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NO. 52.

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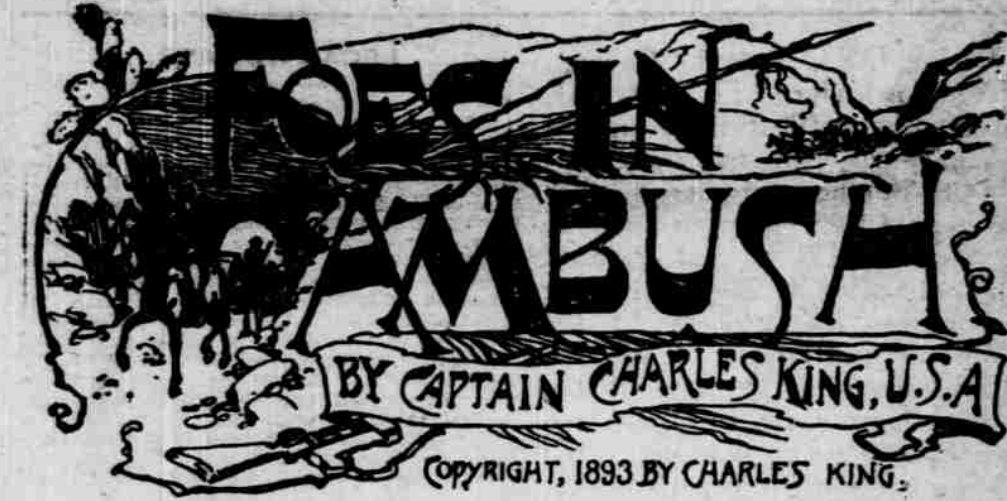
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CHAPTER IV.

And now, with such confirmation of the truth of the story of an Apache raid, the paymaster thought it only right to release Moreno from the distress in which Sergeant Feeny had placed him. When so old an inhabitant of Arizona as Mr. Harvey gave entire credence to the report, recognized the note as really his son's handwriting and assented at all speed to undertake the pursuit, what room for doubt could be left in the mind of a newcomer to the soil? It was time, thought Plummer, to form an alliance, offensive and defensive, with the Mexican denizens of the ranch against the enemy common to both. But again Feeny shook his head in solemn protest.

"I may have been wrong as to the Apaches, sir, but I can't be mistaken as to Moreno. He's in the pay of the Morales brothers, even if not an active member of the gang. He is lurking in there now, I'll warrant you, with two or three of them in hiding, waiting for the coming of the main body. They've been here before this perhaps if it hadn't been for the Apache story. They're more afraid of one Cochise's band than of all the sheriffs from Tucson to Tacoma. I wish the rest of Harvey's people would get here, I hope."

"Long looking into the eyes of the sergeant, Plummer waddled off in the direction of the sound.

"What is it, sergeant?"

"They're coming, sir. Harvey's men, I mean. Will you deliver his message?"

"Just as you say. Why shouldn't you?"

"It'll have so much more effect from your lips, major. They may misdo me."

Far out on the trail the quick tripping hoofs of horses could not be heard. Presently a horseman shot up out of the gloom.

"Halt there!" sang out Feeny.

"Whose party's this?"

"Harvey's, Tucson. Looking for Moreno's. Are we near?"

"You're there now, but you can't stop. Mr. Harvey wants you to come right along after him. He has taken the trail to the Christoval, where the Indians have carried off his daughters."

The man fairly reeled in his saddle, shocked at the dreadful tidings.

"When? How did it happen? Who's gone with him?"

"Some time this morning, from all we can learn. Two squads of cavalry are on the trail, one with Ned Harvey, the other just out from here at dark. The old man and George followed them as soon as they got in. Who's with you?"

"Two Mexicans, that's all. They're no account. I'd best leave them here with the mules. They've been behind and have been scared to death already."

And so in 10 minutes two more of the low caste half bred Mexicans were added to the paymaster's garrison, and Sergeant Feeny's brief expedition of the situation at the ranch only delayed the incoming American long enough to water his horse and stow a little grain in a sack.

"I wouldn't wonder a d---d bit if the Morales gang were around here," was his discouraging assurance. "None of 'em have been seen about Tucson for a week before we left. Wish I could stay and stand by you, but my first duty is with Mr. Harvey. I've been in his camp night and day since he left."

"What sort of looking man is Ned Harvey?" persisted the sergeant, still hopeful of some fraud.

"Tall, dark, smooth face—looks like a Spaniard, almost. I never saw anybody who resembled him hereabouts. I'm afraid it's no plant. I don't want to offend you, sergeant, but I wish to God it was all the Morales gang's doings and that it was only your money they were after. If it's Apaches, and they have got the old man's children, he'll never get over it."

