

ADAMS ANDY

WELLS BROTHERS: THE
YOUNG CATTLE KINGS

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CHAPTER I

WAIFS OF THE PLAIN

The first herd of trail cattle to leave Dodge City, Kansas, for the Northwest, during the summer of 1885, was owned by the veteran drover, Don Lovell. Accidents will happen, and when about midway between the former point and Ogalalla, Nebraska, a rather serious mishap befell Quince Forrest, one of the men with the herd. He and the horse wrangler, who were bunkies, were constantly scuffling, reckless to the point of injury, the pulse of healthy manhood beating a constant alarm to rough contest.

The afternoon previous to the accident, a wayfaring man had overtaken the herd, and spent the night with the trail outfit. During the evening, a flock of sand-hill cranes was sighted, when the stranger expressed a wish to secure a specimen of the bird for its splendid plumage. On Forrest's own suggestion, his being a long-range pistol and the covey wary, the two exchanged belts. The visitor followed the flock, stealing within range a number of times, and emptying the six-shooter at every chance. On securing a fine specimen near nightfall, he returned to the herd, elated over his chance shot and beautiful trophy. However, before returning the belt, he had refilled the cylinder with six instead of five cartridges, thus resting the hammer on a loaded shell. In the enthusiasm of the moment, and ignorant of its danger, belt and pistol were returned to their owner.

Dawn found the camp astir. The sun had flooded the plain while the outfit was breakfasting, the herd was grazing forward in pastoral contentment, the horses stood under saddle for the morning's work, when the trail foreman, Paul Priest, languidly remarked: "If everybody's ready, we'll ride. Fill the canteens; it's high time we were in the saddle. Of course, that means the parting tussle between Quince and the wrangler. It would be a shame to deny those lads anything so enjoyable— they remind me so much of mule colts and half-grown dogs. Now, cut in and worry each other a spell, because you'll be separated until noon. Fly at it, or we mount."

The two addressed never cast a glance at each other, but as the men swung into their saddles, the horse wrangler, with the agility of a tiger, caught his bunkie in the act of mounting, dragging him to the ground, when the expected scuffle ensued. The outfit had barely time to turn their horses, to witness the contest, when the two crashed against the wagon wheel and Forrest's pistol was discharged. The men dismounted instantly, the wrangler eased the victim to the ground, and when the outfit gathered around, the former was smothering the burning clothing of his friend and bunkmate. A withdrawn boot, dripping with blood, was the first indication of the havoc wrought, and on stripping it was found that the bullet had ploughed an open furrow down the thigh, penetrating the calf of the leg from knee to ankle, where it was fortunately deflected outward and into the ground.

The deepest of regret was naturally expressed. The jocular remarks of the foreman, the actions of the wrangler, were instantly recalled to the surrounding group, while the negligence which caused the accident was politely suppressed. The stranger, innocently unaware of any mistake on his part, lent a valuable hand in stanching the blood and in washing and binding up the wounds. No bones were injured, and with youth and a buoyant constitution, there was every hope of recovery.

However, some disposition must be made of the wounded man. No one could recall a house or settlement nearer than the Republican River, unless down the Beaver, which was uncertain, when the visitor came to the rescue. He was positive that some two years before, an old soldier had taken a homestead five or six miles above the trail crossing on the Beaver. He was insistent, and the foreman

yielded so far as to order the herd grazed forward to the Beaver, which was some ten miles distant in their front. All the blankets in the outfit were accordingly brought into use, in making a comfortable bed in the wagon, and the caravan started, carrying the wounded man with it. Taking the stranger with him, the foreman bore away in the direction of the supposed homestead, having previously sent two men on an opposite angle, in search of any settlement down the creek.

The visitor's knowledge of the surrounding country proved to be correct. About six miles above the trail crossing, the Beaver, fringed with willows, meandered through a narrow valley, in which the homestead was located. The presence of the willows was an indication of old beaver dams, which the settler had improved until the water stood in long, placid pools. In response to their hail, two boys, about fourteen and sixteen years of age, emerged from the dug-out and greeted the horsemen. On inquiry, it proved that their father had died during the previous winter, at a settlement on the Solomon River, and the boys were then confronted with the necessity of leaving the claim to avoid suffering want. It was also learned that their mother had died before their father had taken the homestead, and therefore they were left orphans to fight their own battle.

The boys gave their names as Joel and Dell Wells. Both were bright-eyed and alert, freckled from the sun, ragged and healthy. Joel was the oldest, broad-shouldered for his years, distant by nature, with a shock of auburn hair, while Dell's was red; in height, the younger was the equal of his brother, talkative, and frank in countenance. When made acquainted with the errand of the trail boss, the older boy shook his head, but Dell stepped forward: "Awful sorry," said he, with a sweep of his hand, "but our garden failed, and there won't be a dozen roasting-ears in that field of corn. If hot winds don't kill it, it might make fodder. We expect to pull out next week."

"Have you no cows?" inquired the trail foreman.

"We had two, but the funeral expenses took them, and then pa's pension was stopped. You see—"

"I see," said the trail foreman, dismounting. "Possibly we can help each other. Our wagon is well provisioned. If you'll shelter and nurse this wounded man of mine—"

"We can't winter here," said Joel, stepping forward, "and the sooner we get out and find work the better."

"Oh, I was figuring on paying you wages," countered the trail man, now aware of their necessity, "and I suppose you could use a quarter of beef."

"Oh goodness," whispered Dell to his brother; "think, fresh meat."

"And I'll give each of you twenty-five dollars a month—leave the money with my man or pay you in advance. If you say the word, I'll unload my wagon right here, and grub-stake you for two months. I can get more provision at the Republican River, and in the mean time, something may turn up."

The stranger also dismounted and took part in urging the necessity of accepting the offer. Dell brightened at every suggestion, but his brother was tactful, questioning and combating the men, and looking well to the future. A cold and unfriendly world, coupled with misfortune, had aged the elder boy beyond his years, while the younger one was sympathetic, trustful, and dependent.

"Suppose we are delayed in reaching the Solomon until fall," said Dell to his brother; "that will put us into the settlements in time for corn-shucking. If you get six-bits a day, I'm surely worth fifty cents."

"Suppose there is no corn to shuck," replied Joel. "Suppose this wounded man dies on our hands? What then? Haven't you heard pa tell how soldiers died from slight wounds?—from blood-poisoning? If we have to go, we might as well go at once."

According to his light, the boy reasoned well. But when the wayfaring man had most skillfully retold the story of the Good Samaritan, the older boy relented somewhat, while Dell beamed with enthusiasm at the opportunity of rendering every assistance.

"It isn't because we don't want to help you," protested Joel, but it's because we're so poor and have nothing to offer."

"You have health and willing hands," said the trail boss; "let me do the rest."

"But suppose he doesn't recover as soon as expected," cautiously protested Joel, "where are we to get further provision?"

"Good suggestion," assented the trail foreman. "But here: I'll leave two good horses in your care for the wounded man, and all you need to do is to ride down to the trail, hail any passing herd, and simply tell them you are harboring a crippled lad, one of Don Lovell's boys, and you can levy on them for all they have. It's high time you were getting acquainted with these trail outfits. Shelter this man of mine, and all will come out well in the end. Besides, I'll tell old man Don about you boys, and he might take you home to his ranch with him. He has no boys, and he might take a fancy to you two."

