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CHAPTER III.



Alone in the colonel's presence.

and the groups of officers in creasing up and going away could discuss nothing else. The colonel had requested one of their number to remain, as he wished to speak to him further, and that man was Lieut. Hayne.

Seven years had that young gentleman been a second lieutenant of the regiment of infantry, a detachment of which was now stationed at Warren. Only this, and of all companies in the regiment, he was gazetted to the first lieutenant of Capt. Rayner's. For a while the regiment when by itself could talk of little else. Mr. Hayne had spent three or four years in the exile of a little "two company post" far up in the mountains. Except the officers there stationed, none of his comrades had seen him during that time.

No one of them would like to admit that he would care to see him. And yet, when once in a while they got to talking among themselves about him, and the question was sometimes confidentially asked of comrades who came down on leave from that isolated station, "How is Hayne doing?" or "What is Hayne doing?" the answer in which he was referred to grew by degrees far less truculent and confident than it had been when he first went thither. Officers of other regiments rarely spoke to the "Riflers" of Mr. Hayne. Unlike one or two others of their arm of the service, this particular regiment of foot held the affairs of its officers as regimental property in which outsiders had no concern.

If they had disagreements they were referred to themselves; and even in a case which in its day had attracted widespread attention the Riflers had long since learned to shun all talk outside. It was evident to other commands that the Hayne affair was a sore point and one on which they preferred silence. And yet it was getting to be whispered around that the Riflers were by no means so unanimous as they had been in their opinion of their fellow officers. They were becoming divided among themselves; and what complicated matters was the fact that those who felt their views undergoing a reconstruction were compelled to admit that just in proportion as the case of Mr. Hayne rose in their estimation the reputation of another officer was bound to suffer, and that officer was Capt. Rayner.

Between these two men not a word had been exchanged for five years—not a single word since the day when, with a stern face and broken accents, but with stern purpose in every syllable, Lieut. Hayne, standing in the presence of nearly all the officers of his regiment, had hurled this prophecy in his adversary's teeth: "Though it take me years, I will live it down despite you; and you will wish to God you had bitten out your perjured tongue before ever you told the lie that wrecked me."

No wonder there was talk, and lots of it, in the "Riflers" and all through the garrison when Rayner's first lieutenant suddenly threw up his commission and retired to the mines he had located in Montana, and Hayne, the "senior second," was promoted to the vacancy. Speculation as to what would be the result was given a temporary rest by the news that war department orders had granted the subaltern six months' leave, which he had sought in as many years. It was known that he had gone east; but hardly had he been away a fortnight when there came the trouble with the Cheyennes at the reservation—a leap for liberty by some fifty of the band, and an immediate rush of the cavalry in pursuit. There were some bloody atrocities, as there always are. All the troops in the department were ordered to be in readiness for instant service, while the officials eagerly watched the reports to see which way the desperate band would turn; and the next heard from Mr. Hayne was the news that he had thrown up his leave and had hurried out to join his company the moment the eastern papers told of the trouble. It was all practically settled by the time he reached the department; but the spirit and intent of his action could not be doubted. And now here he was at Warren. That very morning during the matinee he had entered the office unannounced, walked up to the desk of the commander, and while every voice but his in the room was still, he quietly spoke:

"Permit me to introduce myself, colonel—Mr. Hayne. I desire to relinquish my leave of absence and report for duty."

The colonel quickly arose and extended his hand. "Mr. Hayne, I am especially glad to see you and to thank you here for all your care and kindness to our men. The doctor tells me that many of them would have died to suffer the loss of noses and ears, even of hands and feet in some cases, but for your attention. Maj. Stannard will add his thanks to mine when he returns. Take a seat, sir, for the present. You are acquainted with the officers of your own regiment, doubtless. Mr. Billings, introduce Mr. Hayne to our officers."

Whereat the adjutant courteously greeted the newcomer, presented a small party of yellow strapped shoulders, and then drew him into earnest talk about the adventure of the train. It was noticed that Mr. Hayne neither by word nor glance gave the slightest recognition of the presence of the officers of his own regiment, and that they as studiously avoided him. One or two of their number had indeed risen and stepped forward, as though to offer him the civil greeting due to one of their own cloth; but it was with evident doubt of the result. They reddened when he met their tentative—which was that of a gentleman—with a cold look of utter repudiation. He did not choose to see them, and they, they, they.

