

THE PERFECT HUSBAND—By Charles G. Norris

One of the Evening Public Ledger's Series of Unpublished Short Stories on Married Life by the Best American Writers of Modern Fiction

THERE was sullen silence across the breakfast table. Lucy Valentine bent her head, and unseeing poked at her food. Her husband finished his ham and eggs deliberately, pushed away his plate and, lounging back in his chair, sucked the wind through his teeth with little smacking noises of his tongue. Then he leisurely folded the morning newspaper, rose, took his hat and coat from the closet and stalked out of the apartment without a word, sharply slamming the outer door behind him.

Lucy sat on, thinking. A look of hopelessness, almost of despair, settled upon her face. That was Tom—that was the way Tom acted; they were in for another dreary

stant bickerings, which recently he had chosen to treat in moody silence, as being entirely his wife's responsibility. He never missed an opportunity to point out to her that he had no voice; he did not even smoke. He regarded her sourly as an ungrateful spouse—a cranky, unreasonable, nervous woman.

Lucy rocked her head in her hands and moaned. Tom was so egregiously stupid, so self-satisfied, so blind. She could have forgiven his obtuseness, but she could not forgive his rudeness. Every day of his life he unconsciously affronted her, and almost as frequently did so deliberately. He growled at her, sneered at her and, when crossed, shouted her into silence.



"Oh, Tom, I don't care how moral you are. I don't care whether you go after other women. All I want you to do is to be kind to me, Tom—and sometimes—just now and then—try to love me a little!"

greeting for her; he would have none; a dark and sullen silence would ensue, him for days to come.

She put the food on the table at the half hour and called him to dinner. He did not stop to wash his face or hands or comb his hair. He came just as he was, sullenly, silently and hunched his chair up to his place. Without a glance at her he began to eat. She watched him lifting the food to his mouth; she watched him spreading the hot biscuits, she had made for him with thick, hard dabs of butter; she watched him as he moved his heavy masticating jaws, slow and deliberately masticating. There he sat, glum, lowering, unresponsive.

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An Introduction to Charles G. Norris



Probably we have no other author in this country who has met with such sudden and lasting success as Charles G. Norris. It came with two books, "Salt" and "Bress."

He was an editor for many years, until the chance came to give his whole attention to writing.

You feel in his work his power to portray phases of the lives of the American people, phases that are universal in their knowledge and perception—even the kitchen and the furniture in the parlor are alive. He is a master craftsman in the handling of his material.

"Bress," which deals with marriage and has gone into more than forty-four editions, took years of labor before it was published.

"The Perfect Husband," written particularly for this all-star program of American fiction, tells its own story. It touches upon a problem of married life that holds vast possibilities for discussion.

SHE had rebelled this morning. The incident that had precipitated the whole trouble had been of trivial consequence; it always was. Tom had said the cream was sour, and she had casually remarked that she didn't see how that could be since it was the morning's delivery, and then he had shouted at her that he guessed he knew what he was talking about, and that when he said the cream was sour, it was sour.

She had said nothing in reply; she had considered his ungraciousness dispassionately for a time, and then in the midst of the breakfast she had suddenly put her clasped hands down before her on the table, and said her say temperately and earnestly, urging her right to courteous treatment. She was familiar with the look of displeasure that came into his face as he listened, and reaching for an argument that would strengthen her words, she had alluded to Mr. Gray and his wife, who lived in the adjoining apartment, and that had proved the spark to his anger.

For Tom hated the Grays, hated everything about them. The suite of rooms these neighbors occupied was on the same floor as the Valentines'; an aptly separated the two establishments, and upon this source of light and ventilation a bedroom window of each apartment gave vent. Much that went on in the Gray household could be heard by the Valentines, and Tom and Lucy listened to the stray words and casual conversations that went on between their unsuspecting neighbors unabashed.

Lucy loved the way in which the Grays spoke to each other. It was so different from that to which she was accustomed. The man had extraordinary manners in his voice; it was beautifully modulated, and when he happened to address his wife as "my dear" it was like a caress. Tom chose to ridicule the little intimate things they said to one another, and to imitate Mr. Gray's manner. It made Lucy acutely uncomfortable, for she admired Mrs. Gray, was genuinely fond of her, and was in terror lest Tom should be in turn overheard.

