

# **FOES IN AMBUSH**

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Foes in ambush by Charles King

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**CHARLES KING**

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AMBUSH**



# Foes in Ambush

BY

CAPTAIN CHARLES KING



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## FOES IN AMBUSH.

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### I.

THE sun was just going down, a hissing globe of fire and torment. Already the lower limb was in contact with the jagged backbone of the mountain chain that rimmed the desert with purple and gold. Out on the barren, hard-baked flat in front of the corral, just where it had been unhitched when the paymaster and his safe were dumped soon after dawn, a weather-beaten ambulance was throwing unbroken a mile-long shadow towards the distant Christobal. The gateway to the east through the Santa Maria, sharply notched in the gleaming range, stood a day's march away,—a day's march now only made by night, for this was Arizona, and from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same anywhere south of that curdling mud-bath, the Gila, the only human beings impervious to the fierceness of its rays were the Apaches. "And they," growled the paymaster, as he petulantly snapped the lock of his little safe, "they're no more human than so many hyenas."

A big man physically was the custodian and dis-

burser of government greenbacks,—so big that, as he stepped forth through the aperture in the hot adobe wall, he ducked his head to avert unwilling contact with its upper edge. Green-glass goggles, a broad-brimmed straw hat, a pongee shirt, loose trousers of brown linen, and dust-colored canvas shoes made up the outer man of a personality as distinctly unmilitary as it was ponderous. Slow and labored in movement, the major was correspondingly sluggish in speech. He sauntered out into the glare of the evening sunshine and became slowly conscious of a desire to swear at what he saw: that, though in a minute or two the day-god would “douse his glim” behind the black horizon, no preparation whatever had been made for a start. There stood the ambulance, every bolt and link and tire hot as a stove-lid, but not a mule in sight. Turning to his left, he strolled along towards a gap in the adobe wall, and entered the dusty interior of the corral. One of the four quadrupeds drowsing under the brush shelter languidly turned an inquiring eye and interrogative ear in his direction, and conveyed, after the manner of the mule, a suggestion as to supper. A Mexican boy sprawling in the shade of a bale of government hay, and clad in cotton shirt and trousers well-nigh as brown as the skin that peeped through occasional gaps, glanced up at him with languid interest an instant, and then resumed the more agreeable con-



temptation of the writhings of an impaled tarantula. Under another section of the shed two placid little burros were dreamily blinking at vacancy, their grizzled fronts expressive of that ineffable peace found only in the faces of saints and donkeys. In the middle of the enclosure a rude windlass coiled with rope stood stretching forth a decrepit lever-arm. The whippetree, dangling from the end over the beaten circular track, seemed cracked with heat and age. The stout rope that stretched tautly from the coil passed over a wooden wheel, and disappeared through a broad-framed aperture into the bowels of the earth. Close at hand in the shade of a brush-covered "leanto" hung three or four huge *ollas*, earthen water-jars, swathed in gunny sack and blanket. Beyond them, warped out of all possibility of future usefulness, stood what had once been the running gear of a California buck-board. Behind it dangled from dusty pegs portions of leather harness, which all the neat's-foot oil of the military pharmacopœia could never again restore to softness or pliability. A newer edition of the same class of vehicle was covered by a canvas "'paulin." A huge stack of barley bags was piled at the far end of the corral, guarded from depredation (quadrupedal) by a barrier of wooden slats, mostly down, and by a tattered biped, very sound asleep.

"Where's the sergeant?" queried the paymaster,

slowly, addressing no one in particular, but looking plaintively around him.

Still leaning a brown chin on a nearly black hand, and stirring up his spider with the forked stick he held in the other paw, the boy simply tilted his head towards the dark opening under the farther end of the shed, an aperture that seemed to lead to nothing but blackness beyond.

“What’s he doing?”

“No sa-a-abe,” drawled the boy, never lifting his handsome eyes from the joys before him.

“Why hasn’t he harnessed up?”

A shrug of the shoulders was the only reply.

“Hey?”

“No sa-a-abe,” slowly as before.

“What’s your name?”

“José.”

“Well, here, José, you go and tell him I want him.”

The boy slowly pulled himself together and found his feet; started reluctantly to obey; glanced back at his captive, now scuttling off for freedom; turned again, scotched him with his forked stick, and then with a vicious “huh!” drove the struggling Araneid into the sandy soil. This done, he lounged off towards the dark corner in the wall of the ranch and dove out of sight.

Presently there slowly issued from this recess a sturdy form in dusty blue blouse, the sleeves of which were decorated with chevrons in far-faded yellow. Under the shabby slouch hat a round, sun-blistered, freckled face, bristling with a week-old beard, peered forth at the staff official with an expression half of languid tolerance, half of mild irritation. In most perfunctory fashion the soldier just touched the hat-rim with his forefinger, then dropped the hand into a convenient pocket. It was plain that he felt but faint respect for the staff rank and station of the man in goggles and authority.

"Sergeant Feeny, I thought I told you I wanted everything ready to start at sunset."

"You did, sir, and then you undid it," was the prompt and sturdy reply.

The paymaster stood irresolute. Through the shading spectacles of green his eyes seemed devoid of any expression. His attitude remained unchanged, thumbs in the low-cut pockets of his wide-flapping trousers, shoulders meek and drooping.

"W-e-ll," he finally drawled, "you understood I wanted to get on to Camp Stoneman by sunrise, didn't you? Didn't my clerk, Mr. Dawes, tell you?"

"He did, yes, sir, and you don't want to get there no more than I do, major. But I told you flat-footed if you let Donovan and those other men go back on