Nor was his greeting hearty any of the cavalrymen. There were only a few present, as most of the—th were still out in the field and marching slowly homeward. The introductions were courteous and formal, there was even constraint among two or three, but there was civility and an evident desire to refer to his services in behalf of their men. All such attempts, however, Mr. Hayne waved aside by an immediate change of the subject. It was plain that to them, he had the manner of a man who was at odds with the world and desired to make no friends.

"I have considered, colonel. I shall turn nobody out, and nobody need be in-compounded in the least."

"Oh! then you will share quarters with some of the bachelors?" asked the colonel, with evident relief.

"No, sir; and the answer was stern in tone, though perfectly respectful; 'I shall live as I have lived for years—nearly alone.'"

One could have heard a pin drop in the office—over the matted floor. The colonel half arose, as if to speak.

"Why, Mr. Hayne, there is not a vacant set of quarters in the garrison. You will have to move some one out if you decide to live alone."

"There may be no quarters in the post, sir, but if you will permit me, I can live near my company and yet in officers' quarters."

"How so, sir?"

"In the house out there on the edge of the garrison, facing the prairie. It is within stone's throw of the barracks of Company B, and is exactly like those built for the officers in here along the parade."

"Why, Mr. Hayne, no officers ever lived there. It is utterly out of the way and isolated. I believe it was built for the sutler years ago, but was bought in by the government afterwards. Wholives there now, Mr. Quartermaster?"

"No, sir. It is being used as a tailor's shop; half a dozen of the company tailors work there; but I can send them back to their own barracks. The house is in good repair, and, as Mr. Hayne says, exactly like those built for officers' use."

"And you mean you want to live there alone, Mr. Hayne?"

"I do, sir, exactly."

The colonel turned sharply to his adjutant. "Is there any one out there on the edge of the garrison, facing the prairie. It is within stone's throw of the barracks of Company B, and is exactly like those built for the officers in here along the parade."

"Why, Mr. Hayne, no officers ever lived there. It is utterly out of the way and isolated. I believe it was built for the sutler years ago, but was bought in by the government afterwards. Wholives there now, Mr. Quartermaster?"

"I'll answer for myself, Buxton," said Blake, and you do as you please. Except that one thing, and the not unusual frivolities of a youngster that occurred previous to this trial, I understand that his character has been above reproach. So far as I can learn, he is a far more reputable character than I am, and a better officer than most of us. Growl all you want to, comrades mine; it's a way we have in the army, and I like it. So long as I include myself in those maddeningly complimentary remarks, I don't care. It is my conviction that the Riflers wouldn't say he was guilty today if they hadn't said so five years ago. It is my information that he has paid every cent of the damages, whether he caused them or not, and it is my intention to go and call upon Mr. Hayne as soon as he's settled. I don't propose to influence any man in his action; and excuse me, Buxton, I think you did."

The captain looked wrathful. Blake was an oddity of whom he rather stood in awe, for there was no mistaking the popularity and respect in which he was held in his own regiment. The—was somewhat remarkable for being emphatically an "outsoken crowd," and for some years, thanks to a leaven of strong and truthful men in whom this trait was pronounced and sustained, it had grown to be the custom of all but a few of the officers to discuss openly and fully all matters of regimental policy and strategy, and to discountenance covert action of any kind. Blake was thoroughly popular and generally respected, despite a tendency to rant and rattle on most occasions. Nevertheless, there were signs of dissent as to the line of action he proposed, though it were only for his own guidance.

"And how do you suppose Rayner and the Riflers generally will regard your calling on their black sheep?" asked Buxton, in a pause.

"I don't know," said Blake, more seriously, and with a tone of concern. "I like Rayner, and have found most of those fellows thorough gentlemen and good friends. This will test the question thoroughly. I believe most of them, except, of course, Rayner, would do the same were they in my place. At all events, I mean to see."

"What are you going to do, Gregg?" asked "the mole," inclining sidelong on his brother troop commander.

