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THE ARMY POST MURDERS

MASON WRIGHT

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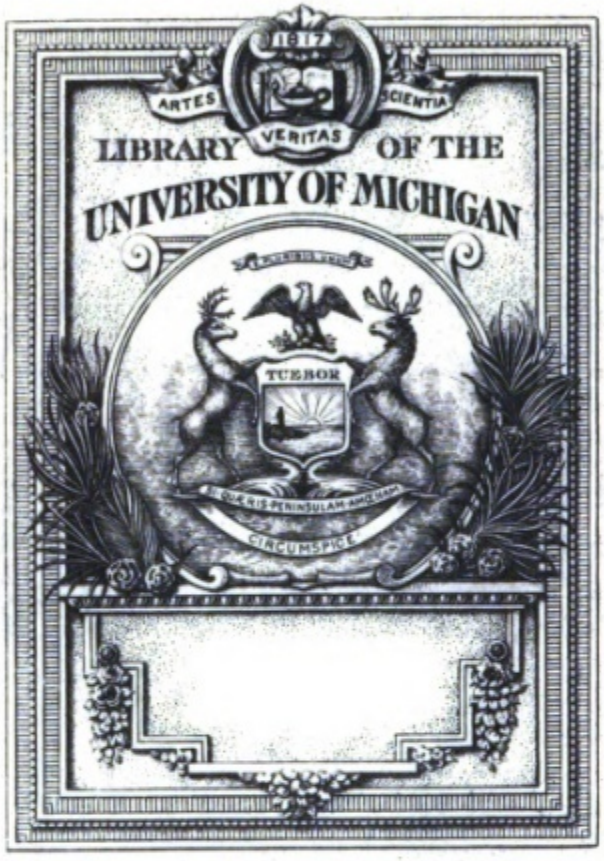

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by

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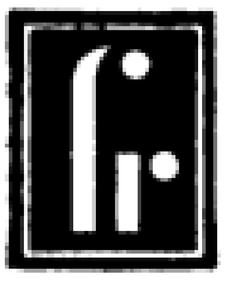

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TO

MARSHALL MARJ AND
GENERAL BILL

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Bequest
O. F. Butler
11-14-39

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CHAPTER I

THE UNEXPECTED GUEST

DOROTHY BALDWIN stood close to the mirror of her dressing table and with her third finger carefully smoothed the carmine on her lips, then wet them with her tongue, and rolled them back and forth between her teeth. She backed away, languorously patting her yellow head, while she surveyed herself with a critical eye.

A door at the back of the house slammed. Heavy footsteps sounded, came up the back stairs, and thumped across the floor of the room next to Dorothy's.

"Is that you, Hal?" she called.

"Yeah," from the adjoining room.

"Sort of late aren't you?" Dorothy tapped a cigaret on the dressing table, and lit it from a tall table lighter. She took several impatient puffs before her husband appeared in the doorway, unfastening his Sam Browne belt.

"Late is right. A bunch of horses down at the bat-

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tery broke out of the corral, and we've been chasing them all over the State of Oklahoma." Captain Baldwin took off his belt and his blouse and tossed them on one of the twin beds, "What are you all dolled up for?"

"Have you forgotten?"

"You mean because it's your birthday?"

"No, you never remember that. We're dining with Minna and Jerry Costain. Have you forgotten?"

Hal groaned, and sitting heavily on the edge of the bed, took the spurs off his boots.

"Have we got to go? I'm tired as the devil."

"Oh, you don't have to dress up. Wear your civies. They're not having anybody but us. I should think that once in a while you wouldn't groan and complain; especially since it's my birthday."

"Oh, all right." Hal drew his hand across his forehead, looked patiently at his wife, and flung himself back on the bed. He hitched his legs up, crossed them on the silk coverlet, and threw an arm across his eyes.

Dorothy stamped out her cigaret, and crossed angrily to the foot of the bed.

"Hal, how many times have I told you not to lie on the beds with those horsy, sweaty boots on? The whole place smells like a stable. I've provided a room for you to keep those smelly uniforms in,

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and I've told you a million times I won't have them in here." There followed a moment of silence. Dorothy Baldwin stood at the foot of the bed with the foot board gripped tightly in her hands. Her face twitched spasmodically; her nostrils dilated, and she controlled her temper with difficulty.

"Hal," she continued in a low voice that trembled with rage, "do you hear me?"

"Yes, Dot." Hal sighed deeply, and taking his arm from his eyes, lay looking up at his wife. She was trembling. He watched her trim little body quivering with anger. The beads on her dress refracted the late afternoon light that shot through the windows of the bedroom. Developing another one of her temper tantrums—she'd been having a good many lately; more than usual. He couldn't understand them. The doctor had called it nerves. Her constant irritability, her emotional reaction to the slightest stimulus had recently been recurring with greater frequency. Tears, entreaties, demands—if these were unsuccessful, she had lately resorted to violent rage. She was definitely reacting on her husband's disposition. For a time he thought that she needed medical attention, but examination—to which she submitted only after the most careful and convincing arguments—proved her physical condition to be perfect. She had a good home, in which she had taken

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Hal stood over her for several minutes, watching her regain control. He was torn between wanting to console her, and knowing the best course was to leave her alone. He crossed to the dressing table, procured a cigaret from the little cloisonné box, and with trembling fingers lit it. Pausing for a moment, with his back toward the bed, he inhaled deeply from the steadying cigaret. Then he walked softly over to the bay window, and stood gazing out.

Perhaps, after all, Dot's trouble was caused by the monotony of this God forsaken post; humdrum army existence. Each day a perfect match for the next—like a string of glass beads. She was an urbanite—born in the roar of New York, raised in its syncopated tempo, incubated in an environment that provided instantly the satisfaction for every want and individual desire. She had never been thrown on her own resources, and consequently she had none. She had grown up dependent upon the countless diversions of the metropolis. Now, suddenly, she had been compressed into the constricting environment of an isolated army post. She liked to go to the theatre; there were none. She went to night clubs; there were none at Fort Comanche. Hal recalled first meeting her at the Club Alababa. She was there with a party of gay, chattering youngsters.

