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QUITE SO

By Thomas Bailey Aldrich

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I.

Of course that was not his name. Even in the State of Maine, where it is still a custom to maim a child for life by christening him Arioeh or Shadrach or Ephraim, nobody would dream of calling a boy "Quite So." It was merely a nickname which we gave him in camp; but it stuck to him with such bur-like tenacity, and is so inseparable from my memory of him, that I do not think I could write definitely of John Bladburn if I were to call him anything but "Quite So."

It was one night shortly after the first battle of Bull Run. The Army of the Potomac, shattered, stunned, and forlorn, was back in its old quarters behind the earthworks. The melancholy line of ambulances bearing our wounded to Washington was not done creeping over Long Bridge; the blue smocks and the gray still lay in windrows on the field of Manassas; and the gloom that weighed down our hearts was like the fog that stretched along the bosom of the Potomac, and enfolded the valley of the Shenandoah. A drizzling rain had set in at twilight, and, growing bolder with the darkness, was beating a dismal tattoo on the tent—the tent of Mess 6, Company A, —th Regiment, N. Y. Volunteers. Our mess, consisting originally of eight men, was reduced to four. Little Billy, as one of the boys grimly remarked, had concluded to remain at Manassas; Corporal Steele we had to leave at Fairfax Court-House, shot through the hip; Hunter and Suydam we had said good-by to that afternoon. “Tell Johnny Reb,” says Hunter, lifting up the leather side-piece of the ambulance, “that I ’ll be back again as soon as I get a new leg.” But Suydam said nothing; he only unclosed his eyes languidly and smiled farewell to us.

The four of us who were left alive and unhurt that shameful July day sat gloomily smoking our brier-wood pipes, thinking our thoughts, and listening to the rain pattering against the canvas. That, and the occasional whine of a hungry cur, foraging on the outskirts of the camp for a stray bone, alone broke the silence, save when a vicious drop of rain detached itself meditatively from the ridge-pole of the tent, and fell upon the wick of our tallow candle, making it “cuss,” as Ned Strong described it. The candle was in the midst of one of its most profane fits when Blakely, knocking the ashes from his pipe and addressing no one in particular, but giving breath, unconsciously as it were, to the result of his cogitations, observed that “it was considerable of a fizzle.”

“The 'on to Richmond' business?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder what they ’ll do about it over yonder,” said Curtis, pointing over his right shoulder. By “over yonder” he meant the North in general and Massachusetts especially. Curtis was a Boston boy, and his sense of locality was so strong that, during all his wanderings in Virginia, I do not believe there was a moment, day or night, when he could not have made a bee-line for Faneuil Hall.

“Do about it?” cried Strong. “They ’ll make about two hundred thousand blue flannel trousers and send them along, each pair with a man in it—all the short men in the long trousers, and all the tall men in the short ones,” he added, ruefully contemplating his own leg-gear, which scarcely reached to his ankles.

“That’s so,” said Blakely. “Just now, when I was tackling the commissary for an extra candle, I saw a crowd of new fellows drawing blankets.”

“I say there, drop that!” cried Strong. “All right, sir, didn’t know it was you,” he added hastily, seeing it was Lieutenant Haines who had thrown back the flap of the tent, and let in a gust of wind and rain that threatened the most serious bronchial consequences to our discontented tallow dip.

“You ’re to bunk in here,” said the lieutenant, speaking to some one outside. The some one stepped in, and Haines vanished in the darkness.

When Strong had succeeded in restoring the candle to consciousness, the light fell upon a tall, shy-looking man of about thirty-five, with long, hay-colored beard and mustache, upon which the rain-drops stood in clusters, like the night-dew on patches of cobweb in a meadow. It was an honest face, with unworldly sort of blue eyes, that looked out from under the broad visor of the infantry cap. With a deferential glance towards us, the new-comer unstrapped his knapsack, spread his blanket over it, and sat down unobtrusively.

“Rather damp night out,” remarked Blakely, whose strong hand was supposed to be conversation.

“Quite so,” replied the stranger, not curtly, but pleasantly, and with an air as if he had said all there was to be said about it.

“Come from the North recently?” inquired Blakely, after a pause.

“Yes.”

“From any place in particular?”

“Maine.”

“People considerably stirred up down there?” continued Blakely, determined not to give up.

“Quite so.”

Blakely threw a puzzled look over the tent, and seeing Ned Strong on the broad grin, frowned severely. Strong instantly assumed an abstracted air, and began humming softly,

“I wish I was in Dixie.”

“The State of Maine,” observed Blakely, with a certain defiance of manner not at all necessary in discussing a geographical question, “is a pleasant State.”

