

Hancock Harrie Irving

Uncle Sam's Boys as Sergeants: or, Handling Their First Real Commands



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H. Irving Hancock

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CHAPTER I

"TIPPED OFF" BY WIG-WAG

LIEUTENANT POPE, battalion adjutant of the first battalion of the Thirty-fourth United States Infantry, looked up from his office desk as the door swung open and a smart, trim-looking young corporal strode in.

Pausing before the desk, the young corporal came to a precise, formal salute. Then, dropping his right hand to his side, the soldier stood at attention.

"Good morning, Corporal Overton."

"Good morning, sir."

"What do you wish?"

"I have been making inquiries, sir," continued Corporal Hal Overton, "and I am informed that you have some signaling flags among the quartermaster's stores."

"I believe I have," nodded Lieutenant Pope.

"I have come to ask, sir, if I may borrow a couple of the flags."

"Borrow? Then, Corporal, I take it that you do not want the flags for duty purposes?"

"Not immediately for duty purposes, sir. Corporal Terry and myself would like to practise at wig-wagging until we become reasonably expert. Sergeant Hupner is an expert at wig-wagging, I understand."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Lieutenant Pope heartily. "Even in the Signal Corps of the Army there are few better signalmen than the sergeant."

"So I understand, sir. Corporal Terry and I are delighted at the idea of having the sergeant instruct us."

"But what do you want to do, especially, with flag signaling?" inquired the quartermaster.

"It is simply, sir, that we want to make ourselves better soldiers."

"It is rarely that we find better soldiers than Terry and yourself," replied the quartermaster, with a friendly smile. "But you are quite right, none the less. A soldier can never know too much of military duties. I see no objection whatever to your having the flags, but as they are not a matter of ordinary issue, I think it better for me to seek Major Silsbee's authority for issuing them."

"Would it have been better if I had gone to the battalion commander in the first place, sir?"

"No; whenever you wish anything in the Army it is usually better to go direct to the officer who has that thing in charge in his department, save when it is something that you are expected to draw through your company officers."

"It was Captain Cortland who sent me to you, sir, but he said he had no authority to draw a requisition for signal flags."

"You have taken the right course, Corporal. If Major Silsbee is in his office it will take but a moment more."

While the young corporal remained at attention Lieutenant Pope turned to his telephone and called for the battalion commander.

"It's all right, Corporal," nodded the lieutenant, hanging up the receiver. Then he wrote on a slip of official paper. "Here is an order on which the quartermaster sergeant will issue you two signal flags. You are, of course, responsible for the flags, or for the value."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Five minutes later Corporal Hal Overton stepped briskly from the building in which the quartermaster's stores were kept. Under his left arm he carried two signal flags, rolled and attached to short staffs.

"Noll hasn't shown up yet. I hope he won't be long," murmured Hal, gazing across the parade grounds in the direction of the barracks of enlisted men. "Bunkie and I have a lot to do to-day."

Readers of the preceding volumes in this series will need no introduction to Corporals Hal Overton and Noll Terry, of the Thirty-fourth United States Infantry.

The headquarters battalion to which these two earnest young soldiers were attached was still stationed at Fort Clowdry. Readers of "Uncle Sam's Boys in the Ranks" are familiar with the circumstances under which Overton and Terry first enlisted at a recruiting office in New York City. These same readers also know how the two young soldiers put in several weeks of steady drilling at a recruit rendezvous near New York, where they learned the first steps in the soldier's strenuous calling. Our readers are also familiar with all the many things that happened during that period of recruit instruction, and how Hal and Noll, while traveling through the Rockies on their way to join their regiment, aided in resisting an attempt by robbers to hold up the United States mail train. Our readers are well aware of all the exciting episodes of that first garrison life, including the life and death fight that Hal Overton had with thieves while he was on sentry duty in officers' row, and of the efforts of one worthless character in the battalion to discredit and disgrace the service of both splendid but new young soldiers.

In the second volume, "Uncle Sam's Boys on Field Duty," our readers were admitted to equally exciting scenes of a wholly different nature. This volume dealt largely with the troops while away in rough country, under practical instruction in the actual duties of soldiers in the field in war time. Just how soldiers learn the grim business of war was most fully set forth in this volume. Among other hosts of entertaining incidents our readers will recall how Hal, on scouting duty, robbed the "enemy's" outpost of rifles, canteens and secured even the corporal's shoes. Some of Hal's and Noll's other brilliant scouting successes are therein told, and it is described how Hal and Noll finally gained the information that resulted in their own side gaining the victory in the mimic campaign. That volume also told how Lieutenant Prescott, aided by Soldiers Hal and Noll, succeeded at very nearly the cost of their lives in arresting a notorious and desperate criminal for the civil authorities, and how all this was done in the most soldier-like manner. It was such deeds as the scouting and the clever arrest that resulted in the appointment of the two chums as corporals. Then there was the affair, while the regulars were on duty in summer encampment with the Colorado National Guard, in which Hal and Noll, acting under impulses of the highest chivalry, got themselves into trouble that came very near to driving them out of the service.

Since the last rousing scenes in and near Denver, something more than a year had passed. It was now the beginning of the fall of the year following when Corporal Hal Overton, with the signal flags under his arm, waited near the parade ground for that other fine young soldier, Corporal Noll Terry.

A year of busy life it had been, though in the main uneventful. Our two young corporals had spent most of their time since in perfecting themselves in the soldier's grim game. They were now looked upon as two of the very finest and staunchest young soldiers in the service.

"Oh, there comes Noll at last," muttered Corporal Overton some minutes later. "And it's high time, too, if he has any regard for the sacredness of a soldier's punctuality. But he's leaving the telegraph office. I wonder if the dear old fellow has been getting any bad news from the home town?"

Corporal Terry, as he came briskly along the smooth, hard walk of a well-kept military post, looked every inch as fine a soldier as his chum. By this time Noll was just as thoroughly in love with all that pertained to the soldier's spirited life as was Overton.

"Think I was never coming?" hailed Noll gayly.

"I began to wonder if you weren't losing sight of the sacredness that is supposed to be attached to a soldier's appointment," said Hal dryly.

"I am afraid I have been so carried away with a new chance that I've treated you just a bit shabbily," Corporal Noll admitted.

"Think no more of it," begged Hal. "I got the flags."

"So my eyes tell me."

"And what have you been up to, Noll?"

"Oh, the greatest chance!" glowed Terry. "You know how hard I have been plugging away at telegraphy in spare time during the last few months?"

"Of course."

"Well, Lieutenant Ray is through with his tour of duty as officer in charge of our telegraph station, and Lieutenant Prescott has succeeded him for the next tour."

"Yes."

"I've been over to the telegraph office to interview Lieutenant Prescott, whom I saw going in there. Prescott is a grand young officer, isn't he?"

"Every man in the battalion knows that," Hal agreed heartily, for, indeed, there were no two more popular young officers in the service than Lieutenants Prescott and Holmes, of B and C Companies, respectively.

Readers of our "High School Boys' Series" and of the "West Point Series" know all about Dick Prescott and Greg Holmes, once leaders among High School athletes and afterwards among the brightest and finest of West Point cadets. Prescott and Holmes were now fully launched in their careers as Army officers.

