

*There are two kinds of secrets: those we keep for another, and those we keep for ourselves.*

## **A Season in Picardy**

By Sam Lutton

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# Prologue

- 1 -

Arrondissement de Passy  
Paris, France  
April 1918

Police Superintendent Fernand Raux opened the dog-eared case file and slowly thumbed his way through a half-dozen crime scene photographs of the dead soldier.

Unsolved homicides were a sour reality of his profession, but the murder of a decorated military officer during wartime was uniquely repugnant, ultimate proof of man's bewildering ability to worsen a catastrophe. A soldier might die on a battlefield, one more among the multitudes already lost, but even the most jaded combat veteran would not expect death while enjoying leave at home, and certainly not at the hands of someone other than the enemy.

Yet, such was the situation here.

With so many foreign troops blundering about these days, identifying murder suspects was doubly difficult. Still, those sometimes-troublesome allied soldiers—British, American, and dark-skinned French colonials from North Africa—were preferable to the hated *Boche*, an impious race whose minions occupied trenches a mere seventy-five kilometers from his beloved city.

However, neither jurisdictional challenges from military authorities nor the proximity of Germany's black-helmeted legions discouraged the police officer. Instead, unsolved homicides intensified his determination; a condition, his wife once remarked,

that frustrated her persistent dietary ministrations to ease the worsening discomfort of his stomach ulcer.

Spousal concerns notwithstanding, Fernand Raux had few illusions. Human existence was an imperfect enterprise. Justice did not always prevail over iniquity. Despite persistent efforts, a small number of killings invariably went unsolved. In those instances Raux took solace from his belief in a Final Reckoning. Individuals who committed murder would eventually pay for their crime, if not here on Earth then certainly in the eternal fires of Hell after God passed judgment on their wretched souls.

He turned toward the rain-spattered window, his mood no less dreary than the weather. From a crumpled package he extracted a cigarette, placed the tube between his lips, and fired the tip with a silver lighter. Then his eyes returned to the file before him.

The scene documented in this manila folder was unlike the violent disorder he and his detectives typically found at a murder site. The crisp photographs suggested a peculiar neatness: an eerie staging more considerate than callous.

Nearly two months had passed since discovery of the French artillery officer's body on the Quai de Passy. Lieutenant Guy Jean Aubray, his wallet and money untouched, had suffered a single gunshot wound to the heart, no doubt fired from a pistol at close range, facts evidenced by the recovered bullet and powder burns on the soldier's blue tunic.

What piqued Raux's curiosity was the unusual positioning of Aubray's corpse. The murderer had arranged the Lieutenant's body neatly, as a mortician might for viewing: legs straight, ankles together, hands crossed at the chest. Pinned to dead soldier's tunic was the *Croix de Guerre*, France's newest decoration for gallantry in wartime. Centered on the ribbon was a red enameled star, an award reserved for those wounded in battle. A few blood specks marred the

red and green-striped ribbon attached to the medal.

The obvious signs of respect led Raux to suppose the officer's death might have been unintentional. Was the killer another soldier, perhaps an acquaintance? Was this crime the appalling result of a drink-induced argument? The bullet—an 8mm round presumably fired from a standard-issue French military revolver—bolstered his 'comrade in arms' theory.

He took a deep drag on his cigarette, blew a shivering blue plume towards the high-coffered ceiling of his office, and continued to study photographs.

Aubray's uniform was unkempt—not what one might expect of a decorated officer. The soldier had also skipped a shave and his mustaches needed fresh wax; evidence of a man who no longer cared about his appearance.

The proximity of the Lieutenant's body to the American Ambulance Field Service headquarters on Rue Raynouard made the Hottinguer mansion a logical starting point for this investigation. Unfortunately, exhaustive interviews with three-dozen American officers and enlisted men yielded no viable suspects.

The dead soldier's widow however, had appeared apprehensive—perhaps even a little guilty—as though she understood the motive behind her husband's premature demise. Further investigation into Madame Lizette Aubray's social life revealed transient affairs with several men—illicit liaisons conducted while her husband was away at the front. Discovery of her marital deceits did not surprise Raux. In addition to obvious signs of discomfiture during that first interview, Madam Aubray exuded a slightly tainted demeanor; a sly amorality not wholly concealed by fine clothes.

Did Lieutenant Aubray's shabbiness indicate that he'd discovered his wife's infidelities? Did he become despondent and indifferent regarding his personal appearance? Perhaps he met death while

confronting his wife's latest lover—possibly another soldier. It was a promising hypothesis but nothing substantial came of it. Predictably, his re-reading of the old file uncovered nothing new.