“In summer,” suggested the stranger.

“In summer, I mean,” returned Blakely with animation, thinking he had broken the ice. “Cold as blazes in winter, though—Isn’t it?”

The new recruit merely nodded.

Blakely eyed the man homicidally for a moment, and then, smiling one of those smiles of simulated gayety which the novelists inform us are more tragic than tears, turned upon him with withering irony.

“Trust you left the old folks pretty comfortable?”

“Dead.”

“The old folks dead!”

“Quite so.”

Blakely made a sudden dive for his blanket, tucked it around him with painful precision, and was heard no more.

Just then the bugle sounded "lights out,"—bugle answering bugle in far-off camps. When our not elaborate night-toilets were complete, Strong threw somebody else's old boot at the candle with infallible aim, and darkness took possession of the tent. Ned, who lay on my left, presently reached over to me, and whispered, "I say, our friend 'quite so' is a garrulous old boy! He'll talk himself to death some of these odd times, if he is n't careful. How he *did* run on!"

The next morning, when I opened my eyes, the new member of Mess 6 was sitting on his knapsack, combing his blonde beard with a horn comb. He nodded pleasantly to me, and to each of the boys as they woke up, one by one. Blakely did not appear disposed to renew the animated conversation of the previous night; but while he was gone to make a requisition for what was in pure sarcasm called coffee, Curtis ventured to ask the man his name.

"Bladburn, John," was the reply.

"That's rather an unwieldy name for every-day use," put in Strong. "If it would n't hurt your feelings, I 'd like to call you Quite So—for short. Don't say no, if you don't like it. Is it agreeable?"

Bladburn gave a little laugh, all to himself, seemingly, and was about to say, "Quite so," when he caught at the words, blushed like a girl, and nodded a sunny assent to Strong. From that day until the end, the sobriquet clung to him.

The disaster at Bull Run was followed, as the reader knows, by a long period of masterly inactivity, so far as the Army of the Potomac was concerned. McDowell, a good soldier, but unlucky, retired to Arlington Heights, and McClellan, who had distinguished himself in Western Virginia, took command of the forces in front of Washington, and bent his energies to reorganizing the demoralized troops. It was a dreary time to the people of the North, who looked fatuously from week to week for "the fall of Richmond;" and it was a dreary time to the denizens of that vast city of tents and forts which stretched in a semicircle before the beleaguered Capitol—so tedious and soul-wearing a time that the hardships of forced marches and the horrors of battle became desirable things to them.

Roll-call morning and evening, guard-duty, dress-parades, an occasional reconnoissance, dominoes, wrestling-matches, and such rude games as could be carried on in camp made up the sum of our lives. The arrival of the mail with letters and papers from home was the event of the day. We noticed that Bladburn neither wrote nor received any letters. When the rest of the boys were scribbling away for dear life, with drum-heads and knapsacks and cracker-boxes for writing-desks, he would sit serenely smoking his pipe, but looking out on us through rings of smoke with a face expressive of the tenderest interest.

"Look here, Quite So," Strong would say, "the mail-bag closes in half an hour. Ain't you going to write?"

"I believe not to-day," Bladburn would reply, as if he had written yesterday, or would write to-morrow: but he never wrote.

He had become a great favorite with us, and with all the officers of the regiment. He talked less than any man I ever knew, but there was nothing sinister or sullen in his reticence. It was sunshine,—warmth and brightness, but no voice. Unassuming and modest to the verge of shyness, he impressed every one as a man of singular pluck and nerve.

"Do you know," said Curtis to me one day, "that that fellow Quite So is clear grit, and when we come to close quarters with our Palmetto brethren over yonder, he'll do something devilish?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, nothing quite explainable; the exasperating coolness of the man, as much as anything. This morning the boys were teasing Muffin Fan [a small mulatto girl who used to bring muffins into camp three times a week,—at the peril of her life!] and Jemmy Blunt of Company K—you know him—was rather rough on the girl, when Quite So, who had been reading under a tree, shut one finger in his book, walked over to where the boys were skylarking, and with the smile of a juvenile angel on his face lifted Jemmy out of that and set him down gently in front of his own tent. There Blunt sat speechless, staring at Quite So, who was back again under the tree, pegging away at his little Latin grammar."

That Latin grammar! He always had it about him, reading it or turning over its dog's-eared pages at odd intervals and in out-of-the-way places. Half a dozen times a day he would draw it out from the bosom of his blouse, which had taken the shape of the book just over the left breast, look at it as if to assure himself it was all right, and then put the thing back. At night the volume lay beneath his pillow. The first thing in the morning, before he was well awake, his hand would go groping instinctively under his knapsack in search of it.

