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CAPTAIN CHARLES KING, U. S. A.

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

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(Continued.)

It seemed but another instant before Hunter was on his feet, reins in hand, while Stella was struggling to rise. Forgetful of himself, he sought to see if the mare were harmed. Ray and Hogan sprang to his side. "Are you hurt, man?" they eagerly asked, but he laughed it off.

"Not at all, sir. I'm only troubled about her." Panting, wide eyed and startled, Stella stood, with heaving flanks, wondering what it all meant. Ray hastened to reassure his wife. Atherton rode up to satisfy himself the soldier was uninjured. Over beyond the roadway and fence two of the laundresses were leading Mrs. Merriweather, shocked and actually weeping, away. At them the sergeant stood gazing fixedly, his discolored face working with passion, and Captain Blake had twice to bid him pick up the bar before he answered and obeyed.

"That's what you call a stand off, I suppose," muttered the man at the opposite post as Merriweather brushed him by. "Don't tell me I don't know who floored you." But the sergeant never heard. He was hastening after his wife.

"Ray," said the colonel as they were riding into the garrison a few minutes later, "that was a piece of gross carelessness on the part of your sergeant. That man has been getting less reliable every month for the last two years. You'd better think twice should he apply for re-enlistment."

"Gerald," said clear sighted Mrs. Blake, as she clung to the arm of the captain, after leaving Mrs. Ray at her gate, "I'm glad that didn't happen in your troop. Are you sure Sergeant Merriweather set that pin properly? Wasn't it his wife that shrieked?" "Pet," said Mrs. Mainwaring to her niece just as the young doctor lifted his cap and looked for an invitation to enter as he met the two ladies returning from a call at the Rays' an hour later, "you and Dr. Jayne came near getting another patient this afternoon, and a most interesting one, they say, a mysterious swell in the scrotals. He might serve to make you forget the handsome unknown who played doctor for you the night of the collision. She hasn't told you about that, I suppose, has she, doctor?"

"M—ah, no, no, indeed," said Dr. Jayne in evident dismay. "What was he like, pray?"

"Oh, divinely tall and most divinely fair," said Mrs. Mainwaring, laughing. "Kate has his flask and handkerchief yet, waiting for him to return and claim them—and her."

And that evening Miss Leroy wondered whether aunts were always so disagreeable or whether this was merely her own fault, and entirely her fault, because she had admitted that, though there were agreeable men in the regiment, they were all married.

CHAPTER IX.

Conway, convalescing, had been bundled back to town, leaving blessings on the head of his fair nurse and reader. Corporal Shannon, kicked by a mule in the quartermaster's corral, was installed in his place. The daily reading was going on in the hospital despite social duties that grew more exacting as Miss Leroy became better known and more appreciated. Over in the sorrel troop's quarters Hunter, despite inflexible reserve as to his past, had won the good will of most of the men. Quin, a garrison bully, pitching upon a horse made for a tangle about, had himself pitched into a snowdrift and when he rushed at his antagonist was

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floored flat by as near a blow on the jaw as ever the —th had heard of. It was a new blow, in fact, to the regiment, and the story went from barrack to barrack that the sorrels had got a swell boxer as well as rider. Curiosity as to Hunter's antecedents burst all bounds. Major Mainwaring's assertion that he had seen the fellow somewhere before and knew he must be a deserter was sufficient to make the recruit an object of interest in garrison society, even if he had not won distinction as trainer of Mrs. Ray's beautiful mare, whose delicate mouth and eastern schooling made her somewhat too sensitive for ordinary cavalry handling.

Ray, once the light rider of the regiment, could have coached her beautifully, but Ray was growing bulky with years, and an old bullet wound in the thigh received during a Sioux campaign years before was troubling him as winter wore on. What no one understood was how Ray came to select Hunter, for Ray declared he had no previous knowledge of him whatever, which was true. Truscott, when appealed to for his opinion, smiled gravely, as was his wont, and said Ray had as unerring an eye for a horseman as he had for a horse. But it was in Sndstown, where dwelt the wives and daughters of the soldiery, that Trooper Hunter's goings and comings, doings and sayings, were becoming matters of such absorbing interest. He was credited with being fabulously wealthy, among other things, for he certainly had money at his command. He also had friends and acquaintances—some said a wife and family, or at least a ladylove—somewhere in town, for he had twice asked for passes, and more than once was believed to have gone thither without that formality. Mrs. Merriweather, who held her head so high above the other women, was accused of "setting her cap" for the stranger, and she laid herself open to calumny by declaring to one or two envious dames that Mr. Hunter was a frequent caller, only Dan didn't like it and had warned him off. "Indeed, he got to coming too often for his own good," said she, which meant worlds of helpless regret on her part.

