

# AFTER TWO YEARS

By Adrienne Thum

*Crippled But Hopeful, the War Hero Goes Back to the Girls Who Were So Kind to Him; Would They Remember Him and Still Be Kind?*

Jim Sanders does not sound like the name of a hero, but in the world war there were heroes who had even less heroic names. Jim had gone gladly to the front. He wanted excitement, and he had a plenty. He had stood in the cold river all night long, up to his arm pits, helping the boats to land.

It is well he had seen some fighting and excitement before this happened, for afterwards he had only pain and anguish in his legs that would not let him sit or lie or stand in any comfort. Then he was sent home, and put in the hospital at Louisville, Camp Zachary Taylor. It was really the nearest thing to home that Jim had ever known. He was born and brought up in the mountains of Kentucky. He was an orphan before he was six, and had lived, until he was old enough to work, on the charity of people almost as poor as himself. After he left Louisville he had gone from hospital to hospital, but to no avail; the nerves in his legs gradually died.

Jim had never been good looking; sandy hair, wispy and unkempt, small blue eyes, a wide mouth, hollow cheeks, that might have been round before pain had done its work. There was one thing Jim had learned while at Camp Taylor that had glorified even pain. It was that he had a personality. He couldn't forget the throb and thrill and joy he felt, in spite of all his suffering, in knowing that to some people he was not an absolute nonentity. The doctors had found they could not help him, and had given him braces for nerves. The steel braces were very awkward that supported his limp and nerveless legs, but the dreadful pain was gone and that was something.

When fortune smiled on Jim in the shape of a pension, his greatest desire was to go back to where he had first felt the thrill of importance. He knew that Camp Taylor was broken up, but there were the people in the city. That night as he lay in his berth in the sleeper he could hardly sleep for thinking of the folks for the last six months of the war. First there was Miss Grace Ross, who had come to teach him how to make baskets and bead things to pass away the tedious hours when he was on his back. She had taught him how to write a little, too. He could only write his name and form the letters of the alphabet. She saw how much he wanted to learn to read and write than to make fancy things, so she gave him a lesson each time she came out.

"What shall I set for a copy for you?" she had asked. And he had answered with a boldness born of a petted invalid: "Set me the copy 'I love you.'" She had laughed, but she did it. He chuckled aloud in his berth when he thought of how Miss Grace looked at him. Then when he had got better for the time being, and could walk around on his crutches and come to Louisville on the car, Miss Grace had invited him to dinner on Sunday. Mrs. Gross had been so polite and always asked him how his rheumatism was. When he told her at one time he thought he was going west, she didn't understand him and asked—"to what city?"

Miss Grace had laughed and explained, "Why, mother, he meant to Heaven; don't you know the boys call it going west?"

They were awfully fine people and had everything grand, but sometimes he was not just as easy about how to eat and what to say as he was with Mother Wilson. He thought of how he got to know Mother Wilson. He was on the street car. He had laid his crutches beside him, but they obtruded into the aisle so that a pretty girl who got in stumbled over one.

"I am sorry," he said.

"O, it doesn't make any difference," she answered, and sat down beside him. "Mother and I always take an interest in soldiers, and especially if they are wounded."

Then they talked for a while and Mary said her brother had been killed on No Man's land during the first of the war. Her mother had been all broken up, but she was cheered by doing for the soldiers, and there was nothing that made her so happy as to feed them. She asked him to come Wednesday night to supper, and every Wednesday night after that he went, and he felt so free that he took his buddy, John Sparks, with him. It made him sad to think of John Sparks because he had not seen him in the two years since they parted at the depot in Louisville. He wondered where he was. He had written to the address John had given him, but had received no answer. Was it because he had not gotten his letter or was it because he did not care?

Well, he wouldn't think of sad things tonight, because tomorrow he would see all these other dear friends. Mother Wilson embroidered for a dressmaker and Mary was a clerk in a big department store. They were poor, but they certainly did have a cozy little flat. He laughed aloud as he thought of those happy evenings when they invited Jane Springer and Pet Cob over to supper, and they toasted marshmallows and popped corn on the kitchen stove later. Mother Wilson said it did seem as if they could never get enough to eat, and the more they ate the happier she was. O, yes, he had almost forgotten Nannie Murphy; she sewed for the same dressmaker that Mother Wilson embroidered for. Of course, Nannie was an old maid—she was 35, but she was good hearted. She made doughnuts for them all. He recollected how she made a man out of the dough with one leg shorter than the other, and gave it to him. Mother Wilson had cried, "For shame, Nannie, to remind Jim that he is lame."