A devastating curiosity seized upon us boys concerning that Latin grammar, for we had discovered the nature of the book. Strong wanted to steal it one night, but concluded not to. "In the first place," reflected Strong, "I haven't the heart to do it, and in the next place I have n't the moral courage. Quite So would placidly break every bone in my body." And I believe Strong was not far out of the way.

Sometimes I was vexed with myself for allowing this tall, simple-hearted country fellow to puzzle me so much. And yet, was he a simple-hearted country fellow? City bred he certainly was not; but his manner, in spite of his awkwardness, had an indescribable air of refinement. Now and then, too, he dropped a word or a phrase that showed his familiarity with unexpected lines of reading. "The other day," said Curtis, with the slightest elevation of eyebrow, "he had the cheek to correct my Latin for me." In short, Quite So was a daily problem to the members of Mess 6. Whenever he was absent, and Blakely and Curtis and Strong and I got together in the tent, we discussed him, evolving various theories to explain why he never wrote to anybody and why nobody ever wrote to him. Had the man committed some terrible crime, and fled to the army to hide his guilt? Blakely suggested that he must have murdered "the old folks." What did he mean by eternally conning that tattered Latin grammar? And was his name Bladburn, anyhow? Even his imperturbable amiability became suspicious. And then his frightful reticence! If he was the victim of any deep grief or crushing calamity, why did n't he seem unhappy? What business had he to be cheerful?

"It's my opinion," said Strong, "that he 's a rival Wandering Jew; the original Jacobs, you know, was a dark fellow."

Blakely inferred from something Bladburn had said, or something he had not said—which was more likely—that he had been a schoolmaster at some period of his life.

“Schoolmaster be hanged!” was Strong’s comment. “Can you fancy a schoolmaster going about conjugating baby verbs out of a dratted little spelling-book? No, Quite So has evidently been a—a—Blest if I can imagine *what* he ‘s been!”

Whatever John Bladburn had been, he was a lonely man. Whenever I want a type of perfect human isolation, I shall think of him, as he was in those days, moving remote, self-contained, and alone in the midst of two hundred thousand men.

II.

The Indian summer, with its infinite beauty and tenderness, came like a reproach that year to Virginia. The foliage, touched here and there with prismatic tints, drooped motionless in the golden haze. The delicate Virginia creeper was almost minded to put forth its scarlet buds again. No wonder the lovely phantom—this dusky Southern sister of the pale Northern June—lingered not long with us, but, filling the once peaceful glens and valleys with her pathos, stole away rebukefully before the savage enginery of man.

The preparations that had been going on for months in arsenals and foundries at the North were nearly completed. For weeks past the air had been filled with rumors of an advance; but the rumor of to-day refuted the rumor of yesterday, and the Grand Army did not move. Heintzelman’s corps was constantly folding its tents, like the Arabs, and as silently stealing away; but somehow it was always in the same place the next morning. One day, at last, orders came down for our brigade to move.

“We ‘re going to Richmond, boys!” shouted Strong, thrusting his head in at the tent; and we all cheered and waved our caps like mad. You see, Big Bethel and Bull Run and Ball’s Bluff (the bloody B’s, as we used to call them) had n’t taught us any better sense.

Rising abruptly from the plateau, to the left of our encampment, was a tall hill covered with a stunted growth of red-oak, persimmon, and chestnut. The night before we struck tents I climbed up to the crest to take a parting look at a spectacle which custom had not been able to rob of its enchantment. There, at my feet, and extending miles and miles away, lay the camps of the Grand Army, with its camp-fires reflected luridly against the sky. Thousands of lights were twinkling in every direction, some nestling in the valley, some like fire-flies beating their wings and palpitating among the trees, and others stretching in parallel lines and curves, like the street-lamps of a city. Somewhere, far off, a band was playing, at intervals it seemed; and now and then, nearer to, a silvery strain from a bugle shot sharply up through the night, and seemed to lose itself like a rocket among the stars—the patient, untroubled stars. Suddenly a hand was laid upon my arm.

“I ‘d like to say a word to you,” said Bladburn.

With a little start of surprise, I made room for him on the fallen tree where I was seated.

“I may n’t get another chance,” he said. “You and the boys have been very kind to me, kinder than I deserve; but sometimes I ‘ve fancied that my not saying anything about myself had given you the idea that all was not right in my past. I want to say that I came down to Virginia with a clean record.”

“We never really doubted it, Bladburn.”