"Lieutenant Prescott has given me a really bully chance," Noll went on happily.

"Did you ask him for it?" suspected Corporal Hal shrewdly.

"Well, I – er – er – hinted some, I guess," responded Noll, with a quiet grin. "But if you want things in this world aren't you a heap more likely to get them by asking than by keeping quiet?"

"Surely. But go on and tell me what it is that you got."

"I haven't exactly got it yet," Noll continued. "But Lieutenant Prescott is going to recommend me for it, and ask Captain Cortland's permission."

"I guess you'll get it, then," nodded Hal Overton. "Mr. Prescott's superior officers think so highly of him that he usually doesn't have to beg very hard to get what he wants. And – what is it?"

"Why, old fellow, I'm to be relieved from most other duties and placed in charge of the telegraph office. You know, there are two soldiers stationed there as day operators, and one as night operator. And I'm to be there in charge night and day."

"Good business," nodded Hal, "if you don't have to keep up night and day as well."

"Oh, no; I'm to be merely responsible to the lieutenant for the proper management of the office. I'm not to be tied down so very closely, after all, and I'm to have the proper amount of leave for recreation and all that sort of thing."

"When do you begin?"

"Day after to-morrow, at nine in the morning."

"You won't be on guard duty while this other detail lasts?"

"No."

"Too bad," muttered Hal. "Of course I may be wrong, but to me the thorough study of real guard duty is one of the most important things in a soldier's profession."

"Oh, I've mastered guard duty pretty well," broke in Corporal Noll.

"Then I congratulate you," was Hal Overton's dry rejoinder. "I feel that I'm only beginning to see the real niceties of the work of the guard."

"We've an hour left before the next drill," resumed young Corporal Terry, after glancing at his watch. "Shall we go over and see if Sergeant Hupner is ready to start breaking us in at wig-wagging?"

"That's what I've been waiting to do," Hal Overton rejoined.

"You don't seem to be a bit glad over my success in getting into telegraphy," complained Noll.

"If it seemed that way, then it's because our tongues were too busy otherwise," Hal answered.

"Noll, I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart, for you're plumb wild to know all about telegraphing."

"Only because it's of use in the military world," explained Corporal Terry. "I wouldn't care a straw about being a telegraph operator in civil life."

"You wouldn't care about being anything else in civil life, would you?"

"No," Corporal Noll admitted promptly. "After a taste of real soldiering in the regular Army I don't see how on earth a fellow can be satisfied with any other kind of life. That is, if a fellow has life, spirit and red blood in him."

Sergeant Hupner proved not only to be disengaged, but ready to begin the instruction of the aspiring young wig-waggers immediately.

It is really no part of an infantry soldier's duty to learn telegraphy, but he is trained at times in the use of the wig-wag signal flags. In the Army both telegraphy and signaling are work usually performed by members of the Signal Corps. In the case of telegraphy, however, at an infantry post where there is no detachment of Signal Corps men, then the work at the telegraph instruments must necessarily fall upon infantry soldiers, since some of the messages sent and received at a military post cannot be intrusted to men who have not taken the oath.

"You take one of the flags, Corporal Overton," began Sergeant Hupner, after stepping from barracks out into the open, "and I'll take the other at the outset. Corporal Terry can look on at first. Now, a signalman, at the beginning of his work, holds the flag straight up before him – so. Each letter in the alphabet has its own series of numbers to stand for it. These numbers are made by dropping the flag so many times to the right or left of your body. Thus – "

Sergeant Hupner described some rapid sweeps with the flag to right and left.

"A, B, C, D, E," he spelled along, as he signaled the letters.

"We know that part of it already, Sergeant," replied Corporal Hal. "We've been studying the alphabet and the punctuation points in the book."¹

"Oh, I'll warrant that you've been studying the alphabet and everything connected with it," replied Sergeant Hupner, with a smile. "And I don't believe you'll need many points from me in order to become first-class signalmen. Take this flag, Terry. Now, Overton, stand off there and signal your full name to me. Spell out the letters slowly, so that I can criticize you when necessary."

Despite his knowledge of the alphabet Hal naturally made a few blunders at first.

"Your work lacks snap," remarked Sergeant Hupner. "Even when you spell slowly you should bring the flag down smartly to either side. Like this."

Sergeant Hupner illustrated briskly with his arms.

"Now send me the name of your regiment."

Hal did better this time.

"You'll soon have the hang of it," declared the sergeant encouragingly. "Now, send me the same thing over again, but with more speed."

"Fine!" added Hupner when Hal had obeyed. "Now, Terry, we'll try you for a few moments. What is your full name?"

Noll signaled it, making each letter carefully with the flag.

"Now tell me – with the flag – what you think of to-day's weather."

"Fine and cool," signaled back Noll.

¹ It would be an excellent idea to reproduce the wig-wag alphabet, with full directions for its use, in this volume of Mr. Hancock's, were it not for the fact that alphabet and directions have just been published in "The Battleship Boys' First Step Upward," which is the second volume in Frank Gee Patchin's Battleship Boys' Series. Readers, therefore, who would like to pick up this fascinating art of signaling messages from distant points will do well to consult Mr. Patchin's volume for simple and explicit directions. – Editor.

Thus the instruction continued. Each young soldier improved a good deal during that hour.

"Now, we'll call it off until to-morrow," remarked the sergeant at last, and turned to re-enter barracks.

"How do you like it, Noll?" asked Overton.

"Oh, it's all right," admitted boyish Corporal Terry. "But I'd rather have telegraphy. I don't see why you've been so wild over the wig-wag flags."

"For just one reason," responded Hal promptly. "Because it's all a part of the soldier's life and duty. I mean to know every phase and detail of the soldier's business that I can possibly pick up. And I hope you won't back out, Noll."

"Oh, no; I'll stick," agreed Corporal Terry, though it sounded as if he promised almost reluctantly.

Ta-ra-ta-ra-ta! The bugler was sounding the first call for drill. That sent the two boyish young corporals quickly into barracks with their signal flags, which they exchanged for their rifles.

Their old friend Hyman – no longer Private Hyman, but now, for three months, Corporal Hyman – regarded them with indulgent eyes.

"You kids been out learning how to wave the shirt?" he queried.

"Yes," nodded Hal. Then, with pretended severity, he demanded: "Do you think, Corporal Hyman, you have chosen a respectful enough manner in addressing other corporals who rank you by virtue of prior appointment to the grade?"

"Oh, nobody takes a corporal seriously except the corporal himself," drawled Hyman. "A corporal in the Army is only a small-fry boss. He's handy to lay the blame on for things, and he doesn't dare to 'sass' back. Neither does the corporal dare to 'take it out of' the private soldiers in his squad, for, if he did, the privates would report him and have him court-martialed. Kids, I'm growing rather tired of being a corporal. I think I'll go to the colonel and –"

But whatever Hyman was going to do he did not explain, for the notes of assembly rang out and all the men in the squad room hastened outside, yet did it with that dignity and seeming deliberation that the soldier soon acquires.

