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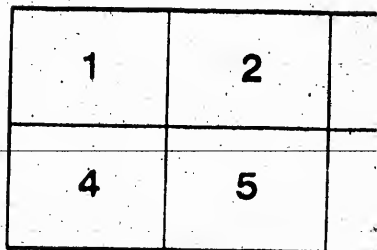
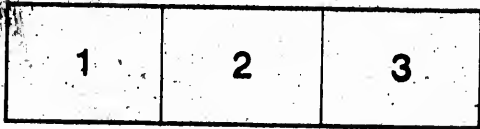
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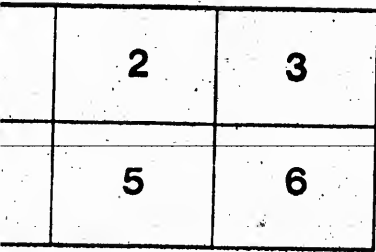
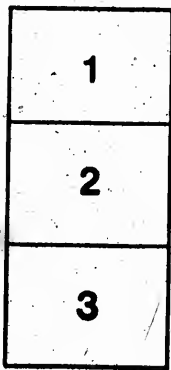
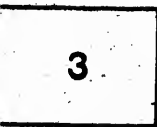
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*W. J. McLaughlin*

# THE DESERTERS;

A NARRATIVE

FOUNDED ON FACTS OF RECENT OCCURRENCE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"SCENES IN A SOLDIER'S LIFE"

THIRD EDITION.

PRICE TWO-PENCE.

Montreal.

PRINTED AT THE OFFICE OF THE MORNING GAZETTE.

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## P R E F A C E .

THE following extract from a MSS. about to be brought before the public in a Work, entitled "Wanderings in the States," being such as cannot fail to be interesting to almost every subject, claiming Britain as a home, and more particularly the soldiers serving at present in the Canadas,—the incident upon which the extract is founded is not only a fact, but of very recent occurrence, and the Author, who has served in almost every part of the world, and whose zeal for the Service has ever been most unremitting, made a point, during his short visit to the United States, during the month of November, to ascertain actually how our deserters were treated,—and from the peculiarity of the circumstance under which he was induced to more especially do so, the meeting of the corporal and four men of the 20th, he resolved upon making it a particular subject for his intended new Work, and at the same time hoped to be the simple means of preventing, if possible, our soldiers from subjecting themselves to such open misery, by describing their situations as they actually are, in the columns of one of the Public Journals. Having done so, and from the very favorable reception it has met with by very many, and who all seemed to see the probable benefit that might accrue from its extensive circulation amongst the soldiers,—but fearing that the circulation of a news-

paper might be too limited, and scarcely ever fall into the hands of the soldier, the Author has thought fit to issue it in a pamphlet form, cheap, in order that it may be more extensively circulated amongst the Army—for whom it has been expressly extracted from the MSS.

The Author, at the same time, would wish to remind the reader, that the language used to relate the short narrative, is drawn from the conversation and sentiments expressed by the parties introduced; and trusts that the good intention will be appreciated by every soldier, and that he will not be misled with an opinion that it has been made up expressly for the soldiers' perusal. It was originally intended to form part of a Work in common with other matter, but was considered so interesting, and so applicable to our Army, that it is published with the hope that every soldier would be able to either read it or hear it read, and be thus warned from taking so foolish and fatal a step as desertion, which often occurs from the most simple and absurd causes, and results in the most poignant distress, in both mind and prospects, which but a little forethought would prevent. To meet bravely any difficulty or any punishment that may be the upshot of his misdemeanor, however severe, will be trifling, indeed, to the misery experienced by desertion, as will be seen in the cases related in the following true narrative.