Lucy had had her misgivings as to the decency of listening to her friend's confidential murmurings with her husband, but she assured herself that her motive was not unworthy curiosity. It was merely that she enjoyed with a hungry soul the manner in which this particular husband and wife spoke to one another. It was beautiful; it soothed her; it was like exquisite distant music.

She had come to be more or less intimately acquainted with Mrs. Gray since that lady had moved next door. The two women visited one another, made frequent shopping trips together and sometimes lunched in each other's kitchens. Lucy regarded Mrs. Gray with undisguised envy. She considered her the most fortunate woman she

knew. She had looks, plenty of clothes, an exquisitely furnished apartment and she had an adoring husband. No wonder Alice Gray could be happy.

Mr. Gray was an interior decorator. He was often away for several days at a time when he went to supervise the work of some rich man's country home. He returned home always with a trilling present for his wife—a bangle, a pair of silver buckles, a lacquered box or perhaps only a handful of jonquils. Frequently he took her out to dinner and the theatre and once, to Lucy's positive knowledge, he had inveigled her downtown in order to buy her a hat.

That had seemed to Lucy the apotheosis of conjugal devotion. Her own husband had never brought her home unexpectedly a present in all his life. Once in a great while she induced him to go with her to the theatre or the movies. He had never commented on anything she wore or took the slightest notice of hat or gown.

LUCY, considering her own lot and the happy circumstances that were Mrs. Gray's on this particular morning, said to herself with considerable bitterness that while she was in no danger of coveting her neighbor's husband, she did long with all her soul for some degree of contentment with her own. And upon these reflections came Alice Gray, her sweet, composed face free of worry, her serene beauty glowing today with unexpected interest.

Alonso had telephoned, she explained, that he was obliged to go to Boston. He would have to be away for several days, and he wanted his wife to accompany him. Could she arrange her affairs so as to be ready to leave with him on the late afternoon train?

Could she? Alice Gray's eyes danced with excitement as she caught Lucy's hand. There was nothing to detain her; she had never visited Boston; she

thought it perfectly sweet of Alonso to want her to go. There was the whole day before her in which to get ready. She needed a new hat, a veil and a bag, and she urged Lucy to come with her and help her pick them out.

Lucy could not resist. She was not small enough to refuse to share this friend's pleasure, even though she felt the injustice of Alice Gray's having so much and herself so little. And the bitter feelings of the early morning were forgotten, as she hastily piled the unwashed breakfast dishes in the sink to soak, gave an indifferent glance at the unmade beds, thrust head and arms into her trim, tailor skirt, and reached for the smart little yellow straw hat which she had only been able to wear once since she bought it a month before.

Later, seated beside her radiant friend on the top of a Fifth avenue bus, the street gay with fashionably dressed women, she caught something of Alice Gray's exhilaration.

The two women threaded the aisles of department stores, priced fabrics and exclaimed over the novelties. Alice Gray bought a charming hat, the veil and a neat little handbag with nickel clasps, and Lucy indulged herself in a much-needed electric iron. In buoyant spirits they made a leisurely progress at a late luncheon hour to one of the smart, new French restaurants on Park avenue.

AND almost in the entrance way, about to pass through the revolving glass doors to the street, absorbed and gaily chatting together, they encountered Alonso Gray and a handsomely dressed woman. A happy exclamation burst from Lucy and she started forward with a delighted greeting.

"Why, it's your husband—it's Mr. Gray!"

But her words died on her lips. Alice Gray's fingers closed like a vice upon her arm, and the hand dragged her aside. Something ugly and unpleasant flashed into Lucy's mind. There was a whirling silence, a dizzying moment while her pulses raced, and her breath was still. Then, unconscious and still chatting amiably, Alonso Gray and his companion passed into the street.

"Two please—and in the corner. I like those upholstered seats." Alice Gray composedly addressed herself to the head waiter, and serenely followed him into the cool and flower-scented restaurant.

"Come, Lucy."

