

## Van

**Charles King**

He was the evolution of a military horse-trade,--one of those periodical swappings required of his dragoons by Uncle Sam on those rare occasions when a regiment that has been dry-rotting half a decade in Arizona is at last relieved by one from the Plains. How it happened that we of the Fifth should have kept him from the clutches of those sharp horse-fanciers of the Sixth is more than I know. Regimental tradition had it that we got him from the Third Cavalry when it came our turn to go into exile in 1871. He was the victim of some temporary malady at the time,--one of those multitudinous ills to which horse-flesh is heir,--or he never would have come to us. It was simply impossible that anybody who knew anything about horses should trade off such a promising young racer so long as there remained an unpledged pay-account in the officers' mess. Possibly the arid climate of Arizona had disagreed with him and he had gone amiss, as would the mechanism of some of the best watches in the regiment, unable to stand the strain of anything so hot and high and dry. Possibly the Third was so overjoyed at getting out of Arizona on any terms that they would gladly have left their eye-teeth in pawn. Whatever may have been the cause, the transfer was an accomplished fact, and Van was one of some seven hundred quadrupeds, of greater or less value, which became the property of the Fifth Regiment of Cavalry, U.S.A., in lawful exchange for a like number of chargers left in the stables along the recently-built Union Pacific to await the coming of their new riders from the distant West.

We had never met in those days, Van and I. "Compadres" and chums as we were destined to become, we were utterly unknown and indifferent to each other; but in point of regimental reputation at the time, Van had decidedly the best of it. He was a celebrity at head-quarters, I a subaltern at an isolated post. He had apparently become acclimated, and was rapidly winning respect for himself and dollars for his backers; I was winning neither for anybody, and doubtless losing both,--they go together, somehow. Van was living on metaphorical clover down near Tucson; I was roughing it out on the rocks of the Mogollon. Each after his

own fashion served out his time in the grim old Territory, and at last "came marching home again;" and early in the summer of the Centennial year, and just in the midst of the great Sioux war of 1876, Van and I made each other's acquaintance.

What I liked about him was the air of thoroughbred ease with which he adapted himself to his surroundings. He was in swell society on the occasion of our first meeting, being bestridden by the colonel of the regiment. He was dressed and caparisoned in the height of martial fashion; his clear eyes, glistening coat, and joyous bearing spoke of the perfection of health; his every glance and movement told of elastic vigor and dauntless spirit. He was a horse with a pedigree,--let alone any self-made reputation,--and he knew it; more than that, he knew that I was charmed at the first greeting; probably he liked it, possibly he liked me. What he saw in me I never discovered. Van, though demonstrative eventually, was reticent and little given to verbal flattery. It was long indeed before any degree of intimacy was established between us: perhaps it might never have come but for the strange and eventful campaign on which we were so speedily launched. Probably we might have continued on our original status of dignified and distant acquaintance. As a member of the colonel's household he could have nothing in common with me or mine, and his acknowledgment of the introduction of my own charger--the cavalryman's better half--was of that airy yet perfunctory politeness which is of the club clubby. Forager, my gray, had sought acquaintance in his impulsive frontier fashion when summoned to the presence of the regimental commander, and, ranging alongside to permit the shake of the hand with which the colonel had honored his rider, he himself had with equine confidence addressed Van, and Van had simply continued his dreamy stare over the springy prairie and taken no earthly notice of him. Forager and I had just joined regimental head-quarters for the first time, as was evident, and we were both "fresh." It was not until the colonel good-naturedly stroked the glossy brown neck of his pet and said, "Van, old boy, this is Forager, of 'K' Troop," that Van considered it the proper thing to admit my fellow to the outer edge of his circle of acquaintance. My gray thought him a supercilious snob, no doubt, and hated him. He hated him more before the day was half over, for the colonel decided to gallop down the valley to look at some new horses that had just come, and invited me to go.

Colonels' invitations are commands, and we went, Forager and I, though it was weariness and vexation of spirit to both. Van and his rider flew easily along, bounding over the springy turf with long, elastic stride, horse and rider taking the rapid motion as an every-day matter, in a cool, imperturbable, this-is-the-way-we-always-do-it style; while my poor old troop-horse, in answer to pressing knee and pricking spur, strove with panting breath and jealously bursting heart to keep alongside. The foam flew from his fevered jaws and flecked the smooth flank of his apparently unconscious rival; and when at last we returned to camp, while Van, without a turned hair or an abnormal heave, coolly nodded off to his stable, poor Forager, blown, sweating, and utterly used up, gazed revengefully after him an instant and then reproachfully at me. He had done his best, and all to no purpose. That confounded clean-cut, supercilious beast had worn him out and never tried a spurt.

