



BY CAPT. CHAS. KING.

CHAPTER XIII.

Clear and sparkling Christmas morning dawned on old Fort Frayne. The clouds that obscured the moon at midnight were being blown away by a steady breeze from the westward...

Two discoveries had been made by the officer of the guard in his search after the removal of Graice, struggling and cursing savagely, to the prison-room on the second floor, where Leale himself directed him placed, instead of among the garrison prisoners in the general room. One was that the sentry had received from some source a flask of whisky after being placed on post, for half emptied, it was found in a woodpile back of the officers' quarters.

Even before the tragedy which had shocked the garrison at busy tongues had everywhere been telling of Thorp's furious denunciation of Graice and of the statement as to his claim to being the son of an officer. Members of the guard had noticed the fury that seemed to possess Graice after that episode. He slunk away from his kind as though unable to face them after having passively refused such a scoring. He had twice been refused by the sergeant permission to leave the guardhouse, as it was surmised he had liquor hidden somewhere and was craving his fiery comfort at this time.

Up to the reveille Christmas morning the word had come that the son of a command, but soon after stable call on the coming ride in with a note to Leale. "All right," he cheerily read. "We found the whole band spoiling for a fight and ready to clean out of the country anyhow, but the cowboys kept on coming and we had to wait until we got there. Then when they knew a fight wouldn't be allowed they came charging down and demanded battle or the surrender of White Wolf and his three pals. Two of the latter were half way to Crazy Woman's Fork by this time, and I do not officially know the other, so the whole village moves up under our wing and will camp on the low ground to the west of the fort. Then when the military authorities come with warrants and the assurance that the two shall have fair play and a square trial, Big Road will surrender the alleged murderers. Meantime no cowboy shall be allowed the reservation. We should be back by noon." Signed, "Fenton."

And by noon back they came, the big squad of regulars, the motley village of Indians, followed by a score of distance by an equally motley array of cowboys and citizens, and all Christmas afternoon the industrious squaws were pitching the tepees on the westward flanks, herding the ponies and cooking for their lords, while most of these latter were loitering about the post, glad of a chance to prow around the quarters and storehouses, and beg for anything they saw or fancied. As for society at Frayne, it accepted the bliss of the situation as readily as it accepted the necessity that sent the command away, and except in one or two households, all thought was centered in the briefly interrupted preparations for the festivities of the following day.

Wyoming winter days are short enough; yet this, almost the shortest of the year, had already proved too long, too trying, to more than one comparative stranger who had come to Frayne. The story of Graice's furious outbreak, of Crow Knife's devotion and dangerous wound, had gone like wildfire over the once more crowded garrison. The former, as has been said, was locked in the smaller prison-room of the guardhouse, where for a time he had been heard savagely raging at his bars and kicking at the resounding woodwork. Crow Knife, borne on a blanket to the hospital, lay silent, patient, and hovering between life and death, the captain whom he loved and for whom he had periled his life sitting steadfast by his side.

Next came the strangely still. The boom of the sunset gun and the evening cheer of the trumpets and the voices of the men at rollcall, all muffled by the fleecy fall of snow, yet there was premonition in the air, and old timers glanced at the sky and the yellow sun, and one by one they began to utter ugly wailing before the coming morn. Within the cheery messrooms, where the troopers were wont to flock with bustle and good-natured soldierly noise, mingling with the clatter of plates and knife and spoon among the cozy homes across the parade, where the families of the officers gathered at dinner, the gloom of the drunken crime, mingling with the shadows of wintry gloaming, seemed to oppress every heart, killing joyous laughter, saddening soldier tones, stifling merry quips and jests, strangling every effort to throw off the weight that had settled on old and young alike. Even among the more reckless and indifferent of the men Leale's impartiality and justice had won respect that outwitted their dread of his stern and unyielding discipline. Even those who had suffered at his hands could not but admire more than they hated him. Among nine-tenths of the troopers he was held in solid esteem, among very many in almost enthusiastic affection, but one and all they united in praise of his conduct on this trying occasion, and in deep, if not loud, denunciation of his brutalized assault. As for the other, the more reputable if red-skinned savage, the soldiers had but one opinion. Crow Knife was the whitest Indian in Wyoming, and they meant to compliment despite its unflattering possibilities. Graice himself had made no friends. A man with a grievance is never popular among soldiers, high or low, and Graice's sullen, surly ways had estranged even those in whom his mouthings against his superiors of every rank, from colonel to corporal, might possibly have responsive echo. That there should be talk of lynching was characteristic of the time and neighborhood and the associations of frontier life, and that it would come to nothing in a military garrison its most strenuous advocates fully realized.

