

King Charles

Trumpeter Fred: A Story of the Plains



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CHAPTER I.

A DANGEROUS MISSION

THERE were only thirty in all that night when the troop reached the Niobrara and unsaddled along the grassy banks. Rather slim numbers for the duty to be performed, and with the captain away, too. Not that the men had lack of confidence in Lieutenant Blunt, but it was practically his first summer at Indian campaigning, and, however well a young soldier may have studied strategy and grand tactics at West Point, it is something very different that is needed in fighting these wild warriors of our prairies and mountains. Blunt was brave and spirited, they all knew that; but in point of experience even Trumpeter Fred was his superior. All along the dusty trail, for an hour before they reached the ford, the tracks of the Indian ponies had been thickly scattered. A war party of at least fifty had evidently gone trotting down stream not six hours before the soldiers rode in to water their tired and thirsty steeds. No comrades were known to be nearer at hand than the garrison at Fort Laramie, fifty long miles away, or those guarding the post of Fort Robinson, right in the heart of the Indian country, and in the very midst of the treacherous tribes along White River. And yet, under its second lieutenant and with only twenty-nine "rank and file," here was "B" Troop ordered to bivouac at the Niobrara crossing, and despite the fact that all the country was alive with war parties of the Sioux, to wait there for further orders.

"Only twenty-nine men all told and a small boy," said Sergeant Dawson, who was forever trying to plague that little trumpeter. It was by no means fair to Fred Waller, either, for while he was somewhat undersized for his fifteen years, his carbine and his Colt's revolver were just as big and just as effective as those of any man in the troop, and he knew how to use them, no matter how hard the "Springfield" kicked. He rode one of the tallest horses, too, and sat him well and firmly, notwithstanding all his furious plunging and "buckings," the day that Dawson slipped the thorny sprig of a wild rosebush under the saddle blanket.

From the first sergeant down to the newest recruit, all the men had grown fond of little Fred in that year of rough scouting and campaigning around old Red Cloud's reservation – all of them, that is to say, with the possible exception of Dawson, who annoyed him in many ways when the officers or first sergeant did not happen to be near, and who sometimes spoke sneeringly of him to such of the troopers as would listen, but these were very few in number.

Fred was the only son of brave old Sergeant Waller, who had served with the regiment all over the plains before the great war of the rebellion, and who had been its standard-bearer in many a sharp fight and stirring charge in Virginia. Now he carried two bullet wounds, and on his bronzed cheek a long white seam, a saber scar, as mementoes of Beverly Ford, Winchester, and Five Forks, and through the efforts of his war commanders a comfortable berth as ordnance sergeant had been secured for him at one of the big frontier posts along the railway. Fred was the pride of the old soldier's heart, and nothing would do but that he, too, must be a trooper. The boy was born far out across the plains in sight of the Chihuahua Mountains, had followed the regiment in his mother's arms up the valley of the Rio Grande to the Albuquerque, then eastward along the Indian-haunted Smoky Hill route to Leavenworth. When the great war burst upon the nation little Fred was just beginning to toddle about the whitewashed walls of the laundresses' quarters – his father was Corporal Waller then – and his baby eyes were big as saucers when he was carried aboard of a big steamship and paddled down the muddy Missouri and around by Cairo and up the winding Ohio to Cincinnati. He

was even more astonished at the railway cars that bore the soldiers and a few women and children eastward and finally landed them at Carlisle. There at the old cavalry barracks the little fellow grew to lusty boyhood, while his father was bearing the blue and gold standard through battle after battle on the Virginia soil. And when the war was over and the regiment was hurried out to "the plains," and again to protect the settlers, the emigrants, and the railway builders from the ceaseless assaults of the painted Indians, little Fred went along, and his soldier education was fairly begun.

Old Waller was now first sergeant of "B" troop. The regimental commander and most of the officers were greatly interested in the laughing, sun-tanned, blue-eyed boy, who rode day after day on his wiry Indian pony along the flanks of the column, scorning, though barely seven years old, to stay in the wagons with the women and children. Everybody had a jolly word of greeting for Fred, and kind-hearted Captain Blaine set his "company tailor" to work, and presently there was made for the boy a natty little cavalry jacket and a tiny pair of yellow chevrons. "Corporal Fred" they called him then, and, though he strove hard not to show it, grim old Sergeant Waller was evidently as proud and pleased as the child. He taught the little man to "stand attention" and bring up his chubby brown hand in salute whenever an officer passed by, and most scrupulously was that salute returned. He early placed the boy under the instruction of the veteran chief trumpeter, and made him practice with the musicians as soon as he was "big enough to blow," as he expressed it. And then, too (for there were no army schools, or schoolmasters in those days), regularly as the day came round and the sergeant's morning duties were done, he had his boy at his knee, book or slate in hand, patiently teaching him the little that he knew himself, and wistfully looking for some better instructor.

