

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Ticky

Stella Gibbons

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About the Book

The Club in central London holds the quarters of Queen Victoria's finest regiment: the First Bloods. Inside the mighty building, with its two exquisite glass towers, the First Bloods and their regimental servants tussle over a portion of recreational ground. Amidst the rows and rumbles - and remarkable punishments - is a mocking and piquant observation of factious all-male societies.

About the Author

Stella Gibbons was born in London in 1902. She went to the North London Collegiate School and studied journalism at University College, London. She then spent ten years working for various newspapers, including the *Evening Standard*. Stella Gibbons is the author of twenty-five novels, three volumes of short stories and four volumes of poetry. Her first publication was a book of poems, *The Mountain Beast* (1930), and her first novel *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) won the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize in 1933. Amongst her works are *Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm* (1940), *Westwood* (1946), *Conference at Cold Comfort Farm* (1959) and *Starlight* (1967). She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1950. In 1933 she married the actor and singer Allan Webb. They had one daughter. Stella Gibbons died in 1989.

ALSO BY STELLA GIBBONS

Cold Comfort Farm

Bassett

Enbury Heath

Nightingale Wood

My American

Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm

The Rich House

The Bachelor

Westwood

The Matchmaker

Conference at Cold Comfort Farm

Here Be Dragons

White Sand and Grey Sand

The Charmers

Starlight

To 198380 and the rest of the British Army

STELLA GIBBONS

Ticky

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

‘There is, perhaps, no species of society so striking and so
captivating to the young man entering on life as that of a
military mess’

Ours, Charles Lever

‘There aren’t better stuff to make soldiers out of nowhere
than Englishmen, God bless ’em! but they’re badgered,
they’re horribly badgered’

Under Two Flags, Ouida

CHAPTER I

BY THE MIDDLE of the nineteenth century there had been no soldier in the family of Molloy of Arnewater, a poor estate in the west of Ireland, for twenty years. He therefore decided that his eldest son, Barry, should become one; and with his last thousand guineas purchased for the young man a commission in that most famous of English regiments, the First Bloods.

Barry was pleased at his prospects, for he had been afraid of growing into a squire like his father, who hunted and drank and grew old, but did nothing more. He was so ambitious that his ambition was dear to him as a secret love would have been to a young man with a softer nature, and he never spoke of it. He wanted very large sums of money, the friendship of titled and distinguished men, the love of beautiful women who were also famous. He was twenty, and his dreams were titanic.

But the purchase of the commission had used up, for the time being, his father's resources. Barry would have only his pay to live on. He could not even take with him to London a new Bloods uniform of violet cloth adorned with copper lace; he must wait until he reached London, where, he supposed, any tailor would give credit to a lieutenant in the First Bloods.

However, his father could mount him well, and did: he took with him a stallion named Bayard, whose bright chestnut coat matched Barry's own curling hair.

Unfortunately, the luxurious accommodation that the young man insisted upon for himself and his mount during

their journey to London swallowed up the three guineas which was the parting present from his mother, and when he at last arrived in the metropolis, after a long and exhausting journey, he was penniless.

It was a louring and sultry afternoon in late summer. The immense cavern of the railway station was almost in twilight and also clouded with steam. Barry stood still, with his hand on the neck of the horse, while old women with baskets, bearded clerks in top hats, and stout prosperous merchants from Dulwich and Camden Town moved out of the station. Once or twice he checked the stallion's impatient movements with a murmur.

At last everyone had gone, and he was alone. His height and pallor and unusual personal beauty (which was adorned rather than obscured by a travelling cape and deerstalker cap of intimidating cut) made him a most striking figure; and three times porters slouched up to him demanding that they should take his baggage or call him a cab. But he haughtily declined by a slight inclination of his head.

He was trying to think out a plan by which he could arrive at the Bloods' headquarters in a dignified and appropriate manner. He would not make his first appearance on foot and leading a restive horse, nor could he ride in a travelling cape and deerstalker cap. And how should his trunks be conveyed?