He proposed to her in the summer of 1917, at

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Delafield Pond at West Point, when Hal was mathematics instructor at the United States Military Academy.

Dorothy sat under a tree on the bank, watching Hal dive. Then he came out of the water and walked toward her. He was dripping wet.

"What nice lean hips you have, Hal," she said. "I've never seen you in a bathing suit before."

He slipped into pongee silk bathrobe, and lay down beside her. "I've been trying all afternoon to summon up enough courage to tell you something, Dot."

"What is it?"

"I've got my orders for overseas," he said calmly.

She looked at him suddenly, fear in her eyes.

"Hal!"

"It's true, Dot. I've got to go next week."

She was very still for a moment, looking out over the rippling pond. Hal sat up quietly and took her hand. The contact suddenly sealed mutual, unspoken desire. Dot slumped a little, and buried her face in the damp folds of his clean dressing gown. She began to cry softly.

"Will you marry me, Dot, before I go?"

Between her sobs, she nodded vaguely, without looking up.

Hal came out of the war a Captain. Dorothy

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joined him at Norfolk, where his transport docked. Together they went to Fort Comanche for station—Dot's first army post.

At Fort Comanche, they lived a routine life. Dorothy struggled bravely to adapt herself to the new environment. She busied herself with her new home, sang at her work and strove valiantly to please her husband. But in her heart she hated the place. She hated the housework. This resentment smoldered in her for several months before it began to manifest itself in her disposition.

She commenced to complain, first about one thing, then another; never about anything tangible, but she complained about things in general. She was filled with self-pity. She suggested that she needed a change and wanted to go home. When Hal told her that he had no money available, she clutched at this opportunity and had one of her temper tantrums—the first Hal had witnessed. Then she began to run up bills, to buy clothes far beyond her means, complaining the while to everyone, posing as the neglected wife—seeking consolation, and gloating with morbid delight if anyone expressed commiseration for her.

Captain Baldwin turned from the window and gazed abstractedly at the prostrate figure of his wife. She seemed suddenly to have become a stranger to

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him. He could not understand her. He realized now, with a crushing rush of consciousness that he and the woman he had taken for his wife did not know each other. They had plunged into the intimate association of marriage with nothing to go on but an acquaintance with each other's party personalities. The depths had never been sounded.

Captain Baldwin walked slowly over to the bed, and leaning over, stroked his wife's head;

"Come on, Dotty. Gather yourself together." Receiving no answer, he turned and went into his own study, and closed the door. He switched on the lights, kicked the boot-jack from under the bed, slowly inserted a boot between the prongs, and drew it off. After a bath, he was in the act of putting cuff links into a soft blue shirt, when the front door bell rang. Hal paused to listen. Presently it rang again. He looked at his wrist watch and frowned—six-thirty—then slipping into a dressing gown, he went downstairs and opened the front door.

Colonel Martin Kalendar, commanding officer of the 15th Field Artillery stood there, his gaunt figure silhouetted against the darkness.

Captain Baldwin failed to conceal his astonishment. Colonel Kalendar laughed softly;

"I see I am early," he said in rich, bass tones. "My

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watch must be off. Mrs. Baldwin said half after six, I believe. May I come in?"

Captain Baldwin stepped aside. Colonel Kalendar swept softly past him, and taking off his hat and coat, revealed his immaculate evening clothes.

"It was most thoughtful of you two youngsters to invite me to dinner, and I understand I am doubly complimented, since today is your wife's birthday." Colonel Kalendar removed a package from the pocket of his coat, and then placed the coat on a chair.

"Yes—yes, it is her birthday," Captain Baldwin stammered, "if you'll make yourself comfortable, I'll tell her you're here." Harland stepped across the hall and flashed on the lights in the living room. "I must apologize for my——", he indicated his attire.

"Oh, quite all right Captain, quite all right. I'm often caught unawares myself when my housekeeper is out." Colonel Kalendar tucked the package snugly beneath his left arm and strolled into the living room chuckling to himself.

Baldwin, trembling with a strange emotion that he had never before experienced, went quickly up the stairs. He felt cold sweat trickle down the sides of his body. He entered his wife's room and quickly closed the door. Dorothy was readjusting her hair at the dressing table.

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"Who was that?" she asked casually.

Harland tried to appear calm.

"Kalendar," he said in a voice that sounded strange.

"Colonel Kalendar? Oh!" Dorothy laid down the comb, and turned quickly to her husband. "Hal, what's the matter? Don't look at me like that!"

Baldwin stood very still. "Haven't I forbidden you ever to ask that man to the house?"

"What are you talking about? I haven't asked him."

"Don't lie to me. He's downstairs now. He told me you'd asked him to dinner tonight."

"That I had asked him?"

"Yes."

"I did not. I've never asked him here."

"He says you did."

"How could I, when we are going out?"

"It isn't enough to have the whole garrison talking about you and Kalendar. Do you have to ask him here?"

"I tell you I——"

"Go down and get rid of him."

"Hal, will you listen to me?"

Baldwin's jaw shot out. He threw open the door, and stood to one side, "Go down and get rid of him."

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"Hal!"

"Do as I tell you."

"I will not." Dorothy Baldwin drew herself up.

"Go down and get rid of him," he commanded in ominous tones.

Dorothy paused a moment, then darted a venomous glance at her husband, and swept defiantly out of the room and slammed the door. Hal listened to her high heels click down the stairs and then went slowly back to his room.

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CHAPTER II

MURDER IN CAPTAIN BALDWIN'S QUARTERS

CAPTAIN JERROLD COSTAIN and his wife lived next to the Baldwins in the north half of the double set of officers' quarters. At twenty minutes to seven, Minna Costain was in her kitchen, busily engaged in blending a hollandaise sauce, when Harland Baldwin entered the house through the back door.

She saw at a glance that he was upset. His face was extremely pale, and as he stood with his back against the door, she noticed that the muscles of his jaws worked rapidly. His eyes swept the room with a glance, then rested on Minna.

"Is Dot here?" he asked thickly.

Minna turned back to the stove, pushed the double-boiler of sauce off the hot fire, and wiping the palms of her hands across the breast of her bungalow apron, she walked toward Hal.