Drill was over in something like an hour. Hal and Noll returned to squad room, where they spent some little time going over their equipment. Then they sauntered outside, for there was still some time before the noon meal at company mess.

"Look at Hyman, in that tree over yonder," said Hal, nodding in the direction.

Corporal Hyman was sitting on one of the lower limbs of a tree some four hundred yards away. It was close to the wall that ran along the front of the reservation, and overlooked the road that came up from the town of Clowdry.

"Yes," grinned Noll. "It's a favorite trick with old Hyman to get up in a tree like that. Says he can think better that way than when he's touching common earth. Hello, he has jumped down to the wall. There he goes into the road outside."

"There was a cloud of dust along the road. I guess he's talking to some one in a carriage or an automobile," guessed Hal.

"Well, it's of no interest to us," mused Noll.

But in that Corporal Terry was wrong.

"There's Hyman up on the wall again," reported Hal.

"So I see, and he's making motions this way."

"He's signaling," muttered Hal, watching the motions of Corporal Hyman's right arm. He had started with that arm held up before his face. Now the arm was falling rhythmically to left and right. "Why, Hyman is asking, 'Can you read this?'"

Then, raising his own arm, Hal signaled back:

"Yes."

Again Hyman's right arm was moving. Hal watched closely, spelling out the wig-wagged signal:

"Pipe – off – what's – coming. Greatest – ever happened – in the – Army. Don't – miss – it."

"Now, what on earth can that be?" queried Noll.

"It must be something unusual to rouse enthusiasm in a man like Hyman," laughed Hal.

And indeed it was something great that was coming. Corporal Hyman's wig-wagging arm was moving again.

"Hustle – over – to – main – road."

Hal and Noll were instantly in motion. It must be confessed that they were eager.

Little did they guess that the coming event was of a nature destined soon to have the whole post at Fort Clowdry by the ears!

CHAPTER II

LIEUTENANT "ALGY" JOINS THE ARMY

IN at the gate down by post number one – in other words, at the guard house – turned an extremely large and costly-looking seven-passenger touring car.

At the driver's post sat an undersized, shrewd-looking little Frenchman.

Behind him, in one of the five seats of the tonneau sat a dapper-looking young man of medium height, with a soft, curly little moustache and dressed in the height of masculine fashion.

At post number one the car was halted, apparently much to the surprise of the solitary passenger, who leaned indolently forward and exchanged some words with the sentry.

"Gracious!" gasped Noll. "He must be a person of some importance, after all. There's the sentry presenting arms."

"And there comes the corporal of the guard, making a rifle salute," added Hal. "It must be a new officer joining the regiment."

"That – an officer?" gasped Noll, in unfeigned disgust. "Don't libel the good old Army, Hal."

Of a sudden the big car shot forward again, and came up the main road to officers' row at a smashing clip.

Then, just as suddenly, it halted beside the two young corporals.

"Hello, boys!" greeted the dapper, smiling little fellow in the tonneau. "Say, I'm afraid I'm all at sea. I've come to live with you fellows, but I'm blessed if I haven't already forgotten what that fellow with the gun told me down at the porter's lodge."

"Porter's lodge? Do you mean the guard house, sir?" Hal asked respectfully.

"Why, yes – if that's what you call it – of course. Names don't matter much to me. Never did. Some one over in Washington – the secretary of something or other – sent me over here. I'm a new lieutenant, and I believe I'm to stay at this beastly place."

At the mention of the word "lieutenant" both Hal and Noll came to a very formal salute.

"Now, what do you mean by that?" smiled the new-comer affably. "Sign of some lodge on the post? I haven't had time to get into any of your secret societies yet, of course."

"We offered you the officer's salute, sir," explained Corporal Hal.

"Oh, then you're officers? I guessed as much," beamed the pleasant young stranger.

"No; we're corporals, sir," Hal informed him.

"Oh, yes; seems to me I've heard about corporals. I'll know more about them later, I dare say. How are you, anyway, boys?"

The stranger leaned out over the side of the car, extending his hand to Corporal Overton, who could not very well refuse it. Then Noll came in for a handshake.

"Of course you understand sir, that we're below the grade of officers," Hal continued.

"Oh, pshaw!" replied the still smiling stranger. "Such things as that don't count. And I've been warned that the Army is one of the most democratic places in the world. I haven't brought any of my 'lugs' here with me – 'pon my word I haven't. I'm Lieutenant Algernon Ferrers. I hope all of you fellows will soon like me well enough to call me Algy."

Though Mr. Ferrers was certainly the biggest joke in the way of an officer that either of the young soldiers had ever seen, it was impossible not to like this pleasant young man.

"Jump in – won't you, boys?" invited Lieutenant Ferrers, throwing the nearer door of the tonneau open. "I'll be tremendously obliged if you'll pilot me to the right place. Where do I ring the bell? Of course I've got to give some one here the glad hand before I can be shown to my rooms."

Though they did so with some misgivings Hal and Noll both stepped into the tonneau.

"Sit right down, boys," urged Lieutenant Ferrers amiably.

"Pardon me, sir," explained Hal Overton. "It would be a bad breach of discipline in this regiment for any enlisted man to sit in the company of his officers."

"Oh, you're enlisted men, eh?" queried the new lieutenant, showing no signs whatever of feeling taken aback. "I'm glad to say I didn't have to enlist. My guv'nor has some good friends at Washington, and I was appointed from civil life."

Hal and Noll had already guessed that much without difficulty. No officer quite like Lieutenant Ferrers had ever been turned out at West Point, and surely such a man had never risen from the ranks. Now, when all the West Point graduates have been commissioned into the Army, and all meritorious enlisted men have been promoted to second lieutenantcies, then, if there be any vacancies left, the President fills these vacancies in the rank of second lieutenant, by appointing young men from civil life.

Generally these appointments from civil life go to the honor graduates of colleges where military drill is conducted by an officer of the Army detailed as instructor. But, occasionally, there are more vacancies than these honor graduates can or will fill – and then political influence very often plays a part in the appointment of some young men as lieutenants in the Army.

"Tell François where to drive, will you?" begged Lieutenant Ferrers.

"I don't believe, sir, that Colonel North is at his office so late in the forenoon," Corporal Hal replied. "But I think, sir, that Captain Hale, the regimental adjutant, will be found there."

"Does Hale assign a fellow's rooms to him?" queried Lieutenant Ferrers innocently.

"If you are under orders to join, sir, you will be expected to report to Colonel North, or else to the regimental adjutant, who represents the colonel."

"I – see," nodded the new lieutenant slowly. "Will you do me the extreme favor to tell François where to leave us?"

Hal leaned forward, indicating the headquarters building.

In another moment the big car stopped before headquarters.

"Come right on in, fellows, and introduce me, won't you?" urged Lieutenant Ferrers.

"I – I am afraid we'd better not," replied Hal, flushing.

"Oh, I see – you've a luncheon appointment, or something of the sort, eh? Well, never mind; glad to have met you. Expect to have many a good time with you later on. Good fellows, both of you, I'll wager."

"Come away from here, Noll," begged Hal, as soon as Mr. Ferrers had run up the steps and into the building. "I'm suffocating."