He could not hit on a plan. He was so hungry that he felt faint and could not think clearly. He stood still, noticing vaguely that the light in the station had grown dimmer and a hush had crept over the scene, while the noise of hoofs and the rolling of wheels outside the building sounded louder in the stillness.

Suddenly he observed someone in a top hat peering at him over the top of a blind, while a porter was eagerly talking to the top hat and pointing at him. The top hat was

the stationmaster. In a moment Barry would be the centre of a scene.

The top hat disappeared from the window and at once reappeared at the office door. The stationmaster, trying not to look as if he were doing so, began to advance upon Barry.

I shall refuse to speak, decided the young man wildly (like many ambitious persons he lacked humour). It's the only dignified thing to do. A terrible pang of disappointment possessed him for a moment; how splendid had been his vision of his entry into the capital! For a year he had been dreaming of it, and here he stood, hungry, angry and penniless, because he had been too proud to sleep in the second-best bedroom at The Two New Potatoes in Dublin and to travel second-class on the train.

The station was now empty, save for Barry, the horse, the advancing stationmaster and the porters, leaning on their barrows like vultures on their nests and gloatingly awaiting the gorgeous row that was blowing up. It was not every day that they saw a swell in a fix.

A low roll of thunder sounded far away.

The stationmaster was now near enough for Barry to see that his whiskers were not black; rather were they a rich brown. He advanced steadily, a lonely figure in a blue frock-coat whose buttons gleamed in the louring stormlight. A second peal of thunder, louder and nearer, rolled round the sky.

Suddenly, at the far end of the station, the figure of an unusually tall man appeared, walking so quickly that his golden beard blew back from the breast of his violet and bronze uniform as he moved.

He careened down the platform, and reached his goal a full yard ahead of the stationmaster. As he put up a glass to a large sleepy blue eye, a third roll of thunder sounded overhead.

"Aw, how de do?" said the giant, saluting. "Lieutenant Molloy, I imagine? Should have been here to meet you but the stweets are cowedded. Her Majesty's dwiving in the Park and all the moleskins are out. Faugh! This your beast, I imagine?"

Barry had returned his salute with one as correct, feeling the cramp and chill slowly recede from his heart as he did so. He had made a fool of himself for nothing. I must learn to control myself properly, he thought fiercely. No one knew that he had made a fool of himself, but that did not console him.

"My name," added the officer easily, "is Venner. Captain Gabwiel Venner, at your service. Nice beast, good boy," he added to the horse. He took no notice of the stationmaster, who had removed his hat, knelt down, and was making a speech, surrounded by the porters who were also on their knees. Barry took no notice either. The beautiful horse and the two tall men stood in calm silence while the thunder crashed; and a horse-box, pushed by a thin little man in the dress of a waiter, came slowly down the platform. It was followed by two more, each pushed by a thin little waiter.

"We'll wide," said Gabriel, and slightly moved one finger, without turning his head, in the direction of the little men, who at once sprang to open the horse-boxes. Out pranced two superb black geldings.

"Your beast must be tired. You'd better wide, had you not, dear old boy?" said Captain Gabriel, caressing the chestnut's nose. "What's his name, Molloy?"

"Bayard," said Barry, smiling and coughing slightly.

"Charmin'."

"I should appreciate it if he could ride. I think the journey has tired him," said Barry.

"Of course he must wide."

One of the little waiters, staring at the gutter, said in a low voice:

"All ve way to ve Club, Capting?"

"Natuwally," replied Captain Gabriel, in a cold tone and without looking at him.

"But it's raining, Capting."

"Natuwally. A storm is in pwogwess. Pway mount, Molloy. If we wide fast we may just be in time to see Her Majesty dwive past the Club."

Her Majesty! The Club! What visions were about to take to themselves a body! Barry's heart beat faster as he put one foot on the quickly outstretched neck of one of the little men and sprang to the saddle. He did not quite like to ride the black gelding in his cape and deerstalker, but of course Captain Gabriel knew what could safely be done without injuring the prestige of the Regiment.

