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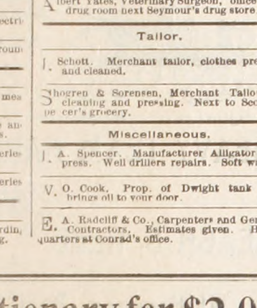

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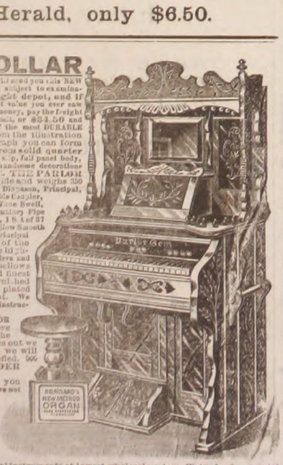

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But to Canker's dismay the officer of the guard made prompt report. The sentry was sent, but the sergeant's tent was empty. The colonel's pet had flown. This meant more trouble for the colonel.

Meantime Stanley Armstrong had hied him to Gen. Drayton's headquarters. The office tents were well filled with clerks, orderlies, aides and other officers who had come in on business, but the meeting was by appointment, and after brief delay the camp commander excused himself to those present and ushered Armstrong into his own private tent, the scene of the merry festivities the evening of Mrs. Garrison's unexpected arrival. There the general turned quickly on his visitor with the low-toned question:

"Well—what have you found?"

"Enough to give me strong reason for believing that Morton, so-called, is young Prime, and that your nephew is with him, sir."

The old soldier's sad eyes lighted with sudden hope. Yet as he passed his hand wearily over his forehead, the look of doubt and uncertainty slowly returned. "It accounts for the letters reaching me here," he said, "but—I've known that boy from babyhood, Armstrong, and a more intense nature I have never heard of. What he starts in to do he will carry out if it kills him." And Drayton looked drearily about the tent as though in search of something he didn't quite know what. Then he settled back slowly into his favorite old chair. "Do sit down, Armstrong. I want to speak with you a moment." Yet it was the colonel who was the first to break the silence.

"May I ask if you have had time to look at any of the letters, sir?"

"Do I look as though I had time to do anything?" said the chief, dropping his hands and uplifting a lined and haggard face, yet so refined. "Anything but work, work, morn, noon and night. The mass of details one has to meet here is something appalling. It weighs on me like a nightmare, Armstrong. No, I was worn out the night after the package reached me. When next I sought it the letters were gone."

"How long was that, general?"

Again the weary hands, with their long, tapering fingers, came up to the old soldier's brow. He pondered a moment. "It must have been the next afternoon, I think, but I can't be sure."

"And you had left them—?"

"In the inside pocket of that old overcoat of mine, hanging there on the rear tent pole," was the answer, as the general turned half round in his chair and glanced wistfully, self-reproachfully thither.

Armstrong arose and, going to the back of the tent, made close examination. The canvas home of the chief was what is known as the hospital tent, but instead of being pitched with the ordinary ridge pole and upright, a substantial wooden frame and floor had first been built and over this the stout canvas was stretched, stanch and taut as the head of a drum. It was all intact and sound. Whoever filched that packet made way with it through the front, and that, as Armstrong well knew, was kept tightly laced, as a rule, from the time the general left it in the morning until his return. It was never unlaced except in his presence or by his order. Then the deft hands of the orderlies on duty would do the trick in a twinkling. Knowing all this, the colonel queried further:

"You went in town, as I remember, late that evening and called on the Primes and other people at the Palace. I think I saw you in the supper room. There was much merriment at your table. Mrs. Garrison seemed to be the life of the party. Now, you left your overcoat with the boy at the cloak stand?"

"No, Armstrong, that's the odd part of it. I only used the cape that evening. The coat was hanging at its usual place when I returned late, with a mass of new orders and papers. No! no! But here, I must get back to the office, and what I wished you to see was that poor boy's letter. What can you hope with a nature like that to deal with?"

Armstrong took the missive held out to him and slowly read it, the general studying his face the while. The letter bore no clew as to the whereabouts of the writer. It read:

The letter bore no clew to the whereabouts of the writer.

"March 1, '98.

"It is six weeks since I repaid all your loving kindness, brought shame and sorrow to you and ruin to myself by deserting from West Point when my commission was but a few short months away. In an hour of intense misery, caused by a girl who had won my very soul, and whose words and letters made me believe she would become my wife the month of my graduation, and who, as I now believe, was then engaged to the man she married in January, I threw myself away. My one thought was to find her, and God knows what beyond.