CHAPTER II.

THE OATH OF ENLISTMENT

IT was while stationed at old Fort Sanders that Waller's enthusiastic devotion to his new captain and his captain's family began. The former troop commander was ordered to the retired list, broken down by wounds, and the senior lieutenant stepped into his place. Waller bade farewell to his old captain with tear-dimmed eyes – they had served together for over fifteen years – and with much inward misgiving, but not the faintest outward show thereof, saluted the new arrival, a young officer but a soldier through and through; it was not a week before the sergeant had fully satisfied himself as to that. Presently the new captain's family reached the fort and took up their abode; a fair-haired, blue-eyed young mother with two children, a boy and a girl, the eldest being three years younger than Fred; and then began another and strong interest.

That very winter scarlet fever devastated the fort. Few children escaped the scourge. There were a dozen little graves in the cemetery out on the prairie when the long winter came to an end. There were two or three larger graves, and one of these held all that was mortal of Fred's loving mother; he and his stern, sad-faced father were now alone in the world.

And Captain Charlton's little household had not been spared. It was among the officers' quarters that the pestilence had first appeared. Frank and Florence Charlton were among the children earliest stricken. The servants fled the house, as frontier servants will, and their place was promptly supplied by Mrs. Waller. She and her husband would listen to no remonstrance, and Mrs. Charlton, overwhelmed with care and dread, was only too glad to have the strong, cheery army woman's help. Over the little brown cottage the shadow of death hovered for days before it was lifted and borne away, and when at last all danger was over and all was again all hope and peace the sergeant's wife went back to her own humble roof across the parade, and there suddenly sickened and died. When the scourge was finally swept from the garrison and the soft winds began to blow from the South, the stricken old soldier was glad of the chance to go with his troop into the field-service, and was almost happy in one thing. Mrs. Charlton had taken his boy as one of her own, and each day she was teaching him faithfully and well. When the troop rode away from Sanders Fred was left behind to occupy a little room under the captain's roof. "Remember, sir, you are sergeant of the guard, and that house and that household are your special charge for all summer long," were Waller's parting words to his boy.

Regularly as the mail reached the troop during its summer scouting Captain Charlton's home missives had their messages for Sergeant Waller; and soon, to his unspeakable joy, letters all his own, addressed in a round boyish hand that grew firmer every week, began to come as his share of the welcome package. Never would he presume to ask for news, yet the captain was not slow to notice how old Waller was sure to be busy close at hand when the home letters came, and prompt to answer, and with soldierly salute to stand erect before his young commander and strive not to show the pride and delight that tingled in every vein at the glowing words in which Mrs. Charlton told of his boy's rapid progress and his devotion to her and the children. His lip would quiver uncontrollably and his eyes fill; his hand might tremble as it touched the brim of his scouting hat, but the salute was precise as ever.

"I thank the captain, and beg to thank the captain's kind lady," was his invariable formula on such occasions. "I hope the boy will always do his duty."

And then he would face about and stride away with his head very high in the air and his eyes blinking hard, and almost immediately his voice would be heard sternly berating some trooper whose horse had tangled himself in his lariat, or whose "kit" was not stowed in proper shape about the saddle. It was his way of striving to hide the joy those messages brought him, and the men were quick to see through it all, and little "Reddy" Mulligan, reprimanded for the third time within a fort-night, started a laugh all through the bivouac by his whimsical protest:

"It's more good news you've been getting from Fred, sergeant, dear; isn't it now? Faith, I wish he'd play ye a thrick wanst in a while, like other byes. Maybe thin I'd be mintioned to the captain for a corporalship." And for once the veteran turned his back on the laughing troop conscious of defeat.

In '74 old Waller changed the yellow stripes and diamond of the first sergeantcy for the crimson and the star of the ordnance, and the troopers, one and all, said good-by to him with infinite regret. Perhaps Dawson, who was next in rank, may be excepted. He confidently expected to be promoted in Waller's place. But though a dashing soldier and a smart non-commissioned officer, he was not the stanch, reliable man the captain needed, and proved it by celebrating Waller's promotion in a very boisterous and unseemly manner. It was plain that he had been drinking heavily, and though Captain Charlton saved him from arrest and court-martial he would not promote him, and plainly, though privately, told him why. The troop knew it was for this reason, but Dawson swore it was all on account of Waller's influence against him when Sergeant Graham was named in regimental orders as the old veteran's successor.

