



MR. WINKLE GOES TO WAR

By THEODORE PRATT

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THE STORY THUS FAR: Forty-four-year-old Wilbert Winkle, who is the proprietor of a general repair shop in the alley back of his home, is notified by his draft board that he is in 1-A. He had thought that the doctor who examined him would not overlook his dyspepsia, his near-sightedness and his cavities in chest. He breaks the bad news to his wife, Amy, and goes to work without kissing her goodby. The next day a newspaper photographer calls on him at his shop and takes his picture, which appears later on the front page under the caption, "Winkle Proud to Fight." The story explains that Winkle was the first married selectee in Springville to be called.

CHAPTER III

"The telephone's been ringing ever since the paper came out," she announced. "People I haven't seen or heard of in years have called. One woman I didn't know at all—I mean, she was a perfect stranger."

"What did she want?" asked Mr. Winkle.

Amy looked baffled. "I don't know," she replied. "She said she just felt she had to call. As if—oh, Wilbert, as if you were dead already."

Mrs. Winkle had often glared at him as if herself wishing him dead,



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and now her concern that he might be killed seemed a little outlandish. Mr. Winkle merely said, "Well, I'm not dead."

"Wilbert, how do you really feel? This morning there wasn't time to find out." Mrs. Winkle gazed at him doubtfully.

Again, at her hesitancy, at this suggestion that the upper hand was being returned to him, Mr. Winkle had an impulse to remind her of certain things. And again he refrained, not thinking the urge was quite decent. But he did protest, "Amy, don't you look at me like that."

"Like what?" she asked. "As if I—that mouse-look," he accused.

She looked abashed. At first Mr. Winkle could not accept the fact that the expression was on her face. "I didn't mean to," she replied. She sounded humble.

"I can't help being the way I am," Mr. Winkle stated.

"Of course, dear. No one can." Mr. Winkle was amazed. But still he didn't say anything about the miracle occurring before his very eyes. He didn't care to embarrass Amy.

"I feel," he said in answer to her previous question, "like taking two doses for my dyspepsia." He fumbled in his pocket for his pills and brought them out.

"Some people are coming in tonight," Mrs. Winkle revealed as she bustled to get dinner. "Just the folks on the street."

Astounded, Mr. Winkle asked, "What for?"

"Well, they wanted to see you. Especially the Pettigrews. Their boy, Jack, has been called, too. He's twenty, you know. He'll be going off with you."

The evening, when it came around, was something of a combination of a funeral, a wedding, a family reunion, and a celebration for a person about to leave on a dangerous expedition.

The Pettigrews were the first to arrive. Mrs. Pettigrew was red-eyed from weeping, and she burst into new tears when she saw Mr. Winkle.

"They probably won't take you," she wept, "but Jack—Jack—they'll take him, and he's only a baby."

Mr. Pettigrew himself said, "This is crazy, Winkle. Here's Jack, hardly over sucking his thumbs. And here's you, old enough to be his father."

Mr. Winkle and Jack eyed each other. The boy was self-conscious, as the young are in the presence of their elders who discuss them. Mr. Winkle, in his position as an adult, felt called upon to say something even though he really had nothing to say.

"Well, Jack," he told the boy, "it looks as if we're being called by our country."

"Yes, sir," Jack said. He could make no more of Mr. Winkle being drafted along with him than Mr. Winkle could make of Jack being selected along with him. Mr. Winkle wished that the boy wouldn't be quite so respectful.

More people came. They chattered, and gazed curiously at Mrs. Winkle, as if they couldn't believe what their eyes saw nor what their ears heard. Some of them were earnest about Mr. Winkle's predicament, some wondered, and others were amused. Mr. Winkle liked the last least of all. He didn't see why people should laugh at him.

Mr. Wescott, their next-door neighbor, a rather pompous individual, cornered Mr. Winkle and stated, "If you're the kind of soldier we're going to have, God help us." He stared at Mr. Winkle as if to ask him how he ever got himself into this.

Mr. Winkle didn't think this was very patriotic.

Mr. Wescott, who was prone to tell anybody all about how anything was conducted, and who could well afford to inform Mr. Winkle about his future because he was over forty-five and not subject to military duty, went on to say, "Of course, you know they won't use you as a combatant."

"You don't think so?" Mr. Winkle asked hopefully.

"Think it out for yourself, man," Mr. Wescott lectured. "They'll have enough young fellows to do the actual fighting. They want men in their proper places, according to their abilities. That's why they're calling you in the first place, so you can release a fighting man to fight."

Mr. Winkle was encouraged. "They won't waste you as a killer," Mr. Wescott assured him.

Mr. Winkle didn't know whether to feel flattered or insulted. His neighbor looked at him critically, as if gauging him for the first time. "You wouldn't be any good, anyway. They'll use you in some kind of mechanical work."

"Well," said Mr. Winkle, "I could handle that." His courage took hold of him at this talk. "But, understand me, if I thought I was capable of using a gun, I'd do it anywhere they say."

"No, sir," Mr. Wescott went on, "you'll never see active service. I can tell you that. You don't have to worry about that for a minute."