Raux took a final puff from his Gauloises Caporal and then snubbed out the half-smoked cigarette in the heavy glass bowl of his ashtray: a monstrosity created from the hollowed out and preserved three-toed hind foot of an African elephant. The grotesque but functional artifact—a bizarre fiftieth birthday gift from his otherwise discerning wife—held a dozen or more crushed cigarette butts.

He raked his tongue with front teeth but an acrid, tarry residue persisted. His doctor had told him nicotine could have a calming effect on the nerves, but forty cigarettes a day might be overdoing it.

Raux unclasped pince-nez and gently rubbed the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. He tucked glasses into a vest pocket, closed the folder and returned it to the desk drawer. The clock mounted on the wall to his left emitted eight soft chimes; time to go home. He stood and stretched, grimacing as blood tingled through stiff muscles.

If his visceral hunch was correct and Aubray's killer was indeed another soldier, one who had not already met death in a filthy, vermin-infested trench, then something might yet develop. Unfortunately, solving murder cases became less of a possibility with each passing week.

Still, one must always hope for the best.

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Michael Jerome slithered his way through the bone-chilling mud of a once-fertile wheat field.

High overhead a German flare suddenly hissed and sputtered beneath a tiny white parachute. He lay still and sucked in air through

clenched teeth. The aromas of death, burnt sulfur and wet, freshly churned earth seeped into his nostrils.

The flare's slowly rotating incandescence revealed a shattered landscape trembling with shadows. Loose strands of barbed wire dangled from canted wooden posts. His eyes followed the rusted skeins as they uncoiled across a pockmarked countryside littered with abandoned weaponry, broken equipment, and fallen soldiers.

From a low hill four hundred yards from where he lay came the hollow *tap-tap-tap* of an enemy machine gun. He held his breath for a long moment while the deadly clatter echoed once more.

Cowering in the darkness of No Man's Land was not where he was supposed to be. Despite the grim military situation, nobody expected ambulance drivers to leave their vehicles and remove wounded men from a still-contested battlefield; stretcher-bearers had that dangerous but necessary responsibility. Even so, there were too many casualties for the unarmed and overworked *brancardiers* to handle. Jerome could not sit dry and comfortable inside his ambulance while soldiers lay injured and waiting for medical attention.

Hours ago, this ruined farmland had clamored with ear-shattering gunfire, artillery explosions, and the screams of wounded and dying men. Nightfall had ushered in exhausted silence, an unsettled quiet broken only by intermittent shots as edgy sentries fired at shadows, real or imagined.

The flare's white-hot glow flickered several times and then winked out. A velvet gloom settled over him once more. He raised his head and then eased forward again, pushing himself through slick ooze.

The rain had passed and a pale half-moon, its milky glow filtered now and then by swiftly passing clouds, allowed Jerome to navigate the sodden field. He paused when he recognized the dull glint of a



discarded French helmet, its curved metal crest reminiscent of plumed knights from a bygone era. A bareheaded man—thick black hair plastered against his skull—lay on his back and grimaced into the night sky. The bearded soldier clutched a Lebel, the durable French infantry rifle dating from the late 1880s. He turned his head as Jerome approached, and then smiled in recognition. The Frenchman’s voice was no more than a hoarse whisper.

*“Ce que vous apporte ici, mon ami?”*

What brought me here? Jerome thought. Good question.

“The weather,” he replied in French. “I came here to enjoy your fine spring sunshine.”

The soldier chuckled softly.

Jerome felt a bloom of warmth inside his chest, a brotherly affection born of shared danger and unspeakable hardship. Despite fear and physical discomfort, he did not feel out of place. Strange as it may have seemed to those back home in St. Louis—especially Margaret, his quick-witted fraternal twin—here was where he belonged. Memories of his pleasant life in America were more like the recollections of a simpleton rather than what he now felt. Witnessing the daily ration of obscenities had fashioned him into something studier, adding an impermeable starch to the soft pliancy of his former being.

The war had clearly changed him, but tatters and patches of who he once was remained embedded within the fabric of his strange new self: a contrary quilting marred by the soiled threads of a haunting, dishonorable act. Jerome knew he could never dissemble those tainted strands of disrepute without unraveling the others...

With effort, he refocused attention on the Frenchman, *“Etes-vous blessé?”* Are you wounded?

*“Oui, mes jambes.”*

He examined the soldier’s legs. Hardened clots of coagulated

blood had pasted trousers to wounds on both legs but there was no indication of persistent bleeding. Still, he had seen enough shattered limbs to realize the *poilu* could not move without assistance. He would have to drag the soldier to the dressing station near to where he had parked his ambulance.

