’s been meeting—and she’s young. Good luck. I can give her a little.”

Without another word he walked out of the room, leaving Jimmy Staunton staring after him open-mouthed. Brigade-Major—and then if Tiny Tim got a Division, which he would—G.S.O. 2, or perhaps even 1…. He could afford it…. With care to start with, it could be done.

Almost in a dream he found himself in the drawing-room. She was sitting smoking a cigarette as he came in, with her back towards him. And for a moment or two he stood by the door drinking her in—the proud little shingled head, the adorable shoulders, the whole wonderful attraction of her. Then, as he closed the door, she turned and looked at him.

“Hallo, Jimmy!” she said. “Finished your shop?”

“Yes,” he answered. “The destiny of the British Army has been settled. Why are you going away so soon, Peggy?”

He was standing beside her, while she stared at the fire.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Aunt Vera asked me to come back.”

“Find it dull here?”

“Dull!” Her voice shook a little. “I’d give everything I possess to stop here, Jimmy.”

“But what’s to prevent you, my dear?” It slipped out unconsciously, that “my dear.” “The regiment don’t think they’re being treated at all well.”

She gave a little shiver, but didn’t speak.

“Peggy, is anything the matter?” He tried to keep his voice even; but it wasn’t a conspicuous success. “I mean—if so, it might help you to cough it up, old thing. Won’t go beyond me, don’t you know.”

He bent down, and saw that her eyes were swimming with tears.

“My dear,” he muttered hoarsely. “Tell me.”

“It’s nothing, Jimmy,” she said, getting up abruptly. “Don’t let’s worry about it. What shall we do? I’ve got a lot of new music…”

“Damn the new music,” answered the man quietly. “I want to know what the trouble is.”

“There isn’t any trouble,” she said defiantly.

“Then why were your eyes full of tears? Sit down again, Peggy—and get it off your chest. Two heads are better than one, old soul.”

She drew in her breath sharply; then she pointed to a chair.

“Go and sit over there, Jimmy, and don’t look at me. And swear—swear that you won’t tell a soul.”

“It’s hardly necessary,” he said quietly. “But I give you my word of honour I’ll tell no one.”

For a time she sat in silence with her head averted; then, a little jerkily, she began to speak.

“I’ve been a fool, Jimmy—such a fool. It all started with a week-end party about six weeks ago. Aunt Vera had asked a

lot of people down for a dance at a house a few miles away. The dance was on the Friday night, and they were all staying till Monday morning. Between them there were about half a dozen cars, so we all split up and went over in driblets. I was going with Aunt Vera, and then after dinner I tore my frock and had to go upstairs to get it mended. And when I came down Aunt Vera had gone, and all the other cars except one. It belonged to a Mr. Maxton—Paul Maxton—and he had waited specially for me. He'd been down a week-end previously, and I rather—liked him. At least I thought I did. He was a beautiful dancer and ... oh! I don't know, Jimmy: I said I was a donkey, didn't I? He had a two-seater coupe, and we followed on after the rest of the party. In the car he started playing the fool, and I suppose I wasn't as angry as I ought to have been. Anyway, he kissed me."

She stole a quick glance at Jimmy Staunton, and then went on hurriedly. For that young gentleman's expression was not prepossessing.

"You see, I'm telling you everything, Jimmy—and I hate him now. We got there late, of course, and so, more or less naturally, we had a good many dances together. And he does dance divinely. And when it was over, I don't know how he managed it, but I found myself going back with him in his car. I suppose, to be fair, I ought to admit that I didn't try and go in one of the others.

"Jimmy, it was horrible—that drive home. He—oh! I can't tell you what it was like. I'm not an innocent little fool—girls aren't, these days. But it was so utterly unexpected: I'd never dreamed for a moment that he was going to behave

as he did. And then”—her voice was low—“he asked me where my room was.”

A strangled grunt came from the chair opposite, but its occupant said nothing.

