



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

Author of "DUNRAVEN RANCH," "THE COLONEL'S DAUGHTER," "MARIAN'S FAITH," ETC.

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CHAPTER XVIII



She saw Rayner grasping his hands.

There had been a scene of somewhat dramatic nature at the colonel's office but a short time before, and one that had fewer witnesses. Agitated, nervous and eventually astonished as Capt. Rayner had been when the colonel had revealed to him the nature of Clancy's confession, he was far more excited and tremulous when he returned a second time. The commanding officer had been sitting deep in thought. It was but natural that a man should show great emotion on learning that the evidence he had given, which had condemned a brother officer to years of solitary punishment, was now disproved. It was to be expected that Rayner should be tremulous and excited. He had been looking worse and worse for a long time past; and now that it was established that he must have been mistaken in what he thought he saw and heard at Battle Butte, it was to be expected that he should show the utmost consternation and an immediate desire to make amends. He had shown great emotion; he was white and rigid as the colonel told him Clancy had made a full confession; but the expression on his face when informed that the man had admitted that he and Sergt. Gower were the only ones guilty of the crime—that Clancy and Gower divided the guilt as they had the money—was a puzzle to the colonel. Capt. Rayner seemed dazed; it was a look of wild relief, half-unbelief, half-delight, that shot across his haggard features. It was evident that he had not heard at all what he expected. He had been pondering over it ever since the captain's hurried departure "to tell his wife."

"We had expected—made all preparations to take this afternoon's train for the east," he stammered. "We are all torn up, all ready to start, and the ladies ought to go; but I cannot feel like going in the face of this."

"There is no reason why you should not go, captain. I am told Mrs. Rayner should leave at once. If need be, you can return from Chicago. Everything will be attended to properly. Of course you will know what to do towards Mr. Hayne. Indeed, I think it might be best for you to go."

But Rayner seemed hardly listening; and the colonel was not a man to throw his words away. "You might see Mrs. Rayner at once, and return by and by," he said; and Rayner gladly escaped, and went home with the wonderful news he had to tell his wife. And now a second time he was back, and was urging upon the commanding officer the necessity of telegraphing and capturing Mrs. Clancy. In plain words he told the colonel he believed that she had escaped with the greater part of the money. The colonel smiled.

"That was attended to early this morning, captain. Hayne and the major asked that she be secured, and the moment we received the report I confirmed their suspicions, and Billings sent dispatches in every direction. She can't get away! She was his temptress, and I mean to make her share all the punishment."

"Colonel," exclaimed Rayner, while his face was as white as his forehead, "he is worse—a thousand times worse! The woman is a fiend! She is the devil in petticoats—and indignity! My God, sir, I have been in torment for weeks past—my poor wife and I. I have been originally, cowardly weak; but I did not know what to do—where to turn—how to take it—how to meet it. Let me tell you. And now great tears were standing in his eyes and beginning to trickle down his cheeks. He dashed them away. His lips were quivering, and he strode nervously up and down the matted floor. "When you refused to let Clancy re-enlist in the 4th, two years after Battle Butte, he came to me and told me a story. He, too, had declared, as I did, that he had seen the money packages in Hayne's hands, and he said the real reason he was kicked out of the 4th was because the officers and men took sides with Hayne and thought he had sworn his reputation away. He begged me not to 'go back on him' as his own regiment had, and I thought he was being persecuted because he told the truth. God knows I fully believed Hayne guilty for more than three years—it is only within the last year or so I began to have doubts; and so I took Clancy into B company and soon made Mrs. Clancy a laundress. But she made trouble for us all, and there was something uncanny about them. She kept throwing out mysterious hints I could not understand when rumors of her had reached me; and at last came the fire that burned them out, and then the stories of what Clancy had said in his