He had not minded a bit, indeed, he thought it was funny, but the tears had come into Nannie's eyes, and she looked ashamed, so he had patted her hand and said: "Don't you mind, Nan; you are just gettin' back at me for teasing you about being an old maid."

His buddy, John Sparks, had a way with girls, looking at them from under his long eyelashes, and kidding them about everything they did, making them laugh and blush in a way they never did with him; but he knew they liked him, too. If they wanted a lamp, bracelet, clock, lock, or anything mended, they always got him to do it. He was skillful with his hands and was so glad to do anything to please them. How he looked forward to those Wednesday evenings. He remembered how Pet Cob had said to him, "You ought to get married, you are so handy about the house."

The remark had thrilled him, so he could hardly answer. "Do you think anybody would marry a lame duck like me?"

"Sure," Jane Springer had chipped in, "didn't you get it in doing your duty; what are we all talking patriotism for if we wouldn't marry a soldier because he had gotten hurt in the war?"

"I can do things with my hands and make a living."

And then Mother Wilson had remarked, "and if your rheumatism don't get well, they will give you a pension, and it ought not to be any the sum when both your legs are hurt."

But Jim was astute enough to see that it was all fun when the girls spoke of marrying him, but when John Sparks was the one in question, there was an undercurrent of seriousness no matter how the girls laughed and joked. When John had gone away he could see how Pet Cob had missed him. She would ask, with a flush, if he had heard anything from him. He would have been mighty glad if any of the girls had thought that much of him.

How he had yearned for a wife and children and home, no one knew. Of course, he wasn't going to give himself away, and he had hoped so he would get well, and then he could ask—well, most any of those girls if she would love him—would make him glad. Of course, he knew now that he would always be a cripple, but he had his pension, and with his clock mending business he could take care of a wife. Everybody had seemed to like him so much, surely he had enough in him for one woman to love. He thought of the three girls, Mary Wilson, Jane Springer, and Pet Cob, all so young and jolly and industrious. Of course, Nannie Murphy was an old maid and out of the question as far as marrying was concerned, but she was good to him and he would be glad to see her. If he had time, he would call on her. The others would want to see as much of him as they could; he was sure of that. He had started his clock mending business in Chicago and he would have to get back in a few days. He laughed to himself as he thought, "especially if I got married."

He would love to see the Rosses again. He never could be too grateful to Miss Grace for teaching him how to write, even as poorly as he did. Of course, he never could expect Miss Grace to look on him as a beau, but he hoped she would always think of him as a friend. She was awful fine, and stylish. He recalled to mind how they all questioned him at Mother Wilson's about his dinners with the Rosses.

He chuckled as he recalled Pet Cob asking:

"Now what was the first thing you had?"

"I think they said 'croquette; it was soft and mushy and brown."

"What kind of a croquette was it—lobster, chicken, veal, mushroom, or what?"

He shook his head.

"Greeny," cried out Mary Wilson.

"What did it taste like?"

"Well, it was soft; maybe it was chicken."

"Then what?" said Mother Wilson.

"Then some kind of fluffy stuff—egg or whipped cream, and it had little black things in it, either peas or nuts."

"What did they taste like?" asked Nannie Murphy. "I don't think peas and nuts taste alike."

"I couldn't tell; it all went down so slick."

"Isn't he the limit. I'd as lief get up a dinner for a dead man," cried Pet Cob.

"I bet he knows pork and beans and pumpkin pie," put in Mother Wilson.

"What did you have next?" persisted Mary.

Jim had brightened at this and answered, "Salad."

"What kind of a salad?"

"O, for the land's sake, Mary, can't you let Jim alone?"

"No, I want to know. Jim ought to learn how to tell something."

Thus cornered Jim said weakly, "All kinds of things; vegetables and fruits."

"Did it have mayonnaise or French dressing?" asked Jane Springer.

"I don't know and I don't care," Jim cried, beaten into a corner.

"That is right, Jim; it ain't fair for them to get after you so hard. But just tell us did you have any dessert?" put in Nannie Murphy.

"Yes, we had a dessert. At first I thought it was an ice, but it didn't taste like one. It was frozen on the outside, but inside it was soft and mushy and had a dark sweet gravy around it. I think it was chocolate."

"Well, I wouldn't hire you for my cook," said Pet.

"Well, he can pop the best corn in the crowd," defended Nannie.

Jim thought with a smile of good old Nannie, how she always took up for him. Yes, he certainly must find time to go see Nannie, even if the other girls did try to keep him as long as they could. Perhaps Mother Wilson would invite them all over to supper as she had on the Wednesday nights when he was at the camp hospital.

