

THE DESERTER. By Capt. CHARLES KING, U. S. A.

Author of "Dunbar's Ranch," "The Colonel's Daughter," "Martin's Faith," etc., etc.

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CHAPTER XVII.

The morning report of the following day showed some items under the head of "Alterations" that involved several of the soldier characters of this story.

"What were they?" he asked Rayner, pressing his hand to his forehead and gazing fixedly at his assistant.

"Never mind! Don't fret!" the adjutant darted in and plunged with his characteristic impetuosity into the pile of papers and other papers stacked up by the sergeant major at his table.

"I am somewhat late this morning, gentlemen, and several matters will occupy my attention; so I will not detain you further."

"The crowd seemed to find their feet very slowly. There was visible disinclination to go. Every man in some inexplicable way appeared to know that there was a new mystery hanging over the garrison, and that the colonel held the key."

"Rayner arose, and seemed to be making preparations to depart with the others, and some of the number, connecting him unerringly with the prevailing conversation, appeared to look back and wait for him to precede them and so secure to themselves the satisfaction of knowing that, if it was a matter connected with Rayner, they "had him along" and nothing could take place without their hearing it."

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"If that were true, Kate, there would be this difference between his trouble and Mr. Hayne's: Capt. Rayner would have wife, wealth and friends to help him bear the cross; Mr. Hayne has borne it five long years unaided. I pray God the truth has been brought to light."

"What fierce reply Mrs. Rayner might have given, who knows? but at that instant a quick step was heard on the piazza, the door opened suddenly, and Capt. Rayner entered, as if by magic."

"Nothing else in the world, Kate. I don't understand it. It clears Hayne utterly. It at least explains how I was mistaken. But what could she have meant?"

"Mrs. Rayner stood like one in a dream, her eyes staring, her lips quivering; and Nellie, with throbbing pulses and clasping hands, looked eagerly from husband to wife, as though beseeching some explanation."

"What did she mean? What did she mean? I say again," asked Rayner, pressing his hand to his forehead and gazing fixedly at his assistant.

"No, sir. Clancy's all right; he was caught last evening, and hadn't time to get more than half drunk before they lodged him. Lieutenant Hayne got him, sir. They had him afore a justice of the peace early this morning."

"Yes, I know all that. What I want is Mrs. Clancy. What has become of her?"

"Faith, I don't know, sir, but the women in Sudsville they all say she's run away, sir—taken her money and gone. She's afraid of Clancy's peaching on her."

"By heavens! the thing is clearing itself!" exclaimed Rayner, with his gasping and wild-eyed wife. "I must go to the colonel at once with his news. And away he went."

"And then again, as the orderly retired, and the sisters were left alone, Nellie Travers with trembling lips asked the captain:

"Have I done so much harm, after all, Kate?"

"Oh, Nellie! Nellie! forgive me, for I have been nearly mad with misery!" was Mrs. Rayner's answer, as she burst into a fresh paroxysm of tears.

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