The latter now put his foot on a little waiter's neck in his turn, and lightly mounted. The two gentlemen rode off; and the three little waiters took out three shabby tall hats, which they had held concealed behind their backs while in the presence of Captain Gabriel, and put them on. They then began to coax Bayard into the horse-box, and after this was done they set off slowly in pursuit of the officers.

The summer rain did not blur the beauty of the city, whose trees were fully out and swinging their branches heavy with wet leaves. The houses were brown or grey or of the cream of honeysuckle petals. Down the wide streets raced spanking victorias, drags, cabriolets, fiacres, their red or yellow wheels spinning and sparkling in the glittering rain. In the west there were beginning the pure colours of a rainbow. Gabriel and Barry sat easily in their saddles with the rain dashing in their faces. No rider ever forgets a ride in warm summer rain. They glanced at one another and smiled.

"Capital, ain't it," said Gabriel.

They turned their horses in through the gates of the Park. The blossoming shrubs were out, and every tree sheltered groups of people: and against the rails on either

side of the Row was pressed a mob of men and women, dressed in rags and wearing caps made of mole fur.

CHAPTER II

A MOMENT LATER Barry could look at nothing except the Club.

The mighty building with its twin glass towers glittered darkly against the heavens, which were still partly obscured by flying clouds. The North Tower, indeed, was temporarily concealed in mists from which its pointed summit emerged, remote and awesome as a mountain peak.

Barry stared, endeavouring to subdue the feelings of reverence, gratitude and awe which filled his spirit, for such emotions are of little or no use in a well-planned career.

As they approached the wide gravelled court in front of the Club, which was surrounded by iron railings, Captain Gabriel observed:

"The moleskins are getting a bath to-day, willy-nilly." He set his horse at the crowd and spoke over his shoulder, "They are even more disagweeable when they are wet than when they are dwy. Come!"

The crowd parted to let them through, though unwillingly and with many a sullen oath, and they had just reached the gates leading into the courtyard when a man cried, "Huzza! The Queen, God bless her!" and flung his moleskin cap into the air.

Instantly the air about Gabriel and Barry was full of unsavoury caps which their owners threw up with a dexterous twist that ensured a safe return, and they both turned their horses to see who was coming.

The rain had almost ceased, but the thunder still rolled overhead and a superb rainbow spanned the sky to the west, losing its curve in a grove of mighty elm trees whose branches still sighed in the wind of the dying storm.

“The Queen! The Queen!”

A low open carriage ran smartly between the lane of cheering people, driven by an upright little figure in a magenta dress. Barry caught the gleam of a shrewd grey eye; a plump hand raised a whip perhaps three inches in greeting to Gabriel, who sat immovably at the salute. The lady opposite the Queen was doing nothing, not even looking at the crowd; she was a slender form in a white crinoline, whose face was shaded by a bonnet covered in white ostrich plumes.

“The Queen ...” muttered Barry, staring after the carriage as it rapidly dwindled away in the direction of the fading rainbow. “Who was the lady with her, pray?”

“Miss Beatwice,” answered Gabriel, colouring deeply. “Miss Beatwice Pwessure. She is a lady-in-waiting to Her Majesty.”

Barry said no more. He had observed the blush and wished to show that he could be tactful. As they cantered across the forecourt and through the open door of the Club into a dim hall whose roof was lost in shadow, Gabriel continued:

“Miss Beatwice is the daughter of Doctor Pwessure. He is headmaster of the Militawy School in the gwounds here,” and Gabriel sighed.

Barry asked no more questions. Gabriel now drew his pistol and fired at a large bronze gong hanging against the wall.

At once echoes sprang up in every corner of the huge hall, rolling and repeating themselves between pillars and amid the groining of the roof.

“That’s the quickest way to bwing them,” said Gabriel.

Barry looked inquiring.

