

King Charles

**Starlight Ranch, and Other
Stories of Army Life
on the Frontier**



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STARLIGHT RANCH

We were crouching round the bivouac fire, for the night was chill, and we were yet high up along the summit of the great range. We had been scouting through the mountains for ten days, steadily working southward, and, though far from our own station, our supplies were abundant, and it was our leader's purpose to make a clean sweep of the line from old Sandy to the Salado, and fully settle the question as to whether the renegade Apaches had betaken themselves, as was possible, to the heights of the Matitzal, or had made a break for their old haunts in the Tonto Basin or along the foot-hills of the Black Mesa to the east. Strong scouting-parties had gone thitherward, too, for "the Chief" was bound to bring these Tontos to terms; but our orders were explicit: "Thoroughly scout the east face of the Matitzal." We had capital Indian allies with us. Their eyes were keen, their legs tireless, and there had been bad blood between them and the tribe now broken away from the reservation. They asked nothing better than a chance to shoot and kill them; so we could feel well assured that if "Tonto sign" appeared anywhere along our path it would instantly be reported. But now we were south of the confluence of Tonto Creek and the Wild Rye, and our scouts declared that beyond that point was the territory of the White Mountain Apaches, where we would not be likely to find the renegades.

East of us, as we lay there in the sheltered nook whence the glare of our fire could not be seen, lay the deep valley of the Tonto brawling along its rocky bed on the way to join the Salado, a few short marches farther south. Beyond it, though we could not see them now, the peaks and "buttes" of the Sierra Ancha rolled up as massive foot-hills to the Mogollon. All through there our scouting-parties had hitherto been able to find Indians whenever they really wanted to. There were some officers who couldn't find the Creek itself if they thought Apaches lurked along its bank, and of such, some of us thought, was our leader.

In the dim twilight only a while before I had heard our chief packer exchanging confidences with one of the sergeants, —

"I tell you, Harry, if the old man were trying to steer clear of all possibility of finding these Tontos, he couldn't have followed a better track than ours has been. And he made it, too; did you notice? Every time the scouts tried to work out to the left he would herd them all back — up-hill."

"We never did think the lieutenant had any too much sand," answered the sergeant, grimly; "but any man with half an eye can see that orders to thoroughly scout the east face of a range does not mean keep on top of it as we've been doing. Why, in two more marches we'll be beyond their stamping-ground entirely, and then it's only a slide down the west face to bring us to those ranches in the Sandy Valley. Ever seen them?"

"No. I've never been this far down; but what do you want to bet that *that's* what the lieutenant is aiming at? He wants to get a look at that pretty girl all the fellows at Fort Phoenix are talking about."

"Dam'd old gray-haired rip! It would be just like him. With a wife and kids up at Sandy too."

There were officers in the party, junior in years of life and years of service to the gray-headed subaltern whom some odd fate had assigned to the command of this detachment, nearly two complete "troops" of cavalry with a pack-train of sturdy little mules to match. We all knew that, as organized, one of our favorite captains had been assigned the command, and that between "the Chief," as we called our general, and him a perfect understanding existed as to just how thorough and searching this scout should be. The general himself came down to Sandy to superintend the start of the various

commands, and rode away after a long interview with our good old colonel, and after seeing the two parties destined for the Black Mesa and the Tonto Basin well on their way. We were to move at nightfall the following day, and within an hour of the time of starting a courier rode in from Prescott with despatches (it was before our military telegraph line was built), and the commander of the division – the superior of our Arizona chief – ordered Captain Tanner to repair at once to San Francisco as witness before an important court-martial. A groan went up from more than one of us when we heard the news, for it meant nothing less than that the command of the most important expedition of all would now devolve upon the senior first lieutenant, Gleason; and so much did it worry Mr. Blake, his junior by several files, that he went at once to Colonel Pelham, and begged to be relieved from duty with that column and ordered to overtake one of the others. The colonel, of course, would listen to nothing of the kind, and to Gleason's immense and evident gratification we were marched forth under his command. There had been no friction, however. Despite his gray beard, Gleason was not an old man, and he really strove to be courteous and conciliatory to his officers, – he was always considerate towards his men; but by the time we had been out ten days, having accomplished nothing, most of us were thoroughly disgusted. Some few ventured to remonstrate. Angry words passed between the commander and Mr. Blake, and on the night on which our story begins there was throughout the command a feeling that we were simply being trifled with.

The chat between our chief packer and Sergeant Merrick ceased instantly as I came forward and passed them on the way to look over the herd guard of the little battalion, but it set me to thinking. This was not the first that the officers of the Sandy garrison had heard of those two new "ranches" established within the year down in the hot but fertile valley, and not more than four hours' easy gallop from Fort Phoenix, where a couple of troops of "Ours" were stationed. The people who had so confidently planted themselves there were evidently well to do, and they brought with them a good-sized retinue of ranch- and herdsman, – mainly Mexicans, – plenty of "stock," and a complete "camp outfit," which served them well until they could raise the adobe walls and finish their homesteads. Curiosity led occasional parties of officers or enlisted men to spend a day in saddle and thus to visit these enterprising neighbors. Such parties were always civilly received, invited to dismount, and soon to take a bite of luncheon with the proprietors, while their horses were promptly led away, unsaddled, rubbed down, and at the proper time fed and watered. The officers, of course, had introduced themselves and proffered the hospitality and assistance of the fort. The proprietors had expressed all proper appreciation, and declared that if anything should happen to be needed they would be sure to call; but they were too busy, they explained, to make social visits. They were hard at work, as the gentlemen could see, getting up their houses and their corrals, for, as one of them expressed it, "We've come to stay." There were three of these pioneers; two of them, brothers evidently, gave the name of Crocker. The third, a tall, swarthy, all-over-frontiersman, was introduced by the others as Mr. Burnham. Subsequent investigations led to the fact that Burnham was first cousin to the Crockers. "Been long in Arizona?" had been asked, and the elder Crocker promptly replied, "No, only a year, – mostly prospecting."

The Crockers were building down towards the stream; but Burnham, from some freak which he did not explain, had driven his stakes and was slowly getting up his walls half a mile south of the other homestead, and high up on a spur of foot-hill that stood at least three hundred feet above the general level of the valley. From his "coigne of vantage" the whitewashed walls and the bright colors of the flag of the fort could be dimly made out, – twenty odd miles down stream.

"Every now and then," said Captain Wayne, who happened up our way on a general court, "a bull-train – a small one – went past the fort on its way up to the ranches, carrying lumber and all manner of supplies, but they never stopped and camped near the post either going or coming, as other trains were sure to do. They never seemed to want anything, even at the sutler's store, though the Lord knows there wasn't much there they *could* want except tanglefoot and tobacco. The bull-train made perhaps six trips in as many months, and by that time the glasses at the fort could make out

that Burnham's place was all finished, but never once had either of the three proprietors put in an appearance, as invited, which was considered not only extraordinary but unneighborly, and everybody quit riding out there."

"But the funniest thing," said Wayne, "happened one night when I was officer of the day. The road up-stream ran within a hundred yards of the post of the sentry on No. 3, which post was back of the officer's quarters, and a quarter of a mile above the stables, corrals, etc. I was making the rounds about one o'clock in the morning. The night was bright and clear, though the moon was low, and I came upon Dexter, one of the sharpest men in my troop, as the sentry on No. 3. After I had given him the countersign and was about going on, – for there was no use in asking *him* if he knew his orders, – he stopped me to ask if I had authorized the stable-sergeant to let out one of the ambulances within the hour. Of course I was amazed and said no. 'Well,' said he, 'not ten minutes ago a four-mule ambulance drove up the road yonder going full tilt, and I thought something was wrong, but it was far beyond my challenge limit.' You can understand that I went to the stables on the jump, ready to scalp the sentry there, the sergeant of the guard, and everybody else. I sailed into the sentry first and he was utterly astonished; he swore that every horse, mule, and wagon was in its proper place. I routed out the old stable-sergeant and we went through everything with his lantern. There wasn't a spoke or a hoof missing. Then I went back to Dexter and asked him what he'd been drinking, and he seemed much hurt. I told him every wheel at the fort was in its proper rut and that nothing could have gone out. Neither could there have been a four-mule ambulance from elsewhere. There wasn't a civilized corral within fifty miles except those new ranches up the valley, and *they* had no such rig. All the same, Dexter stuck to his story, and it ended in our getting a lantern and going down to the road. By Gad! he was right. There, in the moist, yielding sand, were the fresh tracks of a four-mule team and a Concord wagon or something of the same sort. So much for *that* night!

"Next evening as a lot of us were sitting out on the major's piazza, and young Briggs of the infantry was holding forth on the constellations, – you know he's a good deal of an astronomer, – Mrs. Powell suddenly turned to him with 'But you haven't told us the name of that bright planet low down there in the northern sky,' and we all turned and looked where she pointed. Briggs looked too. It was only a little lower than some stars of the second and third magnitude that he had been telling about only five minutes before, only it shone with a redder or yellower glare, – orange I suppose was the real color, – and was clear and strong as the light of Jupiter.

"'That?' says Briggs. 'Why, that must be – Well, I own up. I declare I never knew there was so big a star in that part of the firmament!'

"'Don't worry about it, Briggs, old boy,' drawled the major, who had been squinting at it through a powerful glass he owns. 'That's terra firmament. That planet's at the new ranch up on the spur of the Matitzal.'

"But that wasn't all. Two days after, Baker came in from a scout. He had been over across the range and had stopped at Burnham's on his way down. He didn't see Burnham; he wasn't invited in, but he was full of his subject. 'By *Jove!* fellows. Have any of you been to the ranches lately? No? Well, then, I want to get some of the ladies to go up there and call. In all my life I never saw so pretty a girl as was sitting there on the piazza when I rode around the corner of the house. *Pretty!* She's lovely. Not Mexican. No, indeed! A real American girl, – a young lady, by Gad!'" That, then, explained the new light.