## THE DESERTERS.

On my passage from Albany to New York, whilst in conversation with a gentleman, my attention was arrested by the appearance of a crowd in the fore-part of the vessel, whither we both went, and it turned out to be a Recruiting Party proceeding from Buffalo to New York, with a detachment of about sixty recruits; they appeared fine men, varying from twenty to forty years of age, and seemed to suffer much from absolute filth and want of proper rest or nourishment,—but that is common with recruits. I examined each countenance minutely, as opportunity offered, and presently I saw a face I fancied I knew—then another—another—and a fourth. I was struck with a fear that all was not right, and curiosity led me to come Jonathan over them, and find out all about them.

The first I saw, whose eyes met mine as often as I brought them in contact, and as often exchanged several piercing enquiring glances, I beckoned to, and asked him if he knew me? He said, he did remember having seen me somewhere; and the conversation continued.

I said, I presume you are an Englishman? I am, said he, but feel ashamed to acknowledge it; my mind has, since I took the oath of naturalization, been a rack to me. Feeling for him as I did, I would have waived any further conversation, but I felt that I might learn something of the man's character. He looked much dejected, and, if the face is any index to the mind, his, indeed, told a tale of bitter feeling. I resumed,—You have left our Service recently, I should say? I have, indeed, Sir, was his reply—and from the time I crossed the ferry at Queenston, and placed my foot on the boasted shore of liberty, I felt myself, from that moment, fettered and lost, both to my country and myself. Curiosity led me now to enquire into the cause; after excusing myself for being so inquisitive, I begged him to open his mind to me, and inform me of the cause of his very apparent unhappiness.

Sir, he replied, I see you are an Englishman, and what is more I know you to be a soldier, and one

who has seen much of the world, both in the field and in quarters, and, therefore, I hope you will rather pity the false step I have taken, than blame me, though I can never consider myself again worthy of being called a soldier. It was on the evening of the \_\_\_\_\_, about five weeks ago, I was the corporal in charge of a guard at Queenston, and entrusted to my custody was a young man, a prisoner, who had been brought in under arrest; by some mishap during the night he escaped, and, when it was discovered, the whole guard found themselves in a very unpleasant situation, and well knew the seriousness of the consequences of such a breach of trust, as to permit the escape of a prisoner. We in vain tried to discover his haunt, and at length I spoke to several of them, and in the deepest manner, painted the result of the affair, and at the same time pointed out to them the means of escape. On guard, at the dead hour of night, close to the ferry-boat, and a river which, but a few yards across, enabled us to defy the power of the British—the prospect of immediately joining the Americans, and thus preventing ourselves from, perhaps, two years' imprisonment—all these pictures seemed to dazzle the minds of most of the guard, and four out of six acceded, and, with myself, left the guard, and rowed across to the "shore that shields the soldier's crime." We had little or no money, and we traversed our way to Buffalo, where a party of the American Army were recruiting. Having no other object in view than enlisting, we all at once joined them, and received half the bounty, (five dollars,) and took the oath of naturalization, vowing, in the most solemn terms, to support America in all her undertakings—to fight most vehemently against every other nation, most especially that of Great Britain. The thought of the latter seemed to choke me; my heart throbbled, and my senses seemed to recoil at the idea,—more especially against Great Britain, dear old Britain, thought I,—can it be possible I have sworn so!—My country—whose soil calls aloud for the aid of every heart to whom she gave birth—whose nobility and fame has raised her high above every other na-

tion, as heaven is above earth. My country—whose land is dearer to me than a third that foreign shores could boast, and yet I had sworn to raise my arm against her. I felt myself mad, not—no, totally reckless. Come what would, I thought, fate had cast for me an unfair die, and I was its victim. We consulted together, and conscience seemed to work mutually for each breast. What villains have we been—what sorry, mean, cowardly subjects are we, to call ourselves sons of Britain—to relinquish all right to share in the lot of that which is ever most dear to man—his native land. Day after day rolled on, and as they rolled, came with them deep remorse. Two of my companions in crime, miserable and conscience-stricken, drowned their cares in drink; but that could not drown mine, nor, with the other two, were left to pine inwardly at the thoughts of those we had left behind.