That same summer, with firm hand and glistening eyes, Waller signed his consent to the enlistment of his son as trumpeter in the old troop. How he watched the boy's glowing face as the oath of enlistment, so often lightly spoken, was solemnly repeated, and Fred was bound to the service of his country. How he trembled from head to foot when, but a few weeks afterward and in the dead of night, Charlton and his men hurried forth to intercept a band of Indians who had swooped down upon the herders south of Laramie Peak. Waller could hardly buckle the cantle-straps of Fred's saddle as the little fellow, all eagerness, was bustling about his horse in the dim light of the stable lanterns. Yet when the captain and Lieutenant Rayburn came trotting briskly down the roadway and the men were silently "leading into line," it was the old sergeant's hand that grasped the boy's left foot and swung him lightly into his seat.

"Whatever happens, sir, mind you keep close to the captain," was his parting injunction to his boy. Then his heels came together with the old cavalry "click" and his twitching fingers were stiffened as they went suddenly up in salute to Mr. Rayburn, who bent down from his saddle to say that they would try and take good care of Fred. But Waller answered:

"I thank the lieutenant. The boy is a soldier now, sir. He must take his chances with the rest." Then with one lingering clasp of the trumpeter's hand, "Join your captain," he ordered, and turned away into the darkness.

But the sentry on No. 6 bore witness to the fact that the ordnance sergeant never went to bed again all that night, and the men sent to unload and store the ammunition that came next day from Rock Island Arsenal declared that old Waller was gruffer than ever. All the next night too, he was awake, waiting, watching for tidings from the North. Nothing came until sunset of the second day, just as the whole command was turning out for retreat parade, and then Corporal Rock rode in with dispatches and trotted straight to where the commanding officer was standing in front of the adjutant's office. All eyes were upon him as he threw himself from the saddle and handed the packet to the colonel. Half a dozen officers hastened to join their commander as he tore it open. The piazzas of the officers' quarters were quickly alive with ladies and children, breathlessly eager to hear the news. The colonel's orderly was seen hastening to the surgeon's house – that looked ominous – then Rock remounted; trotted to Captain Charlton's gate, where Mrs. Charlton was tremblingly awaiting him. "It's all right, ma'am," he hastened to say. "Leastwise the captain's safe, but Mulligan is shot – and Ryan and Sergeant Frazer." She hurried in the house with the precious letter he placed in her hands, and while several ladies hastened to join her, the messenger returned to the office.

All this while Sergeant Waller had stood like a statue under the tall white flag-staff where the non-commissioned staff assembled at retreat, watching every move with dry, aching eyes, and a face gray as his mustache.

CHAPTER III. A ROBBER IN CAMP

THE trumpet played the retreat, the sunset gun thundered its good-night to the god of day; the adjutant hurried over and received the reports of the companies, the staff, and band, and then a messenger came running to them: "Mrs. Charlton wants you, Sergeant Waller. Fred's all safe, but they had a sharp fight."

The old man could not trust himself to speak. "Listen to this, sergeant," exclaimed Mrs. Charlton, as she hurried through the little group of ladies at her doorway, and looked up in his face with tear-dimmed eyes:

"Tell Waller that in a running fight of four miles Fred rode close at my heels and no man could have shown more spirit or less fear. I am sure it was a shot from his carbine that tumbled one war pony into the Laramie; and every call he had to sound rang out clear as a bell. I'm proud of the boy."

Waller's face was twitching and working; he cleared his throat and tried to speak; he dashed his hand across his eyes and ground his heels into the gravel of the walk; he heard the kind and gentle voices of the ladies joining in the chorus of congratulation, but he could not see their faces; a mist had risen before his eyes. Even the old formula, "I thank the captain's lady," had deserted him. He mumbled some inarticulate words, and then, in dread of disastrous breakdown, turned suddenly away and strode across the drive. More than one woman was in tears. There was not a ripple of faintest laughter when it was seen that in his blindness the old sergeant had collided with the tree box at the edge of the acequia. Straight to his humble quarters he went; but they were beautiful to him, radiant with the light of joy, pride, gratitude, and love that beamed and burnt in his honest heart.

And now, a year later, all the cavalry was in the field. Gold had tempted explorers and miners innumerable to the Black Hills of Dakota – Indian land by solemn treaty. The Government warned the invaders back, but to no purpose. The Indians swarmed from the agencies and massacred all whom they could overpower. Charlton's troop had early been hurried up to Red Cloud, and now with others was engaged in the perilous work of patrolling the trails around the Indian haunts.