"And did that give the ranch the name by which it is known to you?" we asked Wayne.

"Yes. The ladies called it 'Starlight Ranch' from that night on. But not one of them has seen the girl. Mrs. Frazer and Mrs. Jennings actually took the long drive and asked for the ladies, and were civilly told that there were none at home. It was a Chinese servant who received them. They inquired for Mr. Burnham and he was away too. They asked how many ladies there were, and the Chinaman shook his head – 'No sabe.' 'Had Mr. Burnham's wife and daughter come?' 'No sabe.' 'Were Mr. Burnham and the ladies over at the other ranch?' 'No sabe,' still affably grinning, and

evidently personally pleased to see the strange ladies; but that Chinaman was no fool; he had his instructions and was carrying them out; and Mrs. Frazer, whose eyes are very keen, was confident that she saw the curtains in an upper window gathered just so as to admit a pair of eyes to peep down at the fort wagon with its fair occupants. But the face of which she caught a glimpse was not that of a young woman. They gave the Chinaman their cards, which he curiously inspected and was evidently at a loss what to do with, and after telling him to give them to the ladies when they came home they drove over to the Crocker Ranch. Here only Mexicans were visible about the premises, and, though Mrs. Frazer's Spanish was equal to the task of asking them for water for herself and friend, she could not get an intelligible reply from the swarthy Ganymede who brought them the brimming glasses as to the ladies —*Las señoras*— at the other ranch. They asked for the Crockers, and the Mexican only vaguely pointed up the valley. It was in defeat and humiliation that the ladies with their escort, Mr. Baker, returned to the fort, but Baker rode up again and took a comrade with him, and they both saw the girl with the lovely face and form this time, and had almost accosted her when a sharp, stern voice called her within. A fortnight more and a dozen men, officers or soldiers, had rounded that ranch and had seen two women, — one middle-aged, the other a girl of about eighteen who was fair and bewitchingly pretty. Baker had bowed to her and she had smiled sweetly on him, even while being drawn within doors. One or two men had cornered Burnham and began to ask questions. 'Gentlemen,' said he, 'I'm a poor hand at talk. I've no education. I've lived on the frontier all my life. I mean no offence, but I cannot answer your questions and I cannot ask you into my house. For explanation, I refer you to Mr. Crocker.' Then Baker and a chum of his rode over and called on the elder Crocker, and asked for the explanation. That only added to the strangeness of the thing.

"It is true, gentlemen, that Mr. Burnham's wife and child are now with him; but, partially because of her, his wife's, infirm health, and partially because of a most distressing and unfortunate experience in his past, our kinsman begs that no one will attempt to call at the ranch. He appreciates all the courtesy the gentlemen and ladies at the fort would show, and have shown, but he feels compelled to decline all intercourse. We are beholden, in a measure, to Mr. Burnham, and have to be guided by his wishes. We are young men compared to him, and it was through him that we came to seek our fortune here, but he is virtually the head of both establishments.' Well. There was nothing more to be said, and the boys came away. One thing more transpired. Burnham gave it out that he had lived in Texas before the war, and had fought all the way through in the Confederate service. He thought the officers ought to know this. It was the major himself to whom he told it, and when the major replied that he considered the war over and that that made no difference, Burnham, with a clouded face replied, 'Well, mebbe it don't — to you.' Whereupon the major fired up and told him that if he chose to be an unreconstructed reb, when Union officers and gentlemen were only striving to be civil to him, he might 'go ahead and be d — d,' and came away in high dudgeon." And so matters stood up to the last we had heard from Fort Phoenix, except for one letter which Mrs. Frazer wrote to Mrs. Turner at Sandy, perhaps purely out of feminine mischief, because a year or so previous Baker, as a junior second lieutenant, was doing the devoted to Mrs. Turner, a species of mildly amatory apprenticeship which most of the young officers seemed impelled to serve on first joining. "We are having such a romance here at Phoenix. You have doubtless heard of the beautiful girl at 'Starlight Ranch,' as we call the Burnham place, up the valley. Everybody who called has been rebuffed; but, after catching a few glimpses of her, Mr. Baker became completely infatuated and rode up that way three or four times a week. Of late he has ceased going in the daytime, but it is known that he rides out towards dusk and gets back long after midnight, sometimes not till morning. Of course it takes four hours, nearly, to come from there full-speed, but though Major Tracy will admit nothing, it must be that Mr. Baker has his permission to be away at night. We all believe that it is another case of love laughing at locksmiths and that in some way they contrive to meet. One thing is certain, — Mr. Baker is desperately in love and will permit no trifling with him on the subject." Ordinarily, I suppose, such a letter would have been gall and wormwood to Mrs. Turner, but as young Hunter, a new appointment,

was now a devotee, and as it was a piece of romantic news which interested all Camp Sandy, she read the letter to one lady after another, and so it became public property. Old Catnip, as we called the colonel, was disposed to be a little worried on the subject. Baker was a youngster in whom he had some interest as being a distant connection of his wife's, but Mrs. Pelham had not come to Arizona with us, and the good old fellow was living *en garçon* with the Mess, where, of course, the matter was discussed in all its bearings.

All these things recurred to me as I pottered around through the herds examining side-lines, etc., and looking up the guards. Ordinarily our scouting parties were so small that we had no such thing as an officer-of-the-day, – nor had we now when Gleason could have been excused for ordering one, but he evidently desired to do nothing that might annoy his officers. He *might* want them to stand by him when it came to reporting the route and result of the scout. All the same, he expected that the troop officers would give personal supervision to their command, and especially to look after their "herds," and it was this duty that took me away from the group chatting about the bivouac fire preparatory to "turning in" for the night.

When I got back, a tall, gray-haired trooper was "standing attention" in front of the commanding officer, and had evidently just made some report, for Mr. Gleason nodded his head appreciatively and then said, kindly, —

"You did perfectly right, corporal. Instruct your men to keep a lookout for it, and if seen again to-night to call me at once. I'll bring my field-glass and we'll see what it is."

The trooper raised his left hand to the "carried" carbine in salute and turned away. When he was out of earshot, Gleason spoke to the silent group, —

"Now, there's a case in point. If I had command of a troop and could get old Potts into it I could make something of him, and I know it."

Gleason had consummate faith in his "system" with the rank and file, and no respect for that of any of the captains. Nobody said anything. Blake hated him and puffed unconcernedly at his pipe, with a display of absolute indifference to his superior's views that the latter did not fail to note. The others knew what a trial "old Potts" had been to his troop commander, and did not believe that Gleason could "reform" him at will. The silence was embarrassing, so I inquired, —

"What had he to report?"

"Oh, nothing of any consequence. He and one of the sentries saw what they took to be an Indian signal-fire up Tonto Creek. It soon smouldered away, – but I always make it a point to show respect to these old soldiers."

"You show d – d little respect for their reports all the same," said Blake, suddenly shooting up on a pair of legs that looked like stilts. "An Indian signal-fire is a matter of a heap of consequence in my opinion;" and he wrathfully stalked away.

For some reason Gleason saw fit to take no notice of this piece of insubordination. Placidly he resumed his chat, —

"Now, you gentlemen seem skeptical about Potts. Do any of you know his history?"

"Well, I know he's about the oldest soldier in the regiment; that he served in the First Dragoons when they were in Arizona twenty years ago, and that he gets drunk as a boiled owl every pay-day," was an immediate answer.

"Very good as far as it goes," replied Gleason, with a superior smile; "but I'll just tell you a chapter in his life he never speaks of and I never dreamed of until the last time I was in San Francisco. There I met old General Starr at the 'Occidental,' and almost the first thing he did was to inquire for Potts, and then he told me about him. He was one of the finest sergeants in Starr's troop in '53, – a dashing, handsome fellow, – and while in at Fort Leavenworth he had fallen in love with, won, and married as pretty a young girl as ever came into the regiment. She came out to New Mexico with the detachment with which he served, and was the belle of all the '*bailes*' given either by the 'greasers' or the enlisted men. He was proud of her as he could be, and old Starr swore that the few ladies of

the regiment who were with them at old Fort Fillmore or Stanton were really jealous of her. Even some of the young officers got to saying sweet things to her, and Potts came to the captain about it, and he had it stopped; but the girl's head was turned. There was a handsome young fellow in the sutler's store who kept making her presents on the sly, and when at last Potts found it out he nearly hammered the life out of him. Then came that campaign against the Jicarilla Apaches, and Potts had to go with his troop and leave her at the cantonment, where, to be sure, there were ladies and plenty of people to look after her; and in the fight at Cieneguilla poor Potts was badly wounded, and it was some months before they got back; and meantime the sutler fellow had got in his work, and when the command finally came in with its wounded they had skipped, no one knew where. If Potts hadn't been taken down with brain fever on top of his wound he would have followed their trail, desertion or no desertion, but he was a broken man when he got out of hospital. The last thing old Starr said to me was, 'Now, Gleason, I want you to be kind to my old sergeant; he served all through the war, and I've never forgiven them in the First for going back on him and refusing to re-enlist him; but the captains, one and all, said it was no use; he had sunk lower and lower; was perfectly unreliable; spent nine-tenths of his time in the guard-house and all his money in whiskey; and one after another they refused to take him.'

"How'd we happen to get him, then?" queried one of our party.

"He showed up at San Francisco, neat as a new pin; exhibited several fine discharges, but said nothing of the last two, and was taken into the regiment as we were going through. Of course, its pretty much as they said in the First when we're in garrison, but, once out scouting, days away from a drop of 'tanglefoot,' and he does first rate. That's how he got his corporal's chevrons."