Dell's eyes moistened at the suggestion of a home. The two brothers reentered the dug-out, and the men led their horses down to the creek for a drink. A span of poor old mules stood inside a wooden corral, a rickety wagon and a few rusty farming implements were scattered about, while over all the homestead was the blight of a merciless summer drouth.

"What a pretty little ranch this would make," said the trail boss to the stranger. "If these boys had a hundred cows, with this water and range, in a few years they would be independent men. No wonder that oldest boy is cautious. Just look around and see the reward of their father's and their own labor. Their very home denies them bread."

"Did you notice the older boy brighten," inquired the visitor, "when you suggested leaving horses in their care? It was the only argument that touched him."

"Then I'll use it," said the trail boss, brightening. "We have several cow horses in our remuda, unfit for saddle,—galled backs and the like,—and if these boys would care for them, I'll make their hungry hearts happy. Care and attention and a month's rest would make the ponies as sound as a dollar. You suggest my giving them each a saddle pony; argue the matter, and try and win me over."

The men retraced their steps, leading their horses, and when scarcely halfway from the creek to the dug-out, Dell ran down to meet them. "If you can spare us a few blankets and a pillow," earnestly said the boy, "we'll take the wounded man. He's liable to be feverish at night, and ought to have a pillow. Joel and I can sleep outside or in the stable."

"Hurrah for the Wells boys!" shouted the trail boss. "Hereafter I'll bet my money, horse and saddle, on a red-headed boy. Blankets? Why, you can have half a dozen, and as to pillows, watch me rob the outfit. I have a rubber one, there are several moss ones, and I have a lurking suspicion that there are a few genuine goose-hair pillows in the outfit, and you may pick and choose. They are all yours for the asking."

The men parleyed around some little time, offering pretexts for entering the shack, the interior of which bespoke its own poverty. When all agreements had been reviewed, the men mounted their horses, promising to fulfill their part of the covenant that afternoon or evening.

Once out of hearing, the stranger remarked: "That oldest boy is all right; it was their poverty that caused him to hesitate; he tried to shield their want. We men don't always understand boys. Hereafter, in dealing with Joel, you must use some diplomacy. The death of his parents has developed a responsibility in the older boy which the younger one doesn't feel. That's about all the difference in the two lads. You must deal gently with Joel, and never offend him or expose his needs."

"Trust me," replied the foreman, "and I'll coach Quince—that's the name of the wounded man. Within an hour, he'll be right at home with those boys. If nothing serious happens to his wound, within a week he'll have those youngsters walking on clouds."

The two men rode out of the valley, when they caught sight of a dust cloud, indicating the locality of the trailing herd, then hidden behind the last divide before reaching Beaver Creek. On every hand the undulating plain rolled away to low horizons, and the men rode forward at a leisurely pace.

"I've been thinking of those boys," suddenly said the trail foreman, arousing himself from a reverie. "They're to be pitied. This government ought to be indicted for running a gambling game, robbing children, orphan children of a soldier, at that. There's a fair sample of the skin game the government's running—bets you one hundred and sixty acres against fourteen dollars you can't hold

down a homestead for five years. And big as the odds look, in nine cases out of ten, in this country, the government wins. It ought to be convicted on general principles. Men are not to be pitied, but it's a crime against women and children."

"Oh, you cowmen always rail at the settler," retorted the stranger; "you would kick if you were being hung. There's good in everything. A few years of youthful poverty, once they reach manhood, isn't going to hurt those boys. The school of experience has its advantages."

"If it's convenient, let's keep an eye on those boys the next few years," said the trail boss, catching sight of his remuda. "Now, there's the wagon. Suppose you ride down to the Beaver and select a good camp, well above the trail crossing, and I'll meet the commissary and herd. We'll have to lay over this afternoon, which will admit of watering the herd twice to-day. Try and find some shade."

The men separated, riding away on different angles. The foreman hailed his wagon, found the victim resting comfortably, and reported securing a haven for the wounded man. Instructing his cook to watch for a signal, at the hands of the stranger, indicating a camp on the creek, he turned and awaited the arrival of the lead cattle of the trailing column. Issuing orders to cover the situation, he called off half the men, first veering the herd to the nearest water, and rode to overtake his wagon and saddle horses.

Beaver Creek was barely running water, with an occasional long pool. A hedge of willows was interwoven, Indian fashion, from which a tarpaulin was stretched to the wagon bows, forming a sheltered canopy. Amid a fire of questions, the wounded man was lifted from the wagon.

"Are you sure there isn't a woman at this nester's shack," said he appealingly to the bearers of the blanket stretcher. "If there is, I ain't going. Paul, stand squarely in front of me, where I can see your eyes. After what I've been handed lately, it makes me peevish. I want to feel the walnut juice in your hand clasp. Now, tell it all over once more."

The stranger was artfully excused, to select a beef, after which the foreman sat down beside his man, giving him all the details and making valuable suggestions. He urged courteous treatment of their guest while he remained; that there was nothing to be gained, after the accident, by insult to a visitor, and concluded by praising the boys and bespeaking their protection.

The wounded man was Southern by birth and instinct, and knew that the hospitality of ranch and road and camp was one and the same. "Very well," said he, "but in this instance, remember it's my calf that's gored. Serves me right, though, kitting up to every stranger that comes along. I must be getting tired of you slatterly cow hands." He hesitated a moment. "The one thing I like," he continued, "about this nester layout is those red-headed boys. And these two are just about petting age. I can almost see them eating sugar out of my hand."

After dinner, and now that a haven was secured, the question of medical aid was considered. The couriers down the Beaver had returned and reported no habitation in that direction. Fortunately the destination of the stranger was a settlement on the Republican River, and he volunteered to ride through that afternoon and night and secure a surgeon. Frontier physicians were used to hundred-mile calls. The owner of the herd, had he been present, would have insisted on medical attention, the wounded man reluctantly consented, and the stranger, carrying a hastily written letter to Mr. Lovell, took his departure.

Early evening found the patient installed, not in the dug-out, but in a roomy tent. A quarter of beef hung on a willow, the one-room shack was bountifully provisioned, while the foreman remained to await the arrival of a physician. The day had brought forth wonders to Joel and Dell—from the dark hour of want to the dawn of plenty, while the future was a sealed book. In addition to the promised horses, Forrest's saddle hung in the sod stable, while two extra ponies aroused the wonder of the questioning boys.

"I just brought these two along," explained the foreman, "as their backs were galled during a recent rainy spell. You can see they are unfit for saddle, but with a little attention can be cured—I'll show you how. You have an abundance of water, and after I leave, wash their backs, morning and

evening, and they'll be well in a month. Since you are running a trail hospital, you want to cater to man and beast. Of course, if you boys nurse this man through to health and strength, I'll make an appeal to Mr. Lovell to give you these ponies. They'll come in handy, in case you return to the Solomon, or start a little cattle ranch here."

The sun set in benediction on the little homestead. The transformation seemed magical. Even the blight of summer drouth was toned and tempered by the shadows of evening. The lesson of the day had filled empty hearts with happiness, and when darkness fell, the boys threw off all former reserve, and the bond of host and guest was firmly established. Forrest, even, cemented the tie, by dividing any needful attention between the boys.