Lucy, shaken, bewildered, the significance of what had occurred still half guessed, mechanically obeyed. Mechanically she unglved her hands, mechanically she pushed stray locks of hair up under her hat, mechanically she ordered. But when the obsequious head waiter had murmured, "Bien, madame," and had departed she could only keep her eyes on her plate and sit tongue-tied, fearful of any comment she might hazard, miserably conscious of what must be her friend's humiliation and discomfort.

That unquestionably had been Alonso Gray, and the woman with him had been—Lucy knew with unmistakable intuition that the woman was not of her world or of the world of decent women. Alice had seen it all. She had understood and had saved Lucy from precipitating a frightfully embarrassing encounter. And it had been Alonso! Alonso, the devoted, attentive, considerate companion—the sharer of her marriage vows—her mate, her man, her lawful wedded husband! About Lucy's head came tumbling a castle's walls, and in her ears there roared the sound of crumbling masonry. She shuddered

and bent her face closer to the white cloth.

"My dear—my dear—" Alice Gray laid her hand on Lucy's arm. "You mustn't feel so badly. I understand what's passing in your mind, but my dear, you mustn't concern yourself on my account. I know. I know all about it."

Lucy met her friend's unflinching gaze with widening eyes and parted lips. Mrs. Gray smiled at her, a wry, twisted little smile.

"Oh, yes, I know all about it, and—and I don't care! Alonso is all that I need in a husband; he is considerate, attentive, deferential; he likes to be with me, and to have me with him, and he loves me. Oh, yes, he does; he loves me. Oh, yes, he does; he loves me truly. . . . There have always been women in Alonso's life! This one happens to be a clever artist. Alonso employs her as a decorator. I even know her name. She's Flora Balzani. You know Balzani, the opera singer! She's his divorced wife—and is quite promiscuous. Alonso has been—well—attentive to her for more than a year. Of course, he has no idea I know anything about it, and I wouldn't have him suspect I've learned for anything in the world. You see, he wouldn't want to hurt me, and he would think that if I knew I would be offended. But I have no more feeling of jealousy for this passing fancy of his than I would have for a good cigar he enjoys after dinner. . . ."

"Oh, I know my views are anything but conventional. I am shocking you," Alice interrupted herself, smiling a rather hard, cold little smile; "I would shock most women. But I believe altogether too much emphasis is placed upon fidelity in marriage. As long as my husband in no way jeopardizes my rights as his lawful wife, why should I concern myself with what he does

outside his home? Frankly, I would rather have him unfaithful to me in an occasional way, as he is, than have him drink himself into booziness, as many a man does, and bring home to me a throbbing head, a nasty temper and a rancid breath. Alonso satisfies me; he more than adequately fulfills his part of life's companion with me. I am thoroughly content; what else matters?"

HER own apartment smelled close to her. Lucy, when later the same day she closed the door behind her. It seemed cheerless, empty, desolate. The mood with which Alice Gray had infected her all day dropped from her like a cloak suddenly falling to the floor. She gazed wearily at the familiar walls about her. There was the old faded sofa, the ugly yellow-cased piano, the carpet with the stain of ink near the table, the table itself with its missing castor. Even her father's portrait hung askew from the molding. In the bedroom were the tumbled beds, and the kitchen smelled of stale food and dirty, soaking dishes. It was just like her life—empty and stale and drab.

She put away her things and set about getting dinner, washing the dishes, whipping the unmade beds together, setting the table. After all, her husband was probably no worse than any other woman's. She made him a pan of hot biscuits, of which she knew he was particularly fond.

At 6 o'clock she heard him come in. She heard his creaking steps to the closet, where he always hung his hat and coat. She heard him creak his way back to the front room, where she knew he had thrown himself down on the sofa, and was reading the evening paper with feet cocked over one hard, upholstered arm. He had no word of

concern for her; he would have none; a dark and sullen silence would ensue, him for days to come.

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IN THIRTEEN YEARS Tom Valentine had never seen his wife cry. He was startled now—alarmed and shocked. He watched her in pained uneasiness for some minutes, groping about in his mind for some way to check the flood of sobbing that beat upon his ears. It had been a long, long time since he had laid a hand upon her in affection, yet now he was moved by the violence of her grief, and the unfamiliar impulse came to him.

