



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

Author of "DUNKAVEN RANCH," "THE COLONEL'S DAUGHTER," "MARION'S FAITH," ETC.

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ross looked white and dazed. He turned slowly away, hesitated, looked back, then exclaimed: "You are sure it was—it was not some one that had a right to be there?"

"I am the commanding officer, Mr. Royce," said Buxton, with majestic dignity, "at least I will be after 12 o'clock; and you may depend upon it, gentlemen, this thing will not occur while I am in command."

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 Maj. Waldron running up Prairie avenue, waving his hand and shouting to him.

"What is it, Hayne?" asked Waldron, with kindly interest, leaning out of his carriage. "They will be back to-night, sir. Here is a telegram that has just reached me."

"I can't tell you how sorry I am not to be here to welcome 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. Waldron 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 their packing, Mrs. Waldron, as became an invalid, superintending, and Miss Travers, as became the junior, doing all the work.

Opening it she drew out some paper and envelopes, and with the latter came an envelope sealed and directed. One glance at its superscription sent the blood to her cheek and fire to her eye. Was it possible? Was it credible? Her pet, her baby sister, her pride and delight—until she found her wrong in will—her proud, 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 erring sister an adequate 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!

When the trumpets 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. Waldron, like Juno in wrath inflexible, glaring at her from the commanding height of which she was so proud, and 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: "Kate, I do not recognize your right to overhurl my desk or supervise my correspondence."

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. No! 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 sully your thoughts by such a revelation; but, since nothing else will check you, tell it I must, and what I tell you my husband told me in sacred confidence. Though I am sure 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' window. The 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. Waldron 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 at a suitable farewell. The announcement of impending departure 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 thing to do, and the young officers took hold with a will; they were always ready for a dance.

Now that Mrs. Waldron was really gone, 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. Waldron 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's-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 model officer of the regiment. It was singularly unfortunate that he should have to be 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, by necessary before this court I declare I believe I'd leave you behind," said the colonel to his adjutant. "There is no telling what mischief Capt. Buxton won't do if left to himself."

It must have been near midnight, and the hop was going along beautifully, and Capt. Rayner, who was officer of the day, was just escorting his wife into supper, and Nellie, although looking a little tired and pale, was chatting brightly with a knot of young officers, when a corporal of the guard came to the door: "The commanding officer's compliments, and he desires to see the officer of the day at once."

There was a general laugh. "Isn't that Buxton all over? The colonel would never think of sending for an officer in the dead of night, except for a fire or alarm; but old Bux. begins putting on frills the moment he gets a chance. Thank God, I'm not on guard to-night!" said Mr. Royce.

"What can he want with you?" asked Mrs. Waldron, pettishly. "The idea of one captain ordering another around like this!"

"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. Waldron 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. 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.

"Mrs. Clancy again?" said one. "That was not Mrs. Clancy, 'twas a far different voice," answered Blake, and tore away across the parade as fast as his long legs would carry him. "Look! The guard are running too!" cried Mrs. Waldron. "What can it be?" 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. Waldron had grown ghastly, and was looking at Miss Travers, 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 starters. "What's the matter? What's happened?" were the questions that flew from lip to lip.

"I—I must go home," faltered Mrs. Waldron. "Come, Nellie!" "Oh, don't go, Mrs. Waldron. It can't anything serious."

But, even as they urged, a man came running towards them. "Is the doctor here?" he panted. "Yes. What's the trouble?" asked Dr. Pease, as he squeezed his burly form through the crowded doorway. "You're wanted, sir. Loo'tnant Hayne's shot; an' Capt. Rayner he's hurt too, sir."



"I'll kill the first man who dares enter!" Straight as an arrow Mr. Blake had sped across the parade, darted through the east gate, and, turning, had arrived breathless at the wooden porch of Hayne's quarters. Two bewildered-looking members of the guard were at the door. Blake pushed his way through the little hallway and into the dimly lighted parlor, where a strange scene met his eyes: Lieut. Hayne lay senseless and white upon the lounge across the room; a young and pretty woman, singularly like him in feature and in the color of her abundant tresses, was kneeling beside him, chafing his hands, imploring him to speak—to look at her—unmindful of the fact that her feet were bare and that only a loose wrapper was thrown over her white night dress; Capt. Rayner was seated in a chair, deadly white, and striving to stanch the blood that flowed from a deep gash in his temple and forehead; he seemed still stunned as by the force of the blow that had felled him, and Buxton, speechless with amazement and heaven only knows what other emotions, was glaring at a tall athletic stranger who, in stocking feet, undershirt and trousers, held three frightened-looking soldiers and covered by the carbine of a fourth, was hurling defiance and denunciation at the commanding officer. A revolver lay upon the floor at the feet of a corporal of the guard, who was groaning in pain. A thin veil of powder smoke floated through the room. As Blake leaped in—his cavalry shoul der knots and helmet cords gleaming in the light—a flash of recognition shot into the stranger's eyes, and he curbed his fearful excitement and stopped short in his wrath.