"I'm green," grinned Noll chokingly, "but I'd hate to have as much ahead of me to learn as that new officer has."

"Oh, perhaps he was joshing us," suggested Hal.

"Do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think," responded Noll, struggling hard to keep his gravity, "that Mr. Ferrers is kidding himself worse than any one else."

In the meantime Ferrers had bounded past an orderly and had broken into the office of the regimental adjutant.

"Hello, old chap!" was his joyous greeting of dignified Captain Hale.

"Sir?" demanded the regimental adjutant. "Who the blazes are you, sir?"

"Name's Ferrers, old chap," responded the newcomer, lightly, dropping a card down on the adjutant's desk.

Captain Hale glanced at the card. Then a light seemed to dawn on him.

"Oh! I think it likely you are the Lieutenant Ferrers who has been ordered to the Thirty-fourth," went on Captain Hale.

"You're a wonderful guesser, old chap. Now, where do I go to see about my rooms, housing my servants, storing my cars, etc.?"

Captain Hale tried to hide his grim smile as he held out his hand.

"Welcome to the Thirty-fourth, Mr. Ferrers. And now I think I had better take you to Colonel North. He has been expecting you."

Lieutenant Algernon Ferrers followed the broad-backed adjutant into an inner office, where the very young man was presented to the grizzled-gray Colonel North. Then, as quickly as he could, Captain Hale escaped back to his desk in the outer office.

Colonel North looked at Mr. Ferrers with a glance that did not convey absolute approval.

"Have you been in a train wreck, Mr. Ferrers?" inquired the colonel.

"Oh, dear me, no. Do I look as bad as that?" inquired the new lieutenant, with a downward glance at his faultless attire.

"But you were due to arrive here at four o'clock yesterday afternoon, Mr. Ferrers," continued the colonel. "I was here at my desk, waiting to receive you."

"I hope I didn't inconvenience you any," murmured Ferrers. "You see, Colonel, when I got in at Pueblo I ran across some old friends at the station. They insisted on my staying over with them for half a day. I couldn't very well get out of it, you see."

"Couldn't very well get out of it?" repeated Colonel North distinctly and coldly. "Wouldn't it have been enough, Mr. Ferrers, to have told your friends that you were under orders to be here at four o'clock yesterday?"

"Oh, I say, now," murmured Mr. Ferrers, "I hope you're not going to raise any beastly row about it."

"That is not language to use to your superior officer, Mr. Ferrers!"

"Then you have my instant apology, Colonel," protested the young man. "But, you see, these were very important people that I met – the Porter-Stanleys, of New York. Very likely you have met them."

Colonel North now found it hard to repress a tendency to laugh. But he choked it back.

"I am afraid, Mr. Ferrers, you do not realize the seriousness of failing to obey a military order punctually. More than that, I fear it would take more time than I have between now and luncheon to make it plain to you. But I assure you that you have a great deal, a very great deal, to learn about the strict requirements of Army life and conduct."

"And you'll find me very keen to learn, sir, very keen, I assure you. But, since you're good enough to postpone telling me more about such little matters, may I ask you, Colonel, who will show me to my rooms? I shall need quite a few, for, outside of two chauffeurs – I have five auto cars you know – I have also four household servants and a valet."

"You have – what!" gasped Colonel North.

Mr. Ferrers patiently repeated the details concerning the number of his automobiles and servants.

"And where are they?" demanded the regimental commander.

"I left them over in Clowdry until I send for them, sir."

"Mr. Ferrers, have you any idea how many rooms an unmarried second lieutenant has?"

"A dozen or fifteen, I hope," suggested Mr. Ferrers hopefully. "A gentleman, of course, can't live in fewer rooms."

"Mr. Ferrers, an unmarried second lieutenant lives in bachelor officers' quarters. He has a parlor, bed-room and bath."

"Oh, I say now," protested poor Mr. Ferrers earnestly, "you can't expect me to get along in any such dog-kennel of a place."

"You'll have to, Mr. Ferrers."

"But my servants – my chauffeurs?"

"No room for them on this post."

"But I can't keep five cars running without at least two chauffeurs. And by the way, Colonel, what kind of a garage do you have here?"

"None whatever, Mr. Ferrers. You can keep one small car down at the quartermaster's stables, but that is the best you can do."

Lieutenant Algernon Ferrers, who instantly realized that this fine-looking old colonel was not making game of him, sat back staring, a picture of hopeless dejection.

"I had no idea the Army was anything like as beastly as this," he murmured disconsolately.

"If you're going to remain in the service, Mr. Ferrers," returned the colonel, "I'm afraid you will have to recast many of your ideas. In the first place, you won't need servants. You'll get your meals at the officers' mess, and all the servants needed there are provided."

"But I must have some one to take care of even my two poor little rooms," fidgeted Mr. Ferrers. "I can't undertake to do that myself. Besides, Colonel, I don't know how to do housework."

"Some of the work in your rooms you should and must do yourself," explained Colonel North. "Such, for example, as tidying up your quarters. The rougher work you can have done by a striker."

"Striker!" echoed Mr. Ferrers, a gleam of intelligence coming into his eyes. "No, thank you, Colonel. Strikers never work. I've heard my guv'nor talk about strikes in his business."

"'Striker,'" explained Colonel North, "is Army slang. Your 'striker' is a private soldier, whom you hire at so many a dollars a month to do the rougher work in your quarters. You make whatever bargain you choose with the soldier. At this post the bachelor officers usually pay a striker eight dollars a month."

"At that price I can afford a lot of 'em," responded Mr. Ferrers, brightening considerably.

"An unmarried officer is not allowed to have more than one striker in this regiment," said the colonel, whereat Ferrer's face showed his dismay. "Nor is any soldier obliged to become your striker. You cannot engage him unless the soldier is wholly willing. However, a good many men like the extra pay. You will be assigned to A company. Direct the first sergeant of that company to send you a man who is willing to serve as a striker. And now, Mr. Ferrers, as you appear to be wholly ignorant of Army life I think I will give you a mentor."

Turning to the telephone Colonel North called:

"Connect me with Lieutenant Prescott. Hello, is that you, Mr. Prescott? The regimental commander is speaking. My compliments, Mr. Prescott, and can you come over to headquarters? Thank you."

Ringling off the colonel turned to his very new young lieutenant, saying:

"Mr. Prescott is a last year's graduate of the Military Academy at West Point, and one of the most capable younger officers I have ever met. I can think of no man so well qualified to coach you in the start of your new life, Mr. Ferrers. You have some baggage with you?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Two trunks on the car."

"Then you have uniforms with you?"

"Yes."

"Say 'sir' when answering a superior officer."

"Yes, sir."

"You have your two regulation swords?"

"Yes, sir. And say!" Ferrers beamed forth, with enthusiasm, while his eyes lit up. "The regulation swords are not such a much, so, while I got them, I also had four other swords made that are a whole lot handsomer. Wait until you see me, sir, with the beauty that Tiffany made to my order – my own design, sir."

"Doubtless your extra swords will do very well as ornaments in your quarters, Mr. Ferrers," replied the colonel, trying very hard to keep a straight face. "But you will not appear with any other than the regulation swords."