“If I did n’t write home,” he continued, “it was because I had n’t any home, neither kith nor kin. When I said the old folks were dead, I said it. Am I boring you? If I thought I was”—

“No, Bladburn. I have often wanted you to talk to me about yourself, not from idle curiosity, I trust, but because I liked you that rainy night when you came to camp, and have gone on liking you ever since. This is n’t too much to say, when Heaven only knows how soon I may be past saying it or you listening to it.”

“That’s it,” said Bladburn, hurriedly, “that’s why I want to talk with you. I ‘ve a fancy that I sha’ n’t come out of our first battle.”

The words gave me a queer start, for I had been trying several days to throw off a similar presentiment concerning him—a foolish presentiment that grew out of a dream.

“In case anything of that kind turns up,” he continued, “I ‘d like you to have my Latin grammar here—you ‘ve seen me reading it. You might stick it away in a bookcase, for the sake of old times. It goes against me to think of it falling into rough hands or being kicked about camp and trampled underfoot.”

He was drumming softly with his fingers on the volume in the bosom of his blouse.

“I did n’t intend to speak of this to a living soul,” he went on, motioning me not to answer him; “but something took hold of me to-night and made me follow you up here, Perhaps if I told you all, you would be the more willing to look after the little book in case it goes ill with me. When the war broke out I was teaching school down in Maine, in the same village where my father was schoolmaster before me. The old man when he died left me quite alone. I lived pretty much by myself, having no interests outside of the district school, which seemed in a manner my personal property. Eight years ago last spring a new pupil was brought to the school, a slight slip of a girl, with a sad kind of face and quiet ways. Perhaps it was because she was n’t very strong, and perhaps because she was n’t used over well by those who had charge of her, or perhaps it was because my life was lonely, that my heart warmed to the child. It all seems like a dream now, since that April morning when little Mary stood in front of my desk with her pretty eyes looking down bashfully and her soft hair falling over her face. One day I look up, and six years have gone by—as they go by in dreams—and among the scholars is a tall girl of sixteen, with serious, womanly eyes which I cannot trust myself to look upon. The old life has come to an end. The child has become a woman and can teach the master now. So help me Heaven, I did n’t know that I loved her until that day!

“Long after the children had gone home I sat in the school-room with my face resting on my hands. There

was her desk, the afternoon shadows falling across it. It never looked empty and cheerless before. I went and stood by the low chair, as I had stood hundreds of times. On the desk was a pile of books, ready to be taken away, and among the rest a small Latin grammar which we had studied together. What little despairs and triumphs and happy hours were associated with it! I took it up curiously, as if it were some gentle dead thing, and turned over the pages, and could hardly see them. Turning the pages, idly so, I came to a leaf on which something was written with ink, in the familiar girlish hand. It was only the words 'Dear John,' through which she had drawn two hasty pencil lines—I wish she had n't drawn those lines!" added Bladburn, under his breath.

He was silent for a minute or two, looking off towards the camps, where the lights were fading out one by one.

"I had no right to go and love Mary. I was twice her age, an awkward, unsocial man, that would have blighted her youth. I was as wrong as wrong can be. But I never meant to tell her. I locked the grammar in my desk and the secret in my heart for a year. I could n't bear to meet her in the village, and kept away from every place where she was likely to be. Then she came to me, and sat down at my feet penitently, just as she used to do when she was a child, and asked what she had done to anger me; and then, Heaven forgive me! I told her all, and asked her if she could say with her lips the words she had written, and she nestled in my arms all a-trembling like a bird, and said them over and over again.

"When Mary's family heard of our engagement, there was trouble. They looked higher for Mary than a middle-aged schoolmaster. No blame to them. They forbade me the house, her uncles; but we met in the village and at the neighbors' houses, and I was happy, knowing she loved me. Matters were in this state when the war came on. I had a strong call to look after the old flag, and I hung my head that day when the company raised in our village marched by the school-house to the railroad station; but I couldn't tear myself away. About this time the minister's son, who had been away to college, came to the village. He met Mary here and there, and they became great friends. He was a likely fellow, near her own age, and it was natural they should like one another. Sometimes I winced at seeing him made free of the home from which I was shut out; then I would open the grammar at the leaf where 'Dear John' was written up in the corner, and my trouble was gone. Mary was sorrowful and pale these days, and I think her people were worrying her.