“It was then I smacked his face as hard as I could. And I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man look quite so surprised in all my life. For a moment or two he sat there staring at me, and then he smiled quite politely.

“‘I deserve it, Peggy,’ he said. ’Please forgive me and forget all about it.’

“And we drove on home without another word being spoken. Next day he was perfectly charming, and—oh! don’t misunderstand me, Jimmy—I began to feel a little bit guilty. You know yourself that there are ways and ways of dancing, and the night before I had been a bit excited. And then I’d let him kiss me, and—oh! I don’t know. But I sort of felt that what had happened in the car on the way home was partly my fault. And so, when he came to me that afternoon—it was pouring with rain—and suggested that we should play bridge, I didn’t refuse. He knew I played, and he knew I wasn’t bad—so there was no excuse I could give for not doing so. Besides, I did feel, as I tell you, a little guilty.

“‘You and I,’ he said, ’will take on Singleton and Mrs. Talby. And we’ll wallop their heads off.’

“Oh! Lord, Jimmy—what an ass I was. I can play bridge—family bridge, or when some of you come in to dine—pretty well. But I ought to have known; I ought to have stopped. Captain Singleton and Mrs. Talby, as I found out afterwards, had played together for years. I was absolutely outclassed, and, in addition to that, I did hold the most terrible cards.

And all through that afternoon we went on losing steadily—my partner and I. In fact we were nearly four thousand points down when the dressing-bell went for dinner. And I got up, wondering if I had got two pounds left in my bag upstairs. You see, I'd never thought of asking what we were playing for. We always play sixpence a hundred here, and I sort of assumed that the stakes wouldn't be more than a shilling.

"'I'll square up, Miss Mayhew,' said my partner, 'and you can settle with me later.'

"So, after dinner—we were dancing to a gramophone—I asked him how much I owed him.

"'Look here,' he said, 'you had the most rotten luck to-day. Why not let's take them on again to-morrow, and get some of it back? You simply couldn't hold those foul cards for two days in succession. There's "Tea for Two." Let's go and dance.'

"So we went and danced, and I didn't bother any more. I'd found a five-pound note that I'd forgotten about upstairs, so there was nothing to worry about, as I thought. And when it started to pour on Sunday worse than ever, I was quite ready for my revenge. Jimmy! if anything, the cards went worse. Every finesse went wrong, and when I did have a good hand it didn't fit in with my partner's. We lost and lost and lost, and big rubbers too. Doubles went wrong, and twice we were redoubled, and our opponents pulled it off. I was absolutely frightened to look at the score sheet, but I did when we stopped play. Jimmy! we were six thousand five hundred points down—over ten thousand points in two days.

However, that was a fiver, at a shilling a hundred, and luckily I had it with me.

“It was after dinner again that I tackled Mr. Maxton, and insisted on knowing what I owed him.

“‘It’s the limit,’ he said ruefully. ’I’ve played bridge for years, and I have never known such a run of inhuman luck. Do you know that yesterday and to-day we have played twenty-five rubbers and only won two? Now as to settling up—I’ll let you know.’ He produced his notebook. ’Ten thousand three hundred points down, and twenty-one rubbers on balance—that’s two hundred and eight pounds. One hundred and three for the points, and a hundred and five for the rubbers.’

“Jimmy, I nearly fainted! I just sat there, staring at him blankly, with my poor little fiver clutched in my hand. For a few moments the shock was so paralysing that I could hardly grasp it.

“‘But what were we playing for?’ said a voice I dimly recognised as my own.

“‘The usual stakes,’ he answered, rather surprised. ’A pound a hundred, and a fiver on the rubber. But, if by any chance it’s inconvenient for you to write a cheque for that now, there’s no hurry. I’ve squared up with Singleton and Mrs. Talby. Let it stand over for as long as you like, and send me a cheque when it’s convenient.’

“I didn’t say anything: I was still too dazed. Two hundred and eight pounds!