The party began to see a difference in my appearance, and would sometimes question me as to the cause, but my pride, though exalted indeed, still bade me keep my own counsel. Their song of what they call nationality, bursting in each ear with some strain of boasted liberty, which is as far from America as it was from the West Indies forty years ago, and they seemed to be given with delight as an opportunity of casting hints, and using epithets, which I read as applicable to myself. Upbraodings in all shapes were fired from all sides, and from the general result of the affairs I could see there were many more who had served under the British flag amongst the party, but I was unable to defend myself. I felt as though all they could say was far less than I deserved, and, therefore, burst quietly, and although most unwillingly, projected the intended affront. We were at length ordered to proceed to New York, to join the depot at Governor's Island; and glad, indeed, I was to get removed from Buffalo, hoping it might tend to quiet my unhappy mind. Oh! Sir, he continued, were it possible for me to picture the misery felt by a Briton in the army of the Americans, it would, I am sure, prevent every other soldier from deserting his colors; I speak from experience, and I am corroborated by many others whom I have met since my desertion. The desertion is in itself bad, but to swear to draw a trigger against the land of your birth, is past all human comprehension. Oh! that I could get back to my old corps, and I am sure the same wish is the most solemn one of my comrades; that could we but be once more restored to the society of the regiment we left, and get permission to return, with the promise even of any punish-

ment short of transportation, which, also, we know is our doom if taken. We would most willingly return, for believe me, dear Sir, I never left that I was an Englishman until I came on these shores.

This went on the corporal, and his feelings were borne out by the confessions of the other young men, one of whom I knew personally, and never did I see so much self-hatred as on this occasion. Night began now to close in and I left them, and suffering from an accident I met with a short time before, I retired to my cabin, promising to call on them at Governor's Island; which in a few days after I did. On going to the beach at the end of Broadway I took a small boat and was rowed over to the Island, which in the distance appeared beautiful, well fortified, and contained several extensive well arranged stores and barracks; on our nearer approach I saw the fort guard and the sentinel walking his post. I immediately went to the officer of the guard and asked permission to enter, which he most politely gave; the sentinel hung down his head as I passed, and I was at once struck; standing for a moment, I remembered having seen him in India five years ago, and he seemed so much surprised at seeing me, that it would be almost impossible to describe it. He once belonged to H. M. 13th Light Infantry, and shared in the noble conquest of Jellalabad, and was in many a battle with me. What! W——, can it be possible that you are here? said I. I was going to ask where his decorations were, which he had so honorably won, and which had adorned his breast, but I checked myself lest I should too deeply wound the poor fellow's feelings; I am sorry indeed to see you; I could say no more, but, wrapped in astonishment and regret, I walked on, and now found myself in the fort yard, where all the recruits were undergoing their various classes of instruction in the American art of war. There were several officers about, who, seeing me, doubtless concluded I was a military man, and I must confess were exceedingly polite, and would have shown me anything I wished, but I declined the favor, because I waited particularly to see the corporal and his four companions, and should have been deprived of the object of my visit.

The squads contained about twelve each, men of all sizes and shapes, unsoldier-like, and un instructed. Their dress is of sky-blue cloth, with a broad white stripe down the side of their pantaloons; their hair long and uncombed; short trousers and long straps, and very dirty boots—some unlaced and others half-laced; and, on the whole, they appeared as one mass of uncultivated, half-dressed, tasteless objects. Their

superior officers appeared to have little or no control, for, while at drill, it was a scene of battle and conversation, the front and rear rank quarrelling or chattering, and their whole time was evidently occupied in laughing or chattering to each other, and spitting most intemperately. The officers appeared to have no power, or rather no extreme superiority, over the men, no acknowledged compliments on either side, no saluting; all seemed to be Dick, Bill, and Tom.

