

## BERTIE

“ You don’t happen to know our Bertie, do you ? ” asked Private Smith ; “ he’s a new chap only just joined from the depôt : highly educated an’ all that : one of the struck-pa-with-a-roll-of-music-and-enlisted sort of fellers.”

Smithy paused to ruminate upon the accomplished Bertie. “ I’ve ’eard ’im use words that wasn’t in any dictionary,” Smithy continued with enthusiasm, “ an’ he’s settled arguments we’ve ’ad in the canteen without so much as lookin’ in a book.

“ There was a bit of a friendly discussion the other night about ’ow much alch’ol there was in beer, an’ how many pints it’d take to poison a chap. Gus

Ward, the medical staff chap, worked it all out on a bit of paper, but some of the other chaps said 'e was talkin' through 'is hat.

"To settle it—none of the other chaps would come outside when Gussie invited 'em—we sent over for Bertie.

"Over comes Bertie with a wot-can-I-do-for-you-my-poor-child sort of smile, an' we puts the question to 'im.

"'Twenty-two gallons an' a pint,' sez Bertie prompt.

"'You're a liar!' sez Nobby, and the medical chap asked Bertie to come outside and settle the question.

"'Don't be absurd,' sez Bertie. 'Nobody can tell me anything about alch'ol : it was discovered by a monk, in 1320, when 'e was searchin' for the philosopher's stone. It is known at Lloyd's as a deadly sporadic an'——'

"'Shut 'up,' sez Nobby ; 'we don't

want to know the geography an' 'istory of it, we want to know how many pints of beer it takes to kill a chap.'

" 'Thirty-one gallons an' two pints, as I said before,' sez Bertie huffily; 'an' in future, Private Clark, I don't want you to send for me to settle canteen controversialities.'

" 'Wot was that last word?' sez Nobby, after Bertie had gone. 'Some-thin' insultin', I'll lay.'

" Me an' Nobby 'appened to be over at the coffee-shop next night—it was the night before pay-day, or we wouldn't 'ave been wastin' our time—when in comes Bertie.

" 'E's got an 'orrid languid way of lookin' round, an' it was a minute or two before 'e spots me an' Nob.'

" ' 'Ullo, Clark,' he sez, with a nod just the same as if 'e was an officer. ' 'Ullo, Smithy.'

“ ‘Ullo, face,’ sez Nobby, who’s always got a kind word for every one.

“ ‘I’m gettin’ tired of this sort of life,’ sez Bertie, in a weary voice. ‘I’ve got too much wot the French call *savoir faire*.’

“ ‘See a doctor,’ sez Nobby, ‘or take plenty of exercise, like I do.’

“ ‘You misunderstand me, Clark,’ sez Bertie, with a sad smile. ‘But there, ’ow should you know, my poor feller!’

“ ‘Bertie,’ sez Nobby.

“ ‘What?’ sez Bertie.

“ ‘Don’t call me a “pore feller,”’ sez Nobby, ‘or I’ll give you a dig in the eye.’

“ ‘Don’t lose your temper, Clark,’ sez Bertie, hasty. ‘What I meant to say was, you can’t be expected to comprehend ’ow it feels for a chap who’s drove ’is own brougham to be ordered about by cads of officers, cads an’ bounders that

my alma mater wouldn't 'ave in her set.'

" 'Who's she?' sez Nobby.

" 'My rich aunt,' sez Bertie.

" 'Livin' in the Marylebone-road?' sez Nobby.

" 'No,' sez Bertie carelessly: 'Porchester Gate.'

" 'Ah,' sez Nobby thoughtful, 'that's a work-'ouse that must 'ave been built quite lately—'ow London grows to be sure.'

" Bertie smiled an' shook 'is 'ead.

" 'Ah, Clark!' 'e sez with a pityin' look, 'there's a good old French sayin' that goes, "Ontry noo sivvoo play," which means, "Don't argue with a fool."'

" 'There's another good ole French proverb,' sez Nobby, 'that sez, "Chuprab soor."'

" 'What does that mean?' sez Bertie surprised, so Nobby told 'im.

“ Bertie wasn't what you might call popular with the troops. For one thing 'e used long words that nobody ever 'eard before, an' for the other, 'e was a bun-wallah of the worst kind.”