“‘In fact, I insist,’ I heard him say. ’As a matter of form, and to make it quite in order, give me an IOU.’

“‘It’s very good of you,’ I heard myself saying, as I signed my name to the paper he held out. ‘I’ll send you the money as soon as I can.’

“‘Don’t hurry, Peggy,’ he insisted. ’Between friends such trifles don’t count.’

“And that was six weeks ago. Jimmy! what am I to do?”

Jimmy Staunton stirred restlessly in his chair.

“What’s happened since then, Peggy?” he said. “I suppose you’ve seen Maxton again.”

She nodded her head miserably.

“He’s been down for two week-ends,” she answered. “Last Sunday was the second. And, Jimmy, he was still very nice about it when he first arrived, but on Sunday evening he got me alone. And——” she covered her face with her hands—“he wasn’t nice about it any more.”

“’What do you mean?” said Staunton hoarsely.

She covered her face with her hands, and he only just heard her whispered “Jimmy, can’t you guess?”

And the next moment Staunton was on his feet, white to the lips and shaking.

“The swine!” he stammered. “The ungodly swine! Peggy! Peggy! Look at me, dear. You haven’t...”

She looked at him instantly.

“No, dear. But—but—he wants to know this next week-end.”

“But, dear God! Peggy,” he cried hoarsely, “you’re not even dreaming of doing what this foul sweep suggests. Tell him to go to hell.”

“How I wish I could, Jimmy,” she said with a little twisted smile. “Oh! the mask is off the brute now—he knows he’s

got me. 'You smacked my face once,' he said to me. 'The IOU's yours if you don't smack it again.' But if I do, do you suppose I don't know what will happen? Do you suppose he'll keep that IOU to himself? Everyone will know, and everyone will think the worst. He'll see to that. Oh! Jimmy—what am I to do? I *can't* ask Daddy; I *won't* ask him. I haven't told you that—but he made me promise I wouldn't play cards while I was away. And you know what he thinks of anyone who breaks their word. It would just break his faith in me. Besides—he's so awfully hard up just now, I know."

And suddenly she gave a little gasp, for Staunton was kneeling beside her with his arms round her, and his face touching hers.

"I love you, Peggy," he whispered. "I adore you. Thank God! you've told me. I'll give you the two hundred pounds to-morrow."

"Jimmy, my dear," she cried, "but you're mad! You haven't got two hundred pounds. And anyway——"

"I'll give you the two hundred pounds to-morrow," he replied steadily, "and you'll go and spend the week-end with Lady Badderley. And in her presence, Peggy, you'll hand over the money to this damned, ineffable swab, stating what it's for. Then come back here, my dear, and we'll burn that IOU together. And when you've come back I want to ask you a question."

Before she could answer she heard the door close behind him. And Tiny Tim coming in a quarter of an hour later, and finding her alone, sighed a little sadly. For not unnaturally he placed a totally wrong construction on the situation, though he said nothing about it to Peggy.

§ II

Table of Contents

JIMMY STAUNTON had spoken with his eyes open to what he was saying. He knew that his own bank balance consisted of exactly eighteen pounds; he knew that he had no possible method of raising the money in the time—save one. And he knew exactly what that one method entailed. It was a court-martial offence, with certain cashiering as the result—if he was found out.

In every military unit there are certain funds which consist—not of the public money, but of money subscribed by officers and men for various purposes. There are the profits from the canteen and the Regimental Institute; there are subscriptions for cricket, football, shooting prizes and other things of a like type. And the officer who is responsible for these funds is the second-in-command.

Now the second-in-command—Major Peterson—was on leave, and was not returning for six weeks. And during his absence Jimmy was acting for him. He was empowered to write cheques, and pay in monies to the bank. In fact he was in complete charge of the accounts, and there was no one to say him ‘Nay,’ or raise any questions till the quarterly audit, which would take place on Major Peterson’s return.

