

War Torn

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War Torn

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Summary

What if Peter had in fact married Barbara before the war? What would Bunter come back to?

Chapter 1

Mervyn Bunter was a changed man. Certainly, war had changed him, but more than that -- he returned to his mother's cottage with heart, soul and mind bound up in the welfare of a particular major.

His mother boxed his ears and reasoned with him by turns, but young Bunter (youngest of four, and the only one to return) signally failed to fetch in her firewood, or chop the kindling without constant prompting. She called it shell-shock to her friends, and praised God for one son returned, but in private she wept as many tears for Mervyn as she did for his brothers.

"This Major Lord of yours," she said one day in desperation, when Bunter had sat upon the hearth all night and half the morning, allowing the fire to fizzle to cold, grey coals under his unwavering gaze. "Can you not go up to London and see for yourself just how he's doing?"

"It wouldn't be seemly," Bunter said, bowing his head.

"Why ever not? You wrote me from the Front and said he had a place for you, should you both come home alive. What of that?"

"If his lordship needs me, he will send."

"Ay, and will he? No, you mind me, son. He thinks you comfortable and established valeting some local lordling. If he knew you were set here plaguing my life away, he'd send fast enough. Here, I've an idea -- I'll write him."

"Mother, you'll do no such thing." Bunter jumped to his feet, looking disconcerted.

After that, the widow Bunter found it an easy task to see her boy onto the London train at ten the next morning. A London Lord would pay better than footman at the Manor, and Mervyn, whatever his faults, was a good boy and would send a goodly portion of his wage home. And at least in London, she prayed, his terrible lethargy would fall away.

It was a simple matter to find the townhouse of Lord Peter Wimsey. Finding his lordship, however, was another matter. Bunter was turned away by a butler as pompous as he was fat, and on making a second run via the kitchen, marched out by the cook. "'Ipkin 'as been and told you as 'is lordship ain't 'ere, no, nor likely to be either," she said with satisfaction. "Taken poorly by the war, 'e is, and set up down at Denver with his ma."

Bunter drew himself up to his full height. "I am certain," he said repressively, "that the Dowager Duchess enjoys his lordship's company as the festive season approaches."

"Oh, hoity-toity!" The cook's brow met her hairline as she slammed the door in Bunter's face.

It was a worried man indeed who trudged back to the station and boarded the northbound train. Bunter had never been to Duke's Denver, but villages in general worried him. Everyone

knew everyone else's business. And given the cook's snide remarks, there was plenty of business to know.

It was no surprise that his major was shell-shocked: after that last terrible day, it would have been more surprising if he wasn't.

Peter Wimsey, when Bunter finally gained audience two days later, was in worse case than Bunter had feared. He was seated in a wing chair under a curtained window, his face in shadow. On a settee a few feet away sat a petite blonde with a petulant expression.

"Peter does not always talk," said the Dowager Duchess, who had ushered him in herself. "But you must see for yourself, he is in no case to be employing servants."

"I am tired of servants," said the blonde, standing up. "Who is this man, mother?"

"A sergeant who served with Peter in the war, Barbara. His name is Bunter."

"I'm distracted," exclaimed Barbara. "I certainly cannot consider sergeants. I must get outside of this room -- the walls will drive me mad!"

Bunter licked his lips. "If it would please your ladyship," he said, hesitated, then inclined his head to the dowager. "Your grace. If it would be of service, allow me to sit with the major -- his lordship, as I meant to say. I believe I may be of help to him."

"He's beyond help. But don't let me stop you." With a toss of fine, silvery-blond hair, Barbara swept from the room.

The dowager duchess shook her head helplessly. "So hard on poor dear Barbara," she murmured in a low voice.

Bunter looked at the huddled figure in the wing chair, and could not bring himself to agree.

Lord Peter Wimsey was more than shell-shocked. Bunter, who knew him from a hundred meagre billets, a thousand shared meals, countless quiet words both spoken and unspoken, saw at once that his foundations were rocked, tearing him loose from the anchor of the man he had been.

Peter had nothing left to fall back on. Fortunately, Bunter's reserves went deep enough for the both of them, because, as Bunter reflected, if it had been left up to Barbara, it would have been as well for Peter to have died in the blast.

The house in town was a nexus of comings and goings -- Barbara's friends, young butterflies, as silly as she was herself. They fancied themselves modern, socialists, seekers of peace, and calmly despised Peter for his part in the war, while they enjoyed the luxuries of his money and position.

Their hypocrisy choked Bunter, sent him to his own quarters at the rear of the house to listen for Peter's summons. It came more and more often.