"No, she hasn't come over yet." Minna stopped

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and leaned against the table that stood in the middle of the room. "What's the matter? You look as though you'd seen a ghost."

Hal Baldwin took a few steps, his eyes wandering about the room and then he began to feel through his pockets for a cigaret.

"There's some cigarets on the sink," Minna said pointing, "and give me one."

Hal took a cigaret and passed the package to Minna; he struck a match, and broke it. It fell sputtering to the floor. He stamped it out with his foot, and lit another. His hands shook violently as he held the match for Minna to get a light. She looked up at him obliquely as she puffed at her cigaret.

She leaned back again against the table and with a hissing sound, blew out a great cloud of smoke. "I suppose you and Dot have been at it again?"

"She's queered the detail for tonight all right."

"How's that?" Minna looked down to contemplate the glowing tip of her cigaret. Her voice was very low.

"She's asked Kalendar to dinner."

Minna's head jerked up at the words and she watched Baldwin through narrowed eyes as he turned away to flick the ash of his cigaret into the sink.

"Funny, isn't it? What do you think of that?"

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Baldwin laughed nervously and leaned against the sink.

"You mean he's over there now?" Minna measured her words.

"Yes."

"Where's Dot?" Minna's eyes flashed to the clock on the kitchen cabinet, then back to Hal.

"She's over there with him?"

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not sure of anything."

"What's she doing?"

"I told her to get rid of him. Where's Jerry?"

"What?"

"Where's your husband?"

"Upstairs asleep, I suppose," replied Minna, quickly averting her eyes.

"I'll wake him up. I've got to have a drink." Hal started toward the door leading into the pantry. Minna stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Hal." Minna moved away from the table. "How did you find out Dot had asked Colonel Kalendar to dinner?"

"He told me so when I let him in."

"What in God's name did she do a thing like that for?"

"I wish I knew."

"If Mrs. Dempsey ever gets hold of this it will

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be all over the post in no time. She'll spread the news that either you approve of Dot's conduct, or you are too stupid to realize the situation."

"She has already done that."

Minna Costain knew Mrs. Dempsey as the garrison gossip. There is always one woman on every army post who delights in snatching every breath of gossip, editing it to her own satisfaction and spreading the story as rapidly as the available means of communication will permit. Mrs. Dempsey was such a character at Fort Comanche.

The front door slammed, and Minna Costain started violently. She turned suddenly and started across the kitchen, as Dorothy Baldwin burst through the swinging door from the pantry. The instant she saw Hal, she stopped. Her eyelids fluttered. She caught her breath, and after shaking her head several times, said:

"I didn't tell him, Hal. I didn't tell him."

"What do you mean?" Hal moved toward her slowly.

"I didn't go downstairs to him. I couldn't. You frightened me. I'd been crying. I didn't want him to see me. I went down the back stairs and walked down officers' row."

"Why are you trembling?"

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"I haven't told him, Hal, he's still there—waiting. Didn't you see him?"

"No."

Minna turned, and walked over to the door into the back hall, and called upstairs to her husband.

"Jerry! Oh, Jerry!"

"Yes," came the reply from above.

"Come down here—double time. Hell's broken loose." Minna turned back into the room. A faint sardonic smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

"Don't make me go back there, Hal," said Dorothy.

"I told you to get rid of him. I meant it."

"You do it, Hal. You tell him it was a mistake." She spread her hands pathetically. "Look at me. I couldn't let him see me like this."

Dorothy Baldwin turned away and began to weep. Minna came over to her, and patted her shoulder.

"There, there, Dot, what's the use of upsetting yourself this way?"

The sympathetic touch was too much for Dorothy; she clutched Minna frantically, and burst into hysterical sobs.

Hal watched the two women a moment, and then said:

"I'm sorry, Minna, that you should be party to this scene."

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"That's all right. I've been through a lot of them, but if you two kids don't stop this eternal rowing, something serious is liable to happen."

Minna quietly took Dorothy's hands from around her shoulders, and made her stand up straight.

"Listen, Dot," she continued, "don't be foolish. Anyone would think that Colonel Kalendar was trying to break up your home, and you know that such an idea is absurd."

Jerry Costain came running in, buttoning his uniform blouse.

"What's up?" he inquired curtly.

"These two have had another battle," said Minna.

Hal turned to Costain, "Colonel Kalendar's next door—thinks he's staying for dinner. Says Dot asked him."

Costain glanced quickly at Dot. "That's a fine how-do-you-do. What's to be done about it? All this rowing I've heard going on down here won't forward matters."

Minna spoke suddenly. "Hal, there's only one thing to do; all this temper, and what-not won't help. Go over and tell Kalendar the truth. This affair has come to a show down now, and you'll have to make the best of a bad situation."

"What affair?" retorted Hal.

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"Oh, don't be an ass, Hal," said Minna, "you know perfectly well what I mean."

"Minna's right, old man," added Costain with a short laugh.

Hal Baldwin thought for a moment. He looked at his wife standing by the pantry door, her face streaked with tears.

"You're right, Costain, I'm damn well fed up with Kalendar. I'll settle this matter once and for all." With a quick, impulsive movement, he turned and hurried from the room.

Costain exchanged glances with his wife, as they watched him go.

"When he gets back, he'll need a booster charge; I'll fix a stiff one for him." Costain walked over to Dot. "O.K. Dot, it's all fixed. Perhaps a little one'll help you too." So saying, he went into the pantry.

Minna fished in the pocket of her apron, and pulled out a compact. She proffered it to Dot.

"Here, jazz yourself up a bit. You look seedy. There's a mirror on the side of the kitchen cabinet."

Dot took the compact and walked slowly over to the mirror. After a moment she spoke. "Thanks, Minna, for what you did."

Minna was at the stove again. "That's all right, only I didn't know you were afraid of Kalendar."

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There was a moment's silence punctuated by the sound of Minna beating the hollandaise sauce.

"I believe this stuff has curdled." She leaned close to inspect, "yep, curdled is right, but it tastes just as good."

