

**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 Charles King

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CHARLES KING

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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 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?"

"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 senior first lieutenant, Gleason; and so much did it