denrum; and then she came to my wife and told her a yarn that she swore to its truth, and nearly drove Mrs. Rayner wild with anxiety. She swore that when Clancy got to drinking he imagined he had seen me take the money from Capt. Hill's saddle bags and replace the sealed package; she said he was ready to swear that he and Gower—the deserter—and two of our men, honorably discharged now and living on ranches down in Nebraska, could all swear—would all swear—to the same thing—that I was the thief. "Sure you know it couldn't be so, madam; and yet he wants to go and tell Mr. Hayne," she would say; "there's the four of 'em would swear to it, though Gower's evidence would be no good; but the two men could hurt the captain." Her ingenuity was devilish, for one of the men I had severely punished once in the Black Hills, and both hated me and had sworn they would get even with me yet. God help me, colonel, seeing every day the growing conviction that Hayne was innocent, that somebody else must be guilty, I thought, what if this man should, in drunken gratitude to Hayne for saving his life, go to him and tell him this story, then back it up before the officials and call in these two others? I was weak, but it appalled me. I determined to get him out of the way of such a possibility. I got his discharge, and meantime strove to prevent his drinking or going near Hayne. She knew the real story he would tell. This was her devilish plan to keep me on watch against him. I never dreamed the real truth. She swore to me that \$900 was all the money they had. I believed that when he confessed it would be what she declared. I never dreamed that Clancy and his confederates were the thieves. I never believed the money was taken until after Hayne received it. I saw how Hayne's guilt was believed in even in the face of contradictory evidence before the court. What would be the tendency if three men together were to swear against me, now that everybody thought him wrong? I know very well what you will think of my cowardice. I know you and your officers will say I should have given him every chance—should have courted investigation; and I meant to do so, but first I wanted to hear from those discharged men in Nebraska. The whole scheme would have been exploded two months ago had I not been a coward; but night after night something kept whispering to me, "You have wrecked and ruined a friendless young soldier's life. You shall be brought to law."

The colonel was, as he afterwards remarked, hardly equal to the occasion. He had as much contempt for moral weakness in a soldier as he had for moral cowardice; but Rayner's almost abject recital of his months of misery really left him nothing to say. Had the captain sought to defend or justify any detail of his conduct, he would have pounced on him like a panther. Twice he had the captain sitting on an absurd and silent listener, thought the chief of staff was of an outbreak; but it never came. For some minutes after Rayner ceased the colonel sat steadily regarding him. At last he spoke:

"You have been so frank in your statement, captain, that I feel you fully appreciate how such deplorable weakness must be regarded in an officer. It is unnecessary for me to speak of that. It is unnecessary to see Mr. Hayne's confession, full particulars of Clancy's confession are not yet with me. Maj. Waldron has it all in writing, and Mr. Billings has merely told me the general features. Of course you shall have a copy of it in good time. As you go east today and have your wife and household to think for, it may be as well that you do not attempt to see Mr. Hayne before starting. And this matter will be discussed."

And so it happened that when the Rayners drove to the station that bright afternoon and a throng of ladies and officers gathered to see them off, some of the youngsters going with them into town to await the coming of the train, Nellie Travers had been surrounded by chattering friends of both sexes, constantly occupied, and yet constantly looking for the face of one who came not. For an hour before their departure every tongue in garrison that wagged at all—and few there were that wagged not—were discoursing on the exciting events of the morning—Hayne's emancipation from the last vestige of suspicion, Clancy's capture, confession and tragic death, Mrs. Clancy's flight and probable future. At Rayner's people spoke of these things very guardedly, because every one saw that the captain was moved to the depths of his nature. He was solemnly itself, and Mrs. Rayner watched him with deep anxiety, fearful that he might be exposed to some thoughtless or malicious questioning. Her surveillance was needless, however; even Ross made no allusion to the events of the morning, though he communicated to his fellows in the subsequent confidences of the club room that Midas looked as though he had been pulled through a series of knot holes. "Looks more's the pity he was going to his own funeral than on leave," he added.

As for Hayne, he had been closeted with the colonel and Maj. Waldron for some time after his return—a conference that was broken in upon by the startling news of Clancy's death. Then he had joined his friend, the doctor, at the hospital, and was still there, striving to comfort little Kate, who could not be induced to leave her father's rapidly stiffening form, when Mrs. Waldron re-entered the room. Drawing the child to