"The waiters," explained Gabriel. "That's the fire signal, they never huvwwy unless they think the place is on fire. They'll be here at the double, you'll see."

"But why not have them——" began Barry, then stopped.

"Oh, they are not allowed in the Gweat Hall, it's against the wules. Her Majesty likes the place to look like a cathedwal. It can't look like a cathedwal with a lot of waiters loungin' about in it playin' shove-ha'penny, so they stay in their own quarters until they're called."

"Where are their quarters—if I am not asking too many questions? I trust I am not fatiguing you?"

"Indeed, no. Too pleased. Feedin' quarters down below, sleepin' quarters up above."

Barry stared up into the lofty roof, in whose dim height the thunder rolled.

"And how many of them are there?"

"Waiters? I could not swear," drawled Captain Gabriel, dismounting from his horse. "The Wegiment hires them by the hundwed. There's a little cemetewy wound the back in the gwounds, somewhere, I believe, where they're burwied from time to time."

"Indeed," murmured Barry, also dismounting. "And are they married? That is, do their wives and children live down below, too?"

"Stwictly forbidden to admit a wife or child to the Club on pain of shootin'. Against the wules, you see. They live wound about, outside. Each man is allowed one daguweotype, not to include more than thwee members of his family, and is allowed to look at it for thwee and a half minutes a day. That's to keep them from becomin' hardened. The Colonel is not a bwute."

"One sees that," murmured Barry.

"Evwy evenin' at six o'clock Doctor Pwessure conducts Waiters' Pwayers. Jawin' to them about their sins. *And* thwee times on Sundays. Evwy care is taken of their souls. Awful bwevity of our sojurn here, an' all that. All the same,

they're a deuced ungrateful rebellious discontented lot. Ask Baird, ask anyone. You'll see."

Here the murmur which had been growing louder ever since Gabriel sounded the gong swelled to a roar as a crowd of waiters rushed into the hall, shouting and waving their arms."

"Fire, fire!"

"Where's the fire, Captain?" asked a waiter who was rather thinner than the rest.

"There is no fire," said Gabriel in the low cold tone he kept for the waiters.

The waiter who had asked the question turned back to his advancing comrades with a gesture of despair, saying in a hoarse voice, "It's no use, mates. We got the Monkey's Allowance again."

There was a low murmur of anger and disappointment, but the men made no further movement. They stood still with resigned expressions on their faces as if awaiting orders.

"Take the horses and water them," commanded Gabriel.

"Very good, Captain."

The waiters silently filed out, looking rebellious and secretive.

"I will take you to your rooms, if you are agreeable, Molloy?" said Gabriel, "and then we will dine. New officers always dine in Mess on their first evening here."

The word "dine" aroused unpleasant feelings in Barry. He had no money, and did not know when he would receive his first pay. But he decided to say nothing, and to trust to the kindness and tactfulness which he felt sure Captain Gabriel was exerting on his behalf. He was greatly attracted by Captain Gabriel's air of mingled power and mildness; at first he could not recall where he had before seen a countenance expressing exactly those qualities, and yet he was sure, quite sure, that he had seen it. Suddenly, he recollected that an aunt living in London had once sent

him a representation of the Nelson Monument, and it was on the countenances of the Lions which everlastingly guard the monument of a grateful nation to its hero that he had seen that very look of indolent power.

The storm had gathered again overhead, thunder rolled up in the roof and once the vast spaces were lit by the glare of lightning. The corridors and halls and closed doors that he could see on all sides were now made mysterious by deepening twilight, and that unmistakable atmosphere of luxury and terror informed the great building which is only encountered in the palace of a tyrant.

A horse-drawn tram now appeared in the distance, running between two pathways of richest crimson pile carpet and driven by a small, sullen waiter. The tram was empty and Gabriel and Barry boarded it.

"The Officers' Quarters," commanded Gabriel curtly, and folding his arms became silent.