"He'll lose 'em again before we're back at Sandy forty-eight hours," growled Blake, strolling up to the party again.

But he did not. Prophecies failed this time, and old Potts wore those chevrons to the last.

He was a good prophet and a keen judge of human nature as exemplified in Gleason, who said that "the old man" was planning for a visit to the new ranches above Fort Phoenix. A day or two farther we plodded along down the range, our Indian scouts looking reproachfully – even sullenly – at the commander at every halt, and then came the order to turn back. Two marches more, and the little command went into bivouac close under the eaves of Fort Phoenix and we were exchanging jovial greetings with our brother officers at the post. Turning over the command to Lieutenant Blake, Mr. Gleason went up into the garrison with his own particular pack-mule; billeted himself on the infantry commanding officer – the major – and in a short time appeared freshly-shaved and in the neatest possible undress uniform, ready to call upon the few ladies at the post, and of course to make frequent reference to "my battalion," or "my command," down beyond the dusty, dismal corrals. The rest of us, having come out for business, had no uniforms, nothing but the rough field, scouting rig we wore on such duty, and every man's chin was bristling with a two-weeks'-old beard.

"I'm going to report Gleason for this thing," swore Blake; "you see if I don't, the moment we get back."

The rest of us were "hopping mad," too, but held our tongues so long as we were around Phoenix. We did not want them there to believe there was dissension and almost mutiny impending. Some of us got permission from Blake to go up to the post with its hospitable officers, and I was one who strolled up to "the store" after dark. There we found the major, and Captain Frazer, and Captain Jennings, and most of the youngsters, but Baker was absent. Of course the talk soon drifted to and settled on "Starlight Ranch," and by tattoo most of the garrison crowd were talking like so many Prussians, all at top-voice and all at once. Every man seemed to have some theory of his own with regard to the peculiar conduct of Mr. Burnham, but no one dissented from the quiet remark of Captain Frazer:

"As for Baker's relations with the daughter, he is simply desperately in love and means to marry her. He tells my wife that she is educated and far more refined than her surroundings would indicate,

but that he is refused audience by both Burnham and his wife, and it is only at extreme risk that he is able to meet his lady-love at all. Some nights she is entirely prevented from slipping out to see him."

Presently in came Gleason, beaming and triumphant from his round of calls among the fair sex, and ready now for the game he loved above all things on earth, – poker. For reasons which need not be elaborated here no officer in our command would play with him, and an ugly rumor was going the rounds at Sandy, just before we came away, that, in a game at Olsen's ranch on the Aqua Fria about three weeks before, he had had his face slapped by Lieutenant Ray of our own regiment. But Ray had gone to his lonely post at Camp Cameron, and there was no one by whom we could verify it except some ranchmen, who declared that Gleason had cheated at cards, and Ray "had been a little too full," as they put it, to detect the fraud until it seemed to flash upon him all of a sudden. A game began, however, with three local officers as participants, so presently Carroll and I withdrew and went back to bivouac.

"Have you seen anything of Corporal Potts?" was the first question asked by Mr. Blake.

"Not a thing. Why? Is he missing?"

"Been missing for an hour. He was talking with some of these garrison soldiers here just after the men had come in from the herd, and what I'm afraid of is that he'll go up into the post and get bilin' full there. I've sent other non-commissioned officers after him, but they cannot find him. He hasn't even looked in at the store, so the bar-tender swears."

"The sly old rascal!" said Carroll. "He knows perfectly well how to get all the liquor he wants without exposing himself in the least. No doubt if the bar-tender were asked if he had not filled some flasks this evening he would say yes, and Potts is probably stretched out comfortably in the forage-loft of one of the stables, with a canteen of water and his flask of bug-juice, prepared to make a night of it."

Blake moodily gazed into the embers of the bivouac-fire. Never had we seen him so utterly unlike himself as on this burlesque of a scout, and now that we were virtually homeward-bound, and empty-handed too, he was completely weighed down by the consciousness of our lost opportunities. If something could only have happened to Gleason before the start, so that the command might have devolved on Blake, we all felt that a very different account could have been rendered; for with all his rattling, ranting fun around the garrison, he was a gallant and dutiful soldier in the field. It was now after ten o'clock; most of the men, rolled in their blankets, were sleeping on the scant turf that could be found at intervals in the half-sandy soil below the corrals and stables. The herds of the two troops and the pack-mules were all cropping peacefully at the hay that had been liberally distributed among them because there was hardly grass enough for a "burro." We were all ready to turn in, but there stood our temporary commander, his long legs a-straddle, his hands clasped behind him, and the flickering light of the fire betraying in his face both profound dejection and disgust.

"I wouldn't care so much," said he at last, "but it will give Gleason a chance to say that things always go wrong when he's away. Did you see him up at the post?" he suddenly asked. "What was he doing, Carroll?"

"Poker," was the sententious reply.

"What?" shouted Blake. "Poker? 'I thank thee, good Tubal, – good news, – good news!'" he ranted, with almost joyous relapse into his old manner. "'O Lady Fortune, stand you auspicious', for those fellows at Phoenix, I mean, and may they scoop our worthy chieftain of his last ducat. See what it means, fellows. Win or lose, he'll play all night, he'll drink much if it go agin' him, and I pray it may. He'll be too sick, when morning comes, to join us, and, by my faith, we'll leave his horse and orderly and march away without him. As for Potts, – an he appear not, – we'll let him play hide-and-seek with his would-be reformer. Hullo! What's that?"

There was a sound of alternate shout and challenge towards where the horses were herded on the level stretch below us. The sergeant of the guard was running rapidly thither as Carroll and I reached the corner of the corral. Half a minute's brisk spurt brought us to the scene.

"What's the trouble, sentry?" panted the sergeant.

"One of our fellows trying to take a horse. I was down on this side of the herd when I seen him at the other end trying to loose a side-line. It was just light enough by the moon to let me see the figure, but I couldn't make out who 'twas. I challenged and ran and yelled for the corporal, too, but he got away through the horses somehow. Murphy, who's on the other side of the herds, seen him and challenged too."

"Did he answer?"

"Not a word, sir."

"Count your horses, sergeant, and see if all are here," was ordered. Then we hurried over to Murphy's post.

"Who was the man? Could you make him out?"

"Not plainly, sir; but I think it was one of our own command," and poor Murphy hesitated and stammered. He hated to "give away," as he expressed it, one of his own troop. But his questioners were inexorable.

"What man did this one most look like, so far as you could judge?"

"Well, sir, I hate to suspicion anybody, but 'twas more like Corporal Potts he looked. Sure, if 'twas him, he must ha' been drinkin', for the corporal's not the man to try and run off a horse when he's in his sober sinses."

The waning moon gave hardly enough light for effective search, but we did our best. Blake came out and joined us, looking very grave when he heard the news. Eleven o'clock came, and we gave it up. Not a sign of the marauder could we find. Potts was still absent from the bivouac when we got back, but Blake determined to make no further effort to find him. Long before midnight we were all soundly sleeping, and the next thing I knew my orderly was shaking me by the arm and announcing breakfast. Reveille was just being sounded up at the garrison. The sun had not yet climbed high enough to peep over the Matitzal, but it was broad daylight. In ten minutes Carroll and I were enjoying our coffee and *frijoles*; Blake had ridden up into the garrison. Potts was still absent; and so, as we expected, was Mr. Gleason.

Half an hour more, and in long column of twos, and followed by our pack-train, the command was filing out along the road whereon "No. 3" had seen the ambulance darting by in the darkness. Blake had come back from the post with a flush of anger on his face and with lips compressed. He did not even dismount. "Saddle up at once" was all he said until he gave the commands to mount and march. Opposite the quarters of the commanding officer we were riding at ease, and there he shook his gauntleted fist at the whitewashed walls, and had recourse to his usual safety-valve, —

"Take heed, my lords, the welfare of us all

Hangs on the cutting short that fraudulent man,'

and may the devil fly away with him! What d'ye think he told me when I went to hunt him up?"

There was no suitable conjecture.

"He said to march ahead, leaving his horse, Potts's, and his orderly's, also the pack-mule: he would follow at his leisure. He had given Potts authority to wait and go with him, but did not consider it necessary to notify me."

"Where was he?"

"Still at the store, playing with the trader and some understrappers. Didn't seem to be drunk, either."

And that was the last we heard of our commander until late in the evening. We were then in bivouac on the west bank of the Sandy within short rifle-range of the buildings of Crocker's Ranch on the other side. There the lights burned brightly, and some of our people who had gone across had been courteously received, despite a certain constraint and nervousness displayed by the two brothers. At "Starlight," however, nearly a mile away from us, all was silence and darkness. We had studied

it curiously as we marched up along the west shore, and some of the men had asked permission to fall out and ride over there, "just to see it," but Blake had refused. The Sandy was easily fordable on horseback anywhere, and the Crockers, for the convenience of their ranch people, had placed a lot of bowlders and heaps of stones in such position that they served as a foot-path opposite their corrals. But Blake said he would rather none of his people intruded at "Starlight," and so it happened that we were around the fire when Gleason rode in about nine o'clock, and with him Lieutenant Baker, also the recreant Potts.

"You may retain command, Mr. Blake," said the former, thickly. "I have an engagement this evening."

In an instant Baker was at my side. We had not met before since he was wearing the gray at the Point.

"For God's sake, don't let him follow me, – but *you*, – come if you possibly can. I'll slip off into the willows up-stream as soon as I can do so without his seeing."