"It can never be undone. My career is ended, and I can never look you in the face again. At first I thought I should show the letters, one by one, to the man she married, and ask him what he thought of his wife, but that is too low. I hold them be-cause I have a mad longing to see her again and heap reproach upon her, but, if I fail and should I feel at any time that my end is near, I'm going to send them to you to read—to see how I was lured, and then, if you can, to pity and forgive.

"ROLLIN."

Armstrong's firm lips twitched under his mustache. The general, with moist eyes, had risen from his chair and mechanically held forth his hand. "Poor lad!" sighed Armstrong. "Of course—you know who the girl was?"

"Oh, of course," and Drayton shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, we'll have to go," and led on to the misty light without.

Over across the way were the headquarters tents of a big parade, hopefully awaiting orders for Manila. To their left, separated by a narrow space, so crowded were the camps, were the quarters of the officers of the —teenth infantry, and even through the veil of mist both soldiers could plainly see along the line. Coming toward the gate was Mr. Prime, escorted by the major. Just behind them followed Mildred and the attentive Schuyler. But where was Miss Lawrence? Armstrong had already seen. Lingering, she stood at Billy's tent front, her ear inclined to his protruding pate. He was saying something that took time, and she showed no inclination to hurry him. Miss Prime looked back, then she and Schuyler exchanged significant smiles and glances. There was rather a lingering handclasp before Amy started. Even then she looked back at the boy and smiled.

"H'm!" said the general, as he gazed, "that youngster wouldn't swap places with any subaltern in camp, even if he is under charges."

There was no answer from the strong soldier standing observant at his elbow. But when the chief would have moved Armstrong detained him. "One more question, general. In case you were away and wanted something you had left in this tent, you would send an aide—or orderly, or—would an order signed by one of your staff be sufficient?"

"H'm, well—yes, I suppose it would," said the general.

CHAPTER XII.

Opinion was divided at Camp Merritt as to whether Billy Gray should or should not stand trial. Confident as were his friends of his innocence of all complicity in Morton's escape, there remained the fact that he had telephoned for a carriage, that a carriage had come and that a carriage with four men, apparently soldiers, had driven rapidly townward along Point Lobos avenue. It was seen by half a dozen policemen as it shot under the electric light or gas lamp. Then there was the bundle inside his rolled overcoat that Gray had personally handed Morton when a prisoner. Everybody agreed he should have sent it by orderly—everybody, that is, except some scores of young soldiers in the ranks who could see no harm in it having been done that way, especially two "Delta Sigs" in the —teenth. Then there were the long conferences in the dark. What did they mean? All things considered, the older and wiser heads saw that, as the lieutenant could or would make no satisfactory explanation of these to his colonel, he should to a court—or take the consequences.

"You've made a mess of the thing and an ass of yourself, Billy," was Gordon's comprehensive if not consolatory summary of the matter, "and as Canker has been rapped for one thing or another by camp, division and brigade commanders, one after another, he feels that he's got to prove that he isn't the only fool in the business. You'd better employ good counsel and prepare for a fight."

"Can't afford it," said Billy, briefly, "and I'm blowed if I'll ask my dear old dad to come to the rescue. He's had to cough up (shame on your slang, Billy) far too much already. I tell you, Gordon, I'm so fixed that I can't explain these things unless I'm actually brought to trial. It's—it's—well, you have no secret societies at the Point as we do at college, so you can't fathom it. I'm no more afraid of standing trial than I am of Squeers—and he d——d to him!"

"Good Lawd, youngster—you, you aren't quite such an ass as to suppose a court is going to regard any schoolboy obligation as paramount to that which your oath of office demands. Look hyuh, Billy, your head's just addled! I can't work on you, but somebody must!"

And Gordon went away very low in his mind. He liked that boy. He loved a keen, alert, snappy soldier on drill, and Billy had no superior in the battalion when it came to handling squad or company. The adjutant plainly saw the peril of his position, and further consultation with his brother officers confirmed him in his fears. Schuyler, the brigade commissary, being much with the —teenth—messing with them, in fact, when he was not dancing attendance on Miss Prime—heard all this camp talk and told her. Thus it happened that the very next day when he drove with the cousins (Mr. Prime being the while in conference with the detectives still scouring the city for the young deserter, who the father now felt confident was his missing boy), Miss Lawrence looked the captain full in the face with her clear, searching eyes and plumped at him the point-blank question:

To be Continued.

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It looks suspiciously like faith is lacking when lightning rods are erected on a church.

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