And, all the same, despite the prevailing gloom, the preparations for the dance went on. Battle and murder and sudden death, she answered, gently. "I love to have him brought before me, as we remember him through my Koyle—my brave boy!" "Dare you wait and remember, ma'am. The handsome wild young rider—free wad his money and free wad his fists. Many's the time I've had to stand before him and his little brother—as his is my superior officer this day. Oh, but it's a fine officer he makes, does Master Will! I never see him so strait as 'hand some and martial on parade look his father before him—him that's gone to glory by the love of my soldier this day. I know him, that I don't remember him days when I was a recruit an' he was the colonel's kid. Oh, what days—what days!" and, lost in the enthusiasm of his reminiscences, Korke failed to notice that Lieutenant Farrar and Kitty had come quietly in and were standing but a little distance behind him. "Do ye remember, now, ma'am, the Christmas Master Will mounted his little pony, an' dressed up in his own, an' was to take the docther's daughter out ridin', he wud, an' in minutes later we brought him home all drippin' an' tippin' an' ragin' all along ay Corcorin's ould babby goat havin' butted him into the ditch back o' Company D's quarters, an' him ready to kill me for bustin' wid laughin'. Oh, he was a fine boy—"

And here Will came furiously forward, and Korke, horror-stricken, stiffened up to the salute. "I beg your pardon, Master Will."

"Your reminiscences are ill timed, corporal, to say the least. If you've quite finished, you'd better follow your men unless, and this he added with scathing sarcasm, and glancing at Kitty, who was convulsed with laughter—"

"Unless, perhaps, Miss Ormsby desires you to further entertain her with anecdotes of my childhood," and here Kitty burst in:

"Mercy, no! My constant effort is, out of respect to you, to forget your youth, not to recall it. Surely, you're not going to put on that horrid thing again?" she exclaimed, as Will, who had laid aside his overcoat and saber, now buckled on his weapon.

"Are you afraid I'll injure you with it?" said he, with deep sarcasm.



"LOOKED LIFE AND MY OWN SOUL IN THE FACE."

or death for Crow Knife—poor soul—at the hospital yonder, an' a rope or a punitary cell for the drunken divil in the guardhouse tower."

"What's he in the tower for?" asked Trooper Martin. "All by himself, is he? Too fine for the general room?"

"Too fine?" asked Martin, as he was, answered Korke, as he thrust himself in the general prison room. "Sure, he begged pitiful to be shut up by himself and not put like an onerous Daniel into that lion's mane!"

"What? You officer of the guard?" exclaimed Kitty. "Ah, with sudden change of manner, 'then for one night the post is safe. Here she seized Korke's broom and with a capricious imitation came to the position of charge bayonets. 'Who comes there?' she cried. 'The enemy, a million strong! Halt, enemy, and tremble! Run for your lives! Do you know who my officer is for the guard? It's Master Will. And he compliments, sir, and he says the lieutenant at right shoulder, away she marched for the dressing-room."