It was then that I began to make inquiries about that airy fellow Van, and I soon found he had a history. Like other histories, it may have been a mere codification of lies; but the men of the Fifth were ready to answer for its authenticity, and Van fully looked the character they gave him. He was now in his prime. He had passed the age of tell-tale teeth and was going on between eight and nine, said the knowing ones, but he looked younger and felt younger. He was at heart as full of fun and frolic as any colt, but the responsibilities of his position weighed upon him at times and lent to his elastic step the grave dignity that should mark the movements of the first horse of the regiment.

And then Van was a born aristocrat. He was not impressive in point of size; he was rather small, in fact; but there was that in his bearing and demeanor that attracted instant attention. He was beautifully built,--lithe, sinewy, muscular, with powerful shoulders and solid haunches; his legs were what Oscar Wilde might have called poems, and with better reason than when he applied the epithet to those of Henry Irving: they were straight, slender, and destitute of those heterodox developments at the joints that render equine legs as hideous deformities as knee-sprung trousers of the present mode. His feet and pasterns were shapely and dainty as those of the *\_senoritas\_* (only for pastern read ankle) who so admired him on *\_festa\_* days at Tucson, and who won such stores of *\_dulces\_* from the scowling gallants who had with genuine Mexican pluck

backed the Sonora horses at the races. His color was a deep, dark chocolate-brown; a most unusual tint, but Van was proud of its oddity, and his long, lean head, his pretty little pointed ears, his bright, flashing eye and sensitive nostril, one and all spoke of spirit and intelligence. A glance at that horse would tell the veriest greenhorn that speed, bottom, and pluck were all to be found right there; and he had not been in the regiment a month before the knowing ones were hanging about the Mexican sports and looking out for a chance for a match; and Mexicans, like Indians, are consummate horse-racers.

Not with the "greasers" alone had tact and diplomacy to be brought into play. Van, though invoiced as a troop-horse sick, had attracted the attention of the colonel from the very start, and the colonel had speedily caused him to be transferred to his own stable, where, carefully tended, fed, groomed, and regularly exercised, he speedily gave evidence of the good there was in him. The colonel rarely rode in those days, and cavalry-duties in garrison were few. The regiment was in the mountains most of the time, hunting Apaches, but Van had to be exercised every day; and exercised he was. "Jeff," the colonel's orderly, would lead him sedately forth from his paddock every morning about nine, and ride demurely off towards the quartermaster's stables in rear of the garrison. Keen eyes used to note that Van had a way of sidling along at such times as though his heels were too impatient to keep at their appropriate distance behind the head, and "Jeff's" hand on the bit was very firm, light as it was.

"Bet you what you like those 'L' Company fellows are getting Van in training for a race," said the quartermaster to the adjutant one bright morning, and the chuckle with which the latter received the remark was an indication that the news was no news to him.

"If old Coach don't find it out too soon, some of these swaggering \_caballeros\_ around here are going to lose their last winnings," was his answer. And, true to their cavalry instincts, neither of the staff-officers saw fit to follow Van and his rider beyond the gate to the \_corrals\_.

Once there, however, Jeff would bound off quick as a cat, Van would be speedily taken in charge by a squad of old dragoon sergeants, his cavalry bridle and saddle exchanged for a light racing-rig, and Master Mickey

Lanigan, son and heir of the regimental saddle-sergeant, would be hoisted into his throne, and then Van would be led off, all plunging impatience now, to an improvised race-track across the \_arroyo\_, where he would run against his previous record, and where old horses from the troop-stables would be spurred into occasional spurts with the champion, while all the time vigilant "non-coms" would be thrown out as pickets far and near, to warn off prying Mexican eyes and give notice of the coming of officers. The colonel was always busy in his office at that hour, and interruptions never came. But the race did, and more than one race, too, occurring on Sundays, as Mexican races will, and well-nigh wrecking the hopes of the garrison on one occasion because of the colonel's sudden freak of holding a long mounted inspection on that day. Had he ridden Van for two hours under his heavy weight and housings that morning, all would have been lost. There was terror at Tucson when the cavalry trumpets blew the call for mounted inspection, full dress, that placid Sunday morning, and the sporting sergeants were well-nigh crazed. Not an instant was to be lost. Jeff rushed to the stable, and in five minutes had Van's near fore foot enveloped in a huge poultice, much to Van's amaze and disgust, and when the colonel came down,

Booted and spurred and prepared for a ride,

there stood Jeff in martial solemnity, holding the colonel's other horse, and looking, as did the horse, the picture of dejection.