Men sought the confidence of the new soldier, but gave it up in ignorance as deep as that with which they came to him. Some he laughed at, some he snubbed, none he gratified. It was fortunate he knew how to fight, for there were evil spirits that would have mauled him otherwise on general principles, but Ray kept a sharp lookout for his protegee. He at least should have fair play, despite the hints of the first sergeant that Conway could tell something about him, and had even asked him. Sergeant Fellows, where he could find Hunter the night he came out with a warrant and was knifed by Healy. Ray rode to town and demanded of Conway what he knew or suspected, and Conway said, "Nothing, at least nothing that I could prove."

Ray had flouted the idea of Hunter's being connected in any way with the train robbers—indeed, it was doubtful if the leaders would ever be caught. They were lost to all search, deep in the hills, and their luckless accomplices were still held awaiting the action of some federal official yet to arrive. Stannard and Mainwaring had had almost an open rupture all on account of Hunter, who, daily exercising and training Mrs. Ray's pretty Stella, was, nevertheless, performing all other duties with his troop. Mainwaring, noting how successful Hunter had been with Stella, concluded that he should like to have him try his hand on Velvet, Mrs. Mainwaring's gaddler, who had never

been seen since he was wounded when the trooper was shot, but positively begged to be excused. Atherton was away, summoned to meet the department commander at Paines. Stannard was in temporary command. Mainwaring asked that the trooper should be directed to perform duty for him, for which he was perfectly willing to pay, or else be ordered to cease doing it for Ray. Stannard said no soldier could be compelled to perform menial service for any officer if he didn't wish to, and if he did not wish to train Mrs. Mainwaring's horse he should not be made to. Mainwaring declared training horses could not be menial service in the eyes of a true cavalryman, and Stannard said that it was if a man thought so. Mainwaring got very wrath and swore that between them, Stannard and Blake and Ray, they were bound to spoil a man who gave promise of being a good soldier, despite his shadowy antecedents, and again demanded that he be ordered to cease handling Stella for Ray. Stannard said he only did it for the love of the thing, for practice and recreation and not for emolument, and he should not be derided. Then Atherton came back; Mainwaring appealed to him from Stannard's decision, and Atherton said he'd investigate and decide next

"Ray," said he at evening stables, "whoever set that huge haystack so close to the stables had no idea of prudence. If it were to catch fire, your premises would go. I shall order it removed tomorrow."

Sergeant Merriweather, stable sergeant of the troop up to a week before, heard these words, and so did Sergeant Conroy, to whom he was pointing out certain defects in the mechanism of a grain shoot from the loft above their heads. It was storming, and grooming was being conducted inside. Merriweather stopped short in his explanation, stared at the colonel as though the words had dazed him in some way, and then had to be reminded of the subject which he was discussing. The wind that had banked the snow fields in the southeast during the day veered toward nightfall and blew strong from the southwest. At tattoo it was whisking the hay from the quartermaster's corral and sending it steaming across the line of stables and out upon the bleak prairie, while still farther along, under the "bench," the big haystacks beyond the corral, seemed stripping in the gale, and the biggest of all was that which projected half way



Heady had taken a stiffer brace, for fear of consequences.

across the open space in front of the line of gable ends and just opposite that of Ray's troop. At tattoo the gale was almost a blizzard, and Atherton, ever on the defensive against fires, bade the troop officers look well to their company kitchens and see that all the ranges and stoves were securely banked, then went over to the guardhouse in person and held brief consultation with Blake, who was officer of the day, and his officer of the guard, who, as ill luck would have it, was Lieutenant Brady, at whom Atherton looked with scant favor. He was a young man, whom Blake described as "one of the detriments of the service." He had been fairly well educated somewhere, had sulisted when it was too evident he was in no condition to make a living otherwise, but that was in the summer of 1878, when 2,500 men were suddenly raised by congress to fill the gaps in the regiments engaged in the Sioux war and the ruffraff of the Atlantic cities was rushed to the frontier.

(To Be Continued.)

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