"Do you know," said he to the foreman indifferently, in the presence of the lads, "that I was thinking of calling the oldest one Doc and the youngest one Nurse, but now I'm going to call them just plain Joel and Dell, and they can call me Mr. Quince. Honor bright, I never met a boy who can pour water on a wound, that seems to go to the right spot, like Dell Wells. One day with another, give me a red-headed boy."

CHAPTER II

THE HOSPITAL ON THE BEAVER

The patient passed a feverish night. Priest remained on watch in the tent, but on several occasions aroused the boys, as recourse to pouring water was necessary to relieve the pain. The limb had reached a swollen condition by morning, and considerable anxiety was felt over the uncertainty of a physician arriving. If summoned the previous evening, it was possible that one might arrive by noon, otherwise there was no hope before evening or during the night.

"Better post a guide on the trail," suggested Joel. "If a doctor comes from the Republican, we can pilot him across the prairie and save an hour's time. There's a dim wagon trail runs from here to the first divide, north of the trail crossing on Beaver. Pa used it when he went to Culbertson to draw his pension. It would save the doctor a six or seven mile drive."

"Now, that suggestion is to the point," cheerfully assented the trail foreman. "The herd will noon on the first divide, and we can post the boys of the cut-off. They'll surely meet the doctor this afternoon or evening. Corral the horses, and I'll shorten up the stirrup straps on Forrest's saddle. Who will we send?"

"I'll go," said Dell, jumping at the opportunity. He had admired the horses and heavy Texas saddles the evening previous, and now that a chance presented itself, his eyes danced at the prospect. "Why, I can follow a dim wagon track," he added. "Joel and I used to go halfway to the divide, to meet pa when he bought us new boots."

"I'll see who can best be spared," replied Priest. "Your patient seems to think that no one can pour water like you. Besides, there will be plenty of riding to do, and you'll get your share."

The foreman delayed shortening the stirrup straps until after the horse stood saddled, when he adjusted the lacings as an object lesson to the boys. Both rode the same length of stirrup, mounting the horse to be fitted, and when reduced to the proper length, Dell was allowed to ride past the tent for inspection.

"There's the making of a born cowman," said Forrest, as Dell halted before the open tent. "It's an absolute mistake to think that that boy was ever intended for a farmer. Notice his saddle poise, will you, Paul? Has a pretty foot, too, even if it is slightly sun-burned. We must get him some boots. With that red hair, he never ought to ride any other horse than a black stallion."

When the question arose as to which of the boys was to be sent to intercept the moving herd and await the doctor, Forrest decided the matter. "I'll have to send Joel," said he, "because I simply can't spare Dell. The swelling has benumbed this old leg of mine, and we'll have to give it an occasional rubbing to keep the circulation up. There's where Dell has the true touch; actually he reminds me of my mother. She could tie a rag around a sore toe, in a way that would make a boy forget all his trouble. Hold Joel a minute."

The sound of a moving horse had caught the ear of the wounded man, and when the older boy dismounted at the tent opening, he continued: "Now, Joel, don't let that cow outfit get funny with you. Show them the brand on that horse you're riding, and give them distinctly to understand, even if you are barefooted, that you are one of Don Lovell's men. Of course you don't know him, but with that old man, it's love me, love my dog. Get your dinner with the outfit, and watch for a dust cloud in the south. There's liable to be another herd along any day, and we'll need a cow."

Forrest was nearly forty, while Priest was fully fifty years of age; neither had ever had children of his own, and their hearts went out in manly fullness to these waifs of the plain. On the other hand, a day had brought forth promise and fulfillment, from strangers, to the boys, until the latter's confidence knew no bounds. At random, the men virtually spoke of the cattle on a thousand hills, until the boys fully believed that by merely waving a wand, the bells would tinkle and a cow walk forth.

Where two horses were promised, four had appeared. Where their little store of provision was as good as exhausted, it had been multiplied many fold. Where their living quarters were threatened with intrusion, a tent, with fly, was added; all of which, as if by magic, had risen out of a dip in the plain.

There was no danger, at the hands of the trail men, of any discourtesy to Joel, but to relieve any timidity, the foreman saddled his horse and accompanied the boy a mile or more, fully reviewing the details of his errand. Left behind, and while rubbing the wounded limb, Dell regaled his patient with a scrap of family history. "Pa never let us boys go near the trail," said he. "It seemed like he was afraid of you Texas men; afraid your cattle would trample down our fields and drink up all our water. The herds were so big."

"Suppose the cattle would drink the water," replied Forrest, "the owner would pay for it, which would be better than letting it go to waste. One day's hot winds would absorb more water than the biggest herd of cattle could drink. This ain't no farming country."

"That's so," admitted Dell; "we only had one mess of peas this season, and our potatoes aren't bigger than marbles. Now, let me rub your knee, there where the bullet skipped, between the bandages."

The rubbing over, Forrest pressed home the idea of abandoning farming for cattle ranching. "What your father ought to have done," said he, "was to have made friends with the Texas drovers; given them the water, with or without price, and bought any cripples or sore-footed cattle. Nearly every herd abandons more or less cattle on these long drives, and he could have bought them for a song and sung it himself. The buffalo grass on the divides and among these sand hills is the finest winter grazing in the country. This water that you are wasting would have yearly earned you one hundred head of cripples. A month's rest on this creek and they would kick up their heels and play like calves. After one winter on this range, they would get as fat as plover. Your father missed his chance by not making friends with the Texas trail men."

"Do you think so?" earnestly said Dell.

"I know it," emphatically asserted the wounded man. "Hereafter, you and Joel want to be friendly with these drovers and their men. Cast your bread upon the waters."

"Mother used to read that to us," frankly admitted Dell. There was a marked silence, only broken by a clatter of hoofs, and the trail boss cantered up to the tent.

"That wagon track," said he, dismounting, "is little more than a dim trail. Sorry I didn't think about it sooner, but we ought to have built a smudge fire where this road intersects the cattle trail. In case the doctor doesn't reach there by noon, I sent orders to fly a flag at the junction, and Joel to return home. But if the doctor doesn't reach there until after darkness, he'll never see the flag, and couldn't follow the trail if he did. We'll have to send Joel back."

"It's my turn," said Dell. "I know how to build a smudge fire; build it in a circle, out of cattle chips, in the middle of the road."

"You're a willing boy," said Priest, handing the bridle reins to Dell, "but we'll wait until Joel returns. You may water my horse and turn him in the corral."

The day wore on, and near the middle of the afternoon Joel came riding in. He had waited fully an hour after the departure of the herd, a flag had been left unfurled at the junction, and all other instructions delivered. Both Forrest and Priest knew the distance to the ford on the Republican, and could figure to an hour, by different saddle gaits, the necessary time to cover the distance, even to Culbertson. Still there was a measure of uncertainty: the messenger might have lost his way; there might not have been any physician within call; accidents might have happened to horse or rider,—and one hour wore away, followed by another.

Against his will, Dell was held under restraint until six o'clock. "It's my intention to follow him within an hour," said the foreman, as the boy rounded a bluff and disappeared. "He can build the fire as well as any one, and we'll return before midnight. That'll give the doctor the last minute and the benefit of every doubt."

The foreman's mount stood saddled, and twilight had settled over the valley, when the occupants of the tent were startled by the neigh of a horse. "That's Rowdy," said Forrest; "he always nickers when he sights a wagon or camp. Dell's come."