"What'd you bring me that infernal old hearse-horse for?" said the colonel. "Where's Van?"

"In the stable, dead lame, general," said Jeff, with face of woe, but with diplomatic use of the brevet. "Can't put his nigh fore foot to the ground, sir. I've got it poulticed, sir, and he'll be all right in a day or two----"

"Sure it ain't a nail?" broke in the colonel, to whom nails in the foot were sources of perennial dread.

"Perfectly sure, general," gasped Jeff. "D--d sure!" he added, in a tone of infinite relief, as the colonel rode out on the broad parade. "'Twould 'a' been nails in the coffins of half the Fifth Cavalry if it \_had\_ been."

But that afternoon, while the colonel was taking his siesta, half the populace of the good old Spanish town of Tucson was making the air blue with \_carambas\_ when Van came galloping under the string an easy winner over half a score of Mexican steeds. The "dark horse" became a notoriety, and for once in its history head-quarters of the Fifth Cavalry felt the forthcoming visit of the paymaster to be an object of indifference.

Van won other races in Arizona. No more betting could be got against him around Tucson; but the colonel went off on leave, and he was borrowed down at Camp Bowie awhile, and then transferred to Crittenden,--only temporarily, of course, for no one at head-quarters would part with him for good. Then, when the regiment made its homeward march across the continent in 1875, Van somehow turned up at the \_festa\_ races at Albuquerque and Santa Fe, though the latter was off the line of march by many miles. Then he distinguished himself at Pueblo by winning a handicap sweepstakes where the odds were heavy against him. And so it was that when I met Van at Fort Hays in May, 1876, he was a celebrity. Even then they were talking of getting him down to Dodge City to run against some horses on the Arkansaw; but other and graver matters turned up. Van had run his last race.

Early that spring, or rather late in the winter, a powerful expedition had been sent to the north of Fort Fetterman in search of the hostile bands led by that dare-devil Sioux chieftain Crazy Horse. On "Patrick's Day in the morning," with the thermometer indicating 30 deg. below, and in the face of a biting wind from the north and a blazing glare from the sheen of the untrodden snow, the cavalry came in sight of the Indian encampment down in the valley of Powder River. The fight came off then and there, and, all things considered, Crazy Horse got the best of it. He and his people drew away farther north to join other roving bands. The troops fell back to Fetterman to get a fresh start; and when spring fairly opened, old "Gray Fox," as the Indians called General Crook, marched a strong command up to the Big Horn Mountains, determined to have it out with Crazy Horse and settle the question of supremacy before the end of the season. Then all the unoccupied Indians in the North decided to take a hand. All or most of them were bound by treaty obligations to keep the peace with the government that for years past had fed, clothed, and



protected them. Nine-tenths of those who rushed to the rescue of Crazy Horse and his people had not the faintest excuse for their breach of faith; but it requires neither eloquence nor excuse to persuade the average Indian to take the war-path. The reservations were beset by vehement old strifemongers preaching a crusade against the whites, and by early June there must have been five thousand eager young warriors, under such leaders as Crazy Horse, Gall, Little Big Man, and all manner of Wolves, Bears, and Bulls, and prominent among the later that head-devil, scheming, lying, wire-pulling, big-talker-but-no-fighter, Sitting Bull,-- "Tatanka-e-Yotanka",--five thousand fierce and eager Indians, young and old, swarming through the glorious upland between the Big Horn and the Yellowstone, and more a-coming.

Crook had reached the head-waters of Tongue River with perhaps twelve hundred cavalry and infantry, and found that something must be done to shut off the rush of reinforcements from the southeast. Then it was that we of the Fifth, far away in Kansas, were hurried by rail through Denver to Cheyenne, marched thence to the Black Hills to cut the trails from the great reservations of Red Cloud and Spotted Tail to the disputed ground of the Northwest; and here we had our own little personal tussle with the Cheyennes, and induced them to postpone their further progress towards Sitting Bull and to lead us back to the reservation. It was here, too, we heard how Crazy Horse had pounced on Crook's columns on the bluffs of the Rosebud that sultry morning of the 17th of June and showed the Gray Fox that he and his people were too weak in numbers to cope with them. It was here, too, worse luck, we got the tidings of the dread disaster of the Sunday one week later, and listened in awed silence to the story of Custer's mad attack on ten times his weight in foes--and the natural result. Then came our orders to hasten to the support of Crook, and so it happened that July found us marching for the storied range of the Big Horn, and the first week in August landed us, blistered and burned with sun-glare and stifling alkali-dust, in the welcoming camp of Crook.

