

# Ray's Recruit

.....BY.....  
CAPTAIN CHARLES KING, U. S. A.

AUTHOR OF "THE COLONEL'S DAUGHTER," "FROM THE RANKS," ETC.

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(Continued.)

and furious drove the dance. Loud and shrill arose the whoops and warcries, dying away at times like the yelp of prairie wolves to faint and distant gurgling, then swelling again like the chorus of hounds in full view of the quarry. Drum, rattle and piercing whistle added to the clamor, echoed back from the dark, pine crested cliffs that overhung this wild nook in the hills. Fresh fagots heaped upon the fire threw the dusky, writhing forms, resplendent in war bonnet and savage finery, into bold relief, and Ray's brave heart almost sank within him as he counted. Ponies they could not see, for they were herded farther up the cove beyond the fire, but every indication pointed to there being well nigh 100 well armed warriors right there within revolver shot, while others doubtless hovered like watchful spies about the unsuspecting camp beyond the range.

"We could never get past them without discovery," muttered the captain finally. "We're far too few to drive them. How far is it back down the valley and around to the park?"

"Not less than 40 miles, sir," answered Hunter, "though it can't be more than six or seven over the old game trail across the range."

"Then," said Ray, "there's nothing for it but to send a brace of men up the heights afoot to warn the camp before daybreak, while the troop hangs on to their heels."

It was barely 9 o'clock now, and high aloft on the northern side of the gorge, glistening white, the cliffs broke through the somber fringe of pine and shone like silver in the moonlight. Somewhere ahead of the watchers in the black depths of the westward end of the deep ravine an old game trail wound and twisted up the mountain side over into the beautiful park beyond. Hunter well remembered and had traced it in his notes. Over this trail Lord Lunemouth's joyous party had evidently gone. Over this the Indian scouts had

tracked him. Over this the war party doubtless meant to follow in time to make their dash at daybreak. Over this, neck or nothing, warning must be sent, and the intermediate ground was so completely occupied by the Indians that cavalry could not hope to slip by undetected. It could only be attempted by daring fellows afoot.

And the first man to speak out when in few words Ray explained the situation to the troop was that incorrigible rascal, the Kid. "I'm game to go, sir."

"Good for one," said Ray. "Here's another, sir." "And here," "And here," came in low tone from half a dozen in the wearied troop, but Ray waited for still another voice, until, half turning, he looked as though inquiringly at Hunter, who had already kicked off his boots and was pulling on a pair of moccasins, drawn from his saddlebags. Then Hunter looked up and spoke.

"I, of course, sir. I'm the only man that knows the way." Whereat Ray's white teeth gleamed in the moonlight and the men knew all was well.

Three hours later a strangely assorted pair, a tall, slender, blond bearded man, with clear cut, handsome features, and an undersized, weazen faced, devil may care Irish lad, dressed alike in dark blue shirts and blouses, in light blue riding breeches and Indian tanned leggings, girt with cartridge belt and revolver, and carrying the brown carbine in hand, halted for breath at the very summit of the divide between Keogh's park and the deep gorge in the south-eastward hills. Perilous, indeed, had been their journey. Leaving their com-

rades well below the position of the Indian camp, they had slowly scaled the cliffs to the north, then crept along among the pines until immediately above the rejoicing Indians, and then, slowly and cautiously through the scattered timber, followed westward by the stars until at last in a depression they came upon the trail, easily recognizable in the occasional patches of moonlight. Then, eager and cautious, they followed up, the winding way, ever alert for sound of hoof beat, until at last they reached the crest and Hunter's watch proclaimed it midnight.

From a rocky point they could see outspread beneath them to the northward a beautiful park country, faintly pictured in the silvery light, and laying a hand on his companion's sleeve Hunter pointed afar down to their left front.

"The springs lie just south of that high butte," he murmured, "and there we'll find their camp, if only we can dodge the Indian watchers on the way."

Aye, there was the rub, and there was no time to lose. Ever watchful, as before, they began the gradual descent,



Hunter knelt and sent shot after shot at every fitting form.

peering from tree to tree, fitting like shadows from rock to rock, until at last they reached the lower limit of the timber line, and there before them lay an almost open valley, two miles wide, destitute of "cover" except along the stream that nearly equally divided it, and up that stream, perhaps two miles, some white objects gleamed in the moonlight near a clump of trees, and there at Keogh's Springs, just as Hunter had predicted, lay the threatened camp.

But how were they to reach it unobserved, for here and everywhere the Kid could point out fresh pony tracks, and even as they paused at the belt of pines away out on the slopes beyond, hidden from camp by intervening rises in the ground, dark forms of horsemen, three or four, were plainly visible, and the Kid could tell from old experience that nothing living would escape those watchers' eyes.

But up the slope the trees were thicker, and again, though wearily, they sought their shelter and slowly crawled from clump to clump until toward 3 o'clock they were nearly opposite the sleeping camp, lying out there in a lovely glade, barely long rifle shot away.

Twice, thrice they had seen an Indian on nimble pony, moving cautiously about, well out of sight of camp. Time and again the coyotes yelped and loud mouthed challenge was bayed by suspicious watchdogs near the tents, but still the Saxons slept, all innocent of danger, and time was getting fearfully short.