I signalled Blake to join us, and presently he sauntered over our way, Gleason meantime admonishing his camp cook that he expected to have the very best hot supper for himself and his friend, Lieutenant Baker, ready in twenty minutes, – twenty minutes, for they had an important engagement, an *affaire de coor*, by Jove!

"You fellows know something of this matter," said Baker, hurriedly; "but I cannot begin to tell you how troubled I am. Something is wrong with *her*. She has not met me once this week, and the house is still as a grave. I must see her. She is either ill or imprisoned by her people, or carried away. God only knows why that hound Burnham forbids me the house. I cannot see him. I've never seen his wife. The door is barred against me and I cannot force an entrance. For a while she was able to slip out late in the evening and meet me down the hill-side, but they must have detected her in some way. I do not even know that she is there, but to-night I *mean* to know. If she is within those walls – and alive – she will answer my signal. But for heaven's sake keep that drunken wretch from going over there. He's bent on it. The major gave me leave again for to-night, provided I would see Gleason safely to your camp, and he has been maundering all the way out about how *he* knew more'n I did, – he and Potts, who's half-drunk too, – and how he meant to see me through in this matter."

"Well, here," said Blake, "there's only one thing to be done. You two slip away at once; get your horses, and ford the Sandy well below camp. I'll try and keep him occupied."

In three minutes we were off, leading our steeds until a hundred yards or so away from the fires, then mounting and moving at rapid walk. Following Baker's lead, I rode along, wondering what manner of adventure this was apt to be. I expected him to make an early crossing of the stream, but he did not. "The only fords I know," said he, "are down below Starlight," and so it happened that we made a wide *détour*; but during that dark ride he told me frankly how matters stood. Zoe Burnham had promised to be his wife, and had fully returned his love, but she was deeply attached to her poor mother, whose health was utterly broken, and who seemed to stand in dread of her father. The girl could not bear to leave her mother, though he had implored her to do so and be married at once. "She told me the last time I saw her that old Burnham had sworn to kill me if he caught me around the place, so I have to come armed, you see;" and he exhibited his heavy revolver. "There's something shady about the old man, but I don't know what it is."

At last we crossed the stream, and soon reached a point where we dismounted and fastened our horses among the willows; then slowly and cautiously began the ascent to the ranch. The slope here was long and gradual, and before we had gone fifty yards Baker laid his hand on my arm.

"Wait. Hush!" he said.

Listening, we could distinctly hear the crunching of horses' hoofs, but in the darkness (for the old moon was not yet showing over the range to the east) we could distinguish nothing. One thing was certain: those hoofs were going towards the ranch.

"Heavens!" said Baker. "Do you suppose that Gleason has got the start of us after all? There's no telling what mischief he may do. He swore he would stand inside those walls to-night, for there was no Chinaman on earth whom he could not bribe."

We pushed ahead at the run now, but within a minute I plunged into some unseen hollow; my Mexican spurs tangled, and down I went heavily upon the ground. The shock was severe, and for an instant I lay there half-stunned. Baker was by my side in the twinkling of an eye full of anxiety and sympathy. I was not injured in the slightest, but the breath was knocked out of me, and it was some minutes before I could forge ahead again. We reached the foot of the steep slope; we clambered painfully – at least I did – to the crest, and there stood the black outline of Starlight Ranch, with only a glimmer of light shining through the windows here and there where the shades did not completely cover the space. In front were three horses held by a cavalry trooper.

"Whose horses are these?" panted Baker.

"Lieutenant Gleason's, sir. Him and Corporal Potts has gone round behind the ranch with a Chinaman they found takin' in water."

And then, just at that instant, so piercing, so agonized, so fearful that even the three horses started back snorting and terrified, there rang out on the still night air the most awful shriek I ever heard, the wail of a woman in horror and dismay. Then dull, heavy blows; oaths, curses, stifled exclamations; a fall that shook the windows; Gleason's voice commanding, entreating; a shrill Chinese jabber; a rush through the hall; more blows; gasps; curses; more unavailing orders in Gleason's well-known voice; then a sudden pistol shot, a scream of "Oh, my God!" then moans, and then silence. The casement on the second floor was thrown open, and a fair young face and form were outlined upon the bright light within; a girlish voice called, imploringly, —

"Harry! Harry! Oh, help, if you are there! They are killing father!"

But at the first sound Harry Baker had sprung from my side and disappeared in the darkness.

"We are friends," I shouted to her, — "Harry Baker's friends. He has gone round to the rear entrance." Then I made a dash for the front door, shaking, kicking, and hammering with all my might. I had no idea how to find the rear entrance in the darkness. Presently it was opened by the still chattering, jabbering Chinaman, his face pasty with terror and excitement, and the sight that met my eyes was one not soon to be forgotten.

A broad hall opened straight before me, with a stairway leading to the second floor. A lamp with burnished reflector was burning brightly midway down its length. Another just like it fully lighted a big room to my left, — the dining-room, evidently, — on the floor of which, surrounded by overturned chairs, was lying a woman in a deathlike swoon. Indeed, I thought at first she was dead. In the room to my right, only dimly lighted, a tall man in shirt-sleeves was slowly crawling to a sofa, unsteadily assisted by Gleason; and as I stepped inside, Corporal Potts, who was leaning against the wall at the other end of the room pressing his hand to his side and with ashen face, sank suddenly to the floor, doubled up in a pool of his own blood. In the dining-room, in the hall, everywhere that I could see, were the marks of a fearful struggle. The man on the sofa gasped faintly, "Water," and I ran into the dining-room and hastened back with a brimming goblet.

"What does it all mean?" I demanded of Gleason.

Big drops of sweat were pouring down his pallid face. The fearful scene had entirely sobered him.

"Potts has found the man who robbed him of his wife. That's she on the floor yonder. Go and help her."

But she was already coming to and beginning to stare wildly about her. A glass of water helped to revive her. She staggered across the hall, and then, with a moan of misery and horror at the sight, threw herself upon her knees, not beside the sofa where Burnham lay gasping, but on the floor where lay our poor old corporal. In an instant she had his head in her lap and was crooning over the senseless clay, swaying her body to and fro as she piteously called to him, —

"Frank, Frank! Oh, for the love of Jesus, speak to me! Frank, dear Frank, my husband, my own! Oh, for God's sake, open your eyes and look at me! I wasn't as wicked as they made me out, Frank, God knows I wasn't. I tried to get back to you, but Pierce there swore you were dead, – swore you were killed at Cieneguilla. Oh, Frank, Frank, open your eyes! *Do* hear me, husband. O God, don't let him die! Oh, for pity's sake, gentlemen, can't you do something? Can't you bring him to? He must hear me! He must know how I've been lied to all these years!"

"Quick! Take this and see if you can bring him round," said Gleason, tossing me his flask. I knelt and poured the burning spirit into his open mouth. There were a few gurgles, half-conscious efforts to swallow, and then – success. He opened his glazing eyes and looked up into the face of his wife. His lips moved and he called her by name. She raised him higher in her arms, pillowing his head upon her bosom, and covered his face with frantic kisses. The sight seemed too much for "Burnham." His face worked and twisted with rage; he ground out curses and blasphemy between his clinched teeth; he even strove to rise from the sofa, but Gleason forced him back. Meantime, the poor woman's wild remorse and lamentations were poured into the ears of the dying man.

"Tell me you believe me, Frank. Tell me you forgive me. O God! you don't know what my life has been with him. When I found out that it was all a lie about your being killed at Cieneguilla, he beat me like a slave. He had to go and fight in the war. They made him; they conscripted him; and when he got back he brought me papers to show you were killed in one of the Virginia battles. I gave up hope then for good and all."

Just then who should come springing down the stairs but Baker, who had evidently been calming and soothing his lady-love aloft. He stepped quickly into the parlor.

"Have you sent for a surgeon?" he asked.

The sound of his voice seemed to rouse "Burnham" to renewed life and raging hate.

"Surgeons be damned!" he gasped. "I'm past all surgery; but thank God I've given that ruffian what'll send him to hell before I get there! And you —*you*" – and here he made a frantic grab for the revolver that lay upon the floor, but Gleason kicked it away – "you, young hound, I meant to have wound you up before I got through. But I can jeer at you – God-forsaken idiot – I can triumph over you;" and he stretched forth a quivering, menacing arm and hand. "You *would* have your way – damn you! – so take it. You've given your love to a bastard, – that's what Zoe is."

Baker stood like one turned suddenly into stone. But from the other end of the room came prompt, wrathful, and with the ring of truth in her earnest protest, the mother's loud defence of her child.

"It's a lie, – a fiendish and malignant lie, – and he knows it. Here lies her father, my own husband, murdered by that scoundrel there. Her baptismal certificate is in my room. I've kept it all these years where he never could get it. No, Frank, she's your own, your own baby, whom you never saw. Go – go and bring her. He *must* see his baby-girl. Oh, my darling, don't – don't go until you see her." And again she covered the ashen face with her kisses. I knelt and put the flask to his lips and he eagerly swallowed a few drops. Baker had turned and darted up-stairs. "Burnham's" late effort had proved too much for him. He had fainted away, and the blood was welling afresh from several wounds.

A moment more and Baker reappeared, leading his betrothed. With her long, golden hair rippling down her back, her face white as death, and her eyes wild with dread, she was yet one of the loveliest pictures I ever dreamed of. Obedient to her mother's signal, she knelt close beside them, saying no word.

"Zoe, darling, this is your own father; the one I told you of last winter."