Joel sprang to the open front. "It's Dell, and there's a buckboard following," he whispered. A moment later the vehicle rattled up, led by the irrepressible Dell, as if in charge of a battery of artillery. "This is the place, Doctor," said he, as if dismissing a troop from cavalry drill.

The physician proved to be a typical frontier doctor. He had left Culbertson that morning, was delayed in securing a relay team at the ford on the Republican, and still had traveled ninety miles since sunrise. "If it wasn't for six-shooters in this country," said he, as he entered the tent, "we doctors would have little to do. Your men with the herd told me how the accident happened." Then to Forrest, "Son, think it'll ever happen again?"

"Yes, unless you can cure a fool from lending his pistol," replied Forrest.

"Certainly. I've noticed that similarity in all gunshot wounds: they usually offer good excuses. It's healing in its nature," commented the doctor, as he began removing the bandages. As the examination proceeded, there was a running comment maintained, bordering on the humorous.

"If there's no extra charge," said Forrest, "I wish you would allow the boys to see the wounds. You might also deliver a short lecture on the danger of carrying the hammer of a pistol on a loaded cartridge. The boys are young and may take the lesson seriously, but you're wasting good breath on me. Call the boys—I'm an old dog."

"Gunshot wounds are the only crop in this country," continued the doctor, ignoring the request, "not affected by the drouth. There's an occasional outbreak of Texas fever among cattle, but that's not in my department. Well, that bullet surely was hungry for muscle, but fortunately it had a distaste for bone. This is just a simple case of treatment and avoiding complications. Six weeks to two months and you can buckle on your six-shooter again. Hereafter, better wear it on the other side, and if another accident occurs, it'll give you a hitch in each leg and level you up."

"But there may be no fool loafing around to borrow it," protested Forrest.

"Never fear, son; the fool's eternal," replied the doctor, with a quiet wink at the others.

The presence and unconcern of the old physician dispelled all uneasiness, and the night passed without anxiety, save between the boys. Forrest's lecture to Dell during the day, of the importance of making friends with the drovers, the value of the water, the purchase of disabled cattle, was all carefully reviewed after the boys were snugly in bed. "Were you afraid of the men with the herd today?—afraid of the cowboys?" inquired Dell, when the former subject was exhausted.

"Why, no," replied Joel rather scornfully, from the security of his bunk; "who would be afraid? They are just like any other folks."

Dell was skeptical. "Not like the pictures of cowboys?—not shooting and galloping their horses?"

"Why, you silly boy," said Joel, with contempt; "there wasn't a shot fired, their horses were never out of a walk, never wet a hair, and they changed to fresh ones at noon. The only difference I could see, they wore their hats at dinner. And they were surely cowboys, because they had over three thousand big beeves, and had come all the way from Texas."

"I wish I could have gone," was Dell's only comment.

"Oh, it was a great sight," continued the privileged one. "The column of cattle was a mile long, the trail twice as wide as a city street, and the cattle seemed to walk in loose marching order, of their own accord. Not a man carried a whip; no one even shouted; no one as much as looked at the cattle; the men rode away off yonder. The herd seemed so easy to handle."

"And how many men did it take?" insisted Dell.

"Only eleven with the herd. And they had such queer names for their places. Those in the lead were *point* men, those in the middle were *swing* men, and the one who brought up the rear was the *drag* man. Then there was the cook, who drove the wagon, and the wrangler, who took care of the

horses—over one hundred and forty head. They call the band of saddle horses the remuda; one of the men told me it was Spanish for relay—a relay of horses."

"I'm going the next time," said Dell. "Mr. Quince said he would buy us a cow from the next herd that passed."

"These were all big beeves to-day, going to some fort on the Yellowstone River. And they had such wide, sweeping horns! And the smartest cattle! An hour before noon one of the point men gave a shrill whistle, and the whole column of beeves turned aside and began feeding. The men called it 'throwing the herd off the trail to graze.' It was just like saying *halt!* to soldiers—like we saw at that reunion in Ohio."

"And you weren't afraid?" timidly queried the younger brother.

"No one else was afraid, and why should I be? I was on horseback. Stop asking foolish questions and go to sleep," concluded Joel, with pitying finality, and turned to the wall.

"But suppose those big Texas beeves had stampeded, then what?" There was challenge in Dell's voice, but the brother vouchsafed no answer. A seniority of years had given one a twelve hours' insight over the other, in range cattle, and there was no common ground between sleepy bedfellows to justify further converse. "I piloted in the doctor, anyhow," said Dell defensively. No reply rewarded his assertion.

Morning brought little or no change in the condition of the wounds. The doctor was anxious to return, but Priest urged otherwise. "Let's call it Sunday," said he, "and not work to-day. Besides, if I overtake the herd, I'll have to make a hand. Wait until to-morrow, and we'll bear each other company. If another herd shows up on the trail to-day, it may have a cow. We must make these boys comfortable."

The doctor consented to stay over, and amused himself by quarreling with his patient. During the forenoon Priest and Joel rode out to the nearest high ground, from which a grove was seen on the upper Beaver. "That's what we call Hackberry Grove," said Joel, "and where we get our wood. The creek makes a big bend, and all the bottom land has grown up with timber, some as big as a man's body. It doesn't look very far away, but it takes all day to go and come, hauling wood. There's big springs just above, and the water never fails. That's what makes the trees so thrifty."

"Too bad your father didn't start a little ranch here," said Priest, surveying the scene. "It's a natural cattle range. There are the sand hills to the south; good winter shelter and a carpet of grass."

"We were too poor," frankly admitted the boy. "Every fall we had to go to the Solomon River to hunt work. With pa's pension, and what we could earn, we held down the homestead. Last fall we proved up; pa's service in the army counted on the residence required. It doesn't matter now if we do leave it. All Dell and I have to do is to keep the taxes paid."

"You would be doing wrong to leave this range," said the trail boss in fatherly tones. "There's a fortune in this grass, if you boys only had the cattle to eat it. Try and get a hundred cows on shares, or buy young steers on a credit."

"Why, we have no money, and no one would credit boys," ruefully replied Joel.

"You have something better than either credit or money," frankly replied the cowman; "you control this range. Make that the basis of your beginning. All these cattle that are coming over the trail are hunting a market or a new owner. Convince any man that you have the range, and the cattle will be forthcoming to occupy it."

"But we only hold a quarter-section of land," replied the boy in his bewilderment.

"Good. Take possession of the range, occupy it with cattle, and every one will respect your prior right," argued the practical man. "Range is being rapidly taken up in this western country. Here's your chance. Water and grass, world without end."

Joel was evidently embarrassed. Not that he questioned the older man's advice, but the means to the end seemed totally lacking. The grind of poverty had been his constant companion, until he scarcely looked forward to any reprieve, and the castles being built and the domain surveyed at the

present moment were vague and misty. "I don't doubt your advice," admitted the boy. "A man could do it, you could, but Dell and I had better return to the settlements. Mr. Quince will surely be well by fall."

"Will you make me a promise?" frankly asked the cowman.

"I will," eagerly replied the boy.

"After I leave to-morrow morning, then, tell Forrest that you are thinking of claiming Beaver Creek as a cattle range. Ask him if he knows any way to secure a few cows and yearlings with which to stock it. In the mean time, think it over yourself. Will you do that?"

"Y-e-s, I-I will," admitted Joel, as if trapped into the promise.

