A SOLDIER'S SECRET: A STORY OF THE SIOUX WAR OF 1890. AND AN ARMY PORTIA. TWO NOVELS

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Trieste

A SOLDIER'S SECRET.

A STORY OF

THE SIOUX WAR OF 1890.

AND

AN ARMY PORTIA.

TWO NOVELS.

BY

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TO

ELIZABETH BACON CUSTER,

WHOSE DEVOTION AS WIFE, WHOSE DESOLATION AS WIDOW,
AND
WHOSE BRAVERY AND PATIENCE THROUGH LONG
YEARS "IN THE SHADOW" HAVE
TOUCHED ALL HEARTS,
THIS STORY
IS
Inscribed.

A SOLDIER'S SECRET.

I.

WHEN the Indian summer haze is hovering over the bluffs along the Pawnee in these dreamy, sunshiny afternoons of late November there is a languorous spell even in soldier life, and the troopers love to loll about the wide porches of the barracks during their brief leisure moments, or while waiting the trumpet call for stables. There is scarcely a breath of air astir. The broad, fertile valley under the bluffs, forest-fringed along the stream, gives forth a faint, pungent, smoky odor, and the eye wanders across its soft undulations, its vistas of alternate glade, grove, and shadowy pool, and sees it all as through some filmy, intangible veil. The sharp outlines so characteristic of the frontier at other seasons, giving to the ridge to the northwest that razor-back guise that inspired the original explorers, Kentuckians and Missourians, to refer to the range as "Hawg Buttes," are mellowed into softer curves. There is an echo sprite abroad in the autumn skies, for the distant whistle of the trains, the puff and pant of engines miles away, the rumble of the express as it flies across the wooden truss at Big Bend far down the valley, the lowing of cattle and the tinkle of their bells at the farms beyond the reservation lines, the shout and laughter of village children scouring the stream banks for the last of the year's crop of beech- or butternut, the soft laughter of the ladies gathered in the veranda of the major's quarters, all come floating through the pulseless air to the listening ears of the sentry dawdling here along the post at the western gate, and distracting his attention from the purely military functions which he is called upon to perform. Over at the guard-house many of the men are drowsing in the afternoon sunshine. Among the stables the horses are standing at the picket-line, with drooped heads and lazily-switching tails. The officer of the guard, knowing the colonel to be away on a late shooting-excursion and the

major held at home by the demands of hospitality, has dropped into a doze while sitting bolt upright at his wooden desk. Scores of the garrison proper seem inclined to follow his example, and the tall, dark-faced, black-bearded soldier—a handsome fellow—leaning on the breast-high wall over at the east end midway between the hospital at the edge of the bluff and the junior surgeon's quarters, his chin on his arms, his cap pulled well down over his eyes, seems to have been stricken by the general somnolence. It is only the ladies who are wide awake and alert, for this is Nita Guthrie's last appearance, so to speak. She has been paying a brief visit to Dr. and Mrs. Holden, kinsfolk of hers, but is to take the East-bound train this very night. Mrs. Holden goes too, leaving her lord, the junior medical officer of the station, to the mercy of the other women; and of all the families of some thirty married officers stationed in this big garrison not one is unrepresented at Major Berrien's to-day, for Nita Guthrie has won all hearts. But this, say those who have known her long, is an old, old story with Nita; she has been doing the same thing for years.

There is tang of suggestiveness about this statement; moreover, it is true: Miss Guthrie is not in the first bloom of youth. "Why, she must be nearly thirty," say some of the younger girls and younger matrons, who envy her none the less the freshness, the grace, the winsomeness, that hover about her mobile face; but those who are in position to know and have no reason to feel the faintest jealousy assert very positively that Nita is not more than twenty-five.

"Well, why hasn't she married?" is the instant query of Mrs. Vance, to whose benighted mind it ever appears that because a woman hasn't she cannot.

"Simply because the right man is yet to come," is Mrs. Harper's equally prompt reply. "Nita Guthrie has had more offers in six years than any woman I ever heard of."

"Then there must be something back of it all," responds Mrs. Vance, whose theories are not to be lightly shaken. "Was there some early affair?"

"My *dear* Mrs. Vance, I have no doubt I could tell you a dozen stories, all plausible, all in active circulation when last I visited St. Louis and saw her in society there, and all as near the truth, probably, as any we could invent here. Nobody knows but Nita, and she won't tell."