Old Potts seemed struggling to rise; an inexpressible tenderness shone over his rugged, bearded face; his eyes fastened themselves on the lovely girl before him with a look almost as of wonderment; his lips seemed striving to whisper her name. His wife raised him still higher, and Baker reverently knelt and supported the shoulder of the dying man. There was the silence of the grave in the dimly-lighted room. Slowly, tremulously the arm in the old blue blouse was raised and extended towards

the kneeling girl. Lowly she bent, clasping her hands and with the tears now welling from her eyes. One moment more and the withered old hand that for quarter of a century had grasped the sabre-hilt in the service of our common country slowly fell until it rested on that beautiful, golden head, – one little second or two, in which the lips seemed to murmur a prayer and the fast glazing eyes were fixed in infinite tenderness upon his only child. Then suddenly they sought the face of his sobbing wife, – a quick, faint smile, a sigh, and the hand dropped to the floor. The old trooper's life had gone out in benediction.

Of course there was trouble all around before that wretched affair was explained. Gleason came within an ace of court-martial, but escaped it by saying that he knew of "Burnham's" threats against the life of Lieutenant Baker, and that he went to the ranch in search of the latter and to get him out of danger. They met the Chinaman outside drawing water, and he ushered them in the back way because it was the nearest. Potts asked to go with him that he might see if this was his long-lost wife, – so said Gleason, – and the instant she caught sight of him she shrieked and fainted, and the two men sprang at each other like tigers. Knives were drawn in a minute. Then Burnham fled through the hall, snatched a revolver from its rack, and fired the fatal shot. The surgeon from Fort Phoenix reached them early the next morning, a messenger having been despatched from Crocker's ranch before eleven at night, but all his skill could not save "Burnham," now known to be Pierce, the ex-sutler clerk of the early Fifties. He had prospered and made money ever since the close of the war, and Zoe had been thoroughly well educated in the East before the poor child was summoned to share her mother's exile. His mania seemed to be to avoid all possibility of contact with the troops, but the Crockers had given such glowing accounts of the land near Fort Phoenix, and they were so positively assured that there need be no intercourse whatever with that post, that he determined to risk it. But, go where he would, his sin had found him out.

The long hot summer followed, but it often happened that before many weeks there were interchanges of visits between the fort and the ranch. The ladies insisted that the widow should come thither for change and cheer, and Zoe's appearance at Phoenix was the sensation of the year. Baker was in the seventh heaven. "Burnham," it was found, had a certain sense of justice, for his will had been made long before, and everything he possessed was left unreservedly to the woman whom he had betrayed and, in his tigerish way, doubtless loved, for he had married her in '65, the instant he succeeded in convincing her that Potts was really dead.

So far from combating the will, both the Crockers were cordial in their support. Indeed, it was the elder brother who told the widow of its existence. They had known her and her story many a year, and were ready to devote themselves to her service now. The junior moved up to the "Burnham" place to take general charge and look after matters, for the property was every day increasing in value. And so matters went until the fall, and then, one lovely evening, in the little wooden chapel at the old fort, there was a gathering such as its walls had never known before; and the loveliest bride that Arizona ever saw, blushing, smiling, and radiantly happy, received the congratulations of the entire garrison and of delegations from almost every post in the department.

A few years ago, to the sorrow of everybody in the regiment, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Baker bade it good-by forever. The fond old mother who had so long watched over the growing property for "her children," as she called them, had no longer the strength the duties required. Crocker had taken unto himself a helpmate and was needed at his own place, and our gallant and genial comrade with his sweet wife left us only when it became evident to all at Phoenix that a new master was needed at Starlight Ranch.

WELL WON; OR FROM THE PLAINS TO "THE POINT"

CHAPTER I RALPH MCCREA

The sun was going down, and a little girl with big, dark eyes who was sitting in the waiting-room of the railway station was beginning to look very tired. Ever since the train came in at one o'clock she had been perched there between the iron arms of the seat, and now it was after six o'clock of the long June day, and high time that some one came for her.

A bonny little mite she was, with a wealth of brown hair tumbling down her shoulders and overhanging her heavy eyebrows. She was prettily dressed, and her tiny feet, cased in stout little buttoned boots, stuck straight out before her most of the time, as she sat well back on the broad bench.

She was a silent little body, and for over two hours had hardly opened her lips to any one, – even to the doll that now lay neglected on the seat beside her. Earlier in the afternoon she had been much engrossed with that blue-eyed, flaxen-haired, and overdressed beauty; but, little by little, her interest flagged, and when a six-year-old girlie loses interest in a brand-new doll something serious must be the matter.

Something decidedly serious was the matter now. The train that came up from Denver had brought this little maiden and her father, – a handsome, sturdy-looking ranchman of about thirty years of age, – and they had been welcomed with jubilant cordiality by two or three stalwart men in broad-brimmed slouch hats and frontier garb. They had picked her up in their brawny arms and carried her to the waiting-room, and seated her there in state and fed her with fruit and dainties, and made much of her. Then her father had come in and placed in her arms this wonderful new doll, and while she was still hugging it in her delight, he laid a heavy satchel on the seat beside her and said, —

"And now, baby, papa has to go up-town a ways. He has lots of things to get to take home with us, and some new horses to try. He may be gone a whole hour, but will you stay right here – you and dolly – and take good care of the satchel?"

She looked up a little wistfully. She did not quite like to be left behind, but she felt sure papa could not well take her, – he was always so loving and kind, – and then, there was dolly; and there were other children with their mothers in the room. So she nodded, and put up her little face for his kiss. He took her in his arms a minute and hugged her tight.

"That's my own little Jessie!" he said. "She's as brave as her mother was, fellows, and it's saying a heap."

With that he set her down upon the bench, and they put dolly in her arms again and a package of apples within her reach; and then the jolly party started off.

They waved their hands to her through the window and she smiled shyly at them, and one of them called to a baggage-man and told him to have an eye on little Jessie in there. "She is Farron's kid."

For a while matters did not go so very badly. Other children, who came to look at that marvellous doll and to make timid advances, kept her interested. But presently the east-bound train was signalled and they were all whisked away.

Then came a space of over an hour, during which little Jessie sat there all alone in the big, bare room, playing contentedly with her new toy and chattering in low-toned, murmurous "baby talk" to her, and pointing out the wonderful sunbeams that came slanting in through the dust of the western windows. She had had plenty to eat and a big glass of milk before papa went away, and was neither

hungry nor thirsty; but all the same, it seemed as if that hour were getting very, very long; and every time the tramp of footsteps was heard on the platform outside she looked up eagerly.

Then other people began to come in to wait for a train, and whenever the door opened, the big, dark eyes glanced quickly up with such a hopeful, wistful gaze, and as each new-comer proved to be a total stranger the little maiden's disappointment was so evident that some kind-hearted women came over to speak to her and see if all was right.

But she was as shy as she was lonely, poor little mite, and hung her head and hugged her doll, and shrank away when they tried to take her in their arms. All they could get her to say was that she was waiting for papa and that her name was Jessie Farron.

At last their train came and they had to go, and a new set appeared; and there were people to meet and welcome them with joyous greetings and much homely, homelike chatter, and everybody but one little girl seemed to have friends. It all made Jessie feel more and more lonely, and to wonder what could have happened to keep papa so very long.

Still she was so loyal, so sturdy a little sentinel at her post. The kind-hearted baggage-man came in and strove to get her to go with him to his cottage "a ways up the road," where his wife and little ones were waiting tea for him; but she shook her head and shrank back even from him.

Papa had told her to stay there and she would not budge. Papa had placed his satchel in her charge, and so she kept guard over it and watched every one who approached.

The sun was getting low and shining broadly in through those western windows and making a glare that hurt her eyes, and she longed to change her seat. Between the sun glare and the loneliness her eyes began to fill with big tears, and when once they came it was so hard to force them back; so it happened that poor little Jessie found herself crying despite all her determination to be "papa's own brave daughter."

The windows behind her opened out to the north, and by turning around she could see a wide, level space between the platform and the hotel, where wagons and an omnibus or two, and a four-mule ambulance had been coming and going.

Again and again her eyes had wandered towards this space in hopeful search for father's coming, only to meet with disappointment. At last, just as she had turned and was kneeling on the seat and gazing through the tears that trickled down her pretty face, she saw a sight that made her sore little heart bound high with hope.

First there trotted into the enclosure a span of handsome bay horses with a low phaeton in which were seated two ladies; and directly after them, at full gallop, came two riders on spirited, mettlesome sorrels.

Little Jessie knew the horsemen at a glance. One was a tall, bronzed, dark-moustached trooper in the fatigue uniform of a cavalry sergeant; the other was a blue-eyed, faired-haired young fellow of sixteen years, who raised his cap and bowed to the ladies in the carriage, as he reined his horse up close to the station platform.

He was just about to speak to them when he heard a childish voice calling, "Ralph! Ralph!" and, turning quickly around, he caught sight of a little girl stretching out her arms to him through the window, and crying as if her baby heart would break.

In less time than it takes me to write five words he sprang from his horse, bounded up the platform into the waiting-room, and gathered the child to his heart, anxiously bidding her tell him what was the trouble.

For a few minutes she could only sob in her relief and joy at seeing him, and snuggle close to his face. The ladies wondered to see Ralph McCrea coming towards them with a strange child in his arms, but they were all sympathy and loving-kindness in a moment, so attractive was her sweet face.

"Mrs. Henry, this is Jessie Farron. You know her father; he owns a ranch up on the Chugwater, right near the Laramie road. The station-master says she has been here all alone since he went off at

one o'clock with some friends to buy things for the ranch and try some horses. It must have been his party Sergeant Wells and I saw way out by the fort."

He paused a moment to address a cheering word to the little girl in his arms, and then went on: "Their team had run away over the prairie – a man told us – and they were leading them in to the quartermaster's corral as we rode from the stables. I did not recognize Farron at the distance, but Sergeant Wells will gallop out and tell him Jessie is all right. *Would* you mind taking care of her a few minutes? Poor little girl!" he added, in lower and almost beseeching tones, "she hasn't any mother."