"She's past patience," said poor Will to the guard. "I'm sure I'm not used to that treatment at the hands of his love, and what made it worse was that numbers of people were rapidly arriving and that many had witnessed and enjoyed Kitty's saucy mockery; but right in the midst of these new arrivals came an orderly trumpet with a note which he lost no time in delivering to Mr. Farrar with the brief announcement: 'The officer of the day's compliments, sir, and he says the lieutenant should have it immediately.'"

Helen Daunta was among those who marked the swift coming of the messenger, and it was impossible for her to resist the impulse that drew her toward the young officer. Intuitively she knew that the message in some way concerned her wretched husband, now the object of the wrath and curses of the whole command. Breathless, she watched Farrar as he tore open the envelope and rapidly read the brief inclosure.

"Crow Knife is dead. There is intense excitement among the men, especially the Indians, and a threat of lynching have been going where he was perished, and may try to escape. Look well to your guard. Signed, Farwell, Officer of the Day."

"Escape from my guard," Helen heard him say. "No, it's not my own mother!" The next minute Will had caught up his cap and overcoat and started for the door.

But already Kitty had begun to repent of her experiment, and to question whether she had not hazarded too much in thus provoking her devoted but none the less peevy lover. Peering from the dressing-room she saw him dart past Helen Daunta, and giving very brief answer to some question, asked, saw him pick up his overcoat and coat, and that was more than enough to bring her to terms. Unaware of the coming of the orderly, she looked upon Will's preparation for departure as proof positive that he was angry against her, as to have decided to quit the ballroom for good and all. In an instant she came fluttering to his side, catching him only at the very doorway.

"Where are you going, Mr. Farrar?" she demanded, aggrieved and imploring, both. "You're engaged to me for the very first dance, sir. Surely, you're not going out!"

I regret to have to ask for my release, Miss Ormsby, answered Will, with infinite dignity, "but duty of unusual importance called me at once. My saber and I made sport for you a moment ago, and now we have to go. I'm sure you'll understand, and, bowing very low and looking very majestic, the officer of the guard turned and abruptly left the room, leaving his late tormentor gazing after him with eyes that suddenly filled and lips that quivered sus-

piciously. Ellis saw through it all at once and came to comfort her.

Strange to say, the young officers were laughing but slowly to-night, and several of their names were given. The musicians were in their places and already awaiting the signal of the ball manager, but Leale's absence was remarked by many of the officers, and when Fenton entered, his face, usually so placid, was clouded and anxious. Ormsby was with him, and his eyes seemed to seek and find Ellis at once. Kitty was just turning away as they came.

"I think all promises are at an end between us," was the cold, constrained reply. "I forget nothing. I remember only too well."

"These are last words we can have alone for I have determined to go, and by the very next train. I appeal no longer for your love. The girl who has not learned to love cannot learn to love, but do not pass blind, cruel judgment on the innocent woman whose secret I am shielding at the cost of what is dearest to me in life."

"But she was immovable. Like the soldier, she here refused to be moved. He squarely in the eyes as he answered: 'Neither an innocent woman nor an innocent secret can need shielding at such a cost.'"

"Ellis," he began, his voice trembling with passion, as he stepped close to her side, but she recoiled from him, and noting it and the entrance of new arrivals he struggled the impulse that swayed him. For a moment's silence continued in a tone as cold as her own. "No, I see it is useless. The last word is said. But we cannot forget the world is looking on tonight. You will give me—this dance?"

He inclined his head in assent, but would not trust himself to speak. Even now, when angered and full of jealous distrust, she cared for him far too well not to note the sudden change in tone, not to feel vague yet deep distress that he had again asked her to do what he had determined to leave her this very night; that he would plead no more.

CHAPTER XIV.

An hour later and the long-expected Christmas ball was in full swing, but the music that snared the dancers was deflected, for just as Corporal Korke had predicted, a howling blizzard was sweeping down from the gorges of the Rockies, and whirling deep the drifts about the walls of old Frayne. The snow continued in a tone as cold as her own. "No, I see it is useless. The last word is said. But we cannot forget the world is looking on tonight. You will give me—this dance?"