The back door flew suddenly open and Hal staggered into the kitchen, his face ghastly white. He stood clinging to the door knob, swaying on his feet.

"Jerry—Jerry, for God's sake—quick!"

Costain rushed through the swinging door, and looked at Baldwin.

"What's the matter?"

Baldwin moved his lips but no words came forth. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, gulped convulsively, then said:

"Colonel Kalendar's— over— there— he's—he's been stabbed."

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CHAPTER III

VANISHING HANDS

FOUR terrified people stood in the doorway of the Baldwins' living room, staring at the body of Colonel Kalendar. He sat bolt upright in a chair next to the table in the center of the room, his back toward the door. His left hand lay curled on the arm of the chair, elbow outside; head thrown back. Over the point of the left shoulder, the hilt of a knife was visible.

The overhead chandelier, which Captain Baldwin had turned on half an hour before, shed a garish light on the horrible scene. The window shades had been pulled down, and a thin column of smoke ascended casually from a deep pewter ash tray in which the smouldering butt of a cigaret had fired the remnants of others. The silence of death brooded over the scene, interrupted by the hard staccato breathing of the four people crowded into the doorway.

Without warning, the dead man's left hand slipped

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from the side of the chair, the arm straightened limply and hung dangling from the shoulder.

Baldwin started. "Quick Costain. He isn't dead."

The two men moved softly into the room, and went around the chair so as to face the body—Costain first, followed by Baldwin, who stood fascinated at the sight. He stared at the body, then shuddered.

Kalendar's head was thrown back, his eyes rolled up as though he had tried to look at someone over the top of his head. The jaw hung open in a strained grin, and a few strings of saliva dangled from the lower lip. From the left bosom of the shirt—just at the heart—protruded the large hilt of a long butcher knife. Beneath the edge of the blade, there was only a trace of blood on the white bosom of the shirt.

Costain gripped the hilt of the blade in his left hand, and gave it a tug. It did not budge.

"This was struck with powerful intent. It seems to have pierced the wood on the back of his chair. I've got to get it out—the poor devil may be still living." Costain caught his breath, and with a final effort unfixed the point of the blade, and drew the knife from the body. It glistened blood in the cold light of the room.

Dorothy Baldwin groaned hoarsely, and slipped quietly down the door-jamb to the floor. Minna

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Costain stood against the wall, her spread hands covering her face, to shut out the scene.

Costain turned the knife over and over in his hand, staring at the blade with squinted eyes. His wife looked out from her hands. "Put it down! Put it down!" she screamed.

Costain looked at his wife, and laid the knife on the table, then reaching over the side of the chair, he raised the left hand of the dead Colonel, and paused to feel a pulse.

"I can't feel a pulse—there may be, though." He dropped the hand. "Now listen to me, every one of you——" Hal began to talk incoherently to the women. "Stop that damn chattering—this is murder." He stared with quick eyes at the terrified group. "We're all implicated, every one of us. Get that?"

"I swear before God he was there—like that, when I came after him," groaned Hal Baldwin, looking appealingly at Costain.

"Never mind that," snapped Costain, "we've got to keep our heads. You especially Hal—you found him." Hal Baldwin turned away, wincing. "Now the easiest thing to do is to answer every question they ask. Hal, double time over to Doc. Zabriski's quarters and bring him on the run. I'll get hold of General Phipps. This matter must be reported imme-

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diately." Costain started toward the door. Baldwin hurried after him, and plucked him by the sleeve.

"Listen, Costain, what the hell's all the hurry? I think we better fix this story up, don't you?"

Costain turned, his eyes flashing.

"What do you mean—fix the story?"

"I mean we——" Hal suddenly hesitated, his eyes widened. "No—Costain—no. I didn't mean that you're insinuating—good God—you think I——"

"Never mind what I think—get the surgeon, and hurry. I'll hustle these women upstairs." Costain shrugged his sleeve loose from Baldwin's grip.

Captain Baldwin rushed out of the room, and running out of the front door, slammed it behind him.

Still leaning against the wall, Minna turned to her husband. The black, beady eyes in her drawn and pallid face were wide open with fright.

"What shall we do, Jerry? What shall we do?" she cried.

"Keep your head—you'll need it," he cautioned in a low whisper, glancing around as though to discover unseen eyes.

"Why, why did we ever come over here? I'm going home," Minna groaned.

"You'll do nothing of the sort. You're going to stay here with Dot while I go for the General."

"No, Jerry, no." Her eyes searched his face. "I

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couldn't stay alone with—that." She cast a terrified glance at the body.

"You're going to stay here with Dot, I tell you."

Captain Costain bent down, and slipping his arms under Dorothy Baldwin, lifted her up. He jounced her heavily into a more comfortable carrying position, and turned to his wife.

"Go upstairs and show me her room."

Minna, with a last glance at the body of Colonel Kalendar, left the room hurriedly and preceded her husband up the stairs. At the head of the stairs, she pressed on the hall lights, and entering a room to the right, lit the chandelier, then went over to one of the beds and threw back the coverlet.

Jerry followed her into the room, and deposited Dot's limp form on the twin bed nearest the bay window. He felt her pulse, laid his hand on her cold head.

Minna stood at the foot of the bed watching him under drooped, cynical eyelids.

"See if you can find some aromatic spirits of ammonia in the bathroom," Jerry said, looking at his wife across his shoulder.

"Go to the devil," she cried.

"Minna!" He straightened up.

"You don't seem very damn anxious to get the General," she said hysterically.

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With a lightning move, Jerrold was at his wife's side. "Shut up, you little fool. Do as I tell you. You don't know who's in this house."

Minna's hand flew to her mouth. She turned her head and looked at the door to the hall.

"My God, Jerry, I can't stay here—I'm afraid."

"You've got to. Get the ammonia and give her a teaspoonful in some water. I shan't be gone fifteen minutes."

"Jerry, I can't stay here alone."

"Why not?"

"Suppose someone should come in—what would I do?"

"No one will."

"But, I'm afraid, Jerry. I'm going with you."

"No, you can't; you've got to care for Dorothy." He patted her shoulder encouragingly. "Be a good sport. You've got to play your bit too."