Then followed the memorable campaign of 1876. I do not mean to tell its story here. We set out with ten days' rations on a chase that lasted ten weeks. We roamed some eighteen hundred miles over range and prairie, over "bad lands" and worse waters. We wore out some Indians, a good many soldiers, and a great many horses. We sometimes caught the

Indians, and sometimes they caught us. It was hot, dry summer weather when we left our wagons, tents, and extra clothing; it was sharp and freezing before we saw them again; and meantime, without a rag of canvas or any covering to our backs except what summer-clothing we had when we started, we had tramped through the valleys of the Rosebud, Tongue, and Powder Rivers, had loosened the teeth of some men with scurvy before we struck the Yellowstone, had weeded out the wounded and ineffective there and sent them to the East by river, had taken a fresh start and gone rapidly on in pursuit of the scattering bands, had forded the Little Missouri near where the Northern Pacific now spans the stream, run out of rations entirely at the head of Heart River, and still stuck to the trail and the chase, headed southward over rolling, treeless prairies, and for eleven days and nights of pelting, pitiless rain dragged our way through the bad-lands, meeting and fighting the Sioux two lively days among the rocks of Slim Buttes, subsisting meantime partly on what game we could pick up, but mainly upon our poor, famished, worn-out, staggering horses. It is hard truth for cavalryman to tell, but the choice lay between them and our boots and most of us had no boots left by the time we sighted the Black Hills. Once there, we found provisions and plenty; but never, I venture to say, never was civilized army in such a plight as was the command of General George Crook when his brigade of regulars halted on the north bank of the Belle Fourche in September, 1876. Officers and men were ragged, haggard, half starved, worn down to mere skin and bone; and the horses,--ah, well, only half of them were left: hundreds had dropped starved and exhausted on the line of march, and dozens had been killed and eaten. We had set out blithe and merry, riding jauntily down the wild valley of the Tongue. We straggled in towards the Hills, towing our tottering horses behind us: they had long since grown too weak to carry a rider.

Then came a leisurely saunter through the Hills. Crook bought up all the provisions to be had in Deadwood and other little mining towns, turned over the command to General Merritt, and hastened to the forts to organize a new force, leaving to his successor instructions to come in slowly, giving horses and men time to build up. Men began "building up" fast enough; we did nothing but eat, sleep, and hunt grass for our horses for whole weeks at a time; but our horses,--ah, that was different. There was no grain to be had for them. They had been starving for a month, for



the Indians had burned the grass before us wherever we went, and here in the pine-covered hills what grass could be found was scant and wiry,-- not the rich, juicy, strength-giving bunch grass of the open country. Of my two horses, neither was in condition to do military duty when we got to Whitewood. I was adjutant of the regiment, and had to be bustling around a good deal; and so it happened that one day the colonel said to me, "Well, here's Van. He can't carry my weight any longer. Suppose you take him and see if he won't pick up." And that beautiful October day found the racer of the regiment, though the ghost of his former self, transferred to my keeping.

All through the campaign we had been getting better acquainted, Van and I. The colonel seldom rode him, but had him led along with the head-quarters party in the endeavor to save his strength. A big, raw-boned colt, whom he had named "Chunka Witko," in honor of the Sioux "Crazy Horse," the hero of the summer, had the honor of transporting the colonel over most of those weary miles, and Van spent the long days on the muddy trail in wondering when and where the next race was to come off, and whether at this rate he would be fit for a finish. One day on the Yellowstone I had come suddenly upon a quartermaster who had a peck of oats on his boat. Oats were worth their weight in greenbacks, but so was plug tobacco. He gave me half a peck for all the tobacco in my saddle-bags, and, filling my old campaign hat with the precious grain, I sat me down on a big log by the flowing Yellowstone and told poor old "Donnybrook" to pitch in. "Donnybrook" was a "spare horse" when we started on the campaign, and had been handed over to me after the fight on the War Bonnet, where Merritt turned their own tactics on the Cheyennes. He was sparer still by this time; and later, when we got to the muddy banks of the "Heecha Wapka," there was nothing to spare of him. The head-quarters party had dined on him the previous day, and only groaned when that Mark Tapley of a surgeon remarked that if this was Donnybrook Fare it was tougher than all the stories ever told of it. Poor old Donnybrook! He had recked not of the coming woe that blissful hour by the side of the rippling Yellowstone. His head was deep in my lap, his muzzle buried in oats; he took no thought for the morrow,--he would eat, drink, and be merry, and ask no questions as to what was to happen; and so absorbed were we in our occupation--he in his happiness, I in the contemplation thereof--that neither of us noticed the rapid approach of a