The instructors at drill seemed to find an able mode of conveying their ideas, by dealing out a blow on the side of the head, to those who seemed to, in his opinion, lack improvement, or a poke in the ribs with a stick, to any who might not happen to comprehend as readily as he wished them. This I saw with utter astonishment—that men, calling themselves “sons of freedom,” should permit themselves to be struck as if they were school-boys. However, such was the case. I continued to go round the square, in the hope of finding my friend, the corporal, and on whom my eyes soon fell, just thrown, as it were, into a work of blue, sitting, indeed, like a sentry-box; never did I see such a sight! there he stood, pale and dejected, clothed in a garb that did not fit him in any way; on his right were his companions; they all seemed to recognize me; I determined to wait until the drill was over, and, in the meantime, I retired to the barrack; a small yard, like that of a court, led through an arch into a quadrangle of neatly arranged buildings, apportioned as barrack-rooms. The sentinel at the arch, was a good-looking young man, much cleaner, and evidently a better manufactured soldier than any I had previously seen; and he was sauntering along his oft-trod path, with his mouth half filled with tobacco; whilst one hand supported his musket, the other hand was thrust nearly elbow-deep in his trousers pocket, and his shoulders had, most absurdly, been once square, but his habit had made him stoop.

The barrack-rooms were small, and contained from eight to twelve beds, the floors dirty, and every thing seemed desolate and irregular; system was absent, and comfort an entire stranger. The accoutrements were dirty, and there was nothing calculated to entice the eye, when compared with the well-regulated, comfortable barracks of our Service, where every thing has a place, and every thing is in its place—all clean, and all system—obedience causing quietness, and quietness comfort; where each man finds pleasure in cleanliness—a strict discipline has taught him his duty, which becomes a delight and an honour; where each man, when he sees his officer, is pleased to show respect, which is his due; where each man feels

a confidence in his comrade, to whom habit gives a fraternal tie, and from a beautifully arranged chain of responsibility, like that with which our discipline is connected, each feels it a duty to support it in all cases. Not so with the Service of boasted freedom, where all is as I have described, one scene of dissipation and tumult, and all discipline lost through that erroneous idea of equality. I left the yard in perfect disappointment at seeing a place so different to what I had expected, and as I was returning I heard the bugle sounding the dispersal, and in another moment I was surrounded by the five young men they corroborated all I had seen, by informing me that their rations were coarse and badly cooked—chiefly consisting of salt pork and bread, and that they never get pay—were allowed to go to the canteen and run up a score, either in food or drink, which was paid for by their officer at the end of each quarter, I think he said, and the balance, if any—which, of course, was seldom the case—was given to the man entitled to it. They had had no bedding, and comfort was unknown to them. No regularity—no prospect of happiness—the barrack, which to a soldier is his palace, his chamber and his home, there became a rendezvous of misery, filth and wantonness. One-third, he said, at least, then in the barracks, were British subjects, either emigrants or deserters, chiefly the latter, and they were employed in all the drudgery employment they could get for them, and never trusted to any extent. And they were not only open to the scell and persecution of every man who happened to be an American, but were deprived of many of the indulgences allowed to others, on the pretence—and that a very just one—that they were not to be depended upon—since they would desert their own country, they would do anything. Yet, said they, they will encourage our men on the margin of a lake, within a stone's throw of our shores—hold out the highest prospects to those who will desert—thus entrapping, in the most dastardly and cowardly manner, men from a really free nation to one to whom freedom is bludgeoned. They said they had not yet received the other half of the bounty, and that they expected to be drafted off to Mexico in a few weeks—and most fervently some of them prayed that it might be sooner, and that they might never return. Their arrival from Buffalo was hailed by all the old hands—i. e. deserters—with joy, inasmuch as they saw fresh faces from Britain's Isle; but the corporal said that it was a general feeling of one and all, the regret at so far forgetting themselves not only as to desert so good a Service as the British, but to