She looked at him doubtfully. "Well, I'll try."

Jerry darted quickly out of the room. Minna rushed over and locked the door to the hall, then went into Hal's room and locked the door leading to the back stairs.

She flew back to the bed on which Dorothy Baldwin was lying and sat down. Reaching impulsively for one of Dorothy's hands, she gripped it tightly in her own.

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She listened intently. Her ears attuned themselves quickly to the silence. She heard nothing until presently the sound of a self-starter on a motor came to her—a familiar sound—her car going off—Jerry on his way for General Phipps. The sound of the motor car died away in the distance. Then silence—heavy, oppressive silence. Downstairs in the chair—that body—she had never seen anything like that before —a butcher knife in his chest—cigaret smoke— Her ears caught a furtive sound—someone walking? She shook Dorothy's arm fiercely.

"Dot! Dot!" she cried, looking closely at her unconscious companion.

Dorothy Baldwin stirred.

"Dot!" she cried again.

Dorothy Baldwin's eyes fluttered and opened. She lay quite still blinking at Minna.

"Dorothy," continued Minna, "I'm glad that you are all right."

"Where—where is Hal?" Dot muttered.

"He's gone for the surgeon."

Dorothy Baldwin's hand closed with vise-like grip on Minna's; she muttered something incoherent, and fainted again.

Minna could hear the tiny French clock ticking on the dressing table, and began to count the ticks—one—two—three—four. Anything to keep her mind

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off the thing downstairs. The beams of the moon crept across the floor—full moon—moonlight; how white corpses look in the moonlight—still and cold—death—a butcher knife in the chest.

She remembered Colonel Kalendar; tall, alluring, a deep resonant voice. She had been over to his quarters many times, for recipes—his housekeeper, Jennie, was a wonderful cook. She had studied him, and decided he was unusual—unusual—yes!

Her thoughts were interrupted. Motors in the street—slamming automobile doors—voices—strange voices—then—oblivion.

General Alonzo Phipps, the commanding General at Fort Comanche, alighted gingerly from Captain Costain's modest coupé and stood shrugging his shoulders in his handsome uniform coat. Costain stopped his motor, and stepped out. The men stood facing each other for a moment.

"Murder, you say, Costain, murder?" inquired the General, glancing over his shoulder.

"Yes, sir. It appears to be. Colonel Kalendar is in there in Captain Baldwin's living room. There's a butcher knife in Kalendar's chest."

"Good Lord! This is most horrible—most devastating—well, well!" The General cleared his throat. This was a new situation for him, and he was not quite confident how to estimate it.

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After Lieutenant Clovis Bowles, General Phipps' aide-de-camp had alighted, Costain closed the door of his coupé, and turned toward Captain Baldwin's quarters.

"Er—ah—just a minute, Costain. You say Colonel Kalendar was murdered?"

"I suggested he was, sir. He's sitting in there," Costain nodded toward the quarters, "in the parlor with a carving knife in his chest."

"Murder, undoubtedly!" allowed the General.

At that moment two figures loomed in the darkness. Captain Baldwin and Major Zabriski, the post surgeon, came walking rapidly down the sidewalk.

"Well, well, well, Zabriski, this is a fine situation for a peaceful command. Captain Costain assures me murder has been committed."

"I don't understand it, General," panted Zabriski. "Captain Baldwin appeared at my quarters in a most hysterical condition. You'll pardon my delay, General, but I was not in uniform when Baldwin arrived."

"Quite right—quite all right, Zabriski, I never wear my uniform in the house either; it constricts my abdomen—ha, ha! Shall we go on, gentlemen?"

General Phipps propelled his diminutive body up the walk to the Baldwin quarters. Captain Costain

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and the aide followed, trailed by Major Zabriski and Captain Baldwin.

The five mounted the steps, opened the front door and passed into the quarters.

General Phipps and Costain entered the living room ahead of the others. Costain stopped suddenly and stared wide-eyed and bewildered ahead of him.

The body of Colonel Kalendar had disappeared.

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CHAPTER IV

THE GENERAL'S EDICT

GENERAL PHIPPS walked defiantly around the room, his heels clicking on the floor when he stepped between the rugs. He irritably rapped a shining bootleg with his reed crop. Captain Costain and Hal Baldwin stood side by side at the door, open-mouthed, silent, staring at the vacant chair. Lieutenant Bowles regarded the two officers with quaint inquisitiveness. At length General Phipps settled like a humming bird in front of the window, facing his officers. He clenched his hands behind his back, and rocked to and fro on his feet.

"Well, gentlemen," he began, "do you 'think because it is Hallowe'en that you are privileged to play pranks?"

Baldwin merely shifted his eyes to General Phipps. Costain cleared his throat and muttered:

"I don't understand, General. He was there, in that chair, dead, when I went for you."

Major Zabriski, who had stood to one side when

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they entered the living room, addressed the General:

"Pardon me, General, if you will." He turned to Costain, "Where was Colonel Kalendar when you left?"

Harland Baldwin answered, "There in that chair." He pointed to the chair by the table in the center of the room.

Major Zabriski walked over to the indicated chair. He paused facing it, carefully took out his rimless eyeglasses and adjusted them on his nose. Leaning over, he inspected the chair closely. He passed his hand over the face of the chair back, and suddenly jerked it away; looked at it, then turning to the General, exhibited his hand.

"Blood, General." He raised the palm of his hand to his nose, and inhaled deeply. "Human blood, sir." He closed his fingers over the dark splotch on the palm, then opened them, "Fairly fresh—just becoming sticky. If I may venture a suggestion, I think that you are, perhaps, incorrect about this being a Hallowe'en prank. Something has happened here." He took off his glasses, and holding them poised in his left hand, gazed abstractedly at the officers about him. "Am I correct, gentlemen?"

Captain Baldwin nodded. Costain did not indicate

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assent, but continued to stare at General Phipps, as though he expected him to say something.

"Then," chirped the General, "there must be a corpus delicti. Where is it?" He pointed with his riding crop to Baldwin and Costain. "These gentlemen assure me that Colonel Kalendar was killed in this room. Yet, I find no evidence—that is to say, definite evidence to this effect." The General glanced at his aide-de-camp, "See what you can find, Bowles."