Another flare popped and glittered to life, this one much closer. Both men froze.

The Maxim's hollow echoes reached his ears a split second after bullets spattered into thick mud five yards ahead of where they lay. Teeth clamped shut, Jerome held his breath and waited. An agonizing moment passed: then another row of muddy fountains erupted, not quite as close.

*"L'idiot doit être aveugle,"* the Frenchman hissed.

Jerome tried to ignore icy fingers clawing at his insides. He said, "The idiot might be blind, my friend, but he has an excellent machine gun."

*"D'accord!"* the soldier whispered.

The flare fizzled and died.

"Time to go," Jerome murmured.

He grasped the Frenchman's collar and pulled him toward a blasted out section of barbed wire fence and the friendly troops beyond, an effort made easier by slippery mud. The *poilu* uttered a soft moan between clenched teeth and then became quiet. They stopped twice more on their way to the dressing station, shivering under spiraling flares as the German gunner fired random bursts.

Once inside the dressing station, Jerome watched as a weary-eyed ambulance surgeon exposed the soldier's wounds by scissoring away muddy, blood-stained trousers. The doctor gently probed both legs with black rubber-gloved fingers. "A severe injury," he told the gasping *poilu*, "but you will live to tell grandchildren how you protected France from Hun barbarians." A brief time later, Jerome

helped load the bandaged and sedated soldier plus three others into his ambulance, sliding the stretchers into two-above-two racks.

Finally, an hour or so before dawn, Jerome stumbled inside makeshift quarters built of logs and sandbags. He removed his helmet and filthy trench coat and then eased himself onto an empty ammunition box. Fumbling with the sticky laces of mud-encrusted boots added to his exhaustion. Tempted by the marginal comfort of his lumpy pallet, he instead took a wash in cold water, retrieved pen and a brown leather journal from his kit bag, and began to write.

*March 26, 1918 – Tuesday*

*Another long day... actually nearer two.*

*My ambulance section labored forty hours without pause or letup, driving wounded men from the dressing station west of Roye to the field hospital at Montdidier—a five-mile trip I repeated many times, bouncing and sliding over a narrow dirt road pulverized by artillery and soaked to a pudding by autumn rains.*

*Their suffering is a constant reminder of the cruel and contrary nature of this war and how a solitary secret can deform the normal pattern of one's life. I despair the condition in which I find myself, yet no resolution is possible without worsening an already tragic situation.*

*Something must change.*

-3-

The soft tone of the front door chime interrupted Margaret Jerome's reading of *My Antonia*, the final volume of Willa Cather's Great Plains trilogy. She set the book aside, rose, and then strode toward the high-ceilinged foyer. Margaret swung open the massive, custom-crafted front door and stared into the troubled eyes of the uniformed Western Union delivery boy. One hand found her stomach

as nausea rippled through her insides. With the other, she grasped the door's edge for support."

"I have a telegram for Mr. and Mrs. Jerome," he announced, reaching into his messenger bag. "It's from the Secretary of War," he added quietly.

Her knees quivered as the boy extended a hideous yellow envelope.

The echo of approaching footsteps on parquet worsened the hollow rush of air surging against her eardrums.

"Who is it, Margaret?" her mother called.

*Please God, no... not Michael...*

# 1

“Isn’t this exciting,” Beatrice Jerome said. “Sailing off to France with so many handsome young men.”

Margaret met the blue eyes of her twenty-year-old sibling: a younger version of herself, trim frame made even slimmer by the tightly laced corset hidden beneath summer traveling clothes.

They stood on the promenade deck with others similarly dressed, a civilian minority scattered among increasing numbers of chattering soldiers, an ebullient chorus adding to the humdrum arising from hundreds of dockside well-wishers.

“Everyone seems so happy. There’s even a brass band,” Beatrice added.

Margaret gently fingered the small black rosette pinned to the material above her left breast. “Perhaps they haven’t lost anyone, yet,” she suggested.

Beatrice returned her attention to the long ranks of soldiers entering the ship two decks below. “Yes, that’s probably it.”

Margaret followed her sister’s gaze as more troops dismounted Army trucks, formed in columns along Pier 2, and then boarded the USS *Mongolia*; a passenger liner turned U.S. Navy troopship moored at the Port of Hoboken.

The brown queue shuffled up the aft gangway. Each man shouldered a lumpy duffle bag and a slung rifle while grasping the gang rope with his free hand. One by one they ducked through the

rectangular hatch and disappeared into the ship's interior. Most had smiles on their faces; white teeth gleaming beneath wide-brimmed campaign hats.