Mr. Winkle ceased to worry, but only for the allowed minute, for Mr. Wescott then looked thoughtful and amended, "Of course, men of your age are being used for combat in all the other armies, and if things get to that stage with us, I suppose you've got to consider that you might have to do a little shooting or bayonet work."

When it was time for their visitors to leave, they shook Mr. Winkle's hand as if bidding him goodby before he went into action. Mrs. Pettigrew's tears had dried, but her perturbation remained. She pleaded of Mr. Winkle, "You'll look after Jack, won't you?"

Mr. Winkle, despite all his timidity and ineffectual outer character, could appreciate the humor in a situation. "I think," he said, "Jack ought to look after me."

He and Jack glanced at each other, and both smiled. The condemned men had at least that mutual understanding.

It was nearly eleven before the last of the guests left. Penelope came out from the corner where she had sulked all evening at the invasion of her own peaceful life. Mr. Winkle, out of habit, took her to the back yard.

When he came in again he started for the radio, to turn it on for the nightly war news broadcast he usually favored. Then he stopped and didn't go near it, but turned toward the stairs.

"Aren't you going to listen to the war news?" Mrs. Winkle asked.

"I don't think I will tonight."

"But why—?" Mrs. Winkle began to speak as if she were the same person as of before this morning. But she caught herself and then said merely, "Oh."

Mr. Winkle felt like pinching himself to be sure he was awake and that this was Amy showing such tact and consideration. He smiled a little, but not so she could see him, and he decided that it was very nice indeed to have her this way.

They went upstairs and there, while they prepared themselves for the night, Mrs. Winkle commented in a small voice that seemed to indicate she had other things to say but couldn't say them, "It was a nice party, wasn't it?"

"Except," said Mr. Winkle, "I don't see exactly why it was held."

Mr. Winkle found his imagination running away with itself until his mind was possessed of a nightmare.

He saw himself packed into a troop transport. He had seen pictures of how it was done. The bunks, one on top of another in many tiers, with only a narrow aisle between, made the men look like sardines. Across the ocean the ship throbbed. And then in the night there was a dull, jarring thud. The ship shuddered. It began to list. Its engines stopped. Flames rose and men pushed and fell and screamed and struck and jumped. Mr. Winkle was in the water, which was covered thickly with oil. The

oil caught fire and the flames raced toward him.

He tried to blot out this picture. But it came again, and made him cold all over. He was bathed in perspiration. He began to shake slightly and found he couldn't control it, no matter how much he tried.

At that he learned how far Amy's reformation had gone, and how real it was, and that she was good-hearted all along as he always knew, and that now he was to become a soldier, she was willing to express her feelings about it, even if only silently.

Without a word, Mrs. Winkle turned in the bed beside him. She slipped a soft warm arm under his neck and put the other over his chest, and held him tightly. She seemed to understand.

Mr. Winkle was ashamed that she did, but greatly comforted, too.

The President of the United States, To Wilbert George Winkle,

Greeting: Having submitted yourself to a local board composed of your neighbors for the purpose of determining your availability for training and service in the armed forces of the United States, you are hereby notified that you have now been selected for training and service in the Army.

Mr. Winkle had never before received a communication from the President.

Following his prominent newspaper appearance and the gathering of the people of Maple Avenue, he would look very foolish indeed if he were turned down and returned home after being sent to the Induction Center.

He understood that, even though accepted, he had the privilege of returning home for a week to put his affairs in order before leaving again for good. But his fellow draftees had all announced their intention of waiving the week's furlough, and now he followed suit.

He had heard the jokes to the effect that if you could breathe or were warm, the Army would accept you, and though he didn't like to believe them, he prepared for going away and staying away.

As a precaution against a drastic circumstance, Mr. Winkle made his will, a ceremony that not even Penelope regarded as a happy one.

He finished the few jobs he had in the shop and would take no more. He packed away his tools in grease and oil, and tacked up heavy pa-



In its place over the doors he placed a small sign "Closed."

per over the windows. He took in his sign and placed it on the floor with its face against the wall. In its place, over the doors, he placed a small sign saying, "Closed." He reflected that people who didn't know his establishment wouldn't know what was closed because he had taken in the other sign, but finally decided that this didn't matter in the least.

He was ready to leave.

The evening before his departure he investigated the bag Amy had packed for him and brought downstairs. In it she had put those few articles listed in a pamphlet Mr. Winkle had purchased at a newsstand for guidance.

"Travel light, Mr. Selectee," this advised. "Don't load up with baggage because you won't have any use for it. The Army is going to clothe you, Mr. Selectee, complete to underwear, socks and handkerchiefs."

Only on one point had Mrs. Winkle deviated from the instructions. Upon examining her packing, Mr. Winkle found that she had included his rubbers. He now took them out.

Firmly, showing a spark of her old spirit, Mrs. Winkle put them back again, rewinding them in the tissue paper he stripped away. "With the rubber shortage," she said, "the Army may not have a pair for every man."

"I don't think they have rubbers in the Army," Mr. Winkle protested. "They won't let me wear them."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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