"Possibly not. He seems to be sleeping. But he will know it soon enough. Helen—do you know this—that to-morrow we must give him up?"

"Give him up?" she asked, unable to comprehend his meaning, and looking with new dread into his compassionate face.

"Yes, to the civil authorities. He has committed murder and must be tried by a civil not a military court."

"You must give him up," she moaned. "Oh, what can we do—what can we do?"

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imperious queen, who promptly stowed it away under the wooden settee against the wall, and then, bowing to her partner, indicated to him that at last he was at liberty to lead her to the dance.

And now, smiling, joyous and once more thrilling with mischievous delight, as she bore her sulky prize across the room, Kitty came suddenly upon the major, standing, mooning and preoccupied, gazing, apparently, at the portrait of Colonel Farrar, yet, as was equally apparent to the little knot of laughing lookers-on, seeing it not at all.

"I think all promises are at an end between us," was the cold, constrained reply. "I forget nothing. I remember only too well."

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language entirely, and, groping for his glasses, finding them, distractedly he tried to fit them on Lucretia's finger.

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gerer though he was, he, Private Tom Grace, born Royce Farrar, was legal owner of all that his captain held faires, dearest, most precious in all the world. Leale's love for Helen Daunta was something the whole garrison had seen, and seen with hearty sympathy. It would be some time to teach this proud and honored officer, was, after all, a man to be envied as the husband of the woman his captain could now only vainly and hopelessly love. It was his plan to bargain with him, to make his aid to tempt the honor of a soldier and a gentleman, but for a moment at sight of that stern, sad face, he stood abashed.

"I've got that to say I want no other man to know," was the reply after an interval of a few seconds, "and I want your word of honor that you will hold it sacred."

"I decline any promise whatever. What do you wish to say?"

"Well, what I have to tell you interests you more than any man on earth, Captain Leale. I'm in hell here—I'm at your mercy here, because by accident that knife went into that blind fool's veins. It was only self-defense. I didn't mean to hurt him."

"That's all right, I clearly understand," said Leale; "go on."

"Well, it's as man to man I want to speak. As you know I never meant to harm him. You can give me a chance for justice for me and I—I can make it worth your while."

"That'll do," was the stern response. "No more on that head. What else have you to ask or say?"

"Listen one minute," pleaded the prisoner. "They'll kill me here if they don't get me, quick enough—Indians or troopers, either. I must be helped away. I know your secret—you love my wife. Help me out of this—here—this night, and neither she nor I will ever be seen again."

"Silence, you hound! Slink back to your blanket where you belong. I thank God, my friend, your father never lived to know the depths of your disgrace! Not a word shall I utter with uplifted hand to the miserable fellow strove once more to make himself heard."

"For the sake of the name to which you have brought shame you shall be protected against Indian vengeance, but you shall defend me against myself! I will hear no more of you. To-morrow you may see your colonel, if that will do you any good; but if you have one atom of decency left tell no man living that you are Royce Farrar, and once more sprang heedless of further frantic pleas, turned and left the spot."

But at the porch the captain turned him back. Wind and snow were driving across his path. The sentries are at the front and flank of the guardhouse, muffled to their very eyes, staggered against the force of the gale. It seemed cruelty to keep honest men in the post a night so wild, for no other reason than to protect the life of a man so criminal. The members of the guard who had resumed their lounge about the red-hot stove the moment the captain disappeared, once more sprang to attention as he re-entered and called the sergeant to him.

"I am tempted to ask the officer of the day to relieve those sentries, and let No. 1 come in into the hallway," said he. "I believe that with the wind that is blowing on the Indians there is no possibility of an outbreak on their part."

"There isn't a bit of it," was the sergeant's prompt reply. "But every man in the garrison knows that you're a man of honor, for no other reason than to protect the life of a man so criminal. The members of the guard who had resumed their lounge about the red-hot stove the moment the captain disappeared, once more sprang to attention as he re-entered and called the sergeant to him."

