

By Capt. Charles King, U. S. A.

Author of "DUNBAR RANCH," "THE COLONEL'S DAUGHTER," "MARRIAGE FAIR," ETC.

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CHAPTER XIV.

The best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a-gley. Mrs. Rayner, ill in mind and body, had yielded to her lord's entreaties and determined to start eastward with her sister without delay. Packing was already begun. Miss Travers had promised herself that the world within thirty-six hours put Mr. Hayne in possession of certain facts or theories which in her opinion bore strongly upon the "clearing up" of the case against him. Mrs. Rayner had determined that he would see Maj. Waldron on the coming day and begin active efforts towards the restoration of his social rights; the doctor had about decided on a new project for inducing Clancy to unbecomingly himself of what he knew; Capt. Rayner, tired of the long struggle, was almost ready to welcome anything which should establish his subaltern's innocence, and was on the point of asking for six months' leave just as soon as he had arranged for the removal of his baggage from service; he had reasons for staying at the post until that Hibernal household was fairly and squarely removed; and Mrs. Clancy's plan was to take Mike to the distant east, "where she had friends." There were other schemes and projects, no doubt, but these mainly concerned our leading characters, and one and all they were put to the right about by the events of the following day.



The driver caught sight of Lieut. Hayne wearing his hand.

Under orders for several days to proceed on this particular date to a large town a day's journey eastward by rail. A court martial composed mainly of field officers was ordered there to assemble for the trial of an old captain of cavalry whose propensity it was not so much to get drunk as never to get drunk without concomitant publicity and discovery. It was a rare thing for the old war dog to take so much as a glass of wine; he went for months without it; but the instant he began to drink he was moved to do so something irrepressible, and that was the trouble now. He was an unlucky old trooper, who had risen from the lowest grades, fought with credit, and even, at times, commanded his regiment during the war; but war records could not save him when he wouldn't save himself, and he had to go. The court was ordered, and the result was a foregone conclusion. The colonel, his adjutant and Maj. Stannard were to drive to town during the afternoon and take the east bound train, leaving Maj. Waldron in command of the post; but before Waldron mounting a telegram was received, which was sent from department headquarters the evening before, announcing that one of the officers detailed for the court was seriously ill and directing Maj. Waldron to take his place. So it resulted in the post being left to the command of the senior captain present for duty, and that man was Capt. Buxton. He had never had so big a command before in all his life.

Maj. Waldron of course had to go home and make his preparations. Mr. Hayne therefore had brief opportunity to speak with him. It was seen, however, that they had a short talk together on the major's piazza, and that when they parted the major shook him warmly and cordially by the hand. Rayner, Buxton, Ross and some juniors happened to be coming down along the walk at the moment, and, seeing them, as though with premonition, the major called out, so that all could hear:

"By the way, Hayne, I wish you would drop in occasionally while I'm gone and take Mrs. Waldron out for a walk or drive; my horses are always at your service. And—a I'll write to you about that matter the moment I've had a chance to talk with the colonel—to-morrow, probably." And Hayne touched his cap in parting salute, and went blithely off with brightened eye and rising color.

Buxton glowered after him a moment, and conversation suddenly ceased in their party. Finally he blurted out:

"Strikes me your major might do a good deal better by himself and his regiment by standing up by its morale and discipline than by openly flaunting his favoritism for convicts in our faces. If I were in your regiment I'd cut him."

"You wouldn't have to," muttered one of the group to his neighbor; "the cut would have been on the other side long ago." And the speaker was Buxton's own subaltern.

Rayner said nothing. His eyes were troubled and anxious, and he looked after Hayne with an expression far more wearied than vindictive.

"The major is fond of music, captain," said Mr. Ross, with mischievous intent. "He hasn't been to the club since the night you sang 'Eileen Alanna.' That was about the time Hayne's piano came."

"Yes," put in Foster, "Mrs. Waldron says she goes and over Hayne now night after night just to hear him play."