"Of course you will. And ask him as if life and death depended on securing the cattle. Forrest has been a trail foreman and knows all the drovers and their men. He's liable to remain with you until the season ends. Now, don't fail to ask him."

"Oh, I'll ask him," said Joel more cheerfully. "Did you say that control of a range was a basis on which to start a ranch, and that it had a value?"

"That's it. Now you're catching the idea. Lay hold and never lose sight of the fact that a range that will graze five to ten thousand cattle, the year round, is as good as money in the bank."

Joel's faculties were grappling with the idea. The two turned their horses homeward, casting an occasional glance to the southward, but were unrewarded by the sight of a dust cloud, the signal of an approaching herd. The trail foreman was satisfied that he had instilled interest and inquiry into the boy's mind, which, if carefully nurtured, might result in independence. They had ridden several miles, discussing different matters, and when within sight of the homestead, Joel reined in his horse. "Would you mind repeating," said he, "what you said awhile ago, about control of a range by prior rights?"

The trail foreman freely responded to the awakened interest. "On the range," said he, "custom becomes law. No doubt but it dates back to the first flocks and herds. Its foundations rest on a sense of equity and justice which has always existed among pastoral people. In America it dates from the first invasion of the Spanish. Among us Texans, a man's range is respected equally with his home. By merely laying claim to the grazing privileges of public domain, and occupying it with flocks or herds, the consent of custom gives a man possession. It is an asset that is bought and sold, and is only lost when abandoned. In all human migrations, this custom has followed flocks and herds. Title to land is the only condition to which the custom yields."

"And we could claim this valley, by simply occupying it with cattle, and hold possession of its grazing privileges?" repeated the boy.

"By virtue of a custom, older than any law, you surely can. It's primal range to-day. This is your epoch. The buffalo preceded you, the settler, seeking a home, will follow you. The opportunity is yours. Go in and win."

"But how can we get a start of cattle?" pondered Joel.

"Well, after I leave, you're going to ask Forrest that question. That old boy knows all the ins and outs, and he may surprise you. There's an old maxim about where there's a will there's a way. Now if you have the will, I've a strong suspicion that your Mr. Quince will find the way. Try him, anyhow."

"Oh, I will," assured Joel; "the first thing in the morning."

The leaven of interest had found lodgment. A pleasant evening was spent in the tent. Before excusing the lads for the night, Priest said to the doctor: "This is a fine cattle range, and I'd like your opinion about these boys starting a little ranch on the Beaver."

"Well," said the old physician, looking from Joel to Dell, "there are too many lawyers and doctors already. The farmers raise nothing out here, and about the only prosperous people I meet are you cowmen. You ride good horses, have means to secure your needs, and your general health is actually discouraging to my profession. Yes, I think I'll have to approve of the suggestion. A life in the open, an evening by a camp-fire, a saddle for a pillow—well, I wish I had my life to live over. It wouldn't surprise me to hear of Wells Brothers making a big success as ranchmen. They have health

and youth, and there's nothing like beginning at the bottom of the ladder. In fact, the proposition has my hearty approval. Fight it out, boys; start a ranch."

"Come on, Dell," said Joel, leading the way; "these gentlemen want to make an early start. You'll have to bring in the horses while I get breakfast. Come on."

CHAPTER III

THE BOTTOM RUNG

An early start was delayed. Joel had figured without his guest, as the Texan stands in a class by himself. The peace and serenity of pastoral life affects its people, influencing their normal natures into calm and tranquil ways. Hence, instead of the expected start at sunrise, after breakfast the trail foreman languidly sauntered out to the corral, followed by the boys.

The old physician, even, grew impatient. "What on earth do you think is detaining that man?" he inquired of Forrest. "Here the sun is nearly an hour high, and not a wheel turning. And I can see him from the tent opening, sitting on a log, flicking the ground with his quirt and chatting with those boys. What do you suppose they are talking about?"

"Well, now, that's a hard question," answered Forrest. "I'll chance the subject is of no importance. Just a little social powwow with the boys, most likely. Sit down, Doctor, and take life easy—the cows will calve in the spring."

Patience had almost ceased to be a virtue when the trail boss put in an appearance at the tent. "You are in no particular hurry, are you, Doctor?" he inquired, with a friendly smile.

"Oh, no," said the physician, with delightful irony; "I was just thinking of having the team unhooked, and lay over another day. Still, I am some little distance from home, and have a family that likes to see me occasionally."

The buckboard rattled away. "Come in the tent," called Forrest to the boys. "If old Paul sees you standing out there, he's liable to think of something and come back. Honestly, when it comes to killing time, that old boy is the bell steer."

Only three were now left at the homestead. The first concern was to intercept the next passing herd. Forrest had a wide acquaintance among trail foremen, had met many of them at Dodge only ten days before, while passing that supply point, and it was a matter of waiting until a herd should appear.

There was little delay. Joel was sent at ten o'clock to the nearest swell, and Dell an hour later. The magic was working overtime; the dust cloud was there! In his haste to deliver the message, the sentinel's horse tore past the tent and was only halted at the corral. "It's there!" he shouted, returning, peering through the tent-flaps. "They're coming; another herd's coming. It's in the dip behind the first divide. Shall I go? I saw it first."

"Dismount and rest your saddle," said Forrest. "Come in and let's make a little medicine. If this herd has one, here's where we get a cow. Come in and we'll plot against the Texans."

With great misgiving, Dell dismounted. As he entered the tent, Forrest continued: "Sit on the corner of my bunk, and we'll talk the situation over. Oh, I'm going to send you, never fear. Now, the trouble is, we don't know whose herd this may be, and you must play innocent and foxy. If the herd is behind the first divide, it'll water in the Beaver about four o'clock. Now, ride down the creek and keep your eagle eye open for a lone horseman, either at the crossing or on the trail. That's the foreman, and that's the man we want to see. He may be ten miles in the lead of his herd, and you want to ride straight to him. Give him all the information you can regarding the water, and inquire if this is one of Lovell's herds. That will put you on a chatting basis, and then lead up to your errand. Tell him that you are running a trail hospital, and that you have a wounded man named Quince Forrest at your camp, and ask the foreman to come up and see him. Once you get him here, your work is over, except going back after the cow."

Dell was impatient to be off, and started for the opening. "Hold on," commanded Forrest, "or I'll put a rope on you. Now, ride slowly, let your horse set his own pace, and don't come back without your man. Make out that I'm badly wounded, and that you feel uneasy that blood poisoning may set in."

The messenger lost no time in getting away. Once out of sight of the tent, Dell could not resist the temptation to gallop his mount over level places. Carrying the weight of a boy was nothing to the horse, and before half an hour had passed, the ford and trail came in view of the anxious courier. Halting in order to survey the horizon, the haze and heat-waves of summer so obstructed his view that every object looked blurred and indistinct. Even the dust cloud was missing; and pushing on a mile farther, he reined in again. Now and then in the upper sky, an intervening cloud threw a shadow over the plain, revealing objects more distinctly. For a moment one rested over the trail crossing, and like prophecy fulfilled, there was the lone horseman at the ford!

In the waste places it is a pleasure to unexpectedly meet a fellow being. Before being observed, Dell rode within hailing distance, greeting, and man and boy were soon in friendly converse. There was water sufficient for all needs, the herd required no pilot, the summons found a ready response, and the two were soon riding up the Beaver in a jog trot.