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"SILENCE, YOU HOUND!"

Thinking only of him and for him, she, too, then was almost unconscious of any observation, kindly and good-natured though it was.

Unwilling to interrupt too suddenly the current of his meditations, she hesitated before speaking. Then, half timidly, she suggested, "You like the picture, major?"

Slowly his gaze came down from the flag-draped portrait, and through his eyelashes Wayne benignly regarded her. Finally his wandering wits returned and he roused himself to faltering answer to her repeated question. "It makes him look too old," he said. "I can't bear anything that looks old, don't you know?"

Then dimly conscious of something he might have put in far happier form he quickly strove to recall his words. "I—I don't mean women, course—like old women. You know I liked you twenty years ago."

"You left me to guess it, then," murmured she, vaguely grateful for what this admission of emotions, encouraging avowals even thus late and lukewarm.

"Yes," he went on, "you know it seems to me—wasn't it that last night we danced together at Jefferson barracks? That was every day of twenty years ago."

"Ah, well," answered Lucretia, "you know it is so very difficult to reckon from, because that was the 29th of February, and that coming only once in four years, you—"

"Hah!" Wayne laughingly interrupted, and then suddenly fell back again into his old mooning way. "And yet, you know, there was something I wanted to ask you that night, and I was so confoundedly absent-minded—"

"Oh, very," said she, "for you mentioned that there was something you wanted to ask me, and I have—I've been wondering what it could have been for twenty years."

"Do you know," said he, delightfully, "so have I—so have I. And here he leaned beamingly over her and his eyelashes fell on, and dangled at the ends of their cords. "It was on that night," he went on. "It came to me that it was something connected with this ring—my class ring, you know. It's odd I can't think what it was. Why your hand is so coyly trembling. Delightedly she upraised it to meet the coming ring and then again he faltered.

dozen of his kindred from Big Road's transplanted village, forbidden by the fury of the storm to return to their tepees up the valley, banished by the surgeon from the confines of the hospital where they would have lain set up their mournful death song to the distraction of the patients, and refused by the colonel the creature comforts that he promptly and firmly demanded, except on condition that they consume them in quiet and decorum at the Indian barracks and deny themselves the luxury of their woe. Tomtom and howl were stilled, therefore, while the funeral-baked meats went from hand to mouth, and disappeared with marvelous rapidity, and, indeed, but for its exciting effect upon the warriors, the colonel might as well have accorded them the right to lament after their own fashion, since the howling of the tempest would have drowned all human wail from within the wooden walls. But, while they had promised to hold no aboriginal ceremony over Crow or his death, a man meant to keep their word, they had refused to pledge themselves to attempt no vengeance on his slayer. Well they knew that, throughout the garrison, nine out of ten of the troopers would have ached not a moment to have some one take him to the guardhouse and strung him up to the old flagstaff without the benefit of ideas, this would not have satisfied Indian ideas—changing according to their creed being far too good for them. Two of the oldest and most trustworthy Indians were placed by Leale, with the surgeon's consent, as watchers by the tier of the soldier scout, but the others to a man were herded within the barracks and forbidden to attempt to set foot outside. Close at hand in the adjoining quarters the men of two troops were held in readiness, under orders not to take off their belts, against any sudden revival, but a few of the old timers talked of lynching or other summary vengeance had soon been hushed to silence. What was feared among the officers was that Graice had been told by some of the guard, perhaps of the old timers, of his whereabouts, and that he had determined to set foot outside. Close at hand in the adjoining quarters the men of two troops were held in readiness, under orders not to take off their belts, against any sudden revival, but a few of the old timers talked of lynching or other summary vengeance had soon been hushed to silence. What was feared among the officers was that Graice had been told by some of the guard, perhaps of the old timers, of his whereabouts, and that he had determined to set foot outside. 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