"It was one evening two or three days before we got the news of Bull Run. I had gone down to the burying-ground to trim the spruce hedge set round the old man's lot, and was just stepping into the enclosure, when I heard voices from the opposite side. One was Mary's, and the other I knew to be young Marston's, the minister's son. I did n't mean to listen, but what Mary was saying struck me dumb. *We must never meet again*, she was saying in a wild way. *We must say good-by here, for ever,—good-by, good-by!* And I could hear her sobbing. Then, presently, she said, hurriedly, *No, no; my hand, not my lips!* Then it seemed he kissed her hands, and the two parted, one going towards the parsonage, and the other out by the gate near where I stood.

"I don't know how long I stood there, but the night-dews had wet me to the bone when I stole out of the graveyard and across the road to the school-house. I unlocked the door, and took the Latin grammar from the desk and hid it in my bosom. There was not a sound or a light anywhere as I walked out of the village. And now," said Bladburn, rising suddenly from the tree-trunk, "if the little book ever falls in your way, won't you see that it comes to no harm, for my sake, and for the sake of the little woman who was true to me and did n't love me? Wherever she is to-night, God bless her!"

As we descended to camp with our arms resting on each other's shoulder, the watch-fires were burning low in the valleys and along the hillsides, and as far as the eye could reach the silent tents lay bleaching in the moonlight.

III.

We imagined that the throwing forward of our brigade was the initial movement of a general advance of the army; but that, as the reader will remember, did not take place until the following March. The Confederates had fallen back to Centreville without firing a shot, and the national troops were in possession of Lewinsville, Vienna, and Fairfax Court-House. Our new position was nearly identical with that which we had occupied on the night previous to the battle of Bull Run—on the old turnpike road to Manassas, where the enemy was supposed to be in great force. With a field-glass we could see the Rebel pickets moving in a belt of woodland on our right, and morning and evening we heard the spiteful roll of their snare-drums.

Those pickets soon became a nuisance to us. Hardly a night passed but they fired upon our outposts, so far with no harmful result; but after a while it grew to be a serious matter. The Rebels would crawl out on all-fours from the wood into a field covered with underbrush, and lie there in the dark for hours, waiting for a shot. Then our men took to the rifle-pits—pits ten or twelve feet long by four or five deep, with the loose earth banked up a few inches high on the exposed sides. All the pits bore names, more or less felicitous, by which they were known to their transient tenants. One was called "The Pepper-Box," another "Uncle Sam's Well," another "The Reb-Trap," and another, I am constrained to say, was named after a not-to-be-mentioned tropical locality. Though this rude sort of nomenclature predominated, there was no lack of softer titles, such as "Fortress Matilda" and "Castle Mary," and one had, though unintentionally, a literary flavor to it, "Blair's Grave," which was not popularly considered as reflecting unpleasantly on Nat Blair, who had assisted in making the excavation.

Some of the regiment had discovered a field of late corn in the neighborhood, and used to boil a few ears every day, while it lasted, for the boys detailed on the night-picket. The corn-cobs were always scrupulously preserved and mounted on the parapets of the pits. Whenever a Rebel shot carried away one of these *barbette* guns, there was swearing in that particular trench. Strong, who was very sensitive to this kind of

disaster, was complaining bitterly one morning, because he had lost three "pieces" the night before.

"There's Quite So, now," said Strong, "when a Minie-ball comes *ping!* and knocks one of his guns to flinders, he merely smiles, and does n't at all see the degradation of the thing."

Poor Bladburn! As I watched him day by day going about his duties, in his shy, cheery way, with a smile for every one and not an extra word for anybody, it was hard to believe he was the same man who, that night before we broke camp by the Potomac, had poured out to me the story of his love and sorrow in words that burned in my memory.

While Strong was speaking, Blakely lifted aside the flap of the tent and looked in on us.

"Boys, Quite So was hurt last night," he said, with a white tremor to his lip.

"What!"

"Shot on picket."

"Why, he was in the pit next to mine," cried Strong.

"Badly hurt?"

"Badly hurt."

I knew he was; I need not have asked the question. He never meant to go back to New England!

Bladburn was lying on the stretcher in the hospital-tent The surgeon had knelt down by him, and was carefully cutting away the bosom of his blouse. The Latin grammar, stained and torn, slipped, and fell to the floor. Bladburn gave me a quick glance. I picked up the book, and as I placed it in his hand, the icy fingers closed softly over mine. He was sinking fast. In a few minutes the surgeon finished his examination. When he rose to his feet there were tears on the weather-beaten cheeks. He was a rough outside, but a tender heart.

"My poor lad," he blurted out, "it's no use. If you 've anything to say, say it now, for you 've nearly done with this world."

Then Bladburn lifted his eyes slowly to the surgeon, and the old smile flitted over his face as he murmured, "Quite so."

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