The gait admitted of free conversation, and the new foreman soon had Dell on the defensive. "I always hate to follow a Lovell outfit," said the stranger regretfully; "they're always in trouble. Old man Don's a nice enough man, but he sure works sorry outfits on the trail. I've been expecting to hear something like this. If it isn't rebranding their saddle stock with nigger brands, it's sure to be something worse. And now that flat-headed Quince Forrest plows a fire-guard down his own leg with a six-shooter! Well, wouldn't that sour sweet milk!"

"Oh, it wasn't his fault," protested Dell; "he only loaned his pistol, and it was returned with the hammer on a cartridge."

"Of course," disgustedly assented the trail boss; "with me it's an old story. Hadn't no more sabe than to lend his gun to some prowling tenderfoot. More than likely he urged its loan on this short-horn. Yes, I know Colonel Forrest; I've known him to bet his saddle and ride bareback as the result. It shows his cow-sense. Rather shallow-brained to be allowed so far from home."

"Well," contended poor Dell, "they surely were no friends. At least Mr. Quince don't speak very highly of that man."

"That's his hindsight," said the trail foreman. "If the truth ever comes out, you'll notice his foresight was different. Colonel Quince is famous, after the horse is stolen, for locking the stable door. That other time he offered to take an oath, on a stack of Bibles, never to bet his saddle again. The trouble is the game never repeats; the play never comes up twice alike. If that old boy's gray matter ever comes to full bloom, long before his allotted time, he'll wither away."

Dell was discouraged. He realized that his defense of his friend was weak. This second foreman seemed so different from either Priest or Forrest. He spoke with such deep regret of the seeming faults of others that the boy never doubted his sincerity. He even questioned Dell with such an innocent countenance that the lad withered before his glance, and became disheartened at the success of the errand. Forced to the defense continually, on several occasions Dell nearly betrayed the object of bringing the new man to the homestead, but in each instance was saved by some fortunate turn in the conversation. Never was sight more welcome than the tent, glistening in the sun, and never was relief from duty more welcome to a courier. The only crumb of comfort left to the boy who had ridden forth so boldly was that he had not betrayed the object of his mission and had brought the range men together. Otherwise his banner was trailing in the dust.

The two rode direct to the tent. During the middle of the day, in order to provide free ventilation, the walls were tucked up, and the flaps, rear and front, thrown wide open. Stretched on his bunk, Forrest watched the opening, and when darkened by the new arrival, the wounded man's greeting was most cordial. "Well, if it isn't old Nat Straw," said he, extending his hand. "Here, I've been running over in my mind the different trail bosses who generally go north of the Platte River, but you escaped my memory. It must have gotten into my mind, somehow, that you had married and gone back to chopping cotton. Still driving for Uncle Jess Ellison, I reckon?"

"Yes, still clerking for the same drover," admitted Straw, glancing at the wounded limb. "What's this I hear about you laying off, and trying to eat some poor nester out of house and home? You must be getting doty."

"Enjoy yourself, Nat. The laugh's on me. I'm getting discouraged that I'll ever have common horse sense. Isn't it a shame to be a fool all your life!"

Straw glanced from the bunk to Dell. "I was just telling the boy, as we rode up the creek, that you needed a whole heap of fixing in your upper loft. The poor boy tried his best to defend you, but it was easy to see that he hadn't known you long."

"And of course you strung him for all he could carry," said Forrest. "Here, Dell. You were in such a hurry to get away that I overlooked warning you against these trail varmints. Right now, I can see old Nat leading you in under a wet blanket, and your colors dragging. Don't believe a word he told you, and don't even give him a pleasant look while he stays here."

The discouraged boy brightened, and Joel and Dell were excused, to water and picket the horses. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," resumed Forrest, "brow-beating that boy. Considering my hard luck, I've fallen into angels' hands. These boys are darling fellows. Now before you leave, square yourself with that youngest one."

"A little jollyng while he's young won't hurt him," replied Straw. "It's not a bad idea to learn early to believe nothing that you hear and only half of what you see. If you had been taken snipe hunting oftener when you were young, it wouldn't hurt you any now. There are just about so many knocks coming to each of us, and we've got to take them along with the croup, chicken-pox, measles, and mumps."

During the absence of the boys, Forrest informed Straw of the sad condition which confronted the lads, when accident and necessity threw him into their hands. He also repeated Priest's opinion of the valuable range, unoccupied above on the Beaver, and urged his assistance in securing some cattle with which to stock and claim it for the boys.

"There's plenty of flotsam on the trail," said he, "strays and sore-footed cattle, to occupy this valley and give these boys a start in life. I never even got thanked for a stray, and I've turned hundreds of them loose on these upper ranges, refused on the delivery of a herd. Somebody gets them, and I want these boys of mine to get a few hundred head during this summer. Here's the place to drop your cripples and stray cows. From what Paul says, there's range above here for thousands of cattle, and that's the foundation of a ranch. Without a hoof on it, it has a value in proportion to its carrying capacity, and Priest and I want these boys to secure it. They've treated me white, and I'm going to make a fight for them."

The appeal was not in vain. "Why not," commented Straw. "Let me in and we'll make it three-handed. My herd is contracted again this year to the same cattle company on the Crazy Woman, in Wyoming, as last season, and I want to fool them this trip. They got gay on my hands last summer, held me down to the straight road brand at delivery, and I'll see to it that there are no strays in my herd this year. I went hungry for fresh beef, and gave those sharks over forty good strays. They knew I'd have to leave them behind me. Watch me do it again."

"About how many have you now, and how do they run?"

"They're a hit-and-miss lot, like strays always are. Run from a good cow down to yearlings. There ought to be about twenty-five head, and I'll cut you out five or six cripples. They could never make it through, nohow."

"Any calves among the strays?"

"Two or three."

"Good enough. Give each of the boys a cow and calf, and the others to me. We'll let on that I've bought them."

That no time might be lost in friendly chat, a late dinner was eaten in the tent. Straw would have to meet his herd at the trail crossing that afternoon, which would afford an opportunity to cut

out all strays and cripples. One of the boys would return with him, for the expected cow, and when volunteers were called for, Dell hesitated in offering his services. "I'll excuse you," said Straw to Joel, who had jumped at the chance. "I'm a little weak on this red-headed boy, and when a cow hand picks on me for his side partner, the choice holds until further orders. Bring in the horses off picket, son, and we'll be riding."

The latter order was addressed to Dell. No sooner had the boy departed than Straw turned to Joel. "I've fallen head over ears in love with the idea of this trail hospital. Just where it ought to be; just about midway between Dodge and Ogalalla. Of course I'm hog wild to get in on it. I might get a man hurt any day, might get sick myself, and I want to be a stockholder in this hospital of yours. What's your favorite color in cows?"

Joel's caution caused him to hesitate. "If you have one, send me a milk-white cow *with a black face*" instantly said Forrest. "White cows are rich in cream, and I'm getting peevish, having to drink black coffee."

"A white cow for you," said Straw, nodding to Forrest, "and what color for you?" But Joel, although half convinced, made no answer.

"Send him a red one," authorized Forrest; "red steers bring a dollar a head more than mongrel colors."

"A red cow and calf for Joel, a white one for milk, and Dell can pick his own," said Straw, murmuring a memorandum. "Now, that little passel of cripples, and odds and ends," again nodding to Forrest, "that I'm sawing off on you, I'll bring them up with the cows. Yes, I'm coming back and stay all night."

