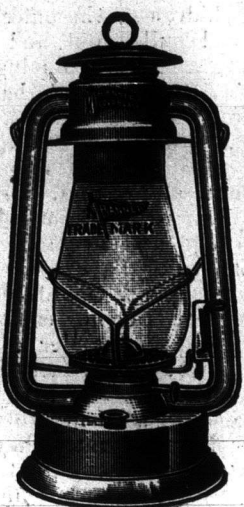


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"Only No. 1," answered the youth, with marked hesitancy, and his face clouded as he spoke.

"Well, what's the matter with that? We can go in there, can't we?" The major shoved his blue hands in the pockets of his worn scouting breeches and glowered.

"Why—yes, sir—you can—only—" Then the lieutenant gulped and got no further. The prettiest thing the major and his two staff officers had seen for six months came galloping up on a spirited bay. Off came the battered felt hats. Major commanding, adjutant, and regimental quartermaster were deaf to further remarks of local officials and sightless to everything but the winsome girl in saddle.

She could not have been more than eighteen. She was divinely tall and, in spite of all that Cheyenne zephyrs could do at the expense of complexion, most divinely fair. She had laughing blue eyes, a lovely mouth, with large, white, even teeth. Her bright brown hair was piled up and scientifically screwed under a jaunty, drab felt hat. Her form was wellnigh perfect, so beautifully was it rounded and developed. She sat her horse like an Amazon queen. Small wonder, she had ridden since babyhood. She had all her father's regiment at her feet, and now sought other worlds to conquer, in spite of the fact that the man she most feared and fancied stood in silence not ten paces away, a witness to the scene.

A brave girl, too, was Jessica Thornton, and a good one. Coquetry is no crime—a woman without it is a rose without its fragrance. Daughter of the regiment, long at Russell, she had turned from the importunity of its commissioned bachelors, and had fascinated big Bob Ramsay of the Fifth; danced with him, three out of six, at the farewell hop the 1st of June; quarrelled with him vehemently that very night, and parted with him ten hours later without a word of remorse. He had sent back a few little, friendly, uncompromising missives and marched the next day. Now, here he was back with his regiment—indeed had been sent in two days ahead, preceding it to choose camp ground and arrange for all supplies, and never had he come near her. She, springing lightly from saddle, overwhelmed the major and his satellites with joyous, jubilant congratulation on their return, but it was Bob Ramsay she was studying out of the corners of her blue eyes—Bob, who was busy directing the unpacking of a big army wagon, and could not be induced to glance at her at all.

Even when the major, "sizing up the situation," found means whereby to summon the young officer into his presence and Jessica Thornton's, no good resulted. Bob saluted his commanding officer and stood at attention. He did not even touch his hat-brim to her. Mentally and physically his attitude was "strictly business," and the major had to devise a pretext.

"Have you relieved Lieutenant Dunn as post commissary?" he asked.

"Four hours ago, sir, and so reported at the time."

"Fact," said the major, coloring, "I had forgotten it. Er—well, that's all—unless—" he finished lamely and glanced to where Miss Thornton, chatting with the adjutant, stood with her left arm through the reins, her gauntleted hands drawing her whip-lash to and from between her ripe red lips, her eyes shooting furtive glances under their long lashes away from the two staff officers and straight at the unmelting Ramsay. The major's hint fell flat. Ramsay chose to regard the situation as entirely official.

"Well—oh, what I wanted to say, Ramsay," hurried on the major, "is that we're going to sleep in No. 1 to-night—make our bedding down on the floor, you know, and as you're relieved from troop duty we'd be glad to have you with us. Tell the wagoner to dump your bedding roll with ours over at the end house of the row."

"Thank you, major. I may have to," answered Ramsay promptly, but still maintaining the attitude of attention. "Dunn went off an hour ago and forgot to leave me the combination. I can't open the office safe and here's a wad of

something like seven hundred dollars commissary funds. If it won't crowd you—"

"Oh, not a bit of it!" said Downer heartily. "The more the merrier."

"Where did Major Downer say you were to sleep?" asked Miss Thornton, suddenly, of the adjutant. "Not—No. 1?" and an odd anxiety stood in her bright eyes.

"No. 1 it is—four doors from yours, as I remember, and convenient to the clubroom." Mr. Billings' gaze was following Ramsay as that officer hastened back to his wagon, still refusing to see that Jessica Thornton stood chatting with his comrades but shooting glances at him. She, too, in spite of gallant effort, found that impulse to gaze uncontrollable, but, noting his persistent indifference, presently turned away.

"I think I'll ride over home now," she said, gathering skirts and reins, even as her eyes, suspiciously beginning to swim, flashed back once more on the broad straight back and squared shoulders of Mr. Robert Ramsay. Her radiant face had paled a bit. Her right hand sought the off pommel; the toe of a shiny little boot popped into the practiced hand of the quartermaster, and up she shot into saddle, light as a bird, and, with a comprehensive nod and smile to the three, rode swiftly away toward the eastward gate.

"Where're you going?" said the adjutant, that night, to Gray, the orderly in charge. "I told you to make down your blankets in the dining-room."

"I know, sir," said Gray, with embarrassed salute. "But—the lieutenant doesn't mind, I—I'd like to sleep over with 'C' Troop. I know most of their fellows. I—I've bolted the rear doors."

"Oh, as you please—though that leaves us with nobody. Preuss, too, asked to sleep over in barracks"—But Gray was gone.

Mr. Billings looked about him. The walls and floor of the little army parlor seemed unusually bare. A wooden table, with a lantern on the south side and a coal stove at the north, were the only items of furniture. Radiating from the latter were the outspread camp kits of four officers, spread on the floor, and though it was barely ten o'clock, two of these gentry, the major and Lieutenant Ramsay, the new post commissary, had turned in for the night. They had been up since the earliest dawn and were glad of rest. Hull, regimental quartermaster, was still out—calling somewhere along the row.

Back of the bare parlor lay the bare dining-room. Back of the bare dining-room the cheerless kitchen; back of that some wood and coal sheds. "Bolt the doors, will you, Billings?" shouted Ramsay, as the former had gone exploring. "I can't risk this money, yet I've got to, until morning."

"All set," answered the adjutant, as he in turn kicked off his boots. In ten minutes in came Hull, locking the door behind him. In twenty the major was snoring and, turning the lantern low, Hull, too, scrambled into his blankets and the quartet was speedily lulled to sleep.

Two hours later Billings started from slumber. Somebody was sneaking.

"Who's that walking about there?" testily demanded the major. "What the devil's the matter?" No answer.

Billings squirmed out of his blankets. "I haven't moved," said he. "Did you put out the light?" he continued, as Hull's long arms came out from under the blanket and the quartermaster indulged in a stretch and yawn. The adjutant had struck a match and was retouching the lantern. The major was sitting up. "Nobody seems to have stirred in this outfit. What had you heard?" asked Billings.

"Somebody moving about—plain as could be. I hailed twice and got no answer. I thought it must be Hull."

"And I thought it was you, Billings," put in the quartermaster. "Somebody was prowling about here in stocking feet—sure." Then Ramsay started up and shoved a hand underneath his rude pillow. The lantern threw its mild rays about the room. "Packet's all right," said he. "Could it have been Gray, or Preuss, coming in after all?"

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