"What devil's work is this?" demanded Blake, glaring intuitively at Buxton. "These people resisted my guards, and had to take the consequences," said Buxton, with a surly yet shaken dignity. "What were the guards doing here?" "What, in God's name, are you doing here?" demanded Blake, forgetful of all consideration of rank and command in the face of such evident catastrophe. "I ordered them here—to enter and search."

"Search what? what for?" "For a woman I had reason to believe he had brought out here from town."

"What? You infernal idiot? Why, she's his own sister, and this gentleman's wife!" The silence, broken only by the hard breathing of some of the excited men and the moaning cry of the woman, was for a moment intense.

"Isn't this Mr. Hurley?" asked Blake, suddenly, as though to make sure, and turning one instant from his furious glare at his superior officer. The stranger, still held, though no longer struggling, replied between his set teeth: "Certainly. I've told him so."

"By heaven, Buxton, is there no limit to your animosity? What fearful work will you do next?" "I'll arrest you, sir, if you speak another disrespectful word!" thundered Buxton, recovering consciousness that as self against Blake's assault.

"Do it and be you know what I would say if a lady were not present. Do it if you think you can stand having this thing ventilated by the court. Pah! I can't waste words on you. Who's gone for the doctor? Here, you men, let's go for Mr. Hurley now. Help me, Mr. Hurley, please. Get your wife back to her room. Bring me some water, one of you." And with that he was lending over Hayne and unbuckling the fatigue uniform in which he was still dressed. Another moment and the doctor had come in, and with him half the young officers of the garrison. Rayner was led away to his own quarters. Buxton, dazed and frightened now, ordered the guards back to their post, and stood pondering over the enormity of his blunder. No one spoke to him or paid the faintest attention other than to elbow him out of the way occasionally. The doctor never so much as noticed him. Blake had briefly recounted the catastrophe to those who first arrived, and as the strophe went from mouth to mouth it grew no better for Buxton. Once he turned short on Mr. Foster, and in aggravated and sullen tone remarked: "I thought you fellows in the Riflers said he had no relations."

"We weren't apt to be invited to meet them if he had but I don't know that anybody was in position to know anything about it. What's that got to do with this affair, I'd like to hear?" At last somebody took him home. Mrs. Waldron, meantime, had arrived and been admitted to Mrs. Hurley's room. The doctor refused to go to Capt. Rayner's, even when a messenger came from Mrs. Waldron herself. He referred her to his assistant, Dr. Grimes. Hayne had regained consciousness, but was sorely shaken. He had been felled by a blow from the butt of a musket; but the report that he was shot proved happily untrue. His right hand still lay near the hilt of his light sword; there was little question that he had raised his weapon against a superior officer, and would have used it with telling effect.

Few people slept that night, along officers' row. Never had Waldron heard of such excitement. Buxton knew not what to do. He paced the floor in agony of mind, for he well understood that there was no shirking the responsibility. From beginning to end he was the cause of the whole catastrophe. He had gone so far as to order his corporal to fire, and he knew it could be proved against him. Thank God, the perplexed corporal had shot high, and the other men, barring the one who had saved Rayner from a furious lunge of the lieutenant's sword, had used their weapons as gingerly and reluctantly as possible. At the very least, he knew, an investigation and fearful scandal must come of it. Night though it was, he sent for the acting adjutant and several of his brother officers, and, setting refreshments before them, besought their advice. He was still commanding officer de jure, but he had lost all stomach for his functions. He would have been glad to send for Blake and beg his pardon for submitting to his insubordination and abusive language, if that course could have stopped inquiry; but he well knew that the whole thing would be noised abroad in less than no time.

At first he thought to give orders against the telegraph operator's sending any messages concerning the matter; but that would have been only a temporary hindrance; he could not control the instruments and operators in town, only those scattered to their homes that Buxton had been knocked down, shot or established in the melee; but he had kept in the rear when the skirmish began, and Rayner and the corporal were the sufferers. They had been knocked "endwise" by Mr. Hurley's practiced fists after Hayne was struck down by the corporal's musket. It was the universal sentiment among the officers of the—th as they scattered to their homes that Buxton had been knocked down, shot or established in the melee; but he had kept in the rear when the skirmish began, and Rayner and the corporal were the sufferers. They had been knocked "endwise" by Mr. Hurley's practiced fists after Hayne was struck down by the corporal's musket. 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