"Oh, I say, now – " broke forth Ferrers anxiously, but the door opened, and Lieutenant Dick Prescott strode in, looking the perfection of handsome soldiery.

"You sent for me, sir?" Prescott asked, coming to a very formal salute.

"Yes, Mr. Prescott. This young gentleman is Lieutenant Algernon Ferrers, lately appointed from civil life. As Mr. Ferrers will presently be glad to admit that he knows less than nothing about Army life, I can think of no one better qualified than you, Mr. Prescott, to explain to him the nature of military life."

"Thank you, Colonel," replied Prescott gravely.

"Kindly take Mr. Ferrers over to the officers' mess and see that he is made to feel at home among you youngsters. And advise him, in all necessary respects, as to what is expected of him in this regiment."

"But my rooms, sir? My little dog-kennel?" urged Ferrers.

"Mr. Prescott will take you to Lieutenant Pope, the battalion quartermaster, who will assign you to quarters. And, Mr. Prescott, make it a point to introduce Mr. Ferrers to Major Silsbee and also Captain Ruggles of A company, for Mr. Ferrers is assigned to that company."

Prescott saluted smartly in leaving his colonel. Ferrers also endeavored to salute, and imitated badly – with the wrong hand.

As soon as the door had closed Colonel North rose, sighed and muttered:

"With a seeming idiot like that on officers' row I can see our old and happy life here passing."

Lieutenant Ferrers, after an infinite amount of coaching by Mr. Prescott, turned out at afternoon parade. Ferrers did not take his post with his company, but stood at one side, out of the way, watching the work with a rather bored look.

By the time that the men were dismissed from parade every enlisted man in barracks appeared to have heard a lot about Lieutenant Ferrers. Every man was either telling or listening to some anecdote about the new young officer, and roars of laughter rang on all sides, for Algy Ferrers, during the brief afternoon, had managed, in spite of Prescott, to make a whole lot of ridiculous breaks.

"That young shave-tail won't last two weeks in the service," predicted Corporal Hyman, who, though he now belonged in another squad room, was just now visiting with Sergeant Hupner's men.

"Oh, I don't know," Noll answered thoughtfully. "I've seen a lot of worse enlisted men licked into shape and become good soldiers. I don't know why the rule shouldn't work as well with a new officer."

Corporal Hal, at this moment, was down at the further end of the squad room, close to an open window. Here, where he had plenty of space for manœuvring, he was practising some moves with the signal flag, while Sergeant Hupner stood by criticising.

"Of all the dizzy young rookies with the waving shirt I consider you the worst," jeered Corporal Hyman, stepping over. "Here, I'm going to take that thing away from you. What you need, Overton, is rest."

Hyman made a dive for the signal flag. Corporal Hal resisted the effort to take it away from him, and a good-natured scuffle followed. While it was going on Hal was forced into the open window.

Hyman seized the staff, giving it a twist. Then Hal started to recover it.

Thus the staff dropped and fell below, just as young Corporal Overton sprang inward.

Instantly, however, the boy remembered that it might drop on some one's head. He wheeled like a flash, bending out of the window, just as a howl floated upward.

"Hey, you idiot!" followed the howl, and the young corporal saw Hinkey, a new recruit in the regiment and company, take off his hat and rub a rising lump on the top of his head.

"Look out below, there!" called Corporal Hal.

"What else are you going to throw out at me?" glared Private Hinkey.

For answer, Corporal Hal sprang over the window sill, landing lightly on the ground below.

"Hinkey, I'm mighty sorry," began Overton. "It was an accident, and – "

"An accident?" flared Hinkey sulkily. "I suppose you expect me to believe that you slammed that flagstaff down and hit me on the top of the head, and that it was all an accident?"

"I certainly do expect you to believe it," replied Corporal Hal, his face flushing.

"Well, I don't," came the ugly response, accompanied by another scowl. "It's a lie, and – "

"Be careful, Hinkey!" warned Corporal Overton, his fine young face paling slightly. "Passing the lie, you know, don't go in the Army!"

"I don't care a hang what goes in the Army," snarled the private, who was a man some twenty-eight years of age, dark of complexion and forbidding of feature. "You've had it in for me all along, Corporal Overton. Only yesterday morning you scorched me at drill."

"You needed it," was the quiet reply. "And I used no abusive language."

"Good thing you didn't," flashed Hinkey. "And the day before – "

"Stop your whining and let me look at your head," advised Corporal Overton. "Whew, what a bump! Hinkey, I'm truly sor – "

"Get away from me, and never mind my head," snapped the other.

"But man, the flesh is cut, and the bump is already the size of a hen's egg, and growing. You must have that attended to at hospital."

"I'll do what I please about that," retorted Hinkey.

"No; you'll do as you're told. You will report to First Sergeant Gray at once, and ask his permission to report at hospital without delay."

"Perhaps you think I will," came the disagreeable retort.

"I know you will," said Corporal Overton more sternly, "for it's a military order and you have no choice but to obey. And, if you think I did that purposely – "

"I don't think, Overton. I know you did."

"Then I'll post you as to your rights in the matter, Private Hinkey. When you report to Sergeant Gray for hospital permission, which you will do at once, you can also state that you believe I assaulted you purposely. Then Sergeant Gray will arrange for you to go to Captain Cortland and make regular complaint against me."

"You think I'm a fool, don't you?" jeered Hinkey.

"On that point I decline to commit myself."

"Fine to go and complain against an officers' pet and boot-lick," laughed Hinkey sullenly. "No, sir! I'll go to no officer with a charge against a favored boot-lick!"

"That's the only way in which you can get redress."

"Is it?" demanded Private Hinkey, with a sudden, intense scowl that made his ill-featured face look satanic. "Well, you wait and see, my fine young buck doughboy!"

"Don't fail to report to Sergeant Gray for hospital permission," Corporal Hal Overton called after the fellow. "If you do, you'll be up against disobedience of orders."

Private Hinkey, moving away, made a derisive gesture behind his back, but the boyish young corporal turned on his heel, stepping off in another direction.

"If that kid thinks he can lord it over me," snarled Private Hinkey under his breath, "he's due to wake up before long."

Nevertheless Private Hinkey had already learned enough of Army life to feel certain that he was obliged to go to Sergeant Gray.

"Sure thing! Go over to hospital and have that head dressed at once," ordered the first sergeant. "How did it happen?"

"The fellow who did it said it was an accident," replied Hinkey, with an ugly leer.

"Then report him," urged the first sergeant of B Company. "I can take care of the offender if it was done on purpose."

"That's all right," snapped Private Hinkey. "So can I."

"If Hinkey is telling the truth, then there's the start of a nice little row in that sore head," thought Gray, glancing after the man headed for hospital.
And, indeed, Sergeant Gray was wholly right.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST BREATH AGAINST A SOLDIER'S HONOR

THE night was so quiet, the air so still, that the single, distant stroke of the town clock bell over in the town of Clowdry was distinctly audible.

Dong! boomed the bell, the vibration reaching the ears of two or three of the lighter sleepers, and causing them to stir lightly in their sleep in Sergeant Hupner's squad room.