He laid down his knife and fork and stared at her stolidly, frowning deeply. He thought of getting up and patting her shoulder; he tried to think of something to say, and in his perplexity began to talk at random. He did not know how to be gentle; he had forgotten how to be tender. The iron bonds of habit were too well forged about him. He had always treated his wife with contempt, and now when he strove to reach her, he found himself only mouthing a justification of his actions that morning.

Lucy could not suspect that behind the harsh voice and slow, clumsy words there stirred within him the first concern for her he had known in years. Only the dogged reiteration of the facts about the cream reached her consciousness. Her sobbing fell silent, but she still pressed her palms to her cheeks, her fingers to her eyes. Presently she was aware he had forsaken the topic of the cream; now it was of his virtues he discoursed.

" . . . I let you live your own life; you go and come as you please; you have your own friends. I never ask you how or why you spend the money every month, and I never let the first go by without depositing your check in the bank. I never question what you do to yourself all day; all I ask of you is to run the house and keep things nice. . . . I don't see how you've got much fault to find with me. I don't drink or gamble or smoke; I don't go out nights, and I've never looked at another woman in all my life. Now some men—"

Lucy listened until she could stand no more. With wet tears staining her cheeks and her face convulsed she suddenly straightened herself and faced him. Her hands flew to her eyes, but she stared at him across the table.

"Oh, Tom, Tom," she cried, "I don't care how moral you are. I don't care anything about other women. I don't care whether you go after them or not. Seek them, kiss them, have them—do anything you like. Gamble, smoke and drink. Don't you care anything about me? I don't care how wicked you are. All I want you to do is to be kind to me, Tom—be kind, be kind! Don't be so ugly and mean to me. And sometimes—just now and then—try to love me a little!"

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NOBODY'S MAN By E. Phillips Oppenheim

How a Great Leader, Almost Ruined by a Money Marriage and a Faithless Wife, Regains Success and Happiness Through an Unusual Woman's Love Is Fascinatingly Told in This Story of Intrigue, Politics, Mystery and Romance by the Noted Author of "The Great Impersonation," "The Profiters," "The Great Prince Shan" and a Score of "Best Sellers"

WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY

ANDREW TALLENTÉ—brilliant statesman, approaching middle age, but still genial in spirit. Defeated in Parliament, he becomes interested in a new political party, owing to co-operation of capital and labor for the public welfare, and is its choice for Premier.

MRS. TALLENTÉ—who has married Andrew to forward social ambitions, trading her great wealth for his political prestige. Furious at his declining a divorce, she plots with her daughter to ruin him.

ANTHONY PARKINSON—he has stolen valuable political papers from Andrew, and who, after a quarrel, has mysteriously disappeared.

LADY JANE PARKINSON—Andrew's nearest neighbor, who stirs his interest greatly after his separation from his calculating wife. Though the daughter of a Duke, she is somewhat eccentric, conducting her estate on her own principles. She is in love with Andrew.

STEPHEN DARTREY—the great Labor-Union chief, a statesman, but without ability as a party leader, for which he picks Talente.

MORA MALL—fascinating young feminist and radical, in love with Dartrey.

MILLER—a court-couraged radical.

dissolved away into a dream of anti-clipation.

Minutes or hours might have passed before he heard the motor stop outside, her voice hiding some friend a cheerful good night, the turning of the key in the door, the drawing of a bolt, a light step in the hall, and then—Jane.

She was wrapped from head to foot in white furs, a small trail of emeralds and diamonds on her head. She entered, humming a tune to herself, serene, desirable.

"Andrew!"

Her exclamation, the light in her eyes, the pleasure which swiftly took the place of her first amazement, intoxicated him. He drew her into his arms and his voice shook.

"Jane," he confessed, "I tried to keep away and I couldn't. I stole in here to wait for you. And you're glad—thank heavens, you're glad!"

"But how long have you been here?" she asked wonderingly.

He shook his head.

"I don't know. I walked down the street, hoping for a miracle. Then I saw your key under the scraper. I let myself in and waited. Jane, how wonderful you are!"

Unconsciously she had unfastened and thrown aside her furs. Her arms and neck shone like alabaster in the shaded light. She looked into his face and began to tremble a little.

"You ought not to have done this," she said.

"Why not?" he pleaded.

"If any one had seen you—if the servants knew!"