Peter had been moved to a room on the third floor -- a part of the old nursery, quieter than the main wing. Dispossessed from his own bedroom as, adjoining Barbara's, she swore she could not get a wink of sleep listening for Peter's nightmares.

Peter, apologetic as always, with confused, bruised eyes that gazed at Barbara with a mix of longing and abject despair, went quietly. If Bunter had never known his major, he would have thought this Wimsey knew no other way.

But Bunter knew -- how he knew -- that Winderspan was no meek donkey to be ordered thus by a jumped-up girl, no better than she should be. As a good servant ought, he signally failed to notice the young men in parts of the house where no visitor should be, but it did not stop him marking them down on the score-sheet he mentally carried in his head.

His Major, broken in war, cuckolded in peace, still silent and closed in, versus the beautiful Barbara. It was no contest -- her penalties mounted until, for Bunter, he no longer even pretended to allot her the deference due the mistress of the house.

This he saved for the Dowager, on her frequent visits.

"Bunter," she said, having sought him out in Peter's outer room, "was it a mistake to let Barbara bring him to town?"

Bunter glanced from the bright, scared eyes to the window, then to the closed door leading to the bed-chamber where Peter still spent the majority of his days.

"If I may speak plainly, your grace," he said heavily, "there was no mistake in bringing him to town. The error runs graver than that."

No fool, the Dowager Duchess. She blinked once, then lowered her gaze. "Of course I knew that," she said, under her breath, then gave herself a shake. "I consider you the expert in his care, Bunter. Whatever you advise, I shall be sure he gets."

Bunter formally inclined his head, aware of having pushed his luck and gotten away with it. "His lordship is, I believe, making progress, your grace."

"I am glad of it."

There was some improvement, certainly. From the stony silence of Bunter's first day, Peter had thawed sufficient to speak when they were alone -- inconsequentialities only, with the occasional question after a man who had been in their unit at the last. Whatever had happened in Peter's tired brain, he knew his men still, who had fallen, who had been wounded.

It was that, coupled with a letter Bunter received from a young private, that set him to arrange the reunion. Twelve men, all he could find within reach of London, summoned to the old nursery for an afternoon of reminiscences, lubricated with his lordship's best port.

They came, curious and sympathetic -- Wimsey had ever been a favourite with the men. And Bunter, through a mixture of bullying, cajoling and insistence, got Wimsey out of his pajamas and out of the darkened room.

It was the singing that brought Barbara running. She froze in the doorway, staring in horror at the spectacle of her husband with an arm across the shoulders of two young men dressed like chimney sweeps, leading ten more in a rousing of chorus of *Oh! it's a lovely war*. Only the words were not as she recalled them.

Hands over her ears, she ran from the room.

"No, Bunter, I'm afraid I don't see at all." Lady Peter Wimsey, blonde, petite and petulant, stood at the doorway to her husband's chambers, hands on her hips. "If Peter is well enough for a party, then he is well enough to join me at the breakfast table. I will thank you to know your place."

Bunter eyed her measuringly. It would never do to slap the little madam, nor yet liken her pedigree to the backstreet trollops of Europe, much as he would have liked to. "Yes, your ladyship," he said instead. "I believe I am fully apprised of my own station, thank you."

She stepped back, his stare sufficient to disconcert her. Bunter allowed not one whit of the satisfied smile he felt to show, and inclined his head majestically. "When his lordship is ready to receive you I shall send a message, your ladyship."

"I advise you not to keep me waiting!" With a sniff, Barbara abandoned her attack and stalked off down the hall.

Bunter withdrew and closed the door behind him. His lordship had married in haste, and Bunter was doing his repenting for him. "A cheap little tart," he mused, "with neither manners nor breeding. I would never have thought it of him."

"Of whom, my Bunter?"

Bunter looked up, suppressing a start. Lord Peter, wrapped in red silk brocade, stood in the doorway to his bedchamber, leaning against the doorjamb. The pose looked nonchalant, but Bunter, well used to Peter's turns, knew at once he was both weak and dizzy.

"The under-housemaid, my lord," Bunter lied immediately. "Shockingly pert, and making time with the boots."

"Ah." Peter lost interest, pushing himself off the wall and taking a wavering step toward his man. "A bath, d'you think, Bunter? I've a deuce of a head."

"Of course, my lord." In two steps, Bunter was at Peter's side, giving him an arm to lean on. The 'head' was partly due to the alcohol consumed but more, Bunter knew, to reaction and to the nightmares which had kept them both from a restful sleep.