(It is, I might say, one of the wilful fallacies of the Army that teetotallers live entirely on lemonade and buns.)

“ We don't mind so much a chap bein' a teetotaller ; every man to 'is taste, an' I've known some very good chaps in that line, but Bertie used to carry 'is fads a bit too far.

“ For instance, 'e got me an' Nobby one night down to an A.T.A. (Army Temperance Association) meetin', an' so worked on Nobby's feelin's by promisin' to lend him 'arf a crown till pay-day that Nobby ups an' signs the pledge.

“ ‘ I feel a different man already,’ sez Nobby, after Bertie 'ad parted with the money, ‘ I do, indeed.’

" ' Ah,' sez Bertie proudly, ' you'll feel better still when you've 'ad a week of it. Don't let your boon companions lure you back into the old 'abit,' 'e sez.

" ' No fear,' sez Nobby, puttin' the 'arf-crown in 'is pocket.

" ' Not so much of the boon companions, Bertie,' I sez, knowin' what 'e was sayin' was a snack for me.

" ' When they offer you the pot—refuse it like a man,' sez Bertie, working hisself up to a great state.

" ' I will,' sez Nobby.

" ' Look 'ere,' sez Bertie excitedly, ' come up to the canteen now an' put yourself to the test.'

" ' Right you are,' sez Nobby quick; ' let's hurry up before it's shut.'

" So we all went up to the canteen, an' the first thing that 'appened when we got inside was Dusty Miller offerin' Nobby 'arf a gallon can.

“ ‘ Drink ’arty, Nobby,’ sez Dusty.

“ Nobby looks at the can, then looks at Bertie, an’ Bertie was smilin’ ’appily all over ’is face.

“ ‘ No,’ sez Nobby chokin’, ‘ no, Dusty, you mean well, but I’m on the tack—on the lemonade tack,’ ’e sez.

“ ‘ Good Nobby,’ sez Bertie.

“ ‘ Let me take one last look at the cursed stuff,’ sez Nobby, takin’ the pot in ’is ’and; ‘ one last sniff,’ ’e sez; ‘ one last taste o’ the poison,’ ’e sez, an’ before we knew what ’ad ’appened ’e’d ’arf emptied the can.

“ ‘ It’s no good, Bertie,’ ’e sez sadly, the temptation is too strong, it’s in me blood,’ ’e sez, ‘ you can have your ’arf-crown back on pay-day.’

“ What chaps didn’t like about Bertie most was the way ’e was always goin’ on about his come-down in the world, how ’e might have been livin’ up in the



West End goin' to theatres every night of 'is life, an' drinkin' port wine with 'is meals, if 'e hadn't been such a fool as to enlist.

" One night when we was playin' billiards in the library Nobby got Bertie to settle a point whether an earl was an 'igher rank than a countess.

" ' A countess, of course,' sez Bertie.

" ' For why ? ' sez Nobby.

" Bertie gave a pityin' sort of laugh.

" ' A countess is a lady count, an' a count is next to a marquis,' he sez.

" ' 'Ow do you know ? ' sez Nobby.

" Bertie gave a sort of tired sigh an' looked at the ceilin'.

" ' My dear Clark,' he sez, ' it ain't for me to boast of the people I met before I come down in the world, but I might say I've met certain parties—no names mentioned—that our officers ain't even on speakin' terms with.'

“ ‘ In shops ? ’ sez Nobby.

“ ‘ No, in country ’ ouses, ’ sez Bertie stiffly.

“ ‘ Leave orf pullin’ Bertie’s leg, ’ sez Spud Murphy, who always likes to get a rise out of Nobby. ‘ Anybody can see Bertie’s mixed with high-class people.’

“ We was all silent for a bit watchin’ Dusty Miller, who was playin’ Mouldy Turner a hundred up, tackle an’ ’ard-lines cannon.

“ We was very interested in it, especially Bertie, who couldn’t take ’is eyes from the cloth.

“ Dusty fluked ’is cannon an’ missed the next shot, an’ then Nobby got a sort of inspiration, an’ calls out to Bertie :

“ ‘ Call the game, marker ! ’

“ ‘ Forty-two plays seventy-six : spot to play, sir, ’ sez Bertie absent-mindedly.”