She turned her eyes to the crowded wharf.

A brass band played 'Yankee Doodle' from a raised platform, its high sides draped in colorful bunting—red, white, and blue folds rippling in fresh morning sunlight. Hordes of spectators and well-wishers, many waving tiny U.S. flags, sang in tune with the melody or cheered from the quay: a swirl of upturned faces and bobbing heads topped by caps, straw boaters, and a dozen styles worn by ladies plain and grand.

Policemen stood at measured intervals; their casual presence sufficient to hold the crowd behind a low barricade. Other policemen straddled well-groomed chestnut mounts and kept order along a narrow driveway clogged with a stuttering line of automobiles, Army trucks, and horse drawn carriages, each stopping to disgorge passengers before moving on. A disharmony of laughter, music, and light-hearted banter rose in soft waves, a pleasant clamor frayed and fluttered by desultory breezes chuffing up the Hudson River.

Margaret felt a cold shiver, there and gone in an instant, that left her with a sense of melancholy bewilderment. *They've forgotten the Lusitania. They don't understand what might happen to us. I pray God it never does.*

Five years earlier the Jerome family had sailed to Europe on Cunard's luxurious ocean liner RMS *Lusitania*. That delightful summer vacation was now an errant memory from another life. The *Lusitania* now lay beneath three hundred feet of water a dozen miles off the Irish coast, victim of a German submarine—a barbarous act that had claimed twelve hundred unfortunate souls.

A similar fate might await those now boarding *Mongolia*. Many of these soldiers—perhaps Beatrice and herself—might find

themselves dumped into the middle of the cold North Atlantic or drowned while trapped inside the shrieking darkness of a doomed ship.

If newspaper reports were accurate, the Kaiser's U-boats roamed the sea at will, an unseen menace capable of attacking any allied vessel within range. Given the brutal nature of this latest European conflict, sailing to France aboard a vulnerable steamship was not an event one should celebrate with unrestrained enthusiasm.

Yet here she was, about to sail to war-ravaged France, plodding through a nightmare spawned by the unexpected arrival of a Western Union telegram. Barely able to stand on watery knees, she had watched her mother's trembling fingers tear open the sickly yellow envelope. That devastating missive had announced the death of Lieutenant Michael P. Jerome, only son of Emily and Big Mike; fraternal twin of Margaret; big brother to Beatrice.

Margaret refused to accept it.

In the first place, Michael wasn't a lieutenant; he was a civilian working with the American Field Service. In the second, how could such an awful thing happen? Her brother was an ambulance driver, not a front-line soldier constantly at risk. Motoring around in a rescue vehicle was not supposed to be any more hazardous than operating an automobile. He might suffer injury in an accident, but *killed* in action? That didn't seem possible.

Finally, and most compelling, Margaret believed she and her brother shared a third consciousness, a mutual awareness of extraordinary experiences felt by one or the other. That sense of psychic unity arose from several incidents in their past, events that validated and strengthened her conviction. It was something they both accepted, even without the telling.

Given her strong belief in a fraternal connection, Margaret found it impossible to accept the reality of her brother's death. If anything

terrible had happened to him, then she would have sensed his distress: that shared cognizance would have signaled what Michael had felt.

But she had experienced no insight, no sudden awareness of his fate. If what the Army said was true, then Michael had suffered a violent death and Margaret had perceived nothing. How could she have been so oblivious to such a catastrophic event? Had that shared consciousness failed at a critical moment, or was their psychological kinship nothing more than comforting delusion?

The ship's horn sounded, a shuddering basso that interrupted her reverie and overwhelmed all conversation. As the deep echo faded and dock sounds returned, Margaret's eyes followed a bright yellow taxi as it eased to a stop just below where she stood.

A tall young man wearing an Army officer's uniform—riding boots, flared breeches, high-collared tunic, and visor cap—opened the rear door and stepped onto the quay. He paid the driver and chatted for a moment while a porter removed luggage from the taxi's trunk.

As he led the porter up the forward gangway—an entry reserved for passengers berthed in the upper decks—the soldier looked up, his eyes scanning the crowded rails. The gesture afforded Margaret a clear view of his face.

“There's another nice-looking man,” Beatrice observed wistfully. “Not exactly handsome, but still rather pleasant to look at.”

“I wonder if he truly understands what he's in for,” Margaret replied.

“Do *we*?” Beatrice asked.

Margaret studied her sister's furrowed brow and slight frown.

“Do you regret leaving Mother and Father as we did?”

“A little. Do you suppose they'll ever forgive us?”