Joel lost all doubts on the moment. The trail boss was coming back, was going to bring each one a cow. There was no question but that this stranger had the cattle in his possession; surely he would not trifle with his own people, with an unfortunate, wounded man. All this seemed so in keeping with the partial outline of Priest, the old gray-haired foreman, that the boy's caution gave place to firm belief. If generous princes ever walked the earth, it was just possible that liberal ones in the rough were still riding it in disguise.

Joel hastened to his brother with the news. "It's all right," said he, throwing the saddle on Straw's horse. "You go right along with this strange foreman. He gave Mr. Quince a milk cow, a white one, and you're to pick one for yourself. If I were going in your place, I'd pick a red one; red cattle are worth a dollar a head more than any other color."

There was something in Joel's voice that told Dell that his brother had not been forgotten. "And you?—don't you?" stammered the younger boy.

"Mr. Quince picked out a cow and calf for me," replied Joel, with a loftiness that two years' seniority confers on healthy boys. "I left it to him to choose mine. You'd better pick out a red one. And say, this hospital of ours is the real thing. It's the only one between Dodge and Ogalalla. This strange foreman wants to take stock in it. I wonder if that was what he meant by sawing off a little passel of cattle on Mr. Quince. Now, don't argue or ask foolish questions, but keep your eyes and ears open."

Fortified anew in courage, Dell accompanied the trail boss to meet his herd. It was a short hour's ride, and on sighting the cattle, then nearing the crossing, they gave rein to their horses and rode for the rear of the long column, where, in the rear-guard of the trailing cattle, naturally the sore and tender-footed animals were to be found. The drag men knew them to a hoof, were delighted to hear that all cripples were to be dropped, and half a dozen were cut off and started up the Beaver. "Nurse them to the nearest water," said Straw to the drag men, "and then push them up the creek until I overtake you. Here's where we drop our strays and cripples. What? No, I'm only endowing a trail hospital."

The herd numbered thirty-one hundred two-year-old steers. They filled the channel of the Beaver for a mile around the crossing, crowding into the deeper pools, and thrashing up and down the creek in slaking their thirst. Dell had never seen so many cattle, almost as uniform in size as that

many marbles, and the ease with which a few men handled the herd became a nine-day wonder to the astonished boy. And when the word passed around to cut all strays up the creek, the facility with which the men culled out the alien down to one class and road brand, proved them masters in the craft. It seemed as easily done as selecting a knife from among the other trinkets in a boy's pocket.

After a change of mounts for the foreman, Dell and the trail boss drifted the strays up the creek. The latter had counted and classed them as cut out of the herd, and when thrown together with the cripples, the promised little passel numbered thirty-five cattle, not counting three calves. Straw excused his men, promising to overtake them the next morning, and man and boy drifted the nucleus of a future ranch toward the homestead.

"Barring that white cow and the red one with the speckled calf," said Straw to Dell, pointing out each, "you're entitled to pick one for yourself. Now, I'm not going to hurry you in making your choice. Any time before we sight the tent and shack, you are to pick one for your own dear cow, and stand by your choice, good or bad. Remember, it carries my compliments to you, as one of the founders of the first hospital on the Texas and Montana cattle trail."

Two miles below the homestead, the half-dozen cripples were dropped to the rear. "You can come back to-morrow morning and get these tender steers," said the foreman, "and drift them up above the improvements. You'll find them near here on the water. Now, we'll sight the tent around the next bend, and you may point out your choice."

"I'll take that red steer," said Dell with marked decision, pointing out a yearling.

A peal of laughter greeted his choice. "That's a boy," shouted Straw; "shoot at a buck and kill a fawn! Why didn't you take that black cow and calf?"

"I like red cattle the best," replied Dell, undaunted. "I've heard they bring a better price. I'll own the only red steer in the bunch."

"Yes, but when your choice is a beef, that black cow and her increase would buy two beeves. Dell, if you ever get to be a cowman, you'll have to do some of your own thinking."

Dell's mistake was in listening to others. Joel was equally guilty, as his lofty comments regarding red cattle were derived from the random remarks of Forrest. The brothers were novices in range cattle, and Dell's error was based in not relying on his own judgment.

On sighting the approaching cattle, Forrest's bunk was eased around to the tent opening, Joel holding the flaps apart, and the little herd was grazed past at a snail's pace in review. Leaving Dell to nurse the nucleus past the improvements, Straw dismounted at the tent. "Well," said he, handing the bridle reins to Joel, "that red-headed Dell is surely the making of a great cowman. All successful men begin at the bottom of the ladder, and he surely put his foot on the lowest rung. What do you suppose his choice was?"

"The bottom rung suggests a yearling," said Forrest.

"Stand up. You spelled the word correct. I'm a sheep herder, if he didn't pick out the only, little, old, red, dobe steer in the entire bunch!"

Forrest eased himself down on the bunk, unable to restrain his laughter. "Well," said he, "we all have to learn, and no one can say Dell wasn't true to his colors."

CHAPTER IV

THE BROTHERS CLAIM A RANGE

The next morning Straw dallied about until Dell brought up the crippled cattle. They were uniform in size; rest was the one thing needful, and it now would be theirs amid bountiful surroundings. They were driven up among the others, now scattered about in plain sight in the valley above, presenting a morning scene of pastoral contentment.

"Even the calves are playing this morning," said Straw to Forrest, as the former entered the tent. "A few cattle surely make this valley look good. What you want to do now is to keep on drawing more. Don't allow no outfit to pass without chipping in, at least give them the chance, and this trail hospital will be on velvet in no time. Of course, all Lovell outfits will tear their shirts boosting the endowment fund, but that needn't bar the other herds. Some outfits may have no cattle, but they can chip in a sore-back or crippled pony. My idea is to bar no one, and if they won't come in, give them a chance to say they don't want to. You ought to send word back to Dodge; any foreman going east or west from there would give you his strays."

The conception of a trail refuge had taken root. The supply points were oases for amusement, but a halfway haven for the long stretches of unsettled country, during the exodus of Texas cattle to the Northwest, was an unknown port. The monotony of from three to five months on the trail, night and day work, was tiring to men, while a glass of milk or even an hour in the shade was a distinct relief. Straw was reluctant to go, returning to make suggestions, by way of excuse, and not until forced by the advancing day did he mount and leave to overtake his herd.

Again the trio was left alone. Straw had given Forrest a list of brands and a classification of the cattle contributed, and a lesson in reading brands was given the boys. "Brands read from left to right," said Forrest to the pair of attentive listeners, "or downward. If more than one brand is on an animal, the upper one is the holding or one in which ownership is vested. Character brands are known by name, and are used because difficult to alter. There is scarcely a letter in the alphabet that a cattle thief can't change. When a cow brute leaves its home range, it's always a temptation to some rustler to alter the brand, and characters are not so easily changed."

The importance of claiming the range was pressing, and now that cattle were occupying it, the opportunity presented itself. A notice was accordingly written, laying claim to all grazing rights, from the Texas and Montana trail crossing on Beaver to the headwaters of the same, including all its tributaries, by virtue of possession and occupancy vested in the claimants, Wells Brothers. "How does that sound?" inquired Forrest, its author, giving a literal reading of the notice. "Nothing small or stingy about that, eh? When you're getting, get a-plenty."