"*Would* I mind!" exclaimed Mrs. Henry, warmly. "Give her to me, Ralph. Come right here, little daughter, and tell me all about it," and the loving woman stood up in the carriage and held forth her arms, to which little Jessie was glad enough to be taken, and there she sobbed, and was soothed and petted and kissed as she had not been since her mother died.

Ralph and the station-master brought to the carriage the wonderful doll – at sight of whose toilet Mrs. Henry could not repress a significant glance at her lady friend, and a suggestive exclamation of "Horrors!" – and the heavy satchel. These were placed where Jessie could see them and feel that they were safe, and then she was able to answer a few questions and to look up trustfully into the gentle face that was nestled every little while to hers, and to sip the cup of milk that Ralph fetched from the hotel. She had certainly fallen into the hands of persons who had very loving hearts.

"Poor little thing! What a shame to leave her all alone! How long has her mother been dead, Ralph?" asked the other lady, rather indignantly.

"About two years, Mrs. Wayne. Father and his officers knew them very well. Our troop was camped up there two whole summers near them, – last summer and the one before, – but Farron took her to Denver to visit her mother's people last April, and has just gone for her. Sergeant Wells said he stopped at the ranch on the way down from Laramie, and Farron told him, then, he couldn't live another month without his little girl, and was going to Denver for her at once."

"I remember them well, now," said Mrs. Henry, "and we saw him sometimes when our troop was at Laramie. What was the last news from your father, Ralph, and when do you go?"

"No news since the letter that met me here. You know he has been scouting ever since General Crook went on up to the Powder River country. Our troop and the Grays are all that are left to guard that whole neighborhood, and the Indians seem to know it. They are 'jumping' from the reservation all the time."

"But the Fifth Cavalry are here now, and they will soon be up there to help you, and put a stop to all that, – won't they?"

"I don't know. The Fifth say that they expect orders to go to the Black Hills, so as to get between the reservations and Sitting Bull's people. Only six troops – half the regiment – have come. Papa's letter said I was to start for Laramie with them, but they have been kept waiting four days already."

"They will start now, though," said the lady. "General Merritt has just got back from Red Cloud, where he went to look into the situation, and he has been in the telegraph office much of the afternoon wiring to Chicago, where General Sheridan is. Colonel Mason told us, as we drove past camp, that they would probably march at daybreak."

"That means that Sergeant Wells and I go at the same time, then," said Ralph, with glistening eyes. "Doesn't it seem odd, after I've been galloping all over this country from here to the Chug for the last three years, that now father won't let me go it alone. I never yet set eyes on a war party of Indians, or heard of one south of the Platte."

"All the same they came, Ralph, and it was simply to protect those settlers that your father's company was there so much. This year they are worse than ever, and there has been no cavalry to spare. If you were my boy, I should be worried half to death at the idea of your riding alone from here to Laramie. What does your mother think of it?"

"It was mother, probably, who made father issue the order. She writes that, eager as she is to see me, she wouldn't think of letting me come alone with Sergeant Wells. Pshaw! He and I would be

safer than the old stage-coach any day. That is never 'jumped' south of Laramie, though it is chased now and then above there. Of course the country's full of Indians between the Platte and the Black Hills, but we shouldn't be likely to come across any."

There was a moment's silence. Nestled in Mrs. Henry's arms the weary little girl was dropping off into placid slumber, and forgetting all her troubles. Both the ladies were wives of officers of the army, and were living at Fort Russell, three miles out from Cheyenne, while their husbands were far to the north with their companies on the Indian campaign, which was just then opening.

It was an anxious time. Since February all of the cavalry and much of the infantry stationed in Nebraska and Wyoming had been out in the wild country above the North Platte River, between the Big Horn Mountains and the Black Hills. For two years previous great numbers of the young warriors had been slipping away from the Sioux reservations and joining the forces of such vicious and intractable chiefs as Sitting Bull, Gall, and Rain-in-the-face, it could scarcely be doubted, with hostile intent.

Several thousands of the Indians were known to be at large, and committing depredations and murders in every direction among the settlers. Now, all pacific means having failed, the matter had been turned over to General Crook, who had recently brought the savage Apaches of Arizona under subjection, to employ such means as he found necessary to defeat their designs.

General Crook found the Sioux and their allies armed with the best modern breech-loaders, well supplied with ammunition and countless herds of war ponies, and far too numerous and powerful to be handled by the small force at his command.

One or two sharp and savage fights occurred in March, while the mercury was still thirty degrees below zero, and then the government decided on a great summer campaign. Generals Terry and Gibbon were to hem the Indians from the north along the Yellowstone, while at the same time General Crook was to march up and attack them from the south.

When June came, four regiments of cavalry and half a dozen infantry regiments were represented among the forces that scouted to and fro in the wild and beautiful uplands of Wyoming, Dakota, and Eastern Montana, searching for the Sioux.

The families of the officers and soldiers remained at the barracks from which the men were sent, and even at the exposed stations of Forts Laramie, Robinson, and Fetterman, many ladies and children remained under the protection of small garrisons of infantry. Among the ladies at Laramie was Mrs. McCrea, Ralph's mother, who waited for the return of her boy from a long absence at school.

A manly, sturdy fellow was Ralph, full of health and vigor, due in great part to the open-air life he had led in his early boyhood. He had "backed" an Indian pony before he was seven, and could sit one like a Comanche by the time he was ten. He had accompanied his father on many a long march and scout, and had ridden every mile of the way from the Gila River in Arizona, across New Mexico, and so on up into Nebraska.

He had caught brook trout in the Cache la Poudre, and shot antelope along the Loup Fork of the Platte. With his father and his father's men to watch and keep him from harm, he had even charged his first buffalo herd and had been fortunate enough to shoot a bull. The skin had been made into a robe, which he carefully kept.

Now, all eager to spend his vacation among his favorite haunts, – in the saddle and among the mountain streams, – Ralph McCrea was going back to his army home, when, as ill-luck would have it, the great Sioux war broke out in the early summer of our Centennial Year, and promised to greatly interfere with, if it did not wholly spoil, many of his cherished plans.

Fort Laramie lay about one hundred miles north of Cheyenne, and Sergeant Wells had come down with the paymaster's escort a few days before, bringing Ralph's pet, his beautiful little Kentucky sorrel "Buford," and now the boy and his faithful friend, the sergeant, were visiting at Fort Russell, and waiting for a safe opportunity to start for home.

Presently, as they chatted in low tones so as not to disturb the little sleeper, there came the sound of rapid hoof-beats, and Sergeant Wells cantered into the enclosure and, riding up to the carriage, said to Ralph, —

"I found him, sir, all safe; but their wagon was being patched up, and he could not leave. He is so thankful to Mrs. Henry for her kindness, and begs to know if she would mind bringing Jessie out to the fort. The men are trying very hard to persuade him not to start for the Chug in the morning."

"Why not, sergeant?"

"Because the telegraph despatches from Laramie say there must be a thousand Indians gone out from the reservation in the last two days. They've cut the wires up to Red Cloud, and no more news can reach us."

Ralph's face grew very pale.

"Father is right in the midst of them, with only fifty men!"

CHAPTER II

CAVALRY ON THE MARCH

It was a lovely June morning when the Fifth Cavalry started on its march. Camp was struck at daybreak, and soon after five o'clock, while the sun was still low in the east and the dew-drops were sparkling on the buffalo grass, the long column was winding up the bare, rolling "divide" which lay between the valleys of Crow and Lodge Pole Creeks. In plain view, only thirty miles away to the west, were the summits of the Rocky Mountains, but such is the altitude of this upland prairie, sloping away eastward between the two forks of the Platte River, that these summits appear to be nothing more than a low range of hills shutting off the western horizon.

Looking southward from the Laramie road, all the year round one can see the great peaks of the range – Long's and Hahn's and Pike's – glistening in their mantles of snow, and down there near them, in Colorado, the mountains slope abruptly into the Valley of the South Platte.

Up here in Wyoming the Rockies go rolling and billowing far out to the east, and the entire stretch of country, from what are called the "Black Hills of Wyoming," in contradistinction to the Black Hills of Dakota, far east as the junction of the forks of the Platte, is one vast inclined plane.

The Union Pacific Railway winds over these Black Hills at Sherman, – the lowest point the engineers could find, – and Sherman is over eight thousand feet above the sea.

From Sherman, eastward, in less than an hour's run the cars go sliding down with smoking brakes to Cheyenne, a fall of two thousand feet. But the wagon-road from Cheyenne to Fort Laramie twists and winds among the ravines and over the divides of this lofty prairie; so that Ralph and his soldier friends, while riding jauntily over the hard-beaten track this clear, crisp, sunshiny, breezy morning, were twice as high above the sea as they would have been at the tiptop of the Catskills and higher even than had they been at the very summit of Mount Washington.

The air at this height, though rare, is keen and exhilarating, and one needs no second look at the troopers to see how bright are their eyes and how nimble and elastic is the pace of their steeds.

The commanding officer, with his adjutant and orderlies and a little group of staff sergeants, had halted at the crest of one of these ridges and was looking back at the advancing column. Beside the winding road was strung a line of wires, – the military telegraph to the border forts, – and with the exception of those bare poles not a stick of timber was anywhere in sight.

The whole surface is destitute of bush or tree, but the thick little bunches of gray-green grass that cover it everywhere are rich with juice and nutriment. This is the buffalo grass of the Western prairies, and the moment the horses' heads are released down go their nozzles, and they are cropping eagerly and gratefully.