Two months of hard and most exciting work had they had, and still the troubles were not over; and then just after the paymaster with his iron safe and bristling escort had paid the outlying posts a visit, and Captain Charlton had been ordered in with him to attend a court-martial at Fort Laramie, there came a week that no man in "B" troop ever forgot.

Mr. Rayburn had been wounded and was in the hospital at Fort Robinson. Twenty of the men were away on escort duty, and so it happened that only young Lieutenant Blunt and about thirty troopers were left at the camp just west of the Agency. Fearful that the money, "burning" as it always does in the soldiers' pockets, would tempt his men to gamble or drink and get into mischief around the crowded post, Charlton had ordered that the troop should march at once to the Niobrara and wait there for his return. It was known, of course, that many Indian bands were out, and it promised to be adventurous. It was Mr. Blunt's first independent command, too, and he felt a trifle nervous. All went well, however, until the morning of the second day, when Sergeant Graham excitedly called his young commander, his face clouded with dismay.

"Lieutenant," he cried, "Sergeant Dawson and several men were robbed last night. The money's clean gone!"

Blunt was out of his blanket in an instant. "How much is missing?" he asked.

"I can't tell yet, sir – a good deal. But that is not the worst of it."

"What on earth could be worse?"

"Trumpeter Waller's gone, sir – deserted; taken his horse, arms, and everything!"

CHAPTER IV. SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES

LIEUTENANT BLUNT'S position on this bright July morning was most embarrassing. Personally he had known the pet trumpeter of "B" troop less than a year; for, as was said in the previous chapter, in point of actual experience on the frontier the boy was the superior of the young West Pointer, who had joined only the preceding autumn. Finding young Fred so great a favorite among the officers and men, Mr. Blunt was quite ready to accept the general verdict, although his first impression of the youngster was that he was a trifle spoiled. On the other hand no other man in the troop had so favorably impressed the new officer as the "left principal guide," Sergeant Dawson, whose dashing horsemanship, fine figure and carriage, and sharp, soldierly ways had attracted his attention at the first outset. Then Dawson's manner to him was so scrupulously deferential and soldierly on all occasions – sometimes the old war-worn sergeants would be a trifle supercilious with green subalterns – that Blunt's moderate amount of vanity was touched. He was always glad, when his turn came round as officer of the guard, to find Sergeant Dawson on the detail, and he recalled, when he came to think over the events of his first half year with the regiment that very summer, that it was when on guard he began to imagine Fred Waller was "somewhat spoiled." Twice the boy "marched on" as orderly trumpeter when he and Dawson were on the guard detail for the day, and both times the sergeant had found fault with the musician, and had most respectfully and diplomatically, but in that semi-confidential manner which shrewd old soldiers so well know how to assume to very young subalterns, given Mr. Blunt to understand that the boy "needed looking after." Months later, when Blunt and Rayburn were discussing the probabilities of promotion, when the sergeant-major of the regiment took his discharge and there was lively competition among the soldiers for this, the finest non-commissioned post in the regiment, Blunt warmly advocated Dawson's claim. "He is the nattiest sergeant in the whole command," he said, "and the smartest one I know."

"Oh, yes!" answered Rayburn with a certain superiority of manner and a quiet sarcasm that provoked the junior officer; "there's no question about Dawson's smartness. One after another every 'plebe' in the regiment starts in with the same enthusiasm about Dawson. I had it myself about eight years ago. But the trouble with him is he isn't a stayer; he can't stand prosperity."

But Blunt preferred to hold to his own views and his faith in the second sergeant of the troop. And so it happened that on this eventful morning he sent Sergeant Graham at once to investigate as to the amounts stolen during the night, and directed that Sergeant Dawson, who was in command of the herd and picket guard, should come to him immediately.

The sun was just rising above the low treeless ridges on the horizon as the lieutenant stood erect and looked about him. Close at hand the Niobrara – "the Running Water" – was brawling over its stony shallows, and the smoke of tiny cook-fires was floating upward into the keen, crisp, morning air. Northward the slopes were bare and treeless, too, but closely carpeted with the dense growth of buffalo grass. Only a few yards out from the bivouac, hopped and sidelined, the troop horses were cropping the still juicy herbage, and three or four soldiers, carbine in hand and garbed in their light-blue overcoats, were posted well out beyond the herd on every side, watching the valley far and near for any signs of Indian coming. Below the bivouac, and further from the Laramie road, was an old log hut, once used as a ranch and "bar" for thirsty souls traversing the well-worn way to the reservation; but the tide of travel had first shifted to the Sidney route, and then been stemmed entirely, so far as the line to or near the agencies was concerned, and the proprietor had taken himself and his fiery poison to better-paying fields. Far away to the southwest the blue cone of Laramie Peak stood boldly against the sky. Nearer at hand, though a day's ride away, old Rawhide Butte rose sturdily from the midst of surrounding prairie slopes. Upstream, among some sparse cottonwood, a bit of ruddy color

among the branches caught the lieutenant's quick eye. Some Indian brave, wrapped in his blanket, had been laid to rest there out of reach of the snarling coyotes, one of whom could be dimly discerned slinking away under the bank, just out of easy rifle range.