"By heaven!" muttered Feeny to himself as the loyal fellow put spurs to his horse and disappeared. "By heaven, I begin to believe it's no plant."

And now with gloomy face the sergeant returned to where he had left Major Plummer watching the westward trail. A brief word at the doorway assured him the clerk was still alert and ready. A pane under the open window, high above the ground, of the room where slept Moreno's wife and daughter, if they slept at all, told him that all was silence there, if not slumber, and then he joined his superior.

"That fellow was of the right sort, sergeant," said Plummer. "I wish we had one or two like him."

"I wish we had, sir. Those greasers are worse than no guards at all. They'll sit there in the corral and smoke papayas by the hour and brag about how they fought their way through the Apaches with Harvey's mules, but for our purpose they're worse than useless. At the first sign of an attack they'd be stampeding out into the darkness, and

they ever put up," he burst in, grinding his teeth in wrath. "Of course you mean to say that the morrow is of mine. They know everything. They knew we were to meet here probably. They felt assured you knew nothing of it at all. They have used our supposed peril to draw away your guard. They have succeeded ever better than they planned, for they have drawn off father, too, and four of our best men into the bargain. But to think that this old scoundrel Moreno should be in it! We've always suspected the Certero, but father has done everything for Moreno, practically built his ranch for him, dug his well, set him up in business, and now he makes this a rendezvous for thugs and assassins. By heaven, I'm glad you have him trapped. How many has he with him do you think?"

"I don't know. I only feel sure he must have one or two, but it's the main gang we have to watch," answered Feeny. "They may be along any minute, and I think it was then when we heard you."

"And that's what is worrying me, Mr. Harvey," said the major as he drew the young man aside. "All they do after now, of course, is my safe fall of money. It is my business to defend it to the last, and they can't have it without a fight. You and your sisters evidently they would not molest, but by this time they know you are here. Very possibly they've followed closely on your trail and may be gathering all around us at this moment. Let me be brief. The sooner you can hitch in those mules again, or those relay mules rather, and get out of here the better. I'll be with you, but about the Apaches in the Santa Maria? We would get there, you know, just about daybreak."

"By Jupiter, I never thought of them! You wouldn't have your guard now that your father's gone?"

"No. We've simply got to stay here, major. Personally I'm only too glad to be here to help you out. I cannot be long before the troops come hurrying back when they find they've been tricked. Very probably they have found it out by this time. Then, with quick decision, he stepped back to the door of the Concord. "Girls! Paquita! Ruthie! Tumble out, both of you. We're to stay here at Moreno's tonight. And, the paymaster adding, "The silent, trembling sisters were lifted from the wagon and led away into the one guestroom—the east room—where, pistol in hand, sat Dave Dawson. The wraps and pillows were quickly packed in. The little hurricane lamp was stood in one corner. A hun-

Run around into the corral and smash the first man that tries to come out. I'll tend to any fellow that shows a head."

Harvey turned with his employee and ran with him as far as the other end of the ranch. Here he entered the low doorway. The little lamp burned dimly, but two pairs of dark dilated eyes gazed eagerly upon him.

"I'm going to close this door now, girls," he whispered. "Lie still. Do not venture near it or the window and don't be frightened. It looks as though some of the Morales gang were around here hoping to find the paymaster unguarded. We'll give them a lesson they'll never forget if they attempt to attack him."

For all answer Ruth Harvey only needed closer to her sister and clung to her for courage and support. Paquita, however, became amazingly at once.

"Is there nothing I can do, Ned? I can't bear to lie here listening and talking no part. Surely I could shoot a pistol well enough."

"You can help us best and most by lying flat and showing not so much as a finger at the door. We can tend to them, Fan. It won't be long before father and the troop come galloping back. Don't show a light, now, unless we call."

Then he darted to the barroom.

"Are they coming?" hailed the clerk in a hoarse whisper.

"Somebody signaled out on the plain. It's probably they. Look out for Moreno now. Don't let him or anybody through that door."

Far out on the desert again, louder, shriller, clearer, the whistle was repeated.

"Ah, blow and be d---d to ye!" muttered Feeny. "There's no answer from here, ye'll get this night. Watch out now. Some of 'em will try to crawl up after a little."

But nearly five minutes passed without other sign or sound. Then closer in a horse stamped and snorted. A fierce light gleamed in the darkness. Feeny, crouching low, darted into the darkness in the direction of the sound. Plummer and Harvey would have restrained him, but it was too late. He was gone before either could speak. Then a second horse snorted and he hid them, and slowly and cautiously the wooden shutter began to open outward. In an instant Harvey had raised his rifle and struck the rebounding board a fierce blow with the butt. The door flew back, crashing in violent contact against the grizzled pate of Moreno himself, who, with a howl of mingled rage and anguish, fell back from the aperture.