Out on the post, not far away, a dog chose to bark at that town-clock bell.

Some one gliding swiftly through the squad room upset a stool with a loud crash. Yet few of the soundly sleeping soldiers bothered their heads about such a series of trivial noises.

Now, a series of hails began, starting down at the guard house and running rapidly around the sentry posts until the sentry pacing near barracks caught it up and called lustily:

"Post number six. One o'clock, and all's well!"

One man in especial had been stirring on his cot as though trying to throw off some phantom of dread. Now instantly after the sentry's hail this stirring sleeper emitted an excited yell.

"Wow! Turn out the guard – post number six!"

Instantly Sergeant Hupner awoke, sitting up on his cot.

"What's the matter with you, you idiot?" growled the disturbed sergeant.

"I've been touched!" wailed the excited voice.

It was the voice of Private William Green, the joke of the squad room, the man who hoarded his money and carried much of it about with him.

"Go to sleep, William," ordered the sergeant in a more soothing voice. "I've often told you that one so young shouldn't drink coffee at supper."

"I've been touched, I tell you!" insisted William Green, now out of his bed and feeling with frantic hands under the head of the mattress. "Don't I know? I tell you, my buckskin pouch is gone. Some one was in this room and got it!"

In a jiffy Sergeant Hupner was out of bed. His groping right hand found the switch and turned on the electric lights. Then Hupner jumped for his uniform trousers and drew them on.

"What's wrong, squad room?" called the voice of the alert sentry outside.

But Hupner first went to the door of the squad room, locked it and dropped the key in his trousers' pocket. Then the sergeant ran to an open window.

"I don't believe it's anything worse than a nightmare of one of the men, sentry. Don't call the guard until I look about a bit."

"Very good, Sergeant."

Then Hupner turned to the cot of Corporal Hal Overton, which was close to the window.

"Why, Corporal, what ails you?" demanded the sergeant. "You're shaking and your face has a frightened look."

"I – I have just awakened from a pretty bad dream," Corporal Hal replied sheepishly. "I'll be over it at once."

"Turn out, Corporal, and you also, Corporal Terry. We've got to investigate in this room."

Hal instantly thrust a leg out. Something dropped to the floor.

Bang!

"Ow!" wailed Private Green. "It wasn't a dream, after all. I knew it would go off."

Sergeant Hupner, bending low like a flash, now picked up a revolver from the floor beside Hal's cot, while Hal himself sat up, staring rather dazedly at the weapon.

"How did this come to be in your bed, Corporal Overton?" demanded the sergeant.

"I don't know, Sergeant."

"But it was in your bed. You shook it out when you went to get up just now."

"That's the gun," insisted Private William Green. "I saw it poked into my face by some one prowling before my cot."

"Were you so scared that you didn't dare jump up or say anything?" demanded Hupner, turning upon Private Green, who had now reached the vicinity of Hal's cot.

"Scared, nothing!" grunted Private William. "I thought I must be dreaming, for there was no danger in this room. Then I heard something go smash down the room, like a stool being tipped over, and then I came altogether out of my doze, and time I did, too! For I put my hand under the mattress and my pouch and money were gone. Whoever poked that gun toward my head got my money!"

By this time more than half the men in the room were sitting up on the edges of their cots. A few more lay still, though wide awake, while a few of the hardest sleepers were still in the Land of Nod.

"Green, are you sure your money's gone?" insisted Hupner sternly. It was no light thing to the reliable old sergeant to find that he had a thief in his squad room.

"Come and look for yourself, Sergeant."

"Corporals Overton and Terry, dress yourselves," ordered the sergeant, as he started after Private William Green. "The rest of you men needn't dress unless I direct it."

"Now, look here, Sergeant," insisted Green, after pulling the mattress bodily from his cot. "Do you see anything that looks like my buckskin pouch?"

There was no pouch to be found on or near Soldier William's cot.

"How much money did you have in the pouch?" demanded Hupner almost angrily.

"Seven hundred and ten dollars," declared Green promptly.

"Whew!"

To most of the soldiers present that much money represented a fortune.

Yet no one in the room thought of doubting William's assertion. As readers of the preceding volume know, Green had had considerable money when he joined the regiment something more than a year earlier. And William was known to be one who was constantly adding to his money by saving his pay.

Moreover, Private Green had made not a little by lending money to comrades in the battalion. He loaned on the time-honored system of lending among enlisted men in the Army – the system of "five now but six on pay day."

There are soldiers in every company – in every squad room – who always spend their pay within a few days after receiving it from the paymaster. As soon as his money is gone, and he needs or wants more, the improvident soldier turns to some comrade who saves and lends his money. The loan is five dollars, but by all the traditions the borrower must return six on pay day.

William Green had been making money on this plan. Some of his wealth Green now had on deposit at a Denver bank, but much of his "pile" he always insisted on carrying with him.

And usually this is a safe enough plan. In no body of men in the world does honesty average higher than among the soldiers of the American regular Army.

Once in a while, of course, an exceptional "black sheep" may get in even among soldiers, and William had often been warned not to keep so much convertible wealth about his person. But William trusted his comrades and carried large sums of cash.

"Corporal Overton, you take one side of the room, and Corporal Terry the other. Scan the floor for any sign of a buckskin pouch."

"Let me help," begged William.

"All right," nodded Sergeant Hupner. "And look, also, for any stool that may be overturned."

The search was unavailing. No sight was gained of the buckskin pouch, while every stool in the room was upright and in place.

"Does any man here know anything about Green's buckskin?" demanded Hupner.

There was no answer.

Crossing to the window, Sergeant Hupner called:

"Sentry, call the corporal of the guard."

Almost immediately the corporal of the guard was at hand. Sergeant Hupner informed him that there had probably been a robbery in the squad room and stated the known circumstances briefly.

Corporal Jason immediately sent a member of the guard to arouse the officer of the day and ask him to come to the squad room.

Soon after Lieutenant Greg Holmes strode into the room, his sword clanking at his side.

Lieutenant Holmes heard Sergeant Hupner's report, which was but a short one.

Then the young officer of the day turned to Corporal Hal, eyeing him keenly.

"Corporal Overton, isn't there something you can tell me about this? You were found awake, shaking somewhat and with an alarmed look on your face."

"That is true, sir," Hal Overton admitted.

"When Sergeant Hupner directed you to rise you did so, and at the same time kicked out of your bed this revolver, which was discharged."

"Yes, sir."

"Corporal," continued Lieutenant Holmes, "it would look as though you must have some knowledge of the affair. Bear in mind that I am not making any charge against you."

"I – I should hope not, sir," stammered Hal Overton, his face growing very pallid.

"What do you know about this matter, Corporal Overton?" pressed the young officer.

"Absolutely nothing, sir, more than Sergeant Hupner has already stated to you, sir. My condition of apparent fright was due to a bad dream from which I was at the moment waking."

"And you know nothing whatever regarding the robbery from Private Green?"

"Absolutely nothing more than the rest, sir," insisted Hal, though his color continued to rise.

The young soldier felt that he was half suspected, and he felt all the awkwardness of innocence – an awkwardness that real guilt seldom displays.