It was not the first time Jimmy had acted in this capacity, and he knew to a nicety how that audit was conducted. Every item in the regimental books was inspected, and the balance arrived at. Then from the balance in hand at the bank was subtracted any unpresented cheques, and if the two figures tallied—as they always did—the audit was over. But Jimmy had never known a detailed inspection of the

pass-book: quite naturally it was deemed unnecessary. Moreover, he knew that the passbook was very near completion and that by the time Peterson returned a new one would have been started. Given three weeks he could raise the money from his father, who was at the moment in Canada. And the two unexplainable entries of a hundred and ninety pounds drawn out and paid back later would probably never be seen. If they were ... but Jimmy refused to let himself think about that. It had to be done: it was the only possible way. No one knew better than he did the ghastly risk: the chance of the old passbook being looked at—the possibility of the bank manager casually mentioning the matter to Peterson one day. But it had to be done.

And it was a perfectly calm and self-possessed young officer who presented a cheque for a hundred and ninety pounds over the counter of Barclays Bank the next morning.

“A large cheque, Mr. Staunton,” said the cashier, raising his eyebrows a little.

“It is a bit,” agreed Jimmy. “But I want the money handy for prizes. We’re having a big show at the ranges shortly.”

When he returned the money he was going to say the show hadn’t come off.

“Let’s hope you have better weather,” said the cashier. “Any fivers?”

“All in pound notes,” said Jimmy. “I should only have to change the fivers.”

Fivers as he knew had their numbers taken, and if he returned different notes it was going to look suspicious.

With the notes in his pocket he left the bank, and going up the street he entered another where he was unknown.

And there he exchanged the Treasury notes for tenners. Assuredly, he reflected grimly to himself, a career of crime had its complications. And after that he returned to lunch in the mess. As far as he could see he had taken every precaution that it was humanly possible for him to take to avoid being found out, but he was far too clear thinking an individual not to realise that the risk of detection was still enormous. One casual remark from the cashier at Barclays Bank, and the whole thing was bound to come out. And then ... finish.

He sent the notes plus his own eighteen pounds with a little covering letter to Peggy that afternoon. It was a stilted effusion: somehow Jimmy felt numbed and dazed. The one dominant thought in his brain that at all costs she must be saved, was jumbled up in his mind with the almost unbelievable fact that he—the product of a line of soldiers—had done what he had. He lied to her, of course; said an aunt had sent him two hundred and fifty pounds—more power to her elbow. Said it was just their secret.... Re-wrote it all four times, in the intervals of gazing dumbly out of the window.

“Wait for an answer,” he told Wilton, when at last he’d sealed it up.

It came, and he read it over and over again.

“*My dear; I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Come and ask me that question when I get back next week —Peggy.*”

And that was a Thursday. On Saturday morning the telephone in his office rang, and the pay sergeant answered it.

“Adjutant’s compliments, sir, and the C.O. wishes to see you at once in the orderly-room.”

For a moment or two Staunton stared at the N.C.O. almost uncomprehendingly. Impossible, of course: Tiny Tim couldn’t have found out. And yet his mouth was so dry as he reached for his hat that he could only nod his reply.

He crossed the barrack square, entered orderly-room and saluted. And as he left the door and advanced to Tiny Tim’s desk, the Adjutant rose and left the office. And Jimmy Staunton’s mouth was drier still. That fact always meant a man was on the mat for something serious, apart from the look on Tiny Tim’s face. It was stern and set, and his eyes were expressionless.

“I have sent for you, Staunton,” he said quietly, “to ask if you have any explanation to offer with regard to a most extraordinary item in the regimental accounts.”

For a moment Jimmy’s heart stood still; then he stiffened, even more rigidly to attention. The suspense was over: he knew he’d been found out.