"What's to hinder our crawling out as far as we can go, then if we're seen shoot the sucker that tries to stop us and run for it?" muttered the Irishman. "It's the only chance I see."

The moon was well over to the west, but still so high her light betrayed every moving object in the open ground, but, as the Kid explained, there seemed to be no other way. Down went the two flat upon their stomachs, and the slow, tortuous process began. Before they had made 100 yards Celtic patience gave out. "D—d if I can stand this!" said the Irishman. "There's not an Indian in sight now. Come on. Let's run for it."

Suiting action to the word, the little sinner was on his feet and in another minute skimming away like a racer to the goal.

And then as Hunter started to follow he saw a sight that made him thrill with dread. As though they sprang from the bowels of the earth, two Indians on swift ponies darted into view, and, bending low over their chargers' necks, lashing them to mad gallop, they fairly shot across the resounding, turf clad prairie, swift and straight toward the scudding form.

"Look out, Kid! Look out!" rang Hunter's voice in a yell that woke the valley. Bang went the Paddy's ready carbine in reply. Dogs, coyotes, car-

bines, rifles, Indian yells and Saxon blasphemy burst upon the silence of the night. An Indian pony plunged and tossed his rider sprawling within a dozen yards of where the Kid had turned at bay, and Hunter, rushing to the rescue, had just time to kneel when two or three revolvers seemed to crack at once, and the air was rent with fire flashes. But the soldier's aim was true, and one tall warrior toppled heavily forward and bit the dust as Hunter sped on to his comrade's aid. He found him clasp his hands about his knee and rolling in agony on the turf.

"For the love of God, don't stop!" cried he. "They've smashed my leg, and I'm done for. There's a dozen to one of us." Dozen or not, they were in for it now. Hunter knelt, and, though his heart beat hard, sent shot after shot at every fitting form he saw until, amazed at the vigorous defense, the Indians seemed to haul away. Then up he lifted the protesting Kid and lugged him full another 100 yards before again he had to drop him and fight. Then once more, half lifting, half dragging, he rushed him on, cheered by the evidence that the Indians dared not come too close and that camp was aroused and blazing away. Luckily the guides had quickly realized what was up. Luckily they reasoned that there could be but few Indians in the immediate neighborhood, for out they came—three or four—to the succor of the burdened man and reached him only as, exhausted by his efforts and by loss of blood from a wound hardly noticed when received, he sank, fainting, to the ground, the Kid still pluckily swearing in his arms.

And so, an hour later, when the Indians swooped in force upon the camp, they found it thoroughly prepared, surrounded by hastily constructed rifle pits or breastworks, around which, 500 yards away, they dashed and yelled and kept up their wild fusillade, but both times they strove to charge three or four saddles were emptied by the cool aim of the defense, and then, to cap the climax of their discomfiture, out from the foothills burst their old acquaintance, the sorrel troop, "Laughing Lightning," as once the Cheyennes had named Ray, cheering in the lead. And the warriors broke for cover and kept in cover at respectful distance until Mainwaring himself, a whole day later, with his three comrade troops, came trotting up the valley, and then they disappeared entirely.

(To be Continued.)

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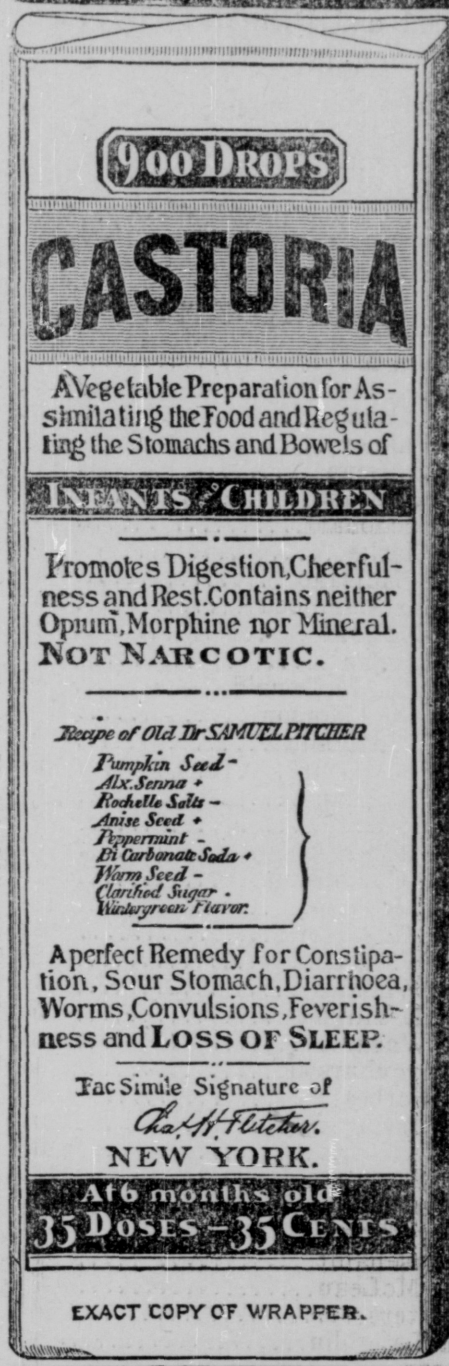
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