Carefully, Bunter conveyed his major to the bathroom and seated him in the chair placed for the purpose. It was the work of a moment to fetch a soothing draught, and once the bath was filled with steaming water, he helped Peter out of his clothes and into the tub.

"Thanks, old man." Submerged in the warm water, Peter reached up and gripped Bunter's hand, smiling. Comrades, rather than master and man.

Bunter returned the pressure. Their relationship was ever complex, but his devotion to Peter would never waver. "My pleasure, Major. All right now?"

"Not yet, I fear." Peter gave a lopsided grin. "You won't wash your hands of me, will you, old chap?"

"Not in this lifetime!" Bunter said fervently.

Chapter 2

Sarah, the more junior of the two parlour maids, ran from the breakfast-room with her skirts gathered up, and cannoned directly into Bunter in the hall. "Oh! Oh, Mr Bunter, sir!"

Bunter drew himself up, looking at the girl quellingly. "What on earth are you about, running in his lordship's house?" The habit of employing Young Persons was, in Bunter's considered opinion, to be deplored. A woman could not in any conscience be trusted to wait upon a gentleman, and while they had their place, a number of them together nearly always resulted in hysteria. Sarah was a prime example.

"But I couldn't stay." Sarah gasped for breath and grabbed Bunter's lapel. "It's terrible!"

Bunter was opening his mouth to reprove her when a resounding crash came from the room she had just vacated. Bunter jumped violently, brushed the girl off and marched to the door. Throwing convention to the wind, he swung it wide, staring in consternation at the scene before him.

Barbara stood poised at the head of the table, the Wedgewood sugar bowl clutched in her hand. Judging by the mess of blue shards and spilled milk, she had already thrown the milk-jug. Peter had taken cover behind the sideboard.

As Bunter entered, Peter's head popped up above the rim. "I fear there's been an accident," he said with carefully forced cheerfulness.

Bunter, looking into the shadows in Peter's eyes, had to physically hold himself in check from causing another one. "If your lordship will come with me," he said, through clenched teeth. "I trust you have not met with any injury?"

"That's right, run away," Barbara jeered. "I married a man, and now you come home a weakling sop --"

Bunter slammed his hand down on the table. The bang startled her into silence. "You have said enough." Bunter glared for a long moment, then held out his hand to Peter. "Come, my lord."

Peter came.

Bunter paused at the door, and inclined his head. "Your ladyship." Then he drew the door closed behind him, took Peter's arm and led him up the stairs.

The crash of the sugar bowl against the doors sent Sarah into real hysterics on the second footman's shoulder, but neither Bunter nor his major looked back.

The London scene was hard work for a man home from active service. Bunter knew it himself -- not averse to spending his half-day accompanying the milliner's daughter to the music hall, he nevertheless was pleased to have no evenings off.

But Peter was not so lucky. With the worst of the terrible shell-shock behind him, Barbara demanded his attendance, squiring her to parties and the newer sort of nightclubs. The theatre was not to her taste.

Bunter aided Lord Peter into his blue silk pyjamas and helped him into the majestic four-poster. Some nights Peter liked the heavy brocade curtains closed tight around him, but tonight would not be one of those nights.

Bunter kept the curtains open, and left the door which connected his own room to Peter's ajar. A night upon the town came with certain consequences, and it behooved a valet worthy of the name to be ready.

The call came a bare hour after Bunter had settled for the night -- so quiet he might have missed it had he not been listening for it. Peter, crying out in his sleep, caught in the dark of the past.

At such times, there were no differences in their stations. Bunter caught his master in his arms and held him tight, stilled his thrashing, soothed him with softer words and softer touch.

Peter came awake slowly, first escaping the fear that had stalked him in the night, then gaining realisation of where he was -- who he was. "I say, Bunter." Lord Peter Wimsey sat back shakily. "I seem to be giving you a lot of bother."

"Don't fret, Major." Bunter deliberately rejected the present, and eased his master back against the pillows. "I'm on watch."

A small smile played at the corner of Peter's mouth. "Yes, you are, you devil. And glad I am of it."

Bunter smiled back. For this man, he'd marched across two continents, duelled with death on a daily basis, gone cold, hungry and sleepless that his master might not.

"You're quite safe now. I shan't let 'em into the bivouac, you know."

Peter moved his hand restlessly on the coverlet and Bunter, alive to every need, gripped the slim fingers, folding them safe within his own strong hand. Peter gripped back. "My Bunter. I know very well we're in London, old chap."