Far as the eye can see to the north and east it roams over a rolling, tumbling surface that seems to have become suddenly petrified. Far to the south are the snow-shimmering peaks; near at hand, to the west, are the gloomy gorges and ravines and wide wastes of upland of the Black Hills of Wyoming; and so clear is the air that they seem but a short hour's gallop away.

There is something strangely deceptive about the distances in an atmosphere so rare and clear as this.

A young surgeon was taking his first ride with a cavalry column in the wide West, and, as he looked back into the valley through which they had been marching for over half an hour, his face was clouded with an expression of odd perplexity.

"What's the matter, doctor?" asked the adjutant, with a grin on his face. "Are you wondering whether those fellows really are United States regulars?" and the young officer nodded towards the long column of horsemen in broad-brimmed slouch hats and flannel shirts or fanciful garb of Indian tanned buckskin. Even among the officers there was hardly a sign of the uniform or trappings which distinguish the soldiers in garrison.

"No, it isn't *that*. I knew that you fellows who had served so long in Arizona had got out of the way of wearing uniform in the field against Indians. What I can't understand is that ridge over there. I thought we had been down in a hollow for the last half-hour, yet look at it; we must have come over that when I was thinking of something else."

"Not a bit of it, doctor," laughed the colonel. "That's where we dismounted and took a short rest and gave the horses a chance to pick a bit."

"Why, but, colonel! that must have been two miles back, – full half an hour ago: you don't mean that ridge is two miles away? I could almost hit that man riding down the road towards us."

"It would be a wonderful shot, doctor. That man is one of the teamsters who went back after a dropped pistol. He is a mile and a half away."

The doctor's eyes were wide open with wonder.

"Of course you must know, colonel, but it is incomprehensible to me."

"It is easily proved, doctor. Take these two telegraph poles nearest us and tell me how far they are apart."

The doctor looked carefully from one pole to another. Only a single wire was strung along the line, and the poles were stout and strong. After a moment's study he said, "Well, they are just about seventy-five yards apart."

"More than that, doctor. They are a good hundred yards. But even at your estimate, just count the poles back to that ridge – of course they are equidistant, or nearly so, all along – and tell me how far you make it."

The doctor's eyes began to dilate again as he silently took account of the number.

"I declare, there are over twenty to the rear of the wagon-train and nearly forty across the ridge! I give it up."

"And now look here," said the colonel, pointing out to the eastward where some lithe-limbed hounds were coursing over the prairie with Ralph on his fleet sorrel racing in pursuit. "Look at young McCrea out there where there are no telegraph poles to help you judge the distance. If he were an Indian whom you wanted to bring down what would you set your sights at, providing you had time to set them at all?" and the veteran Indian fighter smiled grimly.

The doctor shook his head.

"It is too big a puzzle for me," he answered. "Five minutes ago I would have said three hundred at the utmost, but I don't know now."

"How about that, Nihil?" asked the colonel, turning to a soldier riding with the head-quarters party.

Nihil's brown hand goes up to the brim of his scouting hat in salute, but he shook his head.

"The bullet would kick up a dust this side of him, sir," was the answer.

"People sometimes wonder why it is we manage to hit so few of these Cheyennes or Sioux in our battles with them," said the colonel. "Now you can get an idea of one of the difficulties. They rarely come within six hundred yards of us when they are attacking a train or an infantry escort, and are always riding full tilt, just as you saw Ralph just now. It is next to impossible to hit them."

"I understand," said the doctor. "How splendidly that boy rides!"

"Ralph? Yes. He's a genuine trooper. Now, there's a boy whose whole ambition is to go to West Point. He's a manly, truthful, dutiful young fellow, born and raised in the army, knows the plains by heart, and just the one to make a brilliant and valuable cavalry officer, but there isn't a ghost of a chance for him."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Why! how is he to get an appointment? If he had a home somewhere in the East, and his father had influence with the Congressman of the district, it might be done; but the sons of army officers have really very little chance. The President used to have ten appointments a year, but Congress took them away from him. They thought there were too many cadets at the Point; but

while they were virtuously willing to reduce somebody else's prerogatives in that line, it did not occur to them that they might trim a little on their own. Now the President is allowed only ten 'all told,' and can appoint no boy until some of his ten are graduated or otherwise disposed of. It really gives him only two or three appointments a year, and he has probably a thousand applicants for every one. What chance has an army boy in Wyoming against the son of some fellow with Senators and Representatives at his back in Washington? If the army could name an occasional candidate, a boy like Ralph would be sure to go, and we would have more soldiers and fewer scientists in the cavalry."

By this time the head of the compact column was well up, and the captain of the leading troop, riding with his first lieutenant in front of his sets of fours, looked inquiringly at the colonel, as though half expectant of a signal to halt or change the gait. Receiving none, and seeing that the colonel had probably stopped to look over his command, the senior troop leader pushed steadily on.

Behind him, four abreast, came the dragoons, – a stalwart, sunburned, soldierly-looking lot. Not a particle of show or glitter in their attire or equipment. Utterly unlike the dazzling hussars of England or the European continent, when the troopers of the United States are out on the broad prairies of the West "for business," as they put it, hardly a brass button, even, is to be seen.

The colonel notes with satisfaction the nimble, active pace of the horses as they go by at rapid walk, and the easy seat of the men in their saddles.

First the bays of "K" Troop trip quickly past; then the beautiful, sleek grays of "B," Captain Montgomery's company; then more bays in "I" and "A" and "D," and then some sixty-five blacks, "C" Troop's color.

There are two sorrel troops in the regiment and more bays, and later in the year, when new horses were obtained, the Fifth had a roan and a dark-brown troop; but in June, when they were marching up to take their part in the great campaign that followed, only two of their companies were not mounted on bright bay horses, and one and all they were in the pink of condition and eager for a burst "'cross country."

It was, however, their colonel's desire to take them to their destination in good trim, and he permitted no "larking."

They had several hundred miles of weary marching before them. Much of the country beyond the Platte was "Bad Lands," where the grass is scant and poor, the soil ashen and spongy, and the water densely alkaline. All this would tell very sensibly upon the condition of horses that all winter long had been comfortably stabled, regularly groomed and grain-fed, and watered only in pure running streams flushed by springs or melting snow.

It was all very well for young Ralph to be coursing about on his fleet, elastic sorrel, radiant with delight as the boy was at being again "out on the plains" and in the saddle; but the cavalry commander's first care must be to bring his horses to the scene of action in the most effective state of health and soundness. The first few days' marching, therefore, had to be watched with the utmost care.

As the noon hour approached, the doctor noted how the hills off to the west seemed to be growing higher, and that there were broader vistas of wide ranges of barren slopes to the east and north.

The colonel was riding some distance ahead of the battalion, his little escort close beside, and Ralph was giving Buford a resting spell, and placidly ambling alongside the doctor.

Sergeant Wells was riding somewhere in the column with some chum of old days. He belonged to another regiment, but knew the Fifth of old. The hounds had tired of chasing over a waterless country, and with lolling tongues were trotting behind their masters' horses.

The doctor was vastly interested in what he had heard of Ralph, and engaged him in talk. Just as they came in sight of the broad, open valley in which runs the sparkling Lodge Pole, a two-horse wagon rumbled up alongside, and there on the front seat was Farron, the ranchman, with bright-eyed, bonny-faced little Jessie smiling beside him.

"We've caught you, Ralph," he laughed, "though we left Russell an hour or more behind you. I s'pose you'll all camp at Lodge Pole for the night. We're going on to the Chug."

"Hadn't you better see the colonel about that?" asked Ralph, anxiously.

"Oh, it's all right! I got telegrams from Laramie and the Chug, both, just before we left Russell. Not an Indian's been heard of this side of the Platte, and your father's troop has just got in to Laramie."

"Has he?" exclaimed Ralph, with delight. "Then he knows I've started, and perhaps he'll come on to the Chug or Eagle's Nest and meet me."

"More'n likely," answered Farron. "You and the sergeant had better come ahead and spend the night with me at the ranch."

"I've no doubt the colonel will let us go ahead with you," answered Ralph, "but the ranch is too far off the road. We would have to stay at Phillips's for the night. What say you, sergeant?" he asked, as Wells came loping up alongside.

"The very plan, I think. Somebody will surely come ahead to meet us, and we can make Laramie two days before the Fifth."

"Then, good-by, doctor; I must ask the colonel first, but we'll see you at Laramie."

"Good-by, Ralph, and good luck to you in getting that cadetship."

"Oh, well! I *must* trust to luck for that. Father says it all depends on my getting General Sheridan to back me. If *he* would only ask for me, or if I could only do something to make him glad to ask; but what chance is there?"

What chance, indeed? Ralph McCrea little dreamed that at that very moment General Sheridan – far away in Chicago – was reading despatches that determined him to go at once, himself, to Red Cloud Agency; that in four days more the general would be there, at Laramie, and that in two wonderful days, meantime – but who was there who dreamed what would happen meantime?

CHAPTER III

DANGER IN THE AIR

When the head of the cavalry column reached the bridge over Lodge Pole Creek a march of about twenty-five miles had been made, which is an average day's journey for cavalry troops when nothing urgent hastens their movements.

Filing to the right, the horsemen moved down the north bank of the rapidly-running stream, and as soon as the rearmost troop was clear of the road and beyond reach of its dust, the trumpets sounded "halt" and "dismount," and in five minutes the horses, unsaddled, were rolling on the springy turf, and then were driven out in herds, each company's by itself, to graze during the afternoon along the slopes. Each herd was watched and guarded by half a dozen armed troopers, and such horses as were notorious "stampedeers" were securely "side-lined" or hobbled.