Lieutenant Bowles stepped in military fashion to the front—as though he were on perpetual parade.

"Yes, sir." He saluted, turned smartly on his heel and left the room.

The General grunted, tapped his boot; then addressed Baldwin.

"What do you know of this, Baldwin?"

"Only, sir, that Colonel Kalendar was coming to my house to dine tonight, much to my astonishment. At least so he told me."

"When did you learn that?" asked the General.

"When he arrived for dinner," replied Baldwin.

"Oh yes, naturally—of course," said the General, "well?"

"Well, you see we were going out for dinner, and evidently the Colonel had made a mistake so——"

"I see," mused General Phipps, "and where's your wife?"

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"She's upstairs, sir."

"I see," resumed the General, "and when you discovered Colonel Kalendar had arrived for dinner, what did you do?"

"I excused myself, and went upstairs to acquaint my wife of the fact."

"Acquaint her?" The General raised his eyebrows, "Didn't she know it?"

"I mean I went upstairs to tell her that Colonel Kalendar had arrived."

"I see," General Phipps relapsed into silence.

Major Zabriski turned to the General, holding the bloody butcher knife delicately between his fingers. The surface of the handle he guarded with a piece of paper torn from a magazine on the table.

"There's been murder all right, sir. As far as I can tell, a fiendish blow was struck. The hole in the back of the chair appears to be just about the size of this knife blade, and the blade is covered with blood."

"Is that the knife with which Kalendar was murdered?" inquired General Phipps, looking at Baldwin and Costain.

"Yes, sir," Costain replied, "as far as I know. That was the knife I found."

"How, then, does it come to be on the table?"

Costain cleared his throat. "After we discovered

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the body, we stood there in that door a moment. Then suddenly the left hand slipped from the arm of the chair. Baldwin and I rushed over to Colonel Kalendar. I thought of course that he was still alive, and I pulled out the knife."

"Was he alive?" with a glance of professional interest, asked Major Zabriski.

"I don't know," Costain answered. "I was too excited to tell, really. I sent Baldwin for you."

"All of which gets us nowhere," concluded General Phipps. "And you, Costain, have you anything to add to what Captain Baldwin has told me?"

"No, sir, we were all here together."

"We?" The General raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, sir," continued Costain, "Captain Baldwin and his wife, I and my wife. My wife is upstairs now with Mrs. Baldwin."

"I see, you were all going out to dinner together," the General said.

"No, sir," added Costain, "Captain Baldwin and his wife were coming over to my house for dinner. My wife had asked them."

"Then the Baldwins were over at your house?"

"Yes, sir."

"But Colonel Kalendar was here. Was he here alone?"

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Captain Baldwin broke in, "No, sir, after I let Colonel Kalendar in, I went upstairs to tell my wife —I told you that—and to finish getting dressed. I was in a dressing gown when I let him in. My wife came downstairs to—to tell him there had been a mistake."

"And you finished dressing?" inquired General Phipps. "After you were dressed did you come down?"

"No, sir, I went down the back stairs and over to Captain Costain's quarters."

"Why did you do that?"

There was a tense pause, and then from Baldwin, "I'd rather not answer that question, sir."

"I see," the General said, and looked with disapproval at Baldwin.

At this moment Lieutenant Bowles returned.

"I can find no trace of the body, sir. I've searched the premises. Colonel Kalendar's hat and coat are on a chair in the hall. I assume they are his, because the hat has the initials M.K. punched in the sweat band, and sewed to the inner lining of the inside pocket of the coat is a tailor's label"—here Lieutenant Bowles consulted a pocket memorandum book —"McVey and Scott, tailors, 122 West 45th Street, New York, New York. Colonel Martin Kalendar, December 14—1918."

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The General smiled. "I congratulate you, Bowles. Anything else?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Baldwin and Mrs. Costain are coming downstairs. I suggested that the General might desire to interview them."

"I hardly think we need press this distressing situation to the point of embarrassing your wives, gentlemen. However, there are one or two questions I would like to ask them."

"Yes, sir," from Baldwin.

"Yes, sir," from Costain.

Minna Costain entered the room, Dorothy Baldwin leaning heavily on her for support. Both women were agitated. Dorothy looked appealingly at General Phipps, and began to weep softly.

"Chairs, Bowles," said the General.

Bowles procured two chairs from against the wall, and set them side by side near the center of the room, facing the General. Minna helped Dorothy to one chair, and then sat down beside her. Costain remained leaning against the wall opposite; Baldwin moved slowly over behind his wife's chair, and laid his hands on her shoulders. She reached up and gripped one tightly.

General Phipps spoke in a gentle voice, "I am very sorry, Mrs. Baldwin, that you are involved in this terrible affair—and you too, Mrs. Costain."

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Minna looked defiantly at him—her black eyes narrowing to slits.

"I'm not involved," she muttered in a low voice, filled with venom.

"Nevertheless, I must ask you two ladies a few questions. Mrs. Baldwin, your husband tells me that Colonel Kalendar arrived unexpectedly for dinner."

"Yes."

"And that you came down to tell him there had been a mistake and——"

"I didn't come down. . . . I never saw him." Dorothy Baldwin gripped the sides of her chair and spoke in shrill, passionate tones. "I wouldn't come down. I ran down the back stairs and out of the house."

"Oh, you left the house?"

"Yes."

"Why did you do that?"

"I don't know. I was frightened, I guess."

"Why?"

"I was afraid of Colonel Kalendar."

"Why should you be afraid of him?"

"I don't know. Oh, General, please don't ask me any questions now."

General Phipps came a little nearer Mrs. Baldwin.

"I'm afraid I must, Mrs. Baldwin," he said. "You

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went down the back stairs, and left the house, you said."

"Yes."

"Where did you go?"

"I went for a walk." Dorothy bit her lip, realizing the absurd sound of this statement.

"I see." The General tapped his boot. "That left you, Baldwin, alone in the house."

"I never saw Kalendar again, General, until I came back from the Costains' quarters and found him murdered. You see——"

"No, I don't see. I'm damned if I see." The General's eyes flashed.