Bunter nodded gravely. "I won't let the enemy pass regardless, sir."

"The war's over." Peter closed his eyes, but his smile didn't dim.

"Not all enemies wear uniforms," Bunter said, lowering his voice.

Peter didn't reply, but his smile broadened. And when Bunter stood to leave, the hand clasped in his held on.

Chapter 3

At the Front, such a thing was unthinkable. Done often enough, without thought or forethought, pushed from the mind, never allowed into the heart.

It began in fear, in the hungry terror of death, a brief connection, a briefer moment where fear and pain were forgot. It did not matter -- how could it matter when those whom it touched were marked for death?

Bunter thought thus even in the frantic heat of the coupling, the grasping wet of hands, mouths.

For him, it had never been so simple. But for his master, a married peer, it could be nothing else. This Bunter knew -- this Bunter told himself often and anon, to ensure the knowing. Because, if allowed, his mind was capable of quite startling flights of fancy.

Barbara's days were numbered: that much was sure. Lord Peter would never go so far as to instigate a divorce, but Bunter could see he would not have to. If the chit remained at Christmas, Bunter would count himself extremely surprised. If it was not one of the young socialists who ever haunted the house, it would be the retired Major-General Bunter had privately christened Windbag.

Even as Peter drowsed on his chest, even as Bunter allowed himself the luxury -- the impertinence -- of his fingers in the fine gold hair, he reminded himself that for Peter, this could be no more than an instant's release, a momentary comfort. Less than that found in the arms of a Viennese opera singer. The only permanence lay in master and man.

With a heavy heart, Bunter gently disengaged himself and slid out of bed.

"Where are you going, my Bunter?" Peter, blinking sleepily, hoisted himself up on one elbow. Without the monocle, tousled and heavy with sleep, he looked absurdly young and vulnerable. Bunter's heart twisted.

"I merely checked on your lordship," he said stolidly. "I did not mean to disturb you."

"Steady on, old chap." Peter looked anxious. "Have I... I mean, you're not leaving me, are you? It wasn't -- good God, I didn't get it as wrong as all that, I suppose?"

Bunter swallowed hard. "Of course not, Major. I --" He stopped, at a loss.

Peter beckoned him, patting the blankets. "Unless I disgust you," he said, voice low, "join me again. I cannot help my heart, man."

"Your heart?" It was all Bunter could do to get the words out. He returned to the bed and sat beside his employer, his lord. His all.

"My heart," Peter repeated, and kissed him. Bunter stared, and Peter tried a small smile. "For God's sake, Bunter. I'm making a shocking mull of this. Just tell me to my head. Are you wishing me at the devil? Or do you think... could you learn to care for me?"

"I need not learn, Major." Tears stung the backs of Bunter's eyes, and he forced them back. "But I thought -- your world -- Barbara --"

"My world gave me Barbara, and made me a war hero." Peter grinned with a touch of mischief. "I believe that I have had enough of my world. It seems to me I could have some papers made out in the name of Death Bredon. He's a chap who likes to see the world, and much of the continent is known to be rather more... accommodating, shall we say?"

Bunter gulped. "Your lordship -- "

"Bredon, I think." Peter leaned forward. "Come with me, Bunter. Say you'll come."

Bunter stared into Peter's eyes, and smiled at last. "Of course, Bredon," he said, clasping Peter's hand manfully. "I'll come. I'll come!"

LORD PETER WIMSEY DISAPPEARANCE BAFFLES POLICE

Detective Charles Parker of Scotland Yard today stated that there are no further leads to be found in the mysterious case. Lord Peter Wimsey vanished from his London home last Thursday. Also missing is his valet, Mr Mervyn Bunter.

Lord Peter was a decorated war hero, and unconfirmed sources suggest he may have been suffering from shell-shock. However police report no evidence of foul play can be discovered. Lady Peter Wimsey was unavailable for comment, but was later seen at her box at the opera accompanied by Major Thomas Wilkins.

Detective Parker says that no speculation will be entered into by police, but that at this time no further search for Lord Peter Wimsey is being conducted.

In a small, unremarkable flat on the Rue Ste-Claire in Marseilles, two heads bent over the newspaper clipping. One made a comment, evidently facetious, in French. The other, more grave, poured coffee and pushed a cup to his fellow. "We can go home tomorrow, if you please. Tell them we went to Scotland for the shooting, and have no idea what the fuss is about."

The other looked up and shook his head. "No," he said simply, and bent to the paper again. But his hand found his friend's leg and squeezed.

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