

GRIP

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649597727

Grip by John Strange Winter

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Cover @ 2017

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JOHN STRANGE WINTER

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BY

JOHN STRANGE WINTER



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NEW YORK
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CHAPTER I.

BLACK COAT OR RED ?

I HAD been round to the stables after dinner to see if Joe, the under-groom, had been successful in getting hold of a ferret of which I was particularly anxious to possess myself at a reasonable price. No sign of Joe was to be found, and I sauntered back to the house again, and sat down under the veranda which ran along the side of the house where the dining-room was. I could hear my father's voice as he sat over his wine with his great friend and our nearest neighbor, Squire Eden. I had no intention of listening to their conversation, but we Somerses were not a family who dealt in

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secrets and seldom or never took the trouble to lower our voices.

"Yes, Eden," my father was saying, "I know the living is yours by rights; that was why I gave it to your brother Tom. But now that he is gone, poor fellow, I mean to put in a warming-pan and keep it for George."

"But why don't you give Somersley to George?" Squire Eden asked. "You've got a warming-pan there, too."

"I am going to give it to George," said my father, quietly.

Squire Eden gave a low whistle of astonishment. "Whew! I see that you mean to provide for the lad well—and easily," he remarked, significantly. "They must be worth a cool thousand a year between them."

"See here," said my father, as if a bright idea had occurred to him. "My George and your Margaret have been sweethearts ever since they could toddle. They shall marry and live at Somersley. 'Tis the best house of the two, and they can put a curate in at Thorpe-Hutton."

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"Agreed," cried the Squire, "if so be that the young folk themselves are agreeable."

I slipped out of hearing. I was but a lad of sixteen, but all my pulses were tingling and my blood coursing through my veins at double-quick speed. With pleasure? Oh, dear, no; but, on the contrary, with anger and fury and disgust. Was I, for the sake of a paltry thousand a year, no matter whether it happened to be warm or cool, to be stuck into a parson's black coat and kept psalm-singing all my days, when my sole aim and object in life was to wear the scarlet of the soldier and to carve my name indelibly upon the great roll of fame? And all for the sake of a mere girl—Pooh, it was preposterous! It was true that we had been reckoned sweethearts all our lives, but to become a parson for Margaret's sake—why, that was quite another matter.

I was very fond of Margaret—oh, yes, and I admired her dainty peach-bloom face, but to be a parson—a parson! That was a different thing altogether.

Besides, Margaret was such a mite, four years younger than I, and small and slight

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at that. It was preposterous for our fathers to try to settle any such question.

Margaret was the eldest of the Eden family. Then came Edward, the heir, a cocky young beggar two years younger, who always seemed to have his elbows or knees out. The second girl, Constance, was three years younger than Edward, and the other boy was four years younger still.

In our household there were two brothers and two sisters older than I and one boy younger—the little Benjamin we always called him, though his right name was Wynne, after my mother's family.

At this time my eldest brother Robert was in the Guards; then came Will, a dear old chap, in London reading for the Bar. Then the two girls, Lucy and Rachel, twins of three-and-twenty, both rather pretty girls of a reddish type. Young Wynne was only thirteen years old.

We were all reddish, we Somerses; and, with the exception of Wynne, who came into the world as our mother left it, we all ran to size—not mere length of limb, but to breadth of shoulder and depth of chest, and

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to immense strength of person and constitution. And I had fully made up my mind that no black coat should ever case in my longings.

I had hard work to make my father see things in the same light: he was as determined as I was. But I said my say.

"I am very sorry to go against you, Sir Robert," I said bluntly—we all called our father "Sir Robert," more by way of showing our affection than anything else—"but I cannot be a parson. The people would laugh in my face. The farmers would remember the apples I had stolen, and the rat-hunts and the cock-fights I had joined in. I must be a soldier."

"I cannot afford another soldier," said my father.

"You are thinking of Bob!" I exclaimed. "Oh, I've no wish to be a fine gentleman dandy soldier like Bob."

My father burst out laughing. "You had better not let Bob hear you speaking of him in such fashion as that," he said chuckling. "Gad, he'd crack your skull for you, I warrant."