There was Sam La Gros, clerk in the drug store where he bought cigarets. He was an awful clever fellow; he would go to see him. He had taken him to Mother Wilson's one Wednesday, and they had all liked him ever so much; but he never went with him any more, although he thought that he liked Mary Wilson pretty well. He would just stop off on his way to Mother Wilson's and say "Howdy" to Sam.

Jim went to sleep at last. The first thing he knew they were about in Louisville. It would have been a hustle and a scramble to make his toilet except he had not undressed, for the braces on his legs were too hard to adjust for him to take them off in a sleeper. He gave his hair a lick and a promise, put his few scattered possessions in his suit case, and was limping down to the platform.

"Hello, Sam, do you know me?"

"Well, for the love of Mike, if it ain't Jim Sanders. What are those things doing on your legs? I thought by this time you'd be running around like a two-year old."

Jim's face clouded. He had forgotten for the moment all about the pesky things.

"I'm as well as I will ever be, Sam. The nerves are dead and I have to wear these braces to keep my legs from doubling up; but what is all the news with the folks? Seen Mother Wilson and her crowd lately?"

"Well, the latest news with me is I have got a youngster just four weeks old."

"Not and I didn't even know you'd married. Who is the girl?"

"Mary Wilson, of course. Didn't you know I was sweet on Mary?"

Jim's heart gave a thump of disappointment. Not that he cared so much more for Mary than the other girls, only she made one less who might have liked him. But he only said: "I thought you liked Mary, but you never would go with me but once on Wednesday night."

"Yes, but I went most of the other nights. A man don't want a house full of people around when he tells a girl that he loves her."

"Well, I'd like to see her and the kid, too, if it is all right to go."

"Sure it is. We live in the flat with Mother Wilson. She is a sure enough mother to me now, and the grandest kind of a grandmother to the baby."

So Jim hobbled his way to a

street car, just a wee bit sad that things could change so in two years.

Mother Wilson greeted him at her door in a way that warmed his heart.

"It is just like old times to have you back. Come right into the kitchen. There is no fire in the sitting room."

Mary had gone to her mother-in-law's with her baby, there to spend the evening.

"I am so busy getting this embroidery done for a bride. It has to be done by tonight, and it is not half finished. I was just going downtown in a hurry to match this silk, so I will have to excuse myself now, but if you can come and take supper with us this evening, I know Mary and Sam will be delighted and then you can see the baby."

Jim accepted gladly. Then he saw a troubled look come into Mother Wilson's eyes, as she added: "I forgot. Sam told Mary that he would take her to a vaudeville tonight, and as it will be the first time they have been out together since the baby came, I know they would be disappointed not to go."

"That is all right," said Jim.

"Why couldn't you ask Pet Cob and Jane Springer over? I'd like to see the girls."

"My! Didn't you know that Jane Springer has married and gone to St. Louis to live, and Pet Cob was offered a better place in a big store in Chicago and has been there more than a year?"

Jim's heart sank. "And Pet Cob has been in Chicago all that time and never let me know."

"Maybe she did not know your address."

"I sent it to you on a Christmas card. Didn't you tell the girls?"

Mother Wilson cleared her throat and seemed embarrassed. "Well, to tell you the truth, I did tell her, and asked if she wasn't going to let you know she was there."

"And didn't she want to see me? I'd done anything I could to keep her from being lonesome."

"Don't you worry about her being lonesome. Pet's got a beau in Chicago. I think he is a jealous sort of chap, and maybe Pet thought it better not to have you hanging round. You must not feel Pet didn't like you, because I know she did, but naturally she wanted to keep her beau in a good humor."

"How is Nannie Murphy?"

"O, Nannie is the same good soul that she always was." Then Mother Wilson laughed. "She ain't got no beau; it ain't goodness that catches a beau. If it was, Nannie would 'a' been married long ago. But I'll have to go now, and you be sure to come tonight and have supper with me, and I know you will be glad to see the baby."

All the gladness had gone out of the world for Jim; somehow it seemed as if things had gone on just as well and even better without him as with him. Of course, Mother Wilson liked him, but somehow her mind wasn't on him as it had been during the war. Why, she had not even asked him about his rheumatism, she seemed so intent on the embroidery for that bride.