her side and folding her motherly arms about her, she looked up in Hayne's pale face. "They are going in five minutes. Don't you mean to see her?" "Not there—not under his roof or in that crowd. I will go to the station." "I must run over and say good-by in a moment—when the carriage goes around. Shall I—shall I say you will come?" "There was a light in his blue eyes she had seen him take the money from Capt. Hill's saddle bags and replace the sealed package; she said he was ready to swear that he and Gower—the deserter—and two of our men, honorably discharged now and living on ranches down in Nebraska, could all swear—would all swear—to the same thing—that I was the thief. "Sure you know it couldn't be so, madam; and yet he wants to go and tell Mr. Hayne," she would say; "there's the four of 'em would swear to it, though Gower's evidence would be no good; but the two men could hurt the captain." Her ingenuity was devilish, for one of the men I had severely punished once in the Black Hills, and both hated me and had sworn they would get even with me yet. God help me, colonel, seeing every day the growing conviction that Hayne was innocent, that somebody else must be guilty, I thought, what if this man should, in drunken gratitude to Hayne for saving his life, go to him and tell him this story, then back it up before the officials and call in these two others? I was weak, but it appalled me. I determined to get him out of the way of such a possibility. I got his discharge, and meantime strove to prevent his drinking or going near Hayne. She knew the real story he would tell. This was her devilish plan to keep me on watch against him. I never dreamed the real truth. She swore to me that \$900 was all the money they had. I believed that when he confessed it would be what she declared. I never dreamed that Clancy and his confederates were the thieves. I never believed the money was taken until after Hayne received it. I saw how Hayne's guilt was believed in even in the face of contradictory evidence before the court. What would be the tendency if three men together were to swear against me, now that everybody thought him wrong? I know very well what you will think of my cowardice. I know you and your officers will say I should have given him every chance—should have courted investigation; and I meant to do so, but first I wanted to hear from those discharged men in Nebraska. The whole scheme would have been exploded two months ago had I not been a coward; but night after night something kept whispering to me, "You have wrecked and ruined a friendless young soldier's life. You shall be brought to law."

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shook it once, then strode hastily away towards the rear of the train. His eyes were filled with tears he could not repress and could not bear to show. That evening as the train wound steadily eastward into the shadows of the night, and they looked out in farewell upon the slopes they had last seen when a wintry gale swept fiercely over the frozen surface and the shallow ravines were streaked with snow, Kate Rayner, after a long talk with her husband, and abandoning her boy to the sole guardianship of his nurse, settled herself by Nellie's side, and Nellie knew that she either sought confidences or had them to impart. Something of the old, zizzical look was playing about the corner of her pretty mouth as her elder sister, with feminine indirectness, began her verbal skirmishing with the subject. It was not so much before the question was reached which led to her real objective:

"Did he—did Mr. Hayne tell you much about Clancy?" "Not much. There was no time." "You had fully ten minutes, I'm sure. It seemed even longer." "Four by the clock, Kate." "Well, four, then. He must have had something of greater interest." "No answer. Checks redlining, though. "Didn't he?" persistently. "I will tell you what he told me of Clancy, Kate. Mrs. Clancy had utterly deceived you as to what he had to tell, had she not?" "Utterly." And now it was Mrs. Rayner's turn to look painfully. "Mr. Hayne tells me that Clancy's confession was explained how Capt. Rayner was mistaken. It was not so much the captain's fault, after all." "So Mr. Hayne told him. You know they—you saw Mr. Hayne offer him his hand, didn't you?" "I did not see: I know he would." More vivid color, and much hesitation now.

"Knew he would? Why, Nellie, what do you mean? He didn't tell you that he was to see Capt. Rayner. He couldn't have known." "But I knew, Kate; and I told him how the captain had suffered." "But how could you know that he would shake hands with him?" "He promised me." "The silence was unbroken for a moment. Nellie Travers could hear the clanking of her own heart as she nestled closer to her sister and stole a hand into hers. Mrs. Rayner was trying hard to be dutiful, stern, unbending, to keep her faith with the distant lover in the east, whether Nell was true or no; but she had been so humbled, so changed, so shaken, by the events of the past few weeks, that she felt all her old spirit of guardianship ebbing away. "Must I give you up, Nellie and must he, too—Mr. Van Antwerp?" "He has not answered my last letter, Kate. It is nearly a week since I have heard from him." "What did you write, Nellie?" "What I had done twice before—that he ought to release me."

"And—is Clancy's the only confession you have heard today?" "The only one." "A pause, then: "I know what you mean, Kate; but he is not the man to—offer his love to a girl he knows is pledged to another." "But if you were free, Nellie? Tell me." "I have no right to say, Kate; but—and two big tears were welling up into her brave eyes, as she clasped her hands and stretched them yearningly before her—"shall I tell you what I think a girl would say if she were free and had won his love?" "What, Nellie?" "Sister, I say 'Ay.' No woman with a heart could leave a man who has borne so much and come through it all so bravely." "Poor Mrs. Rayner! Humbled and chastened as she was, what refuge had she but tears, and then prayer?"

TO BE CONTINUED.

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