"I don't know," said Gregg, doubtfully. "I think I'll ask the colonel."

"What do you suppose he means to do?"

"I don't know again; but I'll bet we all know as soon as he makes up his mind; and he is making up his mind now. He's made it up, for there goes Mr. Hayne, and he looks the orderer. Something's up already."

Every head was turned to the doorway as the orderly's step was heard in the outer hall, and every voice stilled to hear the message, it was so unusual for the commanding officer to send for one of his subordinates after the morning meeting. The soldier tapped at the panel, and at the prompt "Come in," pushed it partly open and stood with one foot on the threshold, and the other raised to his cap visor in salute.

"Lieut. Blake?" he asked, as he glanced around.

"What is it?" asked Blake, stepping quickly from the window.

"The commanding officer's compliments, sir, and could he see the lieutenant one minute before the court meets?"

"Coming at once," said Blake, as he pushed his way through the chairs, and the orderly faced about and disappeared.

"I'll be there," said Gregg, doubtfully. "I think I'll ask the colonel."



Their hostess led him to her piano.

Facing the broad, bleak prairie, separated from it only by a rough, unpainted picket fence, and flanked by unweathery structures of pine, one of which was used as a storehouse for postmaster's property, the other as the post trader's property, stood the cottage which Mr. Hayne had chosen as his home. As has been said, it was precisely like those built for the subaltern officers, so far as material, plan and dimensions were concerned. The locality made the vast difference which really existed. They stood all in a row, fronting the grassy level of the parade, surrounded by verandas, bordering on a well graded gravel path and an equally well graded drive. Clear, sparkling water rippled in tiny acqueducts through the front yards of each, and so furnished the moisture needed for the life of the various little shrubs and flowering plants. The surroundings were at least "socialable," and there was companionship and jollity, with an occasional rift to keep things lively. The married officers, as a rule, had chosen their quarters farthest from the entrance gate and nearest those of the colonel commanding. The bachelors, except the two or three who were old in the service and had "rank" in lieu of emplacements, were all herded together along the eastern end, a situation that had disadvantages as connected with duties which required the frequent presence of the occupiers at the court mart, or at headquarters, and that was correspondingly far distant from the barracks of the soldiers. It was convenient to the card room and billiard tables at "the store," and in embracing within its limits one house which possessed mysterious interest in the eyes of every woman and most of the men in the garrison; it was said to be haunted.

A sorely perplexed man was the post quartermaster when the rumour came from the railway station that Mr. Hayne had arrived and was coming to report for duty. As a first lieutenant he would have choice of quarters over every second lieutenant in the garrison. There were ten of these young gentlemen, and four of the ten were married. Every set of quarters had its occupants, and Hayne could move in nowhere, unless as occupant of a room or two in the house of some comrade, who would be compelled to move out. This proceeding would lead to vast discomfort, occurring as it would in the dead of winter, and the youngsters were naturally perturbed in spirit—their wives especially so. What made the prospect infinitely worse was the fact that the cavalry bachelors were already living three in a house; the only spare rooms were in the quarters of the second lieutenants of the infantry, and they were not speaking terms with Mr. Hayne. Everything, therefore, pointed to the probability of his "displacing" a junior, who would in turn displace somebody else, and so they would go tumbling like a row of bricks until the lowest and last was reached. All this would involve no end of worry for the quartermaster, who ever under the most favorable circumstances is sure to be a busy man. He was a good officer, and a gentleman, and that worthy was simply agas with relief and joy when he heard Mr. Hayne's astonishing announcement that he would take the quarters out on "Prairie avenue."

It was the talk of the garrison all that day. The ladies, especially, had a good deal to say, because many of the men seemed weary of expressing their views. "Quite the proper thing," for Mr. Hayne was the apparent opinion of the majority of the young wives and mothers. As a particularly kind and considerate thing it was not remarked by one of them, though that view of the case went not entirely unrepresented. In choosing to live there Mr. Hayne separated himself from companionship. That, said some of the commentators—as well as women—she simply accepted as the virtue of necessity, and so there was nothing to comment in his action. But Mr. Hayne was said to possess an eye for the picturesque and beautiful. If so, he deliberately condemned himself to the daily contemplation of a treeless barren, streaked in occasional shallows with dingy patches of snow, ornamented only in spots by abandoned old hats, boots, or tin cans blown beyond the jurisdiction of the garrison police parties. A line of telegraph poles was all that intervened between his fence and the low lying hills of the eastern horizon.