Along the stream little white tents were pitched as the wagons rolled in and were unloaded; and then the braying mules, rolling and kicking in their enjoyment of freedom from harness, were driven out and disposed upon the slopes at a safe distance from the horses. The smokes of little fires began to float into the air, and the jingle of spoon and coffee-pot and "spider" and skillet told that the cooks were busy getting dinner for the hungry campaigners.

Such appetites as those long-day marches give! Such delight in life and motion one feels as he drinks in that rare, keen mountain air! Some of the soldiers – old plainsmen – are already prone upon the turf, their heads pillowed on their saddles, their slouch hats pulled down over their eyes, snatching half an hour's dreamless sleep before the cooks shall summon them to dinner.

One officer from each company is still in saddle, riding around the horses of his own troop to see that the grass is well chosen and that his guards are properly posted and on the alert. Over at the road there stands a sort of frontier tavern and stage station, at which is a telegraph office, and the colonel has been sending despatches to Department Head-Quarters to announce the safe arrival of his command at Lodge Pole *en route* for Fort Laramie. Now he is talking with Ralph.

"It isn't that, my boy. I do not suppose there is an Indian anywhere near the Chugwater; but if your father thought it best that you should wait and start with us, I think it was his desire that you should keep in the protection of the column all the way. Don't you?"

"Yes, sir, I do. The only question now is, will he not come or send forward to the Chug to meet me, and could I not be with mother two days earlier that way? Besides, Farron is determined to go ahead as soon as he has had dinner, and – I don't like to think of little Jessie being up there at the Chug just now. Would you mind my telegraphing to father at Laramie and asking him?"

"No, indeed, Ralph. Do so."

And so a despatch was sent to Laramie, and in the course of an hour, just as they had enjoyed a comfortable dinner, there came the reply, —

"All right. Come ahead to Phillips's Ranch. Party will meet you there at eight in the morning. They stop at Eagle's Nest to-night."

Ralph's eyes danced as he showed this to the colonel who read it gravely and replied, —

"It is all safe, I fancy, or your father would not say so. They have patrols all along the bank of the Platte to the southeast, and no Indians can cross without its being discovered in a few hours. I suppose they never come across between Laramie and Fetterman, do they, Ralph?"

"Certainly not of late years, colonel. It is so far off their line to the reservations where they have to run for safety after their depredations."

"I know that; but now that all but two troops of cavalry have gone up with General Crook they might be emboldened to try a wider sweep. That's all I'm afraid of."

"Even if the Indians came, colonel, they've got those ranch buildings so loop-holed and fortified at Phillips's that we could stand them off a week if need be, and you would reach there by noon at latest."

"Yes. We make an early start to-morrow morning, and 'twill be just another twenty-five miles to our camp on the Chug. If all is well you will be nearly to Eagle's Nest by the time we get to Phillips's, and you will be at Laramie before the sunset-gun to-morrow. Well, give my regards to your father, Ralph, and keep your eye open for the main chance. We cavalry people want you for our representative at West Point, you know."

"Thank you for that, colonel," answered Ralph, with sparkling eyes. "I sha'n't forget it in many a day."

So it happened that late that afternoon, with Farron driving his load of household goods; with brown-haired little Jessie lying sound asleep with her head on his lap; with Sergeant Wells cantering easily alongside and Ralph and Buford scouting a little distance ahead, the two-horse wagon rolled over the crest of the last divide and came just at sunset in sight of the beautiful valley with the odd name of Chugwater.

Farther up the stream towards its sources among the pine-crested Black Hills, there were many places where the busy beavers had dammed its flow. The Indians, bent on trapping these wary creatures, had listened in the stillness of the solitudes to the battering of those wonderful tails upon the mud walls of their dams and forts, and had named the little river after its most marked characteristic, the constant "*chug, chug*" of those cricket-bat caudals.

On the west of the winding stream, in the smiling valley with tiny patches of verdure, lay the ranch with its out-buildings, corrals, and the peacefully browsing stock around it, and little Jessie woke at her father's joyous shout and pointed out her home to Ralph.

There where the trail wound away from the main road the wagon and horsemen must separate, and Ralph reined close alongside and took Jessie in his arms and was hugged tight as he kissed her bonny face. Then he and the sergeant shook hands heartily with Farron, set spurs to their horses, and went loping down northeastward to the broader reaches of the valley.

On their right, across the lowlands, ran the long ridge ending in an abrupt precipice, that was the scene of the great buffalo-killing by the Indians many a long year ago. Straight ahead were the stage station, the forage sheds, and the half dozen buildings of Phillips's. All was as placid and peaceful in the soft evening light as if no hostile Indian had ever existed.

Yet there were to be seen signs of preparation for Indian attack. The herder whom the travellers met two miles south of the station was heavily armed and his mate was only short rifle-shot away. The men waved their hats to Ralph and his soldier comrade, and one of them called out, "Whar'd ye leave the cavalry?" and seemed disappointed to hear they were as far back as Lodge Pole.

At the station, they found the ranchmen prepared for their coming and glad to see them. Captain McCrea had telegraphed twice during the afternoon and seemed anxious to know of their arrival.

"He's in the office at Laramie now," said the telegraph agent, with a smile, "and I wired him the moment we sighted you coming down the hill. Come in and send him a few words. It will please him more than anything I can say."

So Ralph stepped into the little room with its solitary instrument and lonely operator. In those days there was little use for the line except for the conducting of purely military business, and the agents or operators were all soldiers detailed for the purpose. Here at "The Chug" the instrument rested on a little table by the loop-hole of a window in the side of the log hut. Opposite it was the soldier's narrow camp-bed with its brown army blankets and with his heavy overcoat thrown over the foot. Close at hand stood his Springfield rifle, with the belt of cartridges, and over the table hung two Colt's revolvers.

All through the rooms of the station the same war-like preparations were visible, for several times during the spring and early summer war parties of Indians had come prowling up the valley,

driving the herders before them; but, having secured all the beef cattle they could handle, they had hurried back to the fords of the Platte and, except on one or two occasions, had committed no murders.

Well knowing the pluck of the little community at Phillips's, the Indians had not come within long rifle range of the ranch, but on the last two visits the warriors seemed to have grown bolder. While most of the Indians were rounding up cattle and scurrying about in the valley, two miles below the ranch, it was noted that two warriors, on their nimble ponies, had climbed the high ridge on the east that overlooked the ranches in the valley beyond and above Phillips's, and were evidently taking deliberate note of the entire situation.

One of the Indians was seen to point a long, bare arm, on which silver wristlets and bands flashed in the sun, at Farron's lonely ranch four miles up-stream.

That was more than the soldier telegrapher could bear patiently. He took his Springfield rifle out into the fields, and opened a long range fire on these adventurous redskins.

The Indians were a good mile away, but that honest "Long Tom" sent its leaden missiles whistling about their ears, and kicking up the dust around their ponies' heels, until, after a few defiant shouts and such insulting and contemptuous gestures as they could think of, the two had ducked suddenly out of sight behind the bluffs.

All this the ranch people told Ralph and the sergeant, as they were enjoying a hot supper after the fifty-mile ride of the day. Afterwards the two travellers went out into the corral to see that their horses were secure for the night.

Buford looked up with eager whinny at Ralph's footstep, pricked his pretty ears, and looked as full of life and spirit as if he had never had a hard day's gallop in his life. Sergeant Wells had given him a careful rubbing down while Ralph was at the telegraph office, and later, when the horses were thoroughly cool, they were watered at the running stream and given a hearty feed of oats.

Phillips came out to lock up his stable while they were petting Buford, and stood there a moment admiring the pretty fellow.

"With your weight I think he could make a race against any horse in the cavalry, couldn't he, Mr. Ralph?" he asked.

"I'm not quite sure, Phillips; the colonel of the Fifth Cavalry has a horse that I might not care to race. He was being led along behind the head-quarters escort to-day. Barring that horse Van, I would ride Buford against any horse I've ever seen in the service for any distance from a quarter of a mile to a day's march."

"But those Indian ponies, Mr. Ralph, couldn't they beat him?"

"Over rough ground – up hill and down dale – I suppose some of them could. I saw their races up at Red Cloud last year, and old Spotted Tail brought over a couple of ponies from Camp Sheridan that ran like a streak, and there was a Minneconjou chief there who had a very fast pony. Some of the young Ogallallas had quick, active beasts, but, take them on a straight-away run, I wouldn't be afraid to try my luck with Buford against the best of them."

"Well, I hope you'll never have to ride for your life on him. He's pretty and sound and fast, but those Indians have such wind and bottom; they never seem to give out."

A little later – at about half after eight o'clock – Sergeant Wells, the telegraph operator, and one or two of the ranchmen sat tilted back in their rough chairs on the front porch of the station enjoying their pipes. Ralph had begun to feel a little sleepy, and was ready to turn in when he was attracted by the conversation between the two soldiers; the operator was speaking, and the seriousness of his tone caused the boy to listen.

"It isn't that we have any particular cause to worry just here. With our six or seven men we could easily stand off the Indians until help came, but it's Farron and little Jessie I'm thinking of. He and his two men would have no show whatever in case of a sudden and determined attack. They have not been harmed so far, because the Indians always crossed below Laramie and came up to the Chug, and so there was timely warning. Now, they have seen Farron's place up there all by itself.

They can easily find out, by hanging around the traders at Red Cloud, who lives there, how many men he has, and about Jessie. Next to surprising and killing a white man in cold blood, those fellows like nothing better than carrying off a white child and concealing it among them. The gypsies have the same trait. Now, they know that so long as they cross below Laramie the scouts are almost sure to discover it in an hour or two, and as soon as they strike the Chug Valley some herders come tumbling in here and give the alarm. They have come over regularly every moon, since General Crook went up in February, *until now*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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