"Open that again, and I'll blow your head off, you scoundrel!" growled Harvey. "Don't you dare show hair nor hide outside your room. Every man has orders to shoot you on sight, if that's any comfort to you."

"The voice and the old Mexican's head appeared, only an instant had he for plea or protestation, but that instant had served to show a narrow streak of light from the room within. A second hand appeared, holding the watchful eyes upon the plain the position of the ranch—possibly told them something more, for in less than half a minute two horsemen came lumbering up out of the darkness and centering their eyes upon the ranch. The first was a man, the second a pack, the pack as he was, old Plummer's nerves gave a twitch as, sharp and stern, young Harvey challenged.

"Halt there! Who are you? Halt! or we fire!"

"Friends," shouted one of the "Americans," the other, as promptly the order to halt was obeyed, the trained horses going almost on their haunches under the cruel force of the huge Mexican.

"We are seeking Moreno's," continued the first voice. "The Apaches jumped our outfit just after sunset, and we had to run for it."

"What's the name of the man you all told?" demanded Harvey.

"Only two. Two we're partners, prospecting. Been down toward the Sonora line. For the Lord's sake, gentlemen, don't keep us out here. We've lost everything we've had—packs, packers and grub. We're about dead beat for a drink and something to eat."

"What do you think of this, major?" whispered Harvey. "Those are American accents."

"Well, 'd let 'em in," said the major, "but where the devil's Feeny? He's the best judge, really. Their story may be all true. They may be alone."

"I don't know—it isn't likely. You heard that voice out there a moment ago. That was Mexican beyond any doubt. We've got to stand those fellows off till we hear from Feeny."

Then, raising his voice, Harvey called: "Just stay where you are a moment. We're all right perhaps, but our guards have orders to be on the lookout for Morales and his gang, and you might get shot by mistake."

"Well, for God's sake, turn out your men, you've got any, and help us out here. We're all right, but we're the impatient reply. "How many are you?"

"Oh, there's plenty of us here," was Harvey's cheery answer. "Most of G troop, but we've other business on hand."

The order to halt was obeyed just now. You wait there quietly for a minute or two until the sergeant comes around with the patrol. He'll see to you."

Grasping their rifles with nervous hands, the five men stood huddling in a little group at the west end of the low, flat building.

Somewhere out on the dark expanse toward the peak a long, low whistle, ending in an abrupt high note, had sounded. For a moment there was no repetition. The invisible foe was signaling for reply. From whom could answer be expected?

"Watch the old scoundrel's window there and this shutter over here," whispered the sergeant, indicating a board covered port in the westward wall. "They'll try to show a light perhaps,

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"Where away are they?" Then in a low tone, "Go you out beyond the corral," he whispered to old Plummer. "There's four of them out there. Challenge if they try to come in. Then aloud again, "Shure, I don't see any thing, sentry."

"Right out ahead there, sergeant. Two men, mounted."

"Come down, one of ye. Dismount and come in here. I have your gun behind. Give your reins to your pal there," was Feeny's next demand.

There was a moment of hesitation, a faint sound of whispering as though the self styled prospectors were in consultation, and again Feeny spoke in a tone more sharp and imperative: "Dismount, one of ye. Come in here, or I'll send a bullet for your cards. Quick now."

Still another delay. "The prospectors" seemed anxious to edge off into deeper darkness.

"If ye're not off that horse's back in 10 seconds, he jabs, I'll fire. So be lively." And as his excitement rose so did Feeny's Irish.

Four seconds ticked by, and still there was no approach. Fiercely, with sharp emphasis, the sergeant brought his carbine to full cock. "It's aiming I am," said he as he quickly raised the butt to his shoulder. There was a sudden scurry and scramble of horses' hoofs, low voiced words of warning and a muttered curse or two. Then leaped a tongue of fire into the night, and from the corral corner came a sharp report, followed by a cry, a surge, a groan, then silence.

"My God! they've shot the major!" exclaimed Harvey as he leaped away in the direction of the shot. At the same moment away sped the two horsemen in front of the post. No use to fire. They were shrouded in thick darkness and out of harm's way before one could pull trigger. Then came two flashes, two quick reports, then half a dozen rapid, sputtering revolver shots, then a second horse ran out on the plain. Feeny ran like a deer on the trail of Mr. Harvey, and in less time than it takes to tell it came upon the paymaster, sinking, shocked and nervous to the sandy soil, his hands clasping on his side.