He laughed and stopped her mouth with a kiss.

"Dear, these things are trifles. The things that count lie between us two only. Do you know that you have been in my blood like a fever all day? You were there in the House this afternoon, you walked the streets with me, you drew me here. Jane, I haven't felt like this since I was a boy. You have brought me back my youth. I adore you!"

Again she rested willingly enough in his arms, smiling at him, as he drew near to her, with wonderful kindness. The fire of his lips, however, seemed to disturb her. She felt the enveloping turmoil of his passion, now become almost ungovernable, and extricated herself from his arms.

"Put my saucen on the fire, please," she begged. "You will find some whisky and soda on the sideboard there. Parkins evidently thinks that I ought to have a male escort when I come home late."

"I don't want whisky and soda, Jane," he cried passionately. "I want you!"

She rested her hand upon his shoulder.

"And am I not yours, dear," she asked, "foolishly, unwisely, perhaps, but certainly yours? They were all talking about you tonight at dinner and I was so proud," she went on, a little feverishly. "Our host was almost elo-

quent. He said that democracy led by you, instead of proving a curse, might be the salvation of the country, because you have political insight and imperialistic ideas. It is those terrible words which would make a parish council of Parliament from whom one has most to fear."

Talente made no reply. He was standing on the hearth rug, a few feet away from her, watching as she stirred her milk, watching the curve of her body, the grace of her long, smoothly shining arms. And beyond these things he strove to read what was at the back of her mind.

"We must talk almost in whispers," she went on. "And do have your whisky and soda, Andrew, because you must go very soon."

"It would disturb you very much if your servants were to know of my presence here?" he asked, in a queer, even tone.

"Of course it would," she answered, without looking at him. "As you

know, I have lived, from my standpoint, an extraordinarily unconventional life, but that was because I knew myself and was safe. But—I have never done anything like this before in my life."

"You have never been in the same position," he reminded her. "There has never been any one else to consider except yourself."

"True enough," she admitted. "But oughtn't that to make one all the more careful? I loved seeing you when I came in, and I have loved our few minutes together, but I am getting a little nervous. Do you see that it is past 2 o'clock?"

"There is no one to whom you are accountable for anything in life except to me," he told her passionately.

She laughed softly but a little uneasily.

"Dear Andrew," she said, "there is my own sense of what is seemly and—must I use the horrid word—my reputation to be considered. As it is, you

may be seen leaving the house in the small hours of the morning."

A little shiver passed through him. All the splendid warmth of living seemed to be fading away from his heart and thoughts. He was back again in that empty world of unreal persons. Jane had been a dream. This kindly faced, beautiful but anxious girl was not the Jane to whose arms he had come hotfoot through the streets.

"I ought not to have come," he muttered.

"Dear, I don't blame you in the least," she answered, "only be very careful as you go out. If there is any one passing in the street, wait for a moment."

"I understand," he promised. "I will take the greatest care."

He took up his hat and coat mechanically. She thrust her arm through his and led him to the door, looking furtively into his face, as though afraid of what she might find there. Her own heart was beginning to beat faster. She was filled with a queer sense of failure.

"You are not angry with me, Andrew? You know that I have been happy to see you?"

"I am not angry," he answered.

There was a little choking in her throat. She felt the rush of strange things. Her eyes sought his, filled with almost terrified anticipation. It chanced that he was looking away. She clenched her hands. His moment had passed.

"There is something else on your mind, Andrew, I know, but tonight we cannot talk any longer," she said, in something resembling her old tone. "Be very careful, dear. Tomorrow—you will come tomorrow."

He walked down the hall with the footsteps of a cat, let himself out silently into the empty street and walked with lenden footsteps to his rooms. It was not until he had reached the seclusion of his study that the change came. A sudden dull fury burned in his heart. He roused himself out whisky and drank it neat. Then he

When they searched the murdered man's clothing they found nothing but a little box containing a mysterious drug and a playing card.

THE JACK OF CLUBS

This sordid tragedy begins a fascinating romance of crime and relentless retribution in which a playing card is the baffling accompaniment. Begin to read

"Jack o' Judgment"

on Wednesday, July 26

seated himself before his desk and wrote. He did not once hesitate. He did not reread a single sentence. He dug up the anger and the bitterness from his heart and set them out in flaming phrases.