Southeastward lay the distant roofs and the low, squat buildings of the frontier town; southward the shallow valley of the winding creek in which lay the long line of stables for the cavalry and the great stacks of hay; while the row on which he chose to live—"Prairie avenue," as it was termed—was far worse at his end of it than at the other. It covered the whole eastern front. The big, brown hospital building stood at the northern end. Then came the quarters of the surgeon and his assistants, then the snug home of the post trader, then the "store" and its scattering appendages, then the entrance gateway, then a broad vacant space, through which the wind swept like a hurricane, then the little shanty of the trader's fur house and one or two hovel like structures of the adjacent infantry companies. Then came the cottage itself, south of it stood the quartermaster's storehouse, back of which lay an extension filled with ord-

nance stores, then other and smaller sheds devoted to commissary supplies, the post butcher shop, the saddler's shop, then big coal sheds, and then the brow of the bluff, down which at a steep grade plunged the road to the stables. It was as unprepossessing a place for a home as ever was chosen by a man of education or position; and Mr. Hayne was possessed of both. He had, however, despite the flat parade, there was a grand expanse of country to be seen stretching away towards the snow covered Rockies. There was life and the sense of neighborliness to one's kind. Out on Prairie avenue all was wintry desolation, except when twice each day the cavalry officers went plodding by on their way to and from the stables, muffled up in their fur caps and coats, and hardly distinguishable from so many bears, much less from one another.

And yet Mr. Hayne smiled not unhappily as he glanced from his eastern window at this group of burly warriors the afternoon succeeding his dinner at the colonel's. He had been busy all day long unpacking books, book shelves, some few pictures which he loved, and his simple, soldierly outfit of household goods, and getting them into shape. His sole assistant was a Chinese servant, who worked rapidly and well, and who seemed in so wise dismayed by the bleakness of their surroundings. If anything, he was disposed to grin and indulge in high pitched commentaries in "pidgin English" upon the unaccustomed amount of room. His master had been restricted to two rooms and a kitchen during the two years he had served him. Now they had a house to themselves, and more room than they knew what to do with. The quartermaster had sent a detail of men to put up the stoves and move out the rubbish left by the tailors; "Sam" had worked vigorously with soft soap, hot water and a big mop in sprucing up the rooms; the adjutant had sent a little note during the morning, saying that the colonel would be glad to order him any men he needed to put the quarters in proper shape, and that Capt. Rayner had expressed his readiness to send a detail from the company to unload and unpack his boxes, etc., to which Mr. Hayne replied in person that he thanked the commanding officer for his thoughtfulness, but that he had very little to unpack, and needed no assistance beyond that already afforded by the quartermaster's men. Mr. Billings could not help noting that he made no allusion to that part of the letter which spoke of Capt. Rayner's offer. It increased his respect for Mr. Hayne's perceptive powers.

While every officer of the infantry battalion was ready to admit that Mr. Hayne had rendered valuable service to the men of the cavalry regiment, they were not so unanimous in their opinion as to how it should be acknowledged and requited by its officers. No one was prepared for the announcement which the colonel had asked him to dinner and that Blake and Billings were to meet him. Some few of their number thought it going too far, but no one quite coincided with the vehement declaration of Mrs. Rayner that it was an outrage and an affront aimed at the regiment in general and at Capt. Rayner in particular. She was an energetic woman when aroused, and there was no doubt of her being very much aroused as she sped from her room to house to what the other ladies thought it. Rayner's wealth and Mrs. Rayner's qualities had made her an undoubted though not always popular leader in all social matters in the Riflers. She was an authority, so to speak, and one who knew it. Already there had been some points on which she had differed with the colonel's wife, and it was plain to all that it was a difficult thing for her to come down from being the social leader—the leader of the social element of a garrison—and from the position of second or third importance which she had been accorded when first assigned to the station.