third party until a whinny of astonishment sounded close beside us, and Van, trailing his lariat and picket-pin after him, came trotting up, took in the situation at a glance, and, unhesitatingly ranging alongside his comrade of coarser mould and thrusting his velvet muzzle into my lap, looked wistfully into my face with his great soft brown eyes and pleaded for his share. Another minute, and, despite the churlish snappings and threatening heels of Donnybrook, Van was supplied with a portion as big as little Benjamin's, and, stretching myself beside him on the sandy shore, I lay and watched his enjoyment. From that hour he seemed to take me into his confidence, and his was a friendship worth having. Time and again on the march to the Little Missouri and southward to the Hills he indulged me with some slight but unmistakable proof that he held me in esteem and grateful remembrance. It may have been only a bid for more oats, but he kept it up long after he knew there was not an oat in Dakota,--that part of it, at least. But Van was awfully pulled down by the time we reached the pine-barrens up near Deadwood. The scanty supply of forage there obtained (at starvation price) would not begin to give each surviving horse in the three regiments a mouthful. And so by short stages we plodded along through the picturesque beauty of the wild Black Hills, and halted at last in the deep valley of French Creek. Here there was grass for the horses and rest for the men.

For a week now Van had been my undivided property, and was the object of tender solicitude on the part of my German orderly, "Preuss," and myself. The colonel had chosen for his house the foot of a big pine-tree up a little ravine, and I was billeted alongside a fallen ditto a few yards away. Down the ravine, in a little clump of trees, the head-quarters stables were established, and here were gathered at nightfall the chargers of the colonel and his staff. Custer City, an almost deserted village, lay but a few miles off to the west, and thither I had gone the moment I could get leave, and my mission was oats. Three stores were still open, and, now that the troops had come swarming down, were doing a thriving business. Whiskey, tobacco, bottled beer, canned lobster, canned anything, could be had in profusion, but not a grain of oats, barley, or corn. I went over to a miner's wagon-train and offered ten dollars for a sack of oats. The boss teamster said he would not sell oats for a cent apiece if he had them, and so sent me back down the valley sore at heart, for I knew Van's eyes, those great soft brown eyes, would be pleading the

moment I came in sight; and I knew more,--that somewhere the colonel had "made a raise," that he had one sack, for Preuss had seen it, and Chunka Witko had had a peck of oats the night before and another that very morning. Sure enough, Van was waiting, and the moment he saw me coming up the ravine he quit his munching at the scanty herbage, and, with ears erect and eager eyes, came quickly towards me, whinnying welcome and inquiry at the same instant. Sugar and hard-tack, delicacies he often fancied in prosperous times, he took from my hand even now; he was too truly a gentleman at heart to refuse them when he saw they were all I had to give; but he could not understand why the big colt should have his oats and he, Van, the racer and the hero of two months ago, should starve, and I could not explain it.

That night Preuss came up and stood attention before my fire, where I sat jotting down some memoranda in a note-book:

"Lieutenant, I kent shtaendt ut no longer yet. Dot scheneral's horse he git oats ag'in diesen abent, unt Ven, he git noddings, unt he look, unt look. He ot dot golt unt den ot me look, unt I couldn't shtaendt ut, lieutenant----"

And Preuss stopped short and winked hard and drew his ragged shirt-sleeve across his eyes.

Neither could I "shtaendt ut." I jumped up and went to the colonel and begged a hatful of his precious oats, not for my sake, but for Van's. "Self-preservation is the first law of nature," and your own horse before that of all the world is the cavalryman's creed. It was a heap to ask, but Van's claim prevailed, and down the dark ravine "in the gloaming" Preuss and I hastened with eager steps and two hats full of oats; and that rascal Van heard us laugh, and answered with impatient neigh. He knew we had not come empty-handed this time.

Next morning, when every sprig and leaf was glistening in the brilliant sunshine with its frosty dew, Preuss led Van away up the ravine to picket him on a little patch of grass he had discovered the day before and as he passed the colonel's fire a keen-eyed old veteran of the cavalry service,

who had stopped to have a chat with our chief, dropped the stick on which he was whittling and stared hard at our attenuated racer.

"Whose horse is that, orderly?" he asked.

"De \_etschudent's\_, colonel," said Preuss, in his labored dialect.

"The adjutant's! Where did he get him? Why, that horse is a runner!" said "Black Bill," appreciatively.