“Quite by chance,” went on the C.O., “I met the manager of Barclays Bank dining out last night. And he said to me in the course of conversation that he hoped we should have a successful rifle meeting. I asked him what he meant, as we had no intention of having anything of the sort. He then told me that the cashier had told him that you had drawn a cheque for a hundred and ninety pounds on Thursday morning for the purpose of prizes at this meeting, and that the reason why the cashier had mentioned it to him was on account of the largeness of the amount. I was dumbfounded naturally, and requested him to send up the pass-book this

morning. I have it here, with the entry in question. And I would like your explanation."

"I have no explanation, sir," said Jimmy steadily.

"No explanation?" said the Colonel sternly. "You *must* have an explanation for drawing a cheque for a hundred and ninety pounds on the regimental funds. What have you done with the money?"

Jimmy Staunton drew a deep breath. Just for a second he wavered: career, ambition, everything he had lived for—against his promise.

Then—"I have spent it, sir."

"My God!" muttered Tiny Tim, "I can't believe it. You, Staunton—you, of all men. What have you spent it on?"

"Betting, sir," said Jimmy without a falter. "I've owed a bookmaker for months, and he threatened to write to you if I didn't pay up before next Monday. I would like to say also, sir, that in three weeks from now I would have returned the money."

"Everybody who steals is always under that impression," said the Colonel harshly. "I presume you realise what this means, Mr. Staunton."

"Perfectly, sir," answered Jimmy.

"It means a court-martial for you with cashiering as the inevitable result."

For a moment Jimmy stared at the face of the man on the other side of the table, and it was grey and drawn. For a moment there came again temptation well nigh overwhelming to tell him the truth. Cashiered! God! what would his father say? The indelible disgrace of it! With blinding clearness he saw the future stretching out in front

of him, a future without hope and with the shadow of the thing that had happened always hanging over him. And then quite clearly and distinctly his own words rang through his brain—“I promise that I’ll tell no one.”

Least of all her father. It was out of the question; it couldn’t be done. And then he realised that Tiny Tim was speaking again.

“If you can replace this money in three weeks, why haven’t you obtained it before to pay this bookmaker? You tell me you’ve owed him for months. You’ve let it drift, I suppose, and when after what I said to you on Wednesday night you decided that something had to be done. Thank God! my daughter refused you.”

He wasn’t looking at Jimmy, so he didn’t see the look of amazement that showed for a moment on his face.

“Listen, Staunton: I’m failing in my duty, I know. But I can’t have your father’s son cashiered. You will go back to your quarters and send in your papers at once. You will then go on leave, until your resignation is approved. I will replace this money at once, telling the manager at the bank that you withdrew it under a misapprehension. You can send me a cheque for it—when you’re able. And I need hardly add that you are to make no attempt in the future to communicate with my daughter. That will do.”

Without a word Jimmy Staunton saluted, and turned blindly towards the door. It was the end, and he blundered past the Adjutant who was standing about outside without even seeing him.

“What the devil has happened?” muttered that worthy officer to himself, as he watched Jimmy’s progress across

the square. “He can’t have been drinking.”

And his amazement was not lessened when he entered the orderly-room, and had a momentary glimpse of Tiny Tim sitting hunched up in his chair with his face covered with his hands.

§ III

Table of Contents

IT was the Adjutant who first told Peggy that Jimmy Staunton was on leave. They had hacked out together to a meet not far from the barracks, and as hounds were moving off she had remarked on his absence.

“On leave!” she echoed staring at him. “For how long?”

“The C.O. granted him two months,” said the Adjutant, as he shortened one of his leathers.

“But—I didn’t know he intended to go on leave,” she said.

“It was rather sudden,” agreed the Adjutant. “For your ears alone, Miss Mayhew, I think there’s been a bit of trouble. Jimmy had a confidential interview with your father and left the orderly house walking as if he was tight. And the Colonel hasn’t been his usual self since.”

“I thought Daddy was worried at dinner last night,” she said slowly.

“And further—still more for your ears alone,” went on the Adjutant gravely, “the most amazing rumour has reached me through the Regimental Sergeant Major. He’s got a pal who is chief clerk at Divisional Head-quarters, and the devil of it is that his rumours have never been far out before. He tells me that Jimmy has sent in his papers.”