join so paltry a one as that of the American. They had scarcely a drill-instructor that was not a deserter—scarcely a useful man in the whole Service that was not a dejected outcast of Old England—and who all cry aloud to be permitted to again return to the ranks of so noble, so brave an army. But then, the cry is, what is the punishment? Ten or fourteen years transportation—perhaps for life—we cannot, dare not, return, to become soldiers. They said, if Government would but mitigate the sentence and permit those, now absent, to return, the ranks of the other side would be soon thinned, and the misled souls most gladly return penitent and comparatively happy at such a restoration to their former scenes of arduous bliss. Many indeed were the numbers pointed out to me whilst I stood there as men having belonged to different corps of our Service, and amongst the rest, the clean-looking young man on sentry under the arch, whom I had admired—he deserted from the Rifle Brigade. I had now to leave them, and sorry they were that they could not accompany me—they one and all declared that if they could return to the old 20th Regiment again, even with the certainty of two years imprisonment, they would gladly do so; and oh, said one of them, speaking for all, if you go back to Canada and see the 20th Regiment, do not forget to tell them the miserable state we are in, both in mind and comfort. Warn them, and warn the Service at large, that if they have one spark of British honour or soldier's blood in them, never to relinquish it for a nation with such bedaubed and hypocritical professions as we had held out to us. A deserter here must expect nothing but to be the butt and scoff and drudge of every one; and the once proud and high-disciplined heart of England's ranks feels himself cow'd and unable to resent even an insult from them, because the blow they strike is so severe—you're a deserter! The blush rises and again turns pale; and though he may become excited, and, being powerful, take the sorry satisfaction of thrashing his opponent, still he feels himself beaten, because he is a deserter.

Those in authority, unwilling to openly insult the already perjured and unfortunate wretch, do so more deeply by withholding from him the right of indulgence, or by affording satisfaction for suffering, tells him quietly he cannot expect much better treatment from an excited citizen, since he well knows he is a deserter.

The very boys jeer and boast their superiority over you, and upbraid you with your cowardice and fear to return, and challenge you to deny the fact, which conscience accedes to, being a deserter.

The loss of happiness in the field, in the street, or in the barrack, of confidence in all, and every body, the fear of detection, and recognition, forgetful of being protected in a "Land of Liberty," the heaving sigh of the stricken heart, in the midst of revelry, the uninterrupted reflection on by-gone days, when all wore the face of conviviality and comfort, the struggling emotions of the heart in remorse, are all consequent upon the simple and foolish step of desertion.

Such were the sentiments of the corporal and four of our 20th Regiment, in the United States Army, and it will, I trust, have the desired effect, to caution the men of our service against so rash a step; let them think of becoming bound slaves, forced to humble themselves to a Power opposed to their own sentiments and wishes—to become the menial drudges of a collected mob, who make a sorry attempt at discipline, and approach nearer a mob than an army, and who take every opportunity of being not only insolent, but oppressive, and you unable, consequently, to defend yourself, knowing you are a deserter—for, in the language of Bulwer, "He is indeed unarmed who has no excuse for crime;" and then the fact of swearing trost particularly to fight against your native land, there is something most heartrending in the thought, which I feel must strike every Briton with horror, when, if but for a moment, he reflects and asks, can I slay my father? my brother? my friends? Put but the question, can you leave your country's cause, and subject yourselves to such embittered oppression, and you will feel as I feel, and which is so beautifully and emphatically portrayed in the lines of a celebrated poet:—

"There's a magical tie in the land of my home  
Which the heart cannot break tho' the footsteps may roam.

Be the land where it may—at the Line or the Pole—  
It still holds the magnet that draws back the soul.  
'Tis loved by the freeman—'tis loved by the slave;  
'Tis dear to the coward—more dear to the brave.  
Ask of any the spot they love best in the earth,  
And they'll answer with pride—'tis the land of my birth."