And pretty soon Preuss came back to me, chuckling. He had not smiled for six weeks.

"Ven--he veels pully dis morning," he explained. "Dot Colonel Royle he shpeak mit him unt pet him, unt Ven, he laeff unt gick up mit his hint lecks. He git vell bretty gwick yet."

Two days afterwards we broke up our bivouac on French Creek, for every blade of grass was eaten off, and pushed over the hills to its near neighbor, Amphibious Creek, an eccentric stream whose habit of diving into the bowels of the earth at unexpected turns and disappearing from sight entirely, only to come up surging and boiling some miles farther down the valley, had suggested its singular name. "It was half land, half water," explained the topographer of the first expedition that had located and named the streams in these jealously-guarded haunts of the red men. Over on Amphibious Creek we were joined by a motley gang of recruits just enlisted in the distant cities of the East and sent out to help us fight Indians. One out of ten might know how to load a gun, but as frontier soldiers not one in fifty was worth having. But they brought with them capital horses, strong, fat, grain-fed, and these we campaigners levied on at once. Merritt led the old soldiers and the new horses down into the valley of the Cheyenne on a chase after some scattering Indian bands, while "Black Bill" was left to hammer the recruits into shape and teach them how to care for invalid horses. Two handsome young sorrels had come to me as my share of the plunder, and with these for alternate mounts I rode the Cheyenne raid, leaving Van to the fostering care of the gallant old cavalryman who had been so struck with his points the week previous.

One week more, and the reunited forces of the expedition, Van and all, trotted in to "round up" the semi-belligerent warriors at the Red Cloud agency on White River, and, as the war-ponies and rifles of the scowling braves were distributed among the loyal scouts, and dethroned Machpealota (old Red Cloud) turned over the government of the great Sioux nation, Ogallallas and all, to his more reliable rival, Sintegaliska,-- Spotted Tail,--Van surveyed the ceremony of abdication from between my legs, and had the honor of receiving an especial pat and an admiring "\_Washtay\_" from the new chieftain and lord of the loyal Sioux. His highness Spotted Tail was pleased to say that he wouldn't mind swapping four of his ponies for Van, and made some further remarks which my limited knowledge of the Brule Dakota tongue did not enable me to appreciate as they deserved. The fact that the venerable chieftain had hinted that he might be induced to throw in a spare squaw "to boot" was therefore lost, and Van was saved. Early November found us, after an all-summer march of some three thousand miles, once more within sight and sound of civilization. Van and I had taken station at Fort D. A. Russell, and the bustling prairie city of Cheyenne lay only three miles away. Here it was that Van became my pet and pride. Here he lived his life of ease and triumph, and here, gallant fellow, he met his knightly fate.

Once settled at Russell, all the officers of the regiment who were blessed with wives and children were speedily occupied in getting their quarters ready for their reception; and late in November my own little household arrived and were presented to Van. He was then domesticated in a rude but comfortable stable in rear of my little army-house, and there he slept, was groomed and fed, but never confined. He had the run of our yard, and, after critical inspection of the wood-shed, the coal-hole, and the kitchen, Van seemed to decide upon the last-named as his favorite resort. He looked with curious and speculative eyes upon our darky cook on the arrival of that domestic functionary, and seemed for once in his life to be a trifle taken aback by the sight of her woolly pate and Ethiopian complexion. Hannah, however, was duly instructed by her mistress to treat Van on all occasions with great consideration, and this to Hannah's darkened intellect meant unlimited loaf-sugar. The adjutant could not fail to note that Van was almost always to be seen standing at the kitchen door, and on those rare occasions when he himself was permitted to

invade those premises he was never surprised to find Van's shapely head peering in at the window, or head, neck, and shoulders bulging in at the wood-shed beyond.

