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Orange Maize

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1000 Guineas

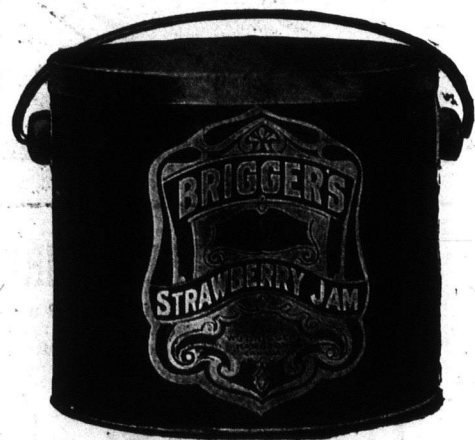
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The Blackwoods, Ltd., Winnipeg

Billings took the lantern and scouted the dining room and kitchen. "All doors bolted and windows fastened," said he. The two front windows had been raised some six inches each for fresh air, but the blinds were latched. The night was sharply cold. The little wood fire in the stove had burned out. Billings shivered a bit as he reset the lantern on the table and huddled again under his blankets. Nothing more was said. The major and his staff officers confided to one another next day that they thought it must have been Ramsay—nervous and anxious because of his packet of currency—stirring about, half asleep, half awake. The sentries about the post were calling twelve o'clock as the quartet dropped off to sleep again. They were calling two when the sound of placid snoring was rudely interrupted. It was the major again.

"D—n that door!" said he, as he shuffled out of his blankets, and with suggestive emphasis shut the light wooden portal that swung between them and the hallway.

"Why, I closed that when I came in," drowsily spoke Hull.

"I know you did," growled the major, burrowing again into warm buffalo robe and blankets. "And the cantankerous thing swung open at one and let in a lot of cold air. I got up and shut it. Five minutes ago that cold draft woke me again. The lantern's burning queer, too."

"Br-r-r!" shuddered Ramsay, sitting up. "We ought to have kept up the fire. Billings' hand here is just like ice. What were you reaching for anyway?" he abruptly queried of his next-door neighbor on the floor.

"When?" asked Billings, yawning. "Just now—just after the major spoke. I felt your hand on my face and it gave me the creeps."

For answer Billings whipped both hands from under his blankets. "Feel," said he. "I didn't touch you."

Ramsay grabbed first one hand, then the other. Each was warm as toast. "Well, I'll be jiggered," said he. "Hull have you been up?"

"Haven't stirred," was the sententious answer. For a moment there was silence. Then Ramsay gave a nervous laugh. "Well, by crimminy, fellows, this may be all right, but I've been told a dozen times, I think, that they had a haunted house here at Russell, and, begad, I believe we're in it." Then all of a sudden he whirled about and up to his knees, and out came his revolver. "By God! Look at that door!"

In an instant the other three also had whirled about and were on their knees at a bound. In the dim gleam of the sputtering lantern, the hall door, closed so carefully by the major not three minutes before, was slowly, unaccountably, swinging open again. Revolver in hand, Hull sprang to his feet and the table, seized in his left the lantern, and four strides took him through the doorway. A cold wind came blowing down from the upper floor, and, left in darkness, the trio heard him swiftly mount the creaking stairs, then go searching through the two rooms and hallway aloft. In five minutes he was back, curiously examining the latch of the offending portal. "All five windows fastened," said he. "Pane broken in the back dormer might account for the cold wind, and there's lots of rubbish in a closet, but that's all." He slammed the door to, shoved his pistol under his pillow, and crawled in again. "But it's—mighty queer," he added. And then there were silence.

Thornton, lieutenant-colonel commanding the post, but under orders to march, met our major in the morning. "How'd you rest?" asked he, and was duly enlightened as to what had taken place. His face was a study, finally he spoke. "Downer you've known me twenty years and know that I don't stampede easy, but I may as well own that I'm up against something here I can't fathom. Our fellows shun that set of quarters as they would a pest-house. Three times we've had men desert post when put on sentry duty back of it. Sloan of the old Rifles shot himself in No. 1 the year it was built, and there isn't a man in the ranks, or a woman in Sudstown, that don't believe his ghost walks there to this day." Then, in lower tone and

with a grimace, "And there are lots of people up here along the line that you couldn't bribe to spend a night there. That's my legacy to you. I march to Laramie to-morrow."

And with the morrow, all but the wives and children of the officers, the old regiment had pulled out and the Fifth struck tents and were moving in. The colonel of each regiment had been a major-general in the war days. One was now going to Europe on leave; the other had been called straight from the field to division headquarters, for Sheridan wished to hear at first hand the details of the strange and eventful campaign. Leaving the colonel's quarters to their legitimate occupant, therefore, when he should reappear, Downer chose No. 5 as the temporary commander of the regiment and post; courteously bade Mrs. Thornton and Jessica to take their own time in packing, assuring them that he would not move in until they were all started for Laramie on the trail of the regiment. Old Stannard, senior captain, had taken No. 9 for his future home. Mrs. Stannard and the ladies of the fifth were still at the Kansas posts occupied at the outbreak of the Sioux war. So for several days the officers were keeping bachelors hall as they shook down into their new station. Billings, the adjutant, went to Kansas to bring up the band and regimental headquarters. Hull, the quartermaster, and Ramsay, the post commissary, set to work to get their offices and storerooms in order. Hull chose No. 8 as his abiding-place and set plasterers and kalsominers to work. Ramsay decided that he would take a room under the quartermaster's roof, as they were to mess together, but both of them shook hands on it that for the present, at least, they would sleep in one house that hadn't a claimant—that in which Jim Sloan had blown out his brains the year of our Lord eighteen sixty-eight and of the post of Fort Russell the first.

When this decision was made known to Troopers Gray and Preuss, strikers-in-ordinary to the two young gentlemen in question, they promptly begged to be relieved from the personal service and extra pay that they had so gladly chosen in the past, and allowed to return to regular duty with their respective companies.

And so it happened that, three nights after this initial experience at No. 1, Trooper Preuss was a member of the guard duly mounted and sentry on the post numbered 5, directly in rear of the back yards of the eastward end of officer's row, between those quarters and the inclosure in which stood the house of the post surgeon, and in full view of the post hospital, one hundred yards out across the flat open prairie. Preuss had begged the sergeant not to put him on the midnight relief and on No. 5, and the sergeant had scorned and scoffed at him.

There was a farewell dance at the assembly-room that evening, complimentary to the ladies of the old regiment still lingering at the post about to move. Jessica Thornton, a radiant picture early in the evening at least, was there, and easily the belle of the ball; but she looked in vain at the doorway hour after hour—the unmuffled Robert came not at all. "Is Mr. Ramsay ill?" she ventured to ask of Hull, and the answer came with hearty reassurance: "Bob? Bob Ramsay has never had a sick day in his life! He's busy, that's all—ghost-hunting."

Her face went white as the flanks of the peak, glistening there in the brilliant moonlight a hundred miles to the south. "Ghosts," she faltered. "You don't mean, Mr. Hull, he—you—have seen—that thing, too?"

"Why, Miss Thornton!" he cried, "we saw nothing. But you! What have you seen?" for, to the quartermaster's surprise, Jessica Thornton, who rode so daintily and so well, was trembling, actually trembling, from head to foot.

"Hush! I don't wish mamma to know—to hear," she murmured. "Yes, mother dear, whenever you say I'll be ready. It is getting late, Mr. Hull, and," with lowered voice, "you are going to stay there at No. 1 tonight? You'll be with him. Think how awful if he had to meet it—alone."

That was but a few minutes after