"Men," it was Sergeant Hupner's voice breaking the stillness now, "if you each want to clear your own individual selves you will step forward and volunteer to have your persons and your belongings searched."

Instantly the men moved forward, and Lieutenant Holmes glanced away from Hal Overton. The lieutenant's survey of the lad's face had not been in the least accusing, but merely a keen look of inquiry.

"All the men in the room have come forward and are willing to be searched, sir," reported the sergeant.

"Good enough, Sergeant, since they volunteer, but I would not have them forced without an order from the post commander. Sergeant, will you undertake the search?"

"Yes, sir; shall I have the corporals assist me?"

"Yes, Sergeant, and I will lend a general oversight at the same time."

That search occupied some forty minutes. Not only were the persons of the men searched, but their chests and all their belongings. Hupner and his two boyish young corporals asked Lieutenant Holmes to search them himself, which the officer of the day did.

"There doesn't appear to be a chance that Private Green's money is in this room, or in the possession of any man in the room," remarked Lieutenant Holmes at last. "Green, you should have taken sensible advice and deposited your money, either with the paymaster or at a bank."

"I shall, sir, if I ever get it back," replied William Green mournfully.

"Well, there appears to be nothing more that I can do," continued Lieutenant Holmes. "However, I will return to the guard house and call up the commanding officer over the telephone, reporting the matter. Let your men go to bed, Sergeant, but you will remain up until either I return or send you some word through the corporal of the guard."

After the officer of the day had gone out, the men of the squad room looked from one to another in bewilderment.

"If any fellow took my money for a joke," announced Private William Green, "I'll call it all off if he'll be kind enough to return it."

No one accepted the offer.

"It's gone, all right, Green, evidently, and serves you right," said Sergeant Hupner gruffly.

In the course of a few minutes the corporal of the guard came back to inform Sergeant Hupner that a guard would be set, both in the corridor and outside, to prevent any man from leaving this squad room during the night. In the morning, immediately following first call to reveille, Colonel North, his adjutant and the officer of the day would visit the squad room together.

"And that's all there is to it, for to-night, men," announced Sergeant Hupner. "Every man in bed now, for I'm going to switch off the light."

Ten minutes later some of the soldiers were asleep, but not all, for presently Hupner's strong military voice boomed through the room:

"Stop that whispering! Silence until first call goes in the morning."

After first call to reveille did sound in the morning barely sixty seconds passed when the door was opened to Colonel North and the two officers accompanying him.

Then, indeed, there was a thorough examination. Each man in the room was questioned keenly by the colonel himself.

"Corporal Overton, how do you account for that revolver being in your bed?"

Colonel North held up the weapon. It was an ordinary service revolver, such as is worn by an orderly when on duty without rifle, and there were many such revolvers in barracks. No soldier was supposed to have one of these revolvers, except by orders, yet it would be easy enough for any soldier to get one by stealth.

"I can't account for it, sir," Hal answered. "I didn't have it myself, or put it in the bed, and I can only guess that some one else did."

"Why should any one else do that, Corporal?"

"Possibly, sir, with a view to making me appear guilty."

"Do you suspect any one in particular?"

"No, sir; I can't imagine why any man in the room, or in the battalion, should want to do it."

"You understand, Corporal Overton, that you are not under any charge, or even suspicion, of guilt in the matter," continued the commanding officer, for Hal in truth was esteemed much too fine a young soldier to be suspected by his officers in the present case.

"Thank you, sir," Hal replied.

The inquiry was soon over and proved as resultless as that made alone by Lieutenant Greg Holmes in the middle of the night. The officers left and the men prepared to hasten out for breakfast formation.

"I never thought Overton would do a trick like that," remarked a low voice behind the young corporal, but Hal heard it.

"Oh, you can't tell. Sometimes these quiet fellows are the worst. Still waters run deep, you know."

"I suppose other fellows in the squad room are thinking the same," thought Hal, his heart throbbing with pain.

He more than half guessed the truth – that the seed of suspicion against him was already sown – that henceforth he would be watched by nearly all eyes.

CHAPTER IV

LIEUTENANT ALGY'S INSPIRATION

LIEUTENANT ALGY FERRERS, the picture of dejection, sat staring across his rather tiny parlor in bachelor quarters at smiling Lieutenant Prescott.

"I thought the Army was a place for gentlemen," murmured Algy aghast.

"At last accounts it was, and I believe still is," replied the West Pointer, with a smile.

"But consider that beastly schedule of the day's work that you've been explaining to me!"

"What's wrong with it?" asked Lieutenant Prescott patiently.

"What's first – what did you call it?"

"First call to reveille, at 5.50 in the morning?"

"Yes; what an utterly impossible time for any gentleman to be out of bed. Unless," added Algy with a sudden bright thought, "he stays up until then, and goes to bed after the beastly row is over."

"That would hardly do, I'm afraid," Lieutenant Prescott laughed softly. "You see, the day is full of duties. Now, sharp at six the march –"

"March? At six in the morning?" gasped Algy Ferrers, his despair increasing by leaps and bounds. "Man alive, I wouldn't feel like crawling – at that time!"

"The term has confused you," replied Prescott. "It's the musician of the guard – the bugler – who plays the march. It's a strain that is played, the first note beginning just as the reveille gun is fired, at the minute of six in the morning. Then, just five minutes later reveille itself is blown."

"All that racket will wake me up mornings," complained Algy sadly.

"It ought to, for it's an officer's business to be up by that time."

"Good heavens!" groaned Algy. "Say, 'pon my word, I'll hate to have any soldiers see me when I'm looking as seedy as I'll look at that time of the day."

"You won't see them immediately," Prescott replied.

"Don't I have to go to my men as soon as I'm up?"

"No; officers don't go down to barracks to see their men rise. Now, listen. Reveille sounds at 6.05, with assembly and roll-call right afterward. There's a very brief athletic drill, followed by recall from the drill at 6.15 o'clock. At 6.20 mess call for breakfast is sounded. Right after breakfast comes police of quarters and premises. 'Police' is the Army term for cleaning up and making everything tidy. Then, just at 7 o'clock the bugler of the guard sounds sick call. The first sergeant of each company makes up the sick report, and a corporal marches the men out who need the doctor – the 'rain-maker,' we call him in the Army. Now, with all that happens up to this time the non-commissioned officers – sergeants and corporals – have to do."

"Then I can sleep a little later, can't I?" proposed Lieutenant Ferrers hopefully.

"If you do you'll be sure to get yourself in a scrape. You'll be coming out of your quarters unshaven, or with your uniform put on too hastily. Colonel North is a true Tartar with any officer who doesn't start the day looking like bandbox goods. And, my dear fellow, it's no greater hardship for you to be up early than it is for the enlisted man. Now, at 7.10 in the morning comes first call to drill. Drill assembly goes at 7.20."

"Do I have to be there?"

"You do, unless excused for some very grave reason. Recall from drill sounds at 8.20."

"That means that drill is over, then?" sighed Algy questioningly.

"Yes. Then, at 8.30, is fatigue call."

"I shall be properly fatigued by that time, no doubt," confessed Algy wretchedly.