"It would be well for him, then, if he kept a better guard on Mr. Hayne's other visitors," said Buxton, with a black scowl. "I don't know how you gentlemen in the Rifles look upon such matters, but in the—the man who dared to introduce a woman of the town into his quarters would be kicked out in short order."

"You don't mean to say that anybody accuses Hayne of that, do you?" asked Ross in amazement.

"I do—just that. Only, I say this to you, it had but just come to light, and only one or two know it. To prove it positively he's got to be allowed more rope; for he got her out of the way last time before we could clinch the matter. If he suspects it is known he won't repeat it; if kept to ourselves he will probably try it again—and be caught. Now I charge you all to regard this as confidential."

"But, Capt. Buxton," said Ross, "this is a serious matter that I don't like to believe in. Who can prove such a story?"

"Of course not, Mr. Ross. You are quite ready to treat a man as a thief, but can't believe he'll do any other that is respectable. That is characteristic of your style of reasoning," said Buxton, with biting sarcasm.

"You can't wince with me with contempt."

CHAPTER XV.

"I have a right to my opinion, and I have known Mr. Hayne for years, and if I did believe him guilty of one crime five years ago I'm not ready to believe him guilty of another now. This isn't—this is Hayne."

"No, of course not, as I said before. Now, will you tell me, Mr. Ross, just why Mr. Hayne chose that ramshackle old shanty out there on the prairie, all by himself, unless it was to be where he could have his chosen companions with him at night, and no one else the wiser?"

"I don't pretend to fathom his motives, sir; but I don't believe it was for any such purpose as you seem to think."

"In other words, you think I'm circulating malicious rumors, do you?"

"I have said nothing of the kind; and I protest against your putting words into my mouth I never used."

"You intimated as much, anyhow, and you plainly don't believe it."

"Well, I don't believe—that is, I don't see how I could happen."

"Couldn't the woman drive out from town after dark, send the carriage back, and have it call for her again in the morning?" asked Buxton.

"Possibly. Still, it isn't a proved fact that a woman spent the night at Hayne's, even if a carriage was seen coming out. You've got hold of some Sodusville gossip, probably," replied Ross.

"I have, have I? By God, sir, I'll teach you better manners before we get through with this question. Do you know who saw the carriage, and who saw the woman, both at Hayne's quarters?"

"Certainly I don't! What I don't understand is the recipient of the story."

"Mr. Ross, just govern your tongue, sir, and remember you are speaking to your superior officer, and don't venture to treat my statement with disrespect hereafter. I saw it myself!"

"You gulped Ross, while amazed and incredulously shot across his startled face."

"You!" exclaimed others of the group, in evident astonishment and dismay. Rayner alone looked unchanged. It was no new to him while to every other man in the party it was a shock. Up to that instant the prevailing belief had been with Ross that Buxton had found some garrison gossip and was building an edifice thereon. His positive statement, however, was too much for the most incredulous.

"Now what have you to say?" he asked, in rude triumph.

"There was no answer for a moment; then Ross spoke:

"Your cousin, Capt. Buxton, I withdraw any expression of doubt. It never occurred to me that you could have seen it. May I ask when and how?"

"The last time I was officer of the day, sir; and Capt. Rayner is my witness as to the time. Others, whom I need not mention, saw it with me. There is no mistake, sir. The woman was there."

And Buxton stood enjoying the effect. Ross looked white and dazed. He turned slowly away, hesitated, looked back, then exclaimed:

"One that is sure it was—it was not some one that had a right to be there?"

"How could it be?" said Buxton, gruffly. "You know he has not an acquaintance in town, or here, who could be with him there at night."

"Does the commanding officer know of it?" asked Mr. Royce, after a moment's silence.

"I am the commanding officer, Mr. Royce, and I know with majestic dignity 'at least I will be after I've got you, and you may depend upon it, gentlemen, this thing will not occur while I am in command without its receiving the exact treatment it deserves. Remember, now, not a word of this to anybody. You are as much interested as I am in bringing to justice a man who will disgrace his uniform and his regiment and insult every lady in the garrison by good and all. This sort of thing of course will run him out of the service for good and all. We simply have to be sure of our ground and make the evidence conclusive. Leave that to me the next time it happens. I repeat, say nothing of this to any one."