“What?” cried the girl, and every vestige of colour had left her face.

“I can hardly believe it,” he said; “but that’s what the Regimental said to me yesterday morning after Guard mounting. And as I said I’ve never known him wrong.”

“But why?” she cried. “What can have induced him to do such a thing?”

“Ask me another,” remarked her companion. “He was sweating like blazes for the Staff College. Of course it may be a complete canard. I certainly told the Regimental he was talking rot.”

“But surely you must *know*, Captain Sykes,” she said desperately. “Anything of that sort would go through you.”

“His application for leave did, of course,” answered the Adjutant. “But nothing else. If it is the truth—which God forbid—it must have gone direct to the C.O.”

And the next moment he was staring blankly at the retreating figure of a girl going back to barracks on a justly enraged horse.

“Tiny—stop eating, and answer some questions.”

Tiny Tim looked up from his solitary luncheon at his daughter, who had just burst into the room like a typhoon.

“Why has Jimmy gone on leave?”

“For reasons, my dear,” said her father quietly, “into which I do not propose to enter.”

“For reasons, Daddy, into which you’ve got to enter,” said his daughter, equally quietly. “In case you don’t know it, I’m going to marry him.”

Her father stared at her blankly.

“I thought you’d refused him,” he muttered. “Anyway, Peggy,” he went on sternly, “you may dismiss any such idea from your mind at once. I absolutely forbid it.”

“Why?” she remarked ominously. “I have a right to know.”

“So be it,” said her father. “Staunton has been guilty of a crime only less culpable in an officer than cowardice. For his father’s sake I spared him being cashiered, and have allowed him to resign his commission.”

“I don’t believe it,” she cried proudly.

“Unfortunately he admits it,” said her father.

“What has he done? You *must* tell me, Daddy.”

For a while he hesitated, then he shrugged his shoulders.

“Embezzled battalion money to pay his betting losses,” he said briefly. “Now you know.”

“Oh! my God.” It was scarcely more than breathed.

“He was in charge of the Regimental funds while Peterson was on leave, and he proceeded to steal a hundred and ninety pounds.”

“When did he do it?” she asked steadily.

“The point seems immaterial,” he remarked. “But if you want to know it was the day after he dined here—Thursday last.”

“Immaterial,” she said with a little sob. “Oh! Jimmy, my dear....”

She stood up suddenly, slim and erect in her riding habit.

“Get into mufti, Tiny; we’ve just got time to catch the 2.30. You know Jimmy’s address, don’t you?”

“What do you want to do?” said her father, staring at her amazed.

She flung her arms round his neck.

“Daddy dear, there’s been the most ghastly mistake. Only do what I ask, and you’ll see. It doesn’t matter what you were going to do this afternoon: everything else must wait.”

And because Tiny Tim was a man of understanding, he said nothing to her going, up in the train, but read *Truth* with great concentration. They took a taxi, and they went to an address somewhere in Bloomsbury, and all that he noticed was that Peggy’s eyes were full of a wonderful light.

He was sitting at the table was Jimmy, when they entered the room, his head on his arm. And Tiny Tim, looking over the girl’s shoulder, saw the hopelessness fade out of his face as he looked up at the sound of the door opening. She went straight up to him and kissed him on the lips.

“My darling,” she said quite steadily. “My darling boy.”

“Peggy,” stammered Jimmy, getting to his feet. “Peggy—is it all right?”

For a moment Tiny Tim was forgotten as he stood by the door.

“Quite all right, my dear,” she answered. “So you’ve been betting, have you, Jimmy?” She faltered for a moment: then she turned to her father.

“There was once a damned fool of a girl, Tiny, who went away to stop with one of her father’s cousins. And there she met a swine of a man, with whom she was idiot enough to play the fool—and bridge. And when she’d lost steadily for two days she found that instead of playing a shilling a hundred as she thought, they’d been playing a pound a