"Bowles!"

"Yes, sir."

"Get me the United States District Attorney over our leased wire to Oklahoma City—Patterson's his name. I want to speak to him personally."

"Yes, sir." Bowles went into the hall and picked up the telephone. He stood in the living room door as he put through the call.

General Phipps again addressed himself to the people in the room. "Colonel Kalendar has been murdered in your quarters, Captain Baldwin—the body is spirited away; none of you is willing to tell me what happened; you all beat around the bush. I've given you an opportunity to tell me everything,

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but you are hiding the facts in the case. Do you understand that? You're hiding what you know; you're not telling me the truth—any of you. Do you expect me to believe a cock and bull story about a body being spirited away fifteen minutes after you saw it here—dead? There's something fishy about this and I intend to probe to the bottom of it."

General Phipps looked from one to the other, in anticipation of some remark. He remained silent for several moments, then his gaze finally returned to Baldwin.

Baldwin moved uneasily in his chair, "But, sir, you don't understand," he began, in an apprehensive voice, "let——"

"I understand that you found Colonel Kalendar murdered. I understand that you and your wife have concealed something from me and also that——"

"Pardon me, sir," Bowles interposed, holding out the telephone, "Mr. Patterson is on the wire."

General Phipps stepped across the room and took the telephone, "Hello, Patterson. General Phipps at Fort Comanche speaking. Yes,—How are you?—That's good— Say, Patterson, there's been a nasty murder down here at the post—no—no. Colonel Kalendar has been killed. Yes—Yes, I know. No—no. Several officers of my command are involved. I'd like you to send down a competent man to handle

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the affair with as little notoriety as possible. I understand that James Boodler from Washington is now on a case of yours. Yes. Can you send him? I know him, you see, and it might make things simpler to have him here— Good. When may I expect him?— That's excellent. Yes— Good-bye and thank you. Yes, I'll take care of that."

General Phipps handed the telephone back to his omnipotent aide, and turned to the gathering. They looked at him thunderstruck.

"You have had your chance, all of you, to be truthful about this affair. You have not done so. This is murder on a military reservation in time of peace. It is a matter of federal jurisprudence; entirely outside the province of the military articles of war. Captain Baldwin, you will consider yourself under arrest in quarters. I can take no action against you, Mrs. Baldwin, but I advise you to remain at home until such time as the civil authorities, who will arrive tomorrow, give you your freedom. Captain Costain, you will remain within the limits of the post until I see fit to relieve that restriction, and I trust that you will also acquaint your wife with the advisability of doing likewise. Mr. Bowles, give the necessary orders to have a guard immediately placed on these quarters, with instructions that no one is to enter or leave here without written authority from me. Place

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another guard inside with orders that nothing in this room is to be handled or removed until after the civil authorities have inspected the premises. You had better remain here until the sentinel reports on."

General Phipps moved briskly over to the door, and turning back said, "Coming Zabriski?" The General deliberately set his cap on his head, drew on his gloves, took a final all-including glance at the gathering and departed, followed by Major Zabriski.

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CHAPTER V

JIMMIE BOODLER TAKES COMMAND

FORT COMANCHE station is four miles from the post. A forlorn greystone doll's house of an edifice squatting alone on an expanse of prairie. A thread of breakfast smoke floated lazily from the chimney. An olive drab "official" car lumbered up to the station platform and stopped. Lieutenant Bowles stepped out and banged the door; spoke a word to the driver and sauntered across the platform to the station. One half of the building served as a waiting, baggage and freight room; the other half housed the station agent. Lieutenant Bowles rapped on the door and entered.

"Hello, Perkie," he said, addressing an individual in overalls and a cast-off soldier shirt, "the Fort Worth on time?"

"Good mornin', Lootenant. I ain't had word 's yet, but I reckon h'it is. H'extry fare spacials mostly keeps t'time. How's your General? Have a cup of coffee?"

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"No thanks, Perkie."

"Who's comin' in, Lootenant, one o' them h'inspectors?" Perkie touched the hot handle of the coffee pot, and vigorously snapped his fingers. "Whew! Hot!" He reached in his hip pocket, and extracting an enormous blue bandanna, gripped the coffee pot, and taking a battered enamel cup from a nearby shelf, filled it with the muddy brown liquor. "Noticed h't was a bit bitey when I went to the outhouse a while back. Shore you didn't git chilled drivin' over? A cup of this black lye 'll either warm ye h'up or kill ye." He sipped noisily from the cup, screwing up his face.

"No thanks, Perkie. Never drink coffee."

"Have the makin's?" With his cup he pointed to a sack of tobacco lying on the table.

"No thanks, don't smoke."

Perkie looked at him.

In the distance a whistle sounded, one long blast for a station stop.

"There she is," said Perkie, setting down the cup of coffee. "Better step smart. She don't pause here but a maybe."

The two men went out onto the platform. A moment later, the Fort Worth Express roared past and ground to a stop. A conductor opened a Pullman door and stuck out his head.

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"One passenger, Perkie, way back in car ninety-six."

Lieutenant Bowles looked back, and far down the track saw a white coated porter descend to the ground, and reach back into the car and withdraw an armful of baggage.

Lieutenant Bowles trotted nimbly down the track, arriving at the car just as James Everhart Boodler stepped off the train.

"Thanks, George. Here," Jimmie Boodler tossed the porter a silver dollar, "buy yourself a new gold tooth."

"Thank you, sir." The porter saluted, stepped into the car, waved to the conductor. As he slammed the door, the train pulled away leaving Lieutenant Bowles and Jimmie Boodler standing on the road bed.

"I presume you are Mr. Boodler?" asked Bowles.

"Yes, sir, I am," Jimmie held out his hand to Lieutenant Bowles and grinned, revealing a row of even sparkling teeth.

"I'm Lieutenant Bowles, General Phipps' aide-de-camp." They shook hands, and Bowles noticed the terrific grip the little man had.

Jimmie Boodler tilted his hat to the back of his head, threw back his coat lapels, and placing his

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knuckles akimbo on his hips, looked around him at the desolate Oklahoma dawn.