Yet the ex-champion and racer did not live an idle existence. He had his hours of duty, and keenly relished them. Office-work over at orderly-call, at high noon it was the adjutant's custom to return to his quarters and speedily to appear in riding-dress on the front piazza. At about the same moment Van, duly caparisoned, would be led forth from his paddock, and in another moment he and his rider would be flying off across the breezy level of the prairie. Cheyenne, as has been said, lay just three miles away, and thither Van would speed with long, elastic strides, as though glorying in his powers. It was at once his exercise and his enjoyment, and to his rider it was the best hour of the day. He rode alone, for no horse at Russell could keep alongside. He rode at full speed, for in all the twenty-four that hour from twelve to one was the only one he could call his own for recreation and for healthful exercise. He rode to Cheyenne that he might be present at the event of the day,--the arrival of the trans-continental train from the East. He sometimes rode beyond, that he might meet the train when it was belated and race it back to town; and this--this was Van's glory. The rolling prairie lay open and free on each side of the iron track, and Van soon learned to take his post upon a little mound whence the coming of the "express" could be marked, and, as it flared into sight from the darkness of the distant snow-shed, Van, all a-tremble with excitement, would begin to leap and plunge and tug at the bit and beg for the word to go. Another moment, and, carefully held until just as the puffing engine came well alongside, Van would leap like arrow from the string, and away we would speed, skimming along the springy turf. Sometimes the engineer would curb his iron horse and hold him back against the "down-grade" impetus of the heavy Pullmans far in rear; sometimes he would open his throttle and give her full head, and the long train would seem to leap into space, whirling clouds of dust from under the whirling wheels, and then Van would almost tear his heart out to keep alongside.

Month after month through the sharp mountain winter, so long as the snow was not whirling through the air in clouds too dense to penetrate, Van and his master had their joyous gallops. Then came the spring, slow,



shy, and reluctant as the springtide sets in on that high plateau in mid-continent, and Van had become even more thoroughly domesticated. He now looked upon himself as one of the family, and he knew the dining-room window, and there, thrice each day and sometimes at odd hours between, he would take his station while the household was at table and plead with those great soft brown eyes for sugar. Commissary-bills ran high that winter, and cut loaf-sugar was an item of untold expenditure. He had found a new ally and friend,--a little girl with eyes as deep and dark as and browner than his own, a winsome little maid of three, whose golden, sunshiny hair floated about her bonny head and sweet serious face like a halo of light from another world. Van "took to her" from the very first. He courted the caress of her little hand, and won her love and trust by the discretion of his movements when she was near. As soon as the days grew warm enough, she was always out on the front piazza when Van and I came home from our daily gallop, and then she would trot out to meet us and be lifted to her perch on the pommel; and then, with mincing gait, like lady's palfrey, stepping as though he might tread on eggs and yet not crush them, Van would take the little one on her own share of the ride. And so it was that the loyal friendship grew and strengthened. The one trick he had was never ventured upon when she was on his back, even after she became accustomed to riding at rapid gait and enjoying the springy canter over the prairie before Van went back to his stable. It was a strange trick: it proved a fatal one.

No other horse I ever rode had one just like it. Running at full speed, his hoofs fairly flashing through the air and never seeming to touch the ground, he would suddenly, as it were, "change step" and gallop "disunited," as we cavalrymen would say. At first I thought it must be that he struck some rolling stone, but soon I found that when bounding over the soft turf it was just the same; and the men who knew him in the days of his prime in Arizona had noted it there. Of course there was nothing to do for it but make him change back as quick as possible on the run, for Van was deaf to remonstrance and proof against the rebuke of spur. Perhaps he could not control the fault; at all events he did not, and the effect was not pleasant. The rider felt a sudden jar, as though the horse had come down stiff-legged from a hurdle-leap; and sometimes it would be so sharp as to shake loose the forage-cap upon his rider's head.

He sometimes did it when going at easy lope, but never when his little girl-friend was on his back; then he went on springs of air.

One bright May morning all the different "troops," as the cavalry-companies are termed, were out at drill on the broad prairie. The colonel was away, the officer of the day was out drilling his own company, the adjutant was seated in his office hard at work over regimental papers, when in came the sergeant of the guard, breathless and excited.

"Lieutenant," he cried, "six general prisoners have escaped from the guard-house. They have got away down the creek towards town."

In hurried question and answer the facts were speedily brought out. Six hard customers, awaiting sentence after trial for larceny, burglary, assault with intent to kill, and finally desertion, had been cooped up together in an inner room of the ramshackle old wooden building that served for a prison, had sawed their way through to open air, and, timing their essay by the sound of the trumpets that told them the whole garrison would be out at morning drill, had slipped through the gap at the right moment, slid down the hill into the creek-bottom, and then scurried off townward. A sentinel down near the stables had caught sight of them, but they were out of view long before his shouts had summoned the corporal of the guard.

No time was to be lost. They were malefactors and vagabonds of the worst character. Two of their number had escaped before and had made it their boast that they could break away from the Russell guard at any time. Directing the sergeant to return to his guard, and hurriedly scribbling a note to the officer of the day, who had his whole troop with him in the saddle out on the prairie, and sending it by the hand of the sergeant-major, the adjutant hurried to his own quarters and called for Van. The news had reached there already. News of any kind travels like wildfire in a garrison, and Van was saddled and bridled before the adjutant reached the gate.