“We had no choice, you *know* that. They were on the mend, but



still too sick to travel. Had we not taken their place, these tickets would have gone to waste. Besides, it took all Father's influence to secure even a single stateroom like the one we share. Given the war, it might have taken months to find another passenger ship not commandeered by the government. Meanwhile, we would have done nothing regarding Michael."

"I suppose you're right," Beatrice said. But then her lips turned slightly upward, forming a half-smile. "But Father was right about not being properly chaperoned. Do you suppose we might become the source of scandalous gossip?"

"I believe he was less concerned about the chaperone and more worried about the two of us on the same ship, travelling through dangerous waters."

Her tiny smile eased to an expression of mild concern. "Yes, of course."

The ship's horn bellowed again, an obvious signal to a waiting dock crew who manhandled fore and aft gangways, sliding them back onto the pier before taking in thick mooring ropes. A tugboat edged alongside. As the big ship eased away, dozens of additional soldiers joined Margaret and Beatrice on deck. They pressed against the rail—sometimes two and three deep—shouting and waving to the crowd. The dockside gathering became louder and more animated, their cheers unrestrained and vigorous.

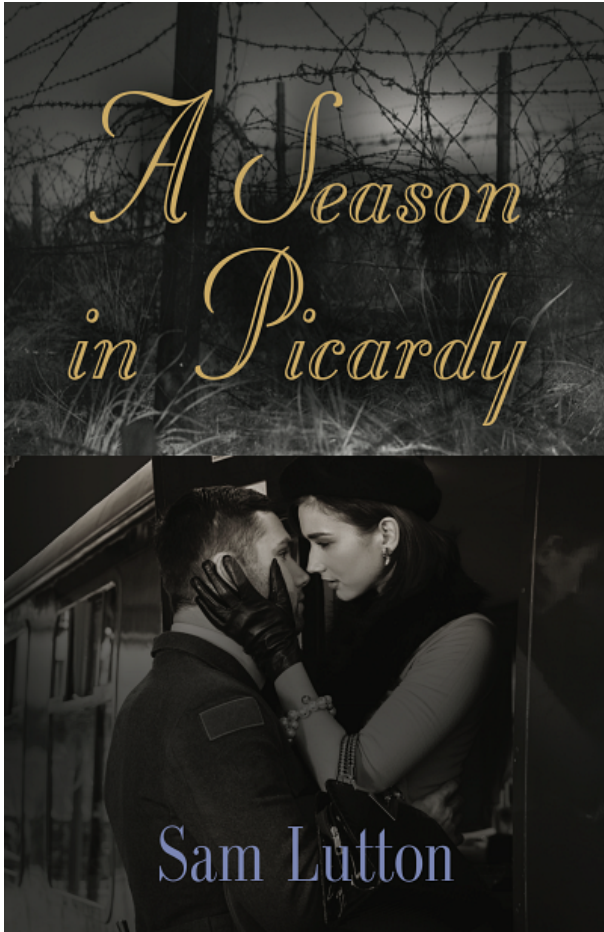
The tug nudged the larger vessel farther into the Hudson River. As the space between the wharf and the troopship grew more distant, the cheering became subdued, a fading hubbub replaced by the persistent chug of the tugboat. Once clear of the dock, the tug pushed the *Mongolia's* stern upstream, a maneuver that slowly brought the Woolworth Building into view. Soaring sixty stories high—New York's tallest structure—the white Gothic tower loomed over lesser companions.

A second tug joined the first and both eased the bigger ship downstream toward Ellis Island. Soon they glided past the Statue of Liberty and then into New York's Upper Bay. Once through the narrows and down the far end of Ambrose Channel, the tugs blew their horns and turned away. The big ship answered with a double blast, gathered steam, and headed out to sea under her own power.

Rather than disperse, the passengers remained close to the rails, savoring one last look at the country they called home. Margaret watched the land slowly diminish to a thin gray hump in the distance. With her gaze fixed on the receding mainland, she thought again of the terrible sequence of events that had led her to this place. She also felt a looming sense of finality: the end of a life familiar and the beginning of one yet unknown.

As the *Mongolia* steamed eastward, trailing a curved pale wake that blended into the darker sea, the reliability of Michael's companionship, a closeness she had known since sharing their mother's womb, likewise receded from her future. The gentle roll of the ship reminded her that the once-solid ground upon which she had confidently trod for her entire life no longer existed. Absent the constancy of her brother's presence, Margaret felt herself unmoored from the life she had known for as long as she could remember.

The deepening sense of isolation increased as the sea edged skyward and swallowed the land.



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