"You'll soon understand what 'fatigue' is in the Army," smiled Lieutenant Prescott. "It's more work, but work that is done without arms."

"Without arms? With the feet, then?"

Lieutenant Prescott bit his lip, but answered:

"By arms this time I mean weapons. First call to guard mounting comes at 8.50, and guard mounting assembly at 9. At 10 another drill begins; at 11 the recall sounds, with recall from fatigue at 11.30. Mess call for enlisted men is at noon, and 1 p. m. fatigue call. Drill call goes again at 1.50, with drill assembly at 2 o'clock. The time spent at these drills varies according to the nature of the work and the orders. Recall from fatigue sounds at 5 o'clock. Parade assembly is at 5.30 at this time of the year, with retreat and evening gun-fire at 6.10. Then comes mess call to supper. With that ends, usually, the working day of the enlisted man. Tattoo sounds at 9 in the evening, with call to quarters at 10.45, and taps, or lights out, at 11 p. m. Except when on guard or special duty you're not likely to have to be with your men much after retreat."

"Oh, I should hope not," exclaimed Algy Ferrers fervently. "By supper time I can see myself a nervous wreck."

"Oh, you'll get used to it," laughed Prescott. "The rest of us all had to."

"And at all of those beastly things and jobs you enumerated, Prescott, I've got to be present and actually do a lot of work?"

"A big lot of work, you'll find."

"And yet they call being an officer in the Army a gentleman's life."

"Yes," replied Prescott, his eyes opening rather wide. "Don't you consider that one may be a gentleman and yet be industrious?"

"Oh, I reckon so," sighed Algy Ferrers. "But it all seems a beastly grind."

"Then how did you ever come to think of going into the Army?"

"I didn't," almost flared up Algy. "It was the gov'nor. He forced me into it. Said he'd cut my allowance off altogether, and leave me out of his will if I didn't get to work. And he chose the Army for me, and put the whole thing through. Wasn't it beastly of the gov'nor?"

"I'm not so sure that it was," smiled Lieutenant Prescott. "Of course it was different with me. My father worked, and had to, or starve. It was the same with me, which may be why I can look upon the idea of a lot of work without feeling insulted by fate. But I reckon, Ferrers, that no man is worth his salt in the world unless he does work."

This was the day after Algy's arrival. Colonel North and Major Silsbee had not yet put the new young officer actually at work. They had allowed him this time of grace to get settled in his new quarters, and to talk over his new duties with young Prescott.

"I can never remember all that long list of things you told me, dear fellow," complained Algy. "Won't you do me a great, big favor?"

"What?"

"Write down for me that – er – time table you laid down for me."

"No." Lieutenant Prescott's tone was almost abrupt. "I'll repeat it to you, Ferrers, and you can write it down for yourself. Get a pencil and paper."

"Give me just time for a cigarette before I take up such exhausting literary work," begged Algy, reaching for his gold cigarette case. "Have one, dear fellow?"

"Thank you, Ferrers. I don't smoke."

"Then what do you do with your time?"

"Work!"

"What beastly old rot the Army is!" murmured Algy, lying back in his easy chair and blowing a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

Rap-tap! sounded at the door.

"Come in," called Algy. It was Lieutenant Holmes who entered.

"Howdy-do, Ferrers?" he hailed the new officer. "I heard Prescott was here and came to find him. You'll pardon me, won't you?"

"Nothing to pardon," murmured Algy.

"Old ramrod," began Lieutenant Holmes, turning to his chum and addressing him by the old West Point nickname, "I came to see you about your pet. He seems to be in increasing trouble."

"Who's my pet!" demanded Prescott in surprise.

"Why, Corporal Overton, of your company."

"Corporal Overton is not my pet, and you'll greatly oblige me by not referring to him again in that fashion, Holmesy," returned the young lieutenant almost stiffly. "Corporal Overton is a mighty fine young soldier, and a good soldier never needs to be his officer's pet; he can stand on his own merits. But what's the trouble with Overton? Is he still absurdly suspected of relieving that simpleton Green of his money?"

"Yes; there's a strong drift of suspicion that way among the men of B Company."

"The idiots!" muttered Prescott impatiently.

"One of my sergeants has just been telling me about Overton's present standing in the company. B Company men have always liked Overton. In fact, he has been well liked all through the battalion, but just now many of the men don't feel sure about the young fellow," continued Lieutenant Holmes. "Not a man will admit that the case is proved, but a good many of them don't like the looks of things. Especially are the men disturbed by the fact of that revolver being in Corporal Overton's bed, and the fact of his being awake and appearing nervous when the alarm was given."

"Greg, you don't believe Overton stole that simpleton soldier's cash?" cried Prescott.

"I don't, and I won't," Lieutenant Holmes replied. "Overton isn't that type of fellow. He's a soldier all the way through, going and coming, and the first characteristic of a real soldier is honesty."

"Yet you say so many of the men suspect him?" mused Prescott.

"Not exactly that they suspect him, but that they'd like to have the whole matter cleared up and see daylight through it."

"From what I know of soldiers," remarked Lieutenant Prescott thoughtfully, "it looks like a mean mess for Overton. Really, nothing but long time, or complete vindication, will ever put Overton back where he'd like to be in the esteem of all his comrades."

"I know it," agreed Holmes. "That's why I'm telling you all this about one of your own men."

"And I ought to have known it myself," Prescott reproached himself. "I ought not to have waited to get the first strong news from an officer of another company."

"Why, I suppose it was easier for me to get this word than it would have been for you. B Company men are too 'sore' to talk much about it. But C Company men, as it doesn't affect any of them, just treat the whole matter as one of ordinary news."

Lieutenant Dick Prescott rose and began to pace the floor. He was deeply concerned – not so much for Hal Overton's sake as for the general good name of B Company. Moreover, young Prescott knew that, if any man in his company were unjustly suspected, it was his duty, as one of the company officers, to find a way to set the whole matter straight.

"What's all the beastly row about, any way?" queried Lieutenant Algernon Ferrers.

Holmes explained it briefly.

"So it's all a row about some seven hundred dollars, it is?" asked Algy.

"If you choose to put it that way," replied Lieutenant Holmes.

"Then see here, Prescott, old chap," cried Algy eagerly, "why all this rotten fuss? Why, I see the way through it as clear as daylight! I'll set the matter straight in thirty seconds!"

CHAPTER V

CORPORAL HAL'S ADMISSION

LIEUTENANT PRESCOTT paused, looking sharply at Algy.

"Ferrers, if you can see a way through difficulties as easily as you promise, then you're going to be a valuable man for the Army. What's your plan?"

"Why, as I understand it," beamed Ferrers placidly, "the whole trouble is caused by the loss of some seven hundred dollars that the Overton chap got from the simpleton Green?"

"Seven hundred which some men almost suspect that Corporal Overton took from Green," corrected Lieutenant Prescott.

"All the same thing, as far as the really important details go," beamed Algy. "I'll settle it out of hand. You know, dear chaps, the gov'nor owns a few banks in his own name, and he ships me yellow-backs by the case lots. Result is, I always have plenty of money, and am likely to have more than ever now, for there doesn't seem to be much chance in the Army to spend it. So – "

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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