But Rayner had already told his wife. Just as Maj. Waldron was driving off to the station that bright April afternoon, and his carriage was whirling through the east gate, the driver caught sight of Lieut. Hayne running up Prairie avenue, waving his hand and shouting to him. He reigned in his spirited bays with some difficulty, and Hayne finally caught up with them.

"What is it, Hayne?" asked Waldron, with kindly interest, leaning out of his carriage.

"They'll be back to-night, sir. Here is a telegram that has just reached me. It can't tell you how sorry I am not to be here to meet them; but Mrs. Waldron will be delighted, and she will come to call the moment you let her know. Keep them till I get back, if you possibly can."

"Ay, ay, sir. Good-by."

"Good-by, Hayne. God bless you, and—good luck!"

A little later that afternoon Mrs. Rayner had occasion to go into her sister's room. It was almost sunset, and Nellie had been summoned downstairs to see visitors. Both the ladies were busy with an invalid, superintending, and Miss Travers, as became the junior, doing all the work. It was rather trying to pack all the trunks and receive visitors of both sexes at odd hours. Some of her garrison acquaintances would have been glad to come and help, but those whom she would have welcomed were not agreeable to the lady of the house, and those the lady of the house would have chosen were not agreeable to her. The relations between the sisters were somewhat strained and unnatural, and had been growing more and more so for several days past. Mrs. Rayner's desk was already packed away. She wanted to send a note, and bethought her of her sister's portfolio.

Opening it she drew out some paper and envelopes, and with the latter came an envelope sealed and directed. One glance at the superscription sent the blood to her cheeks and fire to her eye. Was it possible? Was it credible? Her pet, her baby sister, her pride and delight—until she found her stronger in will—her proud spirit, truthful Nell was beyond question corresponding with Lieut. Hayne! Here was a note addressed to him. How many more might not have been exchanged! Ruthlessly now she explored the desk, searching for something from him, but her scrutiny was vain. Oh, what could she say, what could she do, to convey to her sister the true and true sense of the extent of her displeasure? How could she bring her to realize the shame, the guilt, the scandal of her course? She, Nellie Travers, the betrothed wife of Steven Van Antwerp, corresponding secretly with this—this scoundrel, whose past, crime laden as it had been, was as nothing compared to the present with its degradation of vice! Ah! she had it! What would ever move her as that could and must?

When the trumpet rang out their sunset call and the boom of the evening gun shook the windows in Fort Warren and Nellie Travers came running upstairs again to her room, she started at the sight that met her eyes. There stood Mrs. Rayner, like Juno in wrath inflexible, glaring at her from the commanding height of her person, and, as if pointing in speechless indignation at the little note that lay upon the open portfolio.

For a moment neither spoke. Then Miss Travers, who had turned very white, but whose blue eyes never flinched and whose lips were set and whose little foot was tapping the carpet ominously, thus began:

"I do not recognize your right to oversee my desk or supervise my correspondence."

"Understand this first, Cornelia," said Mrs. Rayner, who hated the baptismal name as much as did her sister, and used it only when she desired to be especially and desperately impressive; "I found it by accident. I never dreamed of such a possibility as this. I never, even after what I have seen and heard, could have believed you guilty of this; but now that I have found out the right to ask, what are its contents?"

"I decline to tell you."

"Do you deny my right to inquire?"

"I will not discuss that question now. The other is far graver. I will not tell you, Kate, except this: there is no word there that an engaged girl should not write."

"Of that I mean to satisfy myself, or rather—"

"You will not open it, Kate. Not put that letter down! You have never known me to prevaricate in the faintest degree, and you have no excuse for doubting. I will furnish a copy of that for Mr. Van Antwerp at any time; but you cannot see it."

"You still persist in your wicked and unnatural intimacy with that man, even after all that I have told you. Now for the last time hear me; I have striven not to tell you this; I have striven not to tell your thoughts by such a revelation; but since nothing else will check you, tell it to me, and I will tell you to my husband told me in sacred confidence, though soon enough it will be a scandal to the whole garrison."