Off to the south lay the same bold, barren, desolate-looking expanse of rolling prairie. Blunt could not suppress a shudder as he thought of the terrible risk the boy had run in his mad break for the settlements beyond the Platte. Of course he could go nowhere else. North, east, and west, all was Indian land, and no lone white man could live there. Of course he was making for the cattle ranges and settlements in Nebraska. Such at least were the lieutenant's theories. He had spent only one year on the frontier, but had been there long enough to know that among the cowboys, ranchmen, and especially among the "riff-raff" ever hanging about the small towns and settlements, a deserter from the army was apt to be welcomed and protected, if he had money, arms, or a good horse. Once plundered of all he possessed, the luckless fellow might then be turned over to the nearest post and the authorized reward of thirty dollars claimed for his apprehension; but if well armed and sober, the deserter had little trouble in making his way through the toughest mining camps and settlements.

CHAPTER V. TRAILING THE TRAITOR

FRED Waller knew all the Valley of the North Platte as well as he did the trails around Sanders and Red buttes, and if he could succeed in eluding the Indian war parties, he would have no difficulty in fording the river, or swimming if necessary; and, with the start he must have had, his light weight, and powerful horse, it would be next to impossible to catch him, even if they could follow his trail. Besides, were they not ordered to remain at the Niobrara until Charlton's return? The more Mr. Blunt thought of the matter the more worried and perplexed he became. Anywhere else he might have sent a sergeant with a couple of men in pursuit, but here it would be exposing them to almost certain death. It was some minutes before Sergeant Dawson came in answer to the summons. Blunt could see the troopers gathered about the first sergeant, excitedly discussing the affair and bemoaning their individual losses. Graham was noting the amounts on a slip of paper, and his fine face was pale with distress. "Is that all now, men?" he asked as he completed the list, then sharply turned away, and once more approached his young commander.

"Lieutenant," he said, halting and raising his hand in salute, "it isn't quite so bad as I feared, but bad enough. Sergeant Farron, Corporal Watts, and I are the principal losers, besides Sergeant Dawson. Three of the men who went into the Agency on pass just after we were paid had left most of their money with me, and that is gone. I had it with my own in the flat wallet I always carried in the inside pocket of my hunting-shirt. You can see, sir, how it was done," and the sergeant displayed a long clean cut through the Indian tanned buckskin. "It took a sharp knife and a light hand to do that, for I'm not a heavy sleeper. Farron, Watts, and I were sleeping side by side just over there on the bank, and they heard nothing all the night. But will the lieutenant look at this handkerchief, sir? Is it chloroformed? I feel dull and heavy, as though I had been drugged. He couldn't have got it from me any other way."

Blunt took the bandanna and sniffed it cautiously, and then turned it over and curiously inspected it. There was certainly an odor of chloroform about it – a strong odor.

"Whose is this?" he asked. "I do not remember seeing any of the men wearing one like this."

"None of them own it, sir. I've asked the whole party but Sergeant Dawson and the men on guard. They have these cheap red things for sale at the store there at the Red Cloud Agency, but none of the troop have I ever seen wearing them; they are too small for neck handkerchiefs. Dawson is out yet, trying to locate the trail. I've sent Robbins for him," and the sergeant looked anxiously away southward, searching the prairie with a world of pain and trouble in his eyes.

"What could possibly have induced the boy to turn scoundrel all at once?" asked the lieutenant. "It will break his old father's heart."

"I can't account for it, sir. He has been as honest and square as a boy could be ever since his enlistment; but the men tell me that he has been spending a good deal of time over in the post whenever we camped there, and I am afraid, from what Donovan says, that he has been gambling with the young fellows at the band quarters. There's a hard lot in there, I'm told; and the old hands encourage the boys to get all they can out of strangers, and then they turn to and fleece the boys. It is about four hundred dollars he has taken. A man knows that will last but a little while on the frontier, but to a boy it seems a big pile."

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