There were many, indeed, who asserted that it was because she found her position unbearable that she decided on her long visit to the east, and departed thither before the Riflers had been at Warren for a month. Her husband had greeted her and her lovely sister with charming grace on their arrival two days previous to the stirring event of the dinner, and every one was looking forward to a probable series of pleasant entertainments by the two households, even while wondering how long the entente cordiale would last—when the colonel's invitation to Mr. Hayne brought on an immediate crisis. It is safe to say that Mrs. Rayner was made to feel that the captain her husband, who had known her for many years, was by no means the best liked officer in his regiment, nor the "deepest" and best informed, but he had a native shrewdness which helped him. He noted even before his wife would speak of it to him the gradual dying out of the bitter feeling that had once existed at Hayne's expense. He felt, though it hurt him seriously to make inquiries, that the man whom he had met socially at Warren had been a different man from the man who had been in the long ago, was slowly but surely gaining strength, even where he would not make friends.

Worse than all, he was beginning to doubt the evidence of his own senses as the years receded, and unknown to any soul on earth, even his wife, there was growing up deep down in his heart a gnawing, insidious, ever festering fear that after all, after all, he might have been mistaken. And yet on the sacred oath of a soldier and a gentleman, against his own searching conscience, he had again and again had the most confidently and positively declared that he had both seen and heard the fatal interview on which the whole case hinged. And as to the exact language employed, he alone of those within earshot had lived to testify for or against the accused; of the five soldiers who stood in that now celebrated group, three were shot to death within the hour. He was growing nervous, irritable, haggard, he was getting to hate the mere mention of the name. The promotion of Hayne to his own company thrilled him with an almost superstitious dismay. Were his words coming true? Was it the judgment of an offended God that his hideous pride, obstinacy and old time hatred of this officer were now to be revenged by daily, hourly contact with the victim of his criminal persecution? He had grown morbidly sensitive to any remarks as to his being "lived down" the toils in which he had been encircled. Might he not "live down" the ensnarer? He dreaded to see him—though Rayner was no coward—and he feared day by day to hear of his restoration to fellowship in the regiment, and yet would have given half his health to bring it about, could it but have been accomplished without the dreadful admission, "I was wrong. I was utterly wrong."

He had grown lavishly hospitable; he had become almost aggressively open handed to his comrades, and had sought to press money upon men who in no wise needed it. He was as eager to lend as some are to borrow, and his brother officers dubbed him "Midas," not because everything he touched would turn to gold, but because he would intrude his gold upon them at every turn. There were some who borrowed; and these he struggled not to let repay. He seemed to have a habit of saying that if he could but get his regimental friends bound to him occasionally he could control their

opinions and actions. It was making him sick at heart, and it made him sneer at a doleful, wide-eyed man, an inferior against the man he had done so much of suffering. This showed out that very morning, Mrs. Rayner had begun to talk, and he turned fiercely upon her.

"Not a word on that subject, Kate, if you love me!—not even the mention of his name! I must have peace in my own home. It is enough to have to talk of it elsewhere."

"Talk of it he had to. The major early that morning said to him, as they were going to the matinee: 'Have you seen Hayne yet?'"

"Not since he was reported on the parade yesterday," was the curt reply.

"Well, I suppose you will send me to help him get those quarters into habitable shape?"

"I will, of course, major, if he asks it. I don't propose sending men to do such work for an officer unless the request comes."

"He is entitled to that consideration, Rayner, and I think the men should be sent to him. He is hardly likely to ask."

"Then he is less likely to get them," said the captain, shortly, for, except the post commander, he well knew that no officer could order it to be done. He was angry at the major for interfering. They were old associates and had entered service almost at the same time, but his friend had the better luck in command, and was now his battalion commander. Rayner made an excuse of stopping to speak with the officer of the day, and the major went on without him. He was a quiet old soldier; he wanted no disturbance with his troubled friend, and, like a sensible man, he turned the matter over to their common superior, in a very few words, before the arrival of the general adjutant, who had caused the colonel to turn quietly to Rayner and say, in the most matter of fact way:

"Oh, Capt. Rayner, I presume Mr. Hayne will need three or four men to help him get his quarters in shape. I suppose you have already thought to send them?"