And when darkness settled down on Fort Warren that starlit April evening and the first warm breeze from the south came sighing about the casements, and one by one the lights appeared along officers' row, there was no light in Nellie Travers' room, but a little note lay in ashes on the hearth, and she, with burning, shame-stricken cheeks, with a black, scorching, gnawing pain at her heart, was hiding her face in her pillow.

And yet it was a jolly evening after all—that is, for some hours and for some people. As Mrs. Rayner and her sister were so soon to go, probably by the morning train if their section could be secured, the garrison had decided to have an informal dance on a suitable farewell. Their frightened looking soldiers and partners had come so suddenly and unexpectedly that there was no time to prepare anything elaborate, such as a german with favors, etc.; but good music and an extemporized supper could be had without trouble. The colonel's wife and most of the cavalry ladies, on consultation, had decided that it was the very thing to do, and the young officers took hold with a will: they were always ready for a dance.

Now that Mrs. Rayner was really going, the quarrel should be ignored, and the ladies would all be as pleasant to her as though nothing had happened, provided, of course, she dropped her absurd airs of injured womanhood and behaved with courtesy. The colonel had had a brief talk with his better half before starting for the train, and suggested that it was very probable that Mrs. Rayner had seen the folly of her ways by that time—the captain certainly had been behaving as though he regretted the estrangement—and if encouraged by a "let-drop-the-whole-thing" sort of manner she would be glad to reciprocate. He felt far less anxiety herein than he did in leaving the post to the command of Capt. Buxton. So scrupulously had he been courteous to that intractable veteran that Buxton had no doubt in his own mind that the colonel looked upon him as the most obedient of the regiment. It was an unusual uniform of the day, and should have been left in command, but his one or two seniors among the captains were away on long leave, and there was no help for it. The colonel, seriously disquieted, had a few words of earnest talk with him before leaving the post, cautioning him so particularly not to interfere with any of the established details and customs that Buxton got very much annoyed, and showed it.

"If your evidence were not imperative, I would not care to come to-night. I declare I believe I'd leave you behind," said the colonel to his adjutant. "There is no telling what mischief Capt. Buxton would do if left to himself."

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"I'll be back in five minutes," said Rayner, as he picked up his sword and disappeared.

But ten minutes—fifteen—passed, and he came not. Mrs. Rayner grew worried and Mr. Blake led her out on the rude piazza to see what they could see, and several others strolled out at the same time. The music had ceased, and the night air was not too cold. Not a soul was in sight out on the starlit parade. Not an unusual sound was heard. There was nothing to indicate the faintest trouble; and yet Capt. Buxton, the commanding officer, had been called out by his "striker" or soldier servant before 11 o'clock, had not returned at all, and in little over half an hour had sent for the officer of the day. What did it mean? Questioning and talking thus among themselves, somebody said, "Hark!" and held up a warning hand.

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And, sure enough, the gleam of the rifles could be seen as the men ran rapidly away in the direction of the east gate. Mrs. Rayner had grown dusky, and was looking at Miss Travers, who with white lips and clinched hands stood leaning on one of the wooden posts and gazing with all her eyes across the dim level. Others came hurrying out from the hall. Other young officers ran in pursuit of the first strikers. "What's the matter? What's happened?" were the questions that flew from lip to lip.

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"I will not discuss that question now. The other is far graver. I will not tell you, Kate, except this: there is no word there that an engaged girl should not write."

"Of that I mean to satisfy myself, or rather—"

"You will not open it, Kate. Not put that letter down! You have never known me to prevaricate in the faintest degree, and you have no excuse for doubting. I will furnish a copy of that for Mr. Van Antwerp at any time; but you cannot see it."

"You still persist in your wicked and unnatural intimacy with that man, even after all that I have told you. Now for the last time hear me; I have striven not to tell you this; I have striven not to tell your thoughts by such a revelation; but since nothing else will check you, tell it to me, and I will tell you to my husband told me in sacred confidence, though soon enough it will be a scandal to the whole garrison."