A sort of lunacy drove him into the bitterness of extremes. His brain seemed fed with the inspiration of his suffering, fed with cruel epigrams and biting words. He dragged his idol down into dust, scoffed at the piecemeal passion which measures its gifts, the complacency of an analyzed virtue, the sense of well-living and self-contentment achieved in the rubric of a dry-as-dust morality. She had failed him, offered him stones instead of bread. He signed the letter, blotted it with firm fingers, addressed the envelope, stamped it and dropped it himself into the pillar box at the corner of the street. Then he turned wearily homeward, filled with the strange, almost maniacal satisfaction of the man who has killed the thing he loves.

CHAPTER XIX

There followed days of sullen battle for Talente, a battle with luck against him, with his back to the wall, with despair more than once yawning at his feet. The house in Charles street struck a very lucky blow at the very existence of his great nervous center. Miller, as chairman of the Associated Trades Unions, issued a manifesto which, notwithstanding his declining influence, exercised considerable effect. It seemed clear that he could rely still upon a good ninety votes in the House of Commons. Horlock became more cheerful. He met Talente leaving the House one windy March evening and the two men shared a taxi together, westward.

To be continued Monday

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A Gwan-to-Bed Story

THE VENTRILOQUIST'S DUMMY

ONCE upon a time, dear children, there was a ventriloquist named Napoleon who had a little dummy named Eddie. They were great friends and could always be seen together.

On the stage Eddie would sit on Napoleon's lap. Off the stage Napoleon would sit on Eddie's trunk.

And thus they went around the countryside, filling the populace with cheer and amusing enough to keep Napoleon's innards supplied with food and Eddie's nose and face painted a lovely red. (Johnny, WILL you get off the piano.)

Now Eddie, the dummy, was an obnoxious little cuss and he noticed that when he was sitting on Napoleon's knee and answering him back in the crowded theatres, the people always laughed at what he said and never at Eddie himself. "All that guy does is ask me questions. Nobody ever laughs at him, but everything I say is funny. I'm good, that's what. I'm good and

with him. Big "stiff." So one day the stage hand left Eddie on the stage just behind one of the curtains and when the curtain went up there was Eddie sitting right in the middle of the stage and all the audience sitting out in front looking at him.

"Now's my chance," thought Eddie. "I'll tell 'em a good joke and get 'em going and I'll show Napoleon that I can get along without him."

And then Eddie tried to open his mouth and wasn't he surprised when he found he couldn't! And then he tried to say something funny, but he couldn't even make a noise. No, sir, no matter how hard he tried. And the audience began to get restless and somebody yelled, "What's that fool dummy doing there? Throw it in the alley."

But just then Napoleon walked on the stage, picked the dummy up and set him on his knee. And then Eddie discovered that it was Napoleon who furnished him all the brains and the ideas and he himself was nothing but a dummy. There are a lot of Napoleons and Eddie's in the world, my dear children, but that's the end of the story. Gwan to bed.



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A sort of lunacy drove him into the bitterness of extremes. His brain seemed fed with the inspiration of his suffering, fed with cruel epigrams and biting words. He dragged his idol down into dust, scoffed at the piecemeal passion which measures its gifts, the complacency of an analyzed virtue, the sense of well-living and self-contentment achieved in the rubric of a dry-as-dust morality. She had failed him, offered him stones instead of bread. He signed the letter, blotted it with firm fingers, addressed the envelope, stamped it and dropped it himself into the pillar box at the corner of the street. Then he turned wearily homeward, filled with the strange, almost maniacal satisfaction of the man who has killed the thing he loves.

CHAPTER XIX

There followed days of sullen battle for Talente, a battle with luck against him, with his back to the wall, with despair more than once yawning at his feet. The house in Charles street struck a very lucky blow at the very existence of his great nervous center. Miller, as chairman of the Associated Trades Unions, issued a manifesto which, notwithstanding his declining influence, exercised considerable effect. It seemed clear that he could rely still upon a good ninety votes in the House of Commons. Horlock became more cheerful. He met Talente leaving the House one windy March evening and the two men shared a taxi together, westward.

To be continued Monday

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