Barry was glad of the opportunity to give his full attention to the objects now flitting past in the dimness as the tram gathered speed. Once they passed a chapel where candles burned before an altar with lilies, once he saw a gymnasium where men were drilling with clubs. Frequently they passed bronze statues of noble female figures holding up torches, or cornucopias apparently filled with books; he saw marble staircases covered with rich red or yellow carpets, and giant aspidistra plants many feet high, whose glossy leaves burgeoned from porcelain tubs.

"Twacts," suddenly observed Gabriel.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Those things in those things those old girls are cawwyin', don't you know," explained Gabriel, jerking his head at a statue, which was already receding into the distance, of a noble woman with a cornucopia. "Her Majesty has them especially designed for the Club. Wouldn't have gwapes or apples. She don't appwove of stwong dwink. Twacts instead. If you climbed up you could

wead the titles 'Little Soldiers and Big Battles' and all that sort of stuff."

His tone, though amiable, was melancholy and reserved, and did not encourage Barry to comment upon what he said, so silence fell once more. But the increasing splendour and order of his surroundings, a regimented gorgeousness, a magnificent precision of luxury which irresistibly suggested that it was designed and executed by a military mind, worked so strongly upon Barry that at last he could keep silent no longer, but observed——

"I suppose that this must be the finest building in London—in the world, for that matter?"

His youthful voice, which was only coloured by a brogue, gave charm to his speech. Gabriel roused himself, stared at him for a second, and then smiled kindly.

"I believe you, my boy! And it costs a mint of money to keep up," he added—rather coarsely, Barry thought. "It's no joke wunning this place, I can tell you."

"But surely the Government ..." began Barry.

"This is Her Majesty's hobby, not the Government's, and we're wesponsible to her for every bwown we spend."

He paused, and muttered something that Barry did not quite catch about saving the dwipping off the beef.

"She sees the accounts every month," he went on, "and there's no hope of cookin' them, either."

Barry felt eager for more information, but his native caution prevented him from giving expression to his feelings beyond a sympathetic inclination of the head and a slight murmur.

They were now passing rows of doors, each half-concealed by a heavy curtain of violet velvet. When the tram reached a door near the end of the row it stopped, and Gabriel stood up, Barry doing likewise.

"Lieutenant's quarters," said Gabriel, as they alighted.

The little waiter, who was driving, now turned his head in their direction.

“Ow about waiting, Capting?”

“Certainly,” returned Gabriel icily.

“Nearly six o’clock. Time for Waiters’ Prayers, Capting.”

Gabriel did not answer. His back was turned and he was about to pull a bell-rope of violet silk outside the door.

“Waiters’ Prayers, six o’clock,” repeated the waiter, putting his head round the side of the tram and slightly raising his voice.

Still Gabriel said nothing. He pulled the bell-rope.

“Oright, then! If I go to ‘ell it’s all your fort!” screamed the waiter, and burst into a passion of hysterical tears.

Gabriel said, without looking round:

“Your Dagueweotype time is docked by two minutes.”

There was a pause. Then the waiter said:

“Very good, Capting.”

Barry and Gabriel stepped into the room beyond, the person who had opened the door to them standing respectfully aside to let them pass. Barry had already taken an impression of a long pale countenance, lowered eyelids, and a ginger moustache.

“Badd, your servant,” explained Gabriel, going on into the room. Here low settees covered in crimson velvet, shaded lamps hung with beaded covers, glossy cabinets stacked with cigars, and a large and glowing fire conveyed a delightful promise of comfort.

“Come out when you’ve changed; we dine with the Colonel, as I said. I’ll take you along,” said Gabriel, dropping his hand for a moment upon the young man’s shoulder.

“I will, thank you. You are most kind,” said Barry, wishing that he had had his uniform.

“Not at all, my dear fellow. In an hour, then.”

Gabriel smiled, gave Barry’s shoulder a slight pressure, and went out.

Barry’s toilet was made in a hip-bath filled with water by Badd, who received jug after jug brought to a door in an