"Well, can you tie this?" he muttered half to himself. "James Everhart Boodler solves Lone Wolf Murder. Ha! Oh, murder me not on the lone prairie."

"I beg your pardon?" said Bowles, as he straightened up with a bag in each hand.

"Oh, nothing, I'm just struck—struck dumb with the scenery you've got around here. Here, gimme some of that baggage."

He took one of the bags and together the two men started down the tracks toward the station.

"If I'd known this place is so ritzy, I'd have brought my wardrobe trunk," laughed Jimmie.

"It isn't much of a place for dressing up. We rough it here—very seldom wear a blouse—just O. D. shirts and campaign hats."

"And boots," smiled Jimmie, contemplating Lieutenant Bowles' immaculate footgear.

Bowles laughed. He liked Jimmie Boodler already. He had a way of smiling and of looking straight at you that got under your skin.

"I suppose you wonder how I get into these boots?' said Bowles.

"No, I can guess that. But how do you get out of them?"

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As they approached the car, the station platform grew narrow, and Bowles fell behind Jimmie Boodler. He noticed he was nearly a head taller than the diminutive detective.

As they got in the car, Bowles was surprised to see Jimmie pull out one of the jump-seats and sit down.

"Wouldn't you prefer to ride back here?" asked Bowles.

"No thanks. I'd rather sit here. I want to see what you look like, and you probably are itching for an opportunity to look me over."

"Well, I——" stammered Bowles, growing red.

The car started and lurched away down the road.

"That's all right, Mr. Bowles . . . Mr. Bowles. That won't do, will it?"

"My first name is Clovis," said Bowles, a little bewildered at the apparent facetiousness of Jimmie's dynamic personality.

"Names are funny things, aren't they? Consider the congruence of mine. Jimmie Boodler. Ever been to West Point?"

"No, I came from civil life—college, I mean—during the war."

"Then you don't know what Boodle is?"

"I can't say that I do," laughed Bowles.

"Well, the cadets at West Point have a candy

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store where they buy stuff and smuggle it into barracks. That's contraband, and they call it boodle, and they call the store 'The Boodlers'. I've never been able to discover whether there's a contraband sugar daddy hanging on my family tree or not."

Jimmie turned and looked out of the car. He smothered a yawn. Bowles had an opportunity to scrutinize his face—lean, rather good looking with a tinge to the cheeks. The dark beard gave evidence he had not yet shaved this morning. His black eyes were surmounted by thin expressive brows. Bowles couldn't see his hair; he had on a gray felt hat set at a jaunty angle. His educated hands looked temperamental but remarkably capable. His clothes were well cut, fashionable, and so quiet that they seemed incongruous. Bowles thought that the tie at least should strike a false note, but it did not.

During the silence, Bowles fell to wondering about this enigma opposite him. Boodler was not the type he had conjured for a detective. He speculated on where Jimmie came from, and what he used to do.

Then suddenly without turning to look at Bowles, Jimmie said,

"I used to be a college professor."

"What?" gasped Bowles.

Jimmie turned and snapped his eyes at the young officer. "Isn't that what you were wondering?"

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"Why, yes, but how did you guess it? Are you clairvoyant in addition to your other talents?"

"Certainly not, but everybody wonders just as you did."

"I see." Damn, thought Bowles, I'm acquiring the old man's vocabulary.

"I taught psychology at the University of Pennsylvania—oh, don't let that worry you—I've got over it. Anyhow, I dropped into this game by accident. I was called in on a case—nasty one, too—out in Bryn Mawr. Series of throat slashings in a girls' school there. Well, I got the breaks and a lot of undeserved notoriety—I capitalized that, and here I am. The living example of Fanny Farmer's recipe for sure-fire success."

"It must be fascinating work," ventured Lieutenant Bowles.

"No, it's a lot like your Army, I guess. Most of it's pick and shovel work."

"Would you like to hear the details about the tragedy at Comanche?"

"Nope. I'm like you soldiers that way too; I can't work on an empty stomach. Show me the shower, let me graze over a couple of three-minute eggs and some coffee, and I'll be ready for work."

"It sounds funny, your calling it work in such a matter of fact way."

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Jimmie looked seriously at Lieutenant Bowles. "I guess you're right. I never looked at it from that angle before."

The automobile stopped. The soldier driver sprang out, and opened the door.

"Well, here we are. You're quartered at the club." Lieutenant Bowles stepped out and addressed the soldier, "Corporal Judson, put Mr. Boodler's bags up in apartment twenty-three."

Jimmie Boodler got out, and stood looking up at the brick building neatly trimmed with white.

"You chaps certainly are well fixed."

They walked up the path, and mounted the steps to the porch. Bowles paused at the door of the building.

"I'll have your breakfast sent up. Judson'll show you the apartment." He flipped up his left cuff to consult his watch. "I've got to see General Phipps. I'm late now and that's one thing the General won't stand for. I'll phone you in about an hour. Make yourself comfortable. S'long." Bowles saluted, and turned away down the porch.

Jimmie found his apartment comfortable. There were three rooms; living room, furnished with ponderous government mahogany furniture; a bathroom, then a bedroom next. He looked out the living room window—evidently toward the back of the

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house. Two soldiers went by on an ash wagon drawn by sleek mules. The soldiers were singing:

"You're in the Army now,
You're not behind a plow.
You'll never get rich——"

The telephone rang. Jimmie turned from the window and crossing to the desk, took down the receiver.

"Hello. Oh, yes, steward. That's right, three minute eggs, coffee and toast. I don't suppose you have such a thing as a morning paper—yes, I thought not."

Jimmie hung up, sauntered into the bedroom, unpacked leisurely; shaved and bathed.

"I suggest a jolly suit of tweed in this bracing prairie air," he mused.

He dressed slowly, ate his breakfast, and dumped his belongings around the room in his usual helter-skelter manner.

At precisely nine o'clock there came a knock on the door. In response to Jimmie's lusty "come in", General Phipps entered, followed by Lieutenant Bowles.

"Well, well, well, well!" chirped the General jovially as he entered the living room and approached Jimmie with extended hand. "I thought

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