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Starlight Ranch and Other Stories of Army Life on the Frontier

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Starlight Ranch

AND

OTHER STORIES OF ARMY

LIFE ON THE FRONTIER.

BY

CAPTAIN CHARLES KING, U.S.A.

AUTHOR OF

"MARION'S FAITH," "THE COLONEL'S
DAUGHTER," ETC.

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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 [Pg 6] 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?" [Pg 7]

"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 sen-

ior first lieutenant, Gleason; and so much did it [Pg 8] 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. [Pg 9] 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 [Pg 10] 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. [Pg 11] 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. [Pg 12] 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 [Pg 13] 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 [Pg 14] 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 [Pg 15] 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 cer [Pg 16] tain,—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. [Pg 17] 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. [Pg 18]

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 '*bailles*' 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 [Pg 19] 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." [Pg 20]

"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 [Pg 21] 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, [Pg 22] 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 [Pg 23] 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 [Pg 24] 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 sideline. 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?" [Pg 25]