"Pick him up, you and your man there. Carry him into the ranch. I'll bait back those blackguards yet," muttered Feeny as he took a quick snap shot at scoundrel who had fired across the plain and sent another into the darkness, aiming vaguely where he could hear the thud of horses' hoofs. For a moment, running from point to point after each discharge, he kept up a rapid fusillade, under cover of which the hapless paymaster was born swiftly away around the corner of the ranch and carried into the bar, where, wild with anxiety, but faithful to his trust, Mr. Dawson still guarded the safe. Then Harvey stepped through the narrow doorway to the eastern room.

"I have to borrow the lamp a moment, Fan," he whispered. "Now, lie still. We may have to stand a siege awhile until father can reach us."

Two minutes more, bending low and with his last cartridge crammed into the chamber of his carbine, Feeny turned to make a run for the ranch. Just as he came speeling in from the westward wall the wooden shutter was hurled open, and a strange voice, loud, exultant, strident, burst upon his ear.

"Come on, Paqual! Come!"

But the rest was lost in the roar of Feeny's ready weapon. The rules of a cascade of adobe blazed red one instant in the flash of the carbine, and the loud report went bellowing out across the plain. But within the ranch there came up a wall of terror and dismay, for Ramon Morales had through the brain, was stretched lifeless at the foot of Moreno and his shuddering wife.

And then Feeny, unscathed, leaped inside the barroom.

"Now for it, men! Drag in those two drunken brute bastards," he cried, laying hold of Mullan's limp carcass. "Lug in wan of them water jars. Stick their d---d heads into that trough, begant. Now be lively. The whole gang'll be on us in less than a minute."

CHAPTER V.

At midnight the situation at Moreno's ranch was a strange one. The occupants of the two rooms furthest to the east were being besieged by 10 or 15 outlawed men, some Mexican, some "gringo," but all cutthroats, and up to this moment the besieged had had the best of it.

And yet their plight was desperate. In the easternmost room, secure from bullet or missile of any kind so long as they crouched close to the ground and back from the doorway, lay trembling in silence old Harvey's daughters. At the door, only the barrel of his rifle protruding, keeping under cover all he possibly could behind an improvised parapet of barley bags, knelt their devoted brother, cool and determined, every now and then whispering words of hope and encouragement in the adjoining room, connected with the eastern chamber by a doorless aperture through the adobe wall, lay the paymaster, sorely wounded, but still conscious and fluky, his faithful clerk ministering to him as best he could, staunching the flow of blood and comforting him with cool water.

At the doorway opening on the hard, cramped space at the southern front of the ranch, sheltering himself behind his breastwork of barley, but never relaxing vigilant watch, knelt Sergeant Paqual, a bandana bound about his forehead, the blood trickling down his right cheek, the sleeve of his flannel shirt rent by a bullet that just grazed the upper arm. Kneeling on the bottom and peeping through a hole in the bottom of the wooden window shutter, one of Harvey's men kept guard. The other faced the doorway into Moreno's domestic apartments, every now and then letting drive a shot through the woodwork to keep them, as he said,



At the door knelt their devoted brother. All the soldiers were gone, he said, except the "pig of a sergeant" and two drugged and senseless swine. Somebody among them was wounded. There were only three, possibly four. Let his companions make a combined attack, two or three through his (Moreno's) rooms, two or three rush in from the corral, and the same number from the south front at once, and beyond doubt the cursed Yankees would succumb. Then the sergeant, who was the men. His connection with the outlaw band was now known, and these witnesses must be put to death. Then when the paymaster's safe could readily be battered open, then there was the mint of money to be divided among the victors, then away to Sonora with their spoil and with old Harvey's beautiful daughters. What ransom would he not be willing to pay—that proud, disdainful father! Was ever luck so great? But haste! haste—no moment could be lost. They must act at once.

And so Morales hurried to station and instruct his men. Prowling like coyotes through the darkness and at respectful distance from the guarded end of the corral ranch, half a dozen of the number crept into the corral. Others were distributed over the southern front. Three of the lighter and more slender of the band were "boasted" through the high window into Moreno's domain. Then through the middle room they made their way, where sat the senora, rocking, weeping and moaning over the body of the outlaw leader, where, hiding under the bed, shivering and praying, crouched the senora's heir daughter, and then, barefooted, they crept into the room adjoining the bar and listened, breathless, to the low toned instructions of the veteran sergeant. From without no glimmer of light could guide the assailants or help them in their aim. There were marks for night shooting, and the more enterprising and adventurous, crawling like snakes to reconnoiter, were soon able to report that most scientifically had the defenses thrown up their breastworks.

From group to group fitted Paqual. At his shrill battery all hands were to rush simultaneously to the attack. [CONTINUED ON FOURTH PAGE.]