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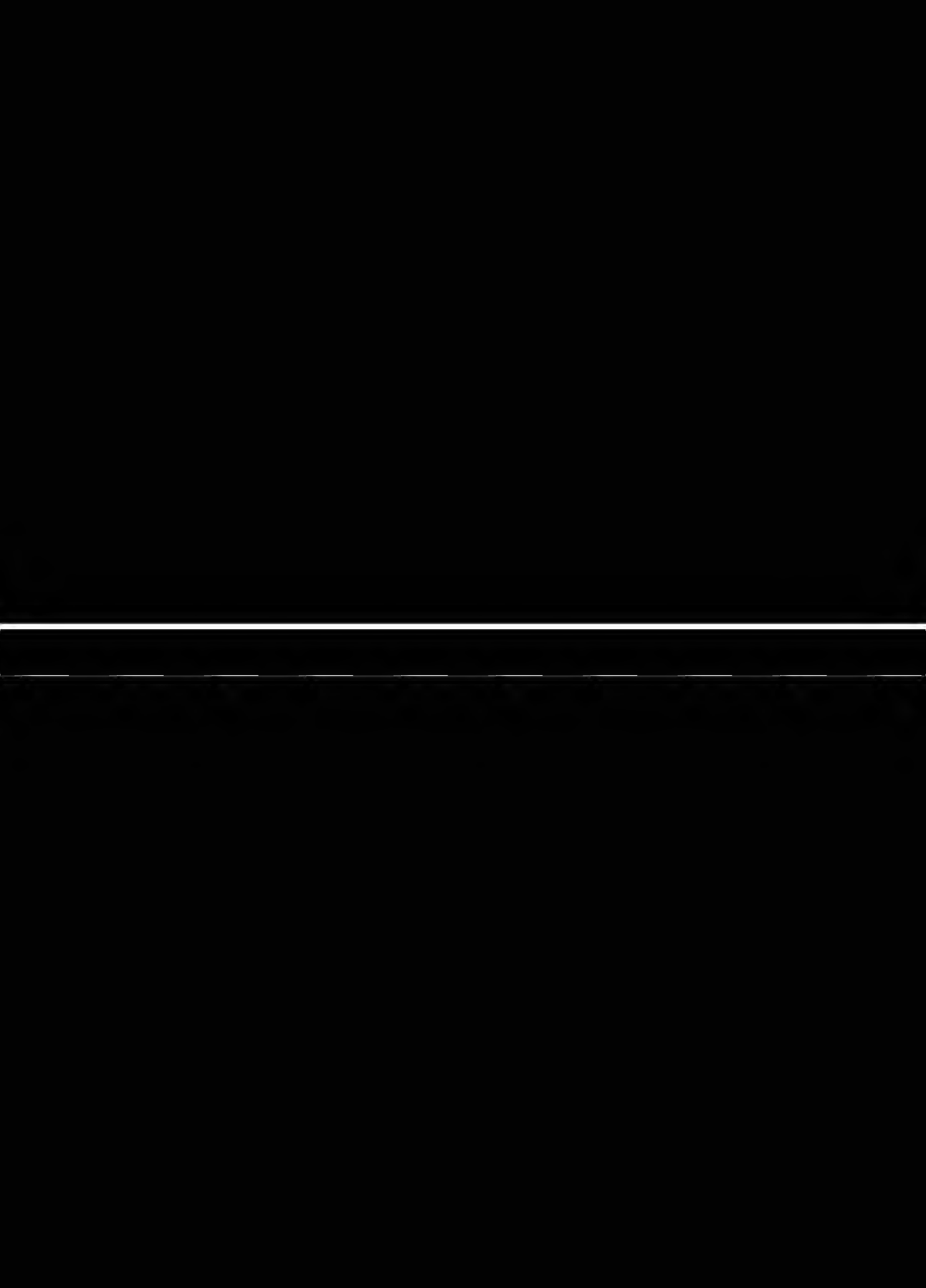
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