It was a painful progress with his crutch and cane and braces to the home of the Rosses. It was a new maid that opened the door; she did not ask him into the cozy library with a welcoming smile as the other maid had done. Instead, she asked him to have a chair in the hall, and gave him a rather suspicious look. Could it be that on account of his lameness she took him for a beggar? He had on nice clothes; he had taken great pains to get the nicest he could in honor of his return to visit his dearest friends. They looked wrinkled from his night on the train and from bending over his crutch. Then he heard the maid asking, "What name shall I say?"

"Jim Sanders. They know me very well indeed—they will be glad to see me," he added, as he marked her disdainful expression.

A few moments later he heard the Rosses talking on the upper landing. They evidently thought he had been invited into the library out of hearing.

"Mother, it is Jim Sanders downstairs."

"Well, I have got to do that shopping this morning. I will just speak to him and excuse myself. Don't you forget you are going out to luncheon, Grace. Don't let him make you late."

"No, mother, but I must invite him to dinner this evening. It would seem too cool to let him go without inviting him at all."

"Well, just as you like, but the Flemings are coming, and I don't think it will be as pleasant with him. Of course, though, if you can't get out of it, invite him, because I wouldn't hurt his feelings for the world."

Jim did not want them to know that he had heard their conversa-

tion, so he slipped as noiselessly as he could into the library, where he felt sure they expected to find him.

The two ladies came in and greeted him with great cordiality—nor would Jim have felt any lack of the old-time friendship if he had not overheard the conversation on the stairs. Mrs. Ross was exaggeratedly sorry about his legs being paralyzed, listened with absorbed interest to some of the details of the treatment that he had undergone; then when he paused she excused herself, saying she had a most important engagement. Grace was not as effusive as her mother, but Jim felt there was more sympathy for him behind her silence. There was a rather awkward pause after Mrs. Ross left, then Grace remarked: "It is a great thing to have the war over. We can all get back to our normal life."

"But, Miss Grace, I had the time of my life while I was in the hospital here. I never can be grateful enough for all you did for me. I know it was just because the war was going on and you all wanted to be good to us sick soldiers, but then I thought it was all me."

Grace flushed. "I don't know what you mean."

"Well, I can't say things very well, I know, but I thought it was me that the folks were so good to and not just a sick soldier."

"Well, it was you, of course. We would never have met you if you had not been a soldier in the hospital."

"Every one is so busy it seems as if they don't have the time they used to have two years ago. Mother Wilson is such a busy woman, it seems as if she don't have the fun in her she had then."

"O, she is the one who took you to the Methodist church, and you liked going so much she wanted you to join and told her you couldn't because you were waiting to join the church your wife belonged to," laughed Grace.

"That's the one, but I think now I'd take most anything for my chance of getting married."

"You are only 21. I wouldn't give up yet."

"It ain't my age, it is this," and he touched the brace on his leg.

After a few moments' silence Jim asked Grace if she knew anything of the two boys who had had cots beside him at the hospital.

"O, yes," she answered, relieved to change the subject. "The little Virginian went home soon after you left Louisville, and he sent me an invitation to his wedding. And the other one, Litton, I think his name was, I met on the street the other day, and he asked after you. I would not have known him, he looked so well and robust, if he had not stopped me. I was glad to see him, too," and then she added, "I shall always take an interest in the boys that were out at camp."

After a little more talk, Jim remembered about Grace having an engagement to luncheon, so he awkwardly rose to go.

"Oh, don't go yet," said Grace uneasily. "I have an engagement to luncheon, but," looking at her wrist watch, "I don't have to go for half an hour yet."

Jim muttered something about some other folks expecting him.

"Won't you come to dinner tomorrow night?" begged Grace earnestly.

"No, I'm going back tomorrow night."

"This is too short a stay. Well, can't you come to dinner tonight. I know mother would be delighted. She did not know your stay would be so hurried. Why don't you let your friends get more than this little glimpse of you?"

"I told Mother Wilson I'd come there to supper tonight."

"That is too bad for us not to be able to see any more of you than this."

Jim fancied he saw relief in Grace's eyes if not in her tone. He felt instinctively that had it been in her power she would have gladly gone back to the old feeling of interest she had had for him, only the interest was not there and, try as she would, she could not get it back.

"Well, good-bye, and good luck to you," she said, stretching out her hand. "Be sure and come back soon again, and then you must stay longer. It hardly seems worth while to come so far for only one night."

"It is so hard to get around in these things," pointing to his braces. "that I don't think I will travel any more; when I get back to Chicago I reckon I'll stay there."

So Jim went to a cafeteria to lunch, and thought bitterly as he ate his roast beef and mashed potatoes how little he had expected, with all his friends, to be forced to lunch alone. Then he thought of Nannie Murphy.

In the day time she would be sewing.

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