Now as the autumn sun, all red burnished gold, is sinking to the

horizon on this final day of a charming and memorable visit, Nita Guthrie is bidding adieu with laughing, kindly cordiality to the little coterie gathered in her honor. To one and all she has the same frank, gracious manner. Over all she throws the same odd magnetic spell, seeming to impress each and every one in turn with the same idea: "Now, you are just the most thoroughly delightful creature I have ever met, and I cannot bear to say good-by to you." There is the lingering hand-clasp, and yet not the faintest sentimentality. Nita's blue eyes—very blue—gaze straight into those of her friends. She seems to advance a step or two, as though eager to meet and take by the hand each new-comer. Even the elders among the women find it hard to go; and as for the girls, they linger spell-bound; they cluster about her, watching the sunshine in her face, the play of her features, the sparkle of her eyes, drinking in her winsome words, her rippling laughter.

"It's just the only chance we've had to ourselves, Miss Nita," protests Winifred Berrien. "You've been surrounded by men all the rest of the time, and we couldn't see you now if it weren't that they had to be in stables. Oh, if you only *didn't* have to go to-night!"

"Indeed, Winnie, I don't want to go. It seems to me nothing can be more delightful than life in an army post like this. Certainly no girl ever had a better time anywhere than you have given me here, and it is so unlike what I fancied it might be."

"It is entirely unlike what life on the frontier used to be, Miss Guthrie," answers her hostess, the major's wife, in her calm, placid way. "Any one contrasting our beatitude of to-day with our life here, there, and everywhere over the West during the Indian campaigns in which the regiment was incessantly engaged, can only wonder how we found it possible to exist in those days. Social conditions have changed, too, and in the gathering of our troops in larger garrisons a great many of the unpleasant features of the old life have been eliminated entirely. Indeed, I wish you might stay and see more of us. But you are coming again, are you not?"

"If wishing will bring it about, I shall be with you again with the coming summer or early in the spring. I have promised Mrs. Holden that I will return to her, if only for a fortnight."

The enthusiasm excited among the girls, and apparently shared by all the women present, when this announcement is made, ought certainly to convince Miss Guthrie that they most reluctantly part with her now

and most pleasantly anticipate her future coming. The clamor of voices is such that for a time no one is conscious of the fact that out on the parade the regimental line has formed, and that the band is already trooping down the front. Berrien had taken his position as commanding officer. Several subalterns, whose heads were kept rigidly straight to the front, found their eyes wandering furtively over towards the major's quarters. In couples and groups, a number of the ladies come sauntering forth, gathering opposite the centre nearer the colonel's house, from which point they generally watched the closing ceremony of the day. But, still oblivious to any music but that of her voice, a dozen of their number hover about Miss Guthrie. Even gun-fire fails to distract their attention. It is not until the major himself returns, tossing off his helmet and tugging at his waist-belt, that they realize that parade is over and dinner waiting.

"Now, you *will* come back next spring?"—"You *will* write?"—"You *won't* forget to send me the photograph,—mind, cabinet size,—Miss Nita?"—"Indeed, if ever I get anywhere near St. Louis you'll be the first soul I shall come in search of."

It is a little flock of enthusiastic army girls surrounding her, maidens whose early lives had been spent wandering from river to mountain, from the Gulf to the Columbia, to whom city life was almost a revelation, and city belles, beings from another world. Winifred Berrien is the leader of the coterie, a girl whose eyes are as dark as Nita's are blue, and they are ready to brim over at this very instant.

"Here comes Captain Rolfe for you now, and we've got to let you go; but we'll all be down to see you off at train-time."

The man who enters at the moment and stands just within the heavy Navajo portière, smilingly looking upon the group and quite unconscious of the almost vengeful glances in the eyes of the young girls, is a cavalry officer about thirty-five years of age. He is a tall fellow, somewhat heavily built, yet well-proportioned and athletic. His face is tanned by long exposure to the sun and wind of the wide frontier. His brown hair, close-cropped, has a suspicion of gray just silvering the temples. His eyebrows are thick and strongly marked. The eyes beneath are deep-set and fringed with heavy lashes. The moustache, sweeping from his upper lip, is of a lighter brown than his hair, but equally thick, heavy, and curling. Otherwise his face is smoothly shaved, and is one which impresses those who look upon it, even carelessly, as strong and resolute. He still wears the double-