"Bring me my revolver and belt,--quick," he said to the servant, as he swung into saddle. The man darted into the house and came back with the belt and holster.

"I was cleaning your 'Colt,' sir," he said, "but here's the Smith & Wesson," handing up the burnished nickel-plated weapon then in use experimentally on the frontier. Looking only to see that fresh cartridges were in each chamber and that the hammer was on the safety-notch, the adjutant thrust it into the holster, and in an instant he and Van flew through the east gate in rapid pursuit.

Oh, how gloriously Van ran that day! Out on the prairie the gay guidons of the troops were fluttering in the brilliant sunshine; here, there, everywhere, the skirmish-lines and reserves were dotting the plain; the air was ringing with the merry trumpet-calls and the stirring words of command. Yet men forgot their drill and reined up on the line to watch Van as he flashed by, wondering, too, what could take the adjutant off at such an hour and at such a pace.

"What's the row?" shouted the commanding officer of one company.

"Prisoners loose," was the answer shouted back, but only indistinctly heard. On went Van like one inspired, and as we cleared the drill-ground and got well out on the open plain in long sweeping curve, we changed our course, aiming more to the right, so as to strike the valley west of the town. It was possible to get there first and head them off. Then suddenly I became aware of something jolting up and down behind me. My hand went back in search: there was no time to look: the prairie just here was cut up with little gopher-holes and criss-crossed by tiny canals from the main acequia, or irrigating ditch. It was that wretched Smith & Wesson bobbing up and down in the holster. The Colt revolver of the day was a trifle longer, and my man in changing pistols had not thought to change holsters. This one, made for the Colt, was too long and loose by half an inch, and the pistol was pounding up and down with every stride. Just ahead of us came the flash of the sparkling water in one of the little ditches. Van cleared it in his stride with no effort whatever. Then, just beyond,--oh, fatal trick!--seemingly when in mid-air he changed step, striking the ground with a sudden shock that jarred us both and flung the downward-pointed pistol up against the closely-buttoned holster-flap. There was a sharp report, and my heart stood still an instant. I knew--oh, well I knew it was the death-note of my gallant pet. On he went, never

swaying, never swerving, never slackening his racing speed; but, turning in the saddle and glancing back, I saw, just back of the cantle, just to the right of the spine in the glossy brown back, that one tiny, grimy, powder-stained hole. I knew the deadly bullet had ranged downward through his very vitals. I knew that Van had run his last race, was even now rushing towards a goal he would never reach. Fast as he might fly, he could not leave Death behind.

The chase was over. Looking back, I could see the troopers already hastening in pursuit, but we were out of the race. Gently, firmly I drew the rein. Both hands were needed, for Van had never stopped here, and some strange power urged him on now. Full three hundred yards he ran before he would consent to halt. Then I sprang from the saddle and ran to his head. His eyes met mine. Soft and brown, and larger than ever, they gazed imploringly. Pain and bewilderment, strange, wistful pleading, but all the old love and trust, were there as I threw my arms about his neck and bowed his head upon my breast. I could not bear to meet his eyes. I could not look into them and read there the deadly pain and faintness that were rapidly robbing them of their lustre, but that could not shake their faith in his friend and master. No wonder mine grew sightless as his own through swimming tears. I who had killed him could not face his last conscious gaze.

One moment more, and, swaying, tottering first from side to side, poor Van fell with heavy thud upon the turf. Kneeling, I took his head in my arms and strove to call back one sign of recognition; but all that was gone. Van's spirit was ebbing away in some fierce, wild dream: his glazing eyes were fixed on vacancy; his breath came in quick, convulsive gasps; great tremors shook his frame, growing every instant more violent. Suddenly a fiery light shot into his dying eyes. The old high mettle leaped to vivid life, and then, as though the flag had dropped, the starting-drum had tapped, Van's fleeting spirit whirled into his dying race. Lying on his side, his hoofs flew through the air, his powerful limbs worked back and forth swifter than ever in their swiftest gallop, his eyes were aflame, his nostrils wide distended, his chest heaving, and his magnificent machinery running like lightning. Only for a minute, though,--only for one short, painful minute. It was only a half-mile dash,--poor old fellow!--only a hopeless struggle against a rival that never knew defeat. Suddenly all

ceased as suddenly as all began. One stiffening quiver, one long sigh, and my pet and pride was gone. Old friends were near him even then. "I was with him when he won his first race at Tucson," said old Sergeant Donnelly, who had ridden to our aid, "and I knowed then he would die racing."