"But where are we to get the cattle to stock such a big country?" pondered Joel. "It's twenty miles to the head of this creek."

"We might as well lay big plans as little ones. Here's where we make a spoon or spoil a horn. Saddle a horse and post this notice down at the trail crossing. Sink a stake where every one can see it, and nail your colors to the sign-board. We are the people, and must be respected."

Joel hastened away to post the important notice. Dell was detailed on sentinel duty, on lookout for another herd, but each trip he managed to find some excuse to ride among the cattle. "What's the brand on my white cow?" inquired Forrest, the object leading up to another peculiarity in color.

"I couldn't *read* it," said Dell, airing his range parlance.

"No? Well, did you ever see a white cow with a black face?" inquired the wounded man, coming direct to the matter at issue.

"Not that I remember; why?"

"Because there never lived such a colored cow. Nature has one color that she never mars. You can find any colored cow with a white face, but you'll never find a milk-white cow with a colored face. That line is drawn, and you want to remember it. You'll never shoot a wild swan with a blue wing, or see yellow snowflakes fall, or meet a pure white cow with a black face. Hereafter, if any one attempts to send you on a wild-goose chase, to hunt such a cow, tell them that no such animal ever walked this earth."

Joel returned before noon. No sign of an approaching herd was sighted by the middle of the afternoon, and the trio resigned themselves to random conversation.

"Dell," said Forrest, "it's been on my mind all day to ask you why you picked a yearling yesterday when you had a chance to take a cow. Straw laughed at you."

"Because Joel said red cattle were worth a dollar a head more than any other color."

"Young man," inquired Forrest of Joel, "what's your authority for that statement?"

"Didn't you pick me a red cow yesterday, and didn't you admit to Mr. Straw that red cattle were worth the most?" said Joel, in defense of his actions.

"And you rushed away and palmed my random talking off on Dell as original advice? You'll do. Claiming a little more than you actually know will never hurt you any. Now here's a prize for the best brand reader: The boy who brings me a correct list of brands, as furnished by Straw, gets my white cow and calf as a reward. I want the road and ranch brand on the cripples, and the only or holding brand on the others. Now, fool one another if you can. Ride through them slowly, and the one who brings me a perfect list is my bully boy."

The incentive of reward stimulated the brothers to action. They scampered away on ponies, not even waiting to saddle, and several hours were spent in copying brands. These included characters, figures, and letters, and to read them with skill was largely a matter of practice. Any novice ought to copy brands, but in this instance the amateur's list would be compared with that of an experienced trail foreman, a neutral judge from which there was no appeal.

The task occupied the entire evening. Forrest not only had them read, but looked over each copy, lending impartial assistance in reading characters that might baffle a boy. There were some half dozen of the latter in Straw's list, a *turkey track* being the most difficult to interpret, but when all characters were fully understood, Joel still had four errors to Dell's three. The cripples were found to be correct in each instance, and were exempt from further disturbance. Forrest now insisted that to classify, by enumerating each grade, would assist in locating the errors, which work would have to be postponed until morning.

The boys were thoroughly in earnest in mastering the task. Forrest regaled them with examples of the wonderful expertness of the Texans in reading brands and classifying cattle. "Down home," said he, "we have boys who read brands as easily as a girl reads a novel. I know men who can count one hundred head of mixed cattle, as they leave a corral, or trail along, and not only classify them but also give you every brand correctly. Now, that's the kind of cowmen I aim to make out of you boys, and to-morrow morning you must get these brands accurate. What was that?"

Both boys sprang to the tent opening and listened. It sounded like a shot, and within a few moments was seconded by a distant hail.

"Some one must be lost," suggested Joel. "He's down the creek."

"Lost your grandmother!" exclaimed Forrest. "We're all lost in this country. Here, fire this six-shooter in the air, and follow it up with a Comanche yell. Dell, build a little fire on the nearest knoll. It's more than likely some trail man hunting this camp."

The signal-fire was soon burning. The only answer vouchsafed was some fifteen minutes later, when the clatter of an approaching horse was distinctly heard. A lantern shone through the tent walls, and the prompt hail of the horseman proved him no stranger. "Is Quince Forrest here?" he inquired, as his horse shied at the tent.

"He is. Come in, Dorg," said Forrest, recognizing by his voice the horseman without to be Dorg Seay, one of Don Lovell's foremen. "Come in and let us feast our eyes on your handsome face."

Seay peeped within and timidly entered. "Well," said he, pulling at a straggling mustache, "evidently it isn't as bad as reported. Priest wrote back to old man Don that you had attempted suicide—unfortunate in love was the reason given—and I have orders to inquire into your health or scatter flowers on your grave. Able to sit up and take notice?—no complications, I hope?"

"When did you leave Dodge?" inquired Forrest, ignoring Seay's persiflage.

"About a week ago. A telegram was waiting me on the railroad, and I rode through this afternoon. If this ranch boasts anything to eat, now would be an awful nice time to mention it."

Seay's wants were looked after.

"How many herds between here and the railroad?" inquired Forrest, resuming the conversation.

"Only one ahead of mine. In fact, I'm foreman of both herds—live with the lead one and occasionally go back and see my own. It all depends on who feeds best."

"And when will your herd reach the Beaver?" continued Forrest.

"I left orders to water my lead herd in the Beaver at three o'clock to-morrow, and my own dear cattle will be at their heels. My outfit acts as rear-guard to Blocker's herd."

These men, in the employ of the same drover, had not seen each other in months, and a fire of questions followed, and were answered. The chronicle of the long drive, of accident by flood and field, led up to the prospects for a northern demand for cattle.

"The market has barely opened in Dodge," said Seay, in reply to a question. "Unless the herds are sold or contracted, very few will leave Dodge for the Platte River before the first of July. Old man Don isn't driving a hoof that isn't placed, so all his herds will pass Ogallala before the first of the month. The bulk of the drive going north of the Platte will come next month. With the exception of scattering herds, the first of August will end the drive."

The men talked far into the night. When they were left alone in the tent, Forrest unfolded his plans for starting the boys in life.

"We found them actually on their uppers," said he; "they hadn't tasted meat in months, and were living on greens and garden truck. It's a good range, and we must get them some cattle. The first year may be a little tough, but by drawing on all of Lovell's wagons for the necessary staples, we can provision them until next spring. You must leave some flour and salt and beans and the like."

"Beans!" echoed Seay. "That will surely tickle my cook. Did you ever notice that the farther north it goes, a Texas trail outfit gets tastier? Let it start out on bacon and beans and blackstrap, and after the herd crosses the Platte, the varmints want prairie chicken and fried trout. Tasty! Why, those old boys develop an elegant taste for dainties. Nothing but good old beef ever makes them even think of home again. Yes, my cook will give you his last bean, and make a presentation speech gratis."

Forrest's wound had begun to mend, the soreness and swelling had left the knee joint, and the following morning Seay spent in making crutches. Crude and for temporary use, the wounded man tried them out, and by assistance reached the entrance, where he was eased into an old family rocking-chair in the shade of the tent.

"This has been the dream of my life," said he, "to sit like some old patriarch in my tent door and count my cattle. See that white cow yonder?" pointing with a crutch. "Well, she belongs to your uncle John Quincy. And that reminds me that she and her calf are up as a reward to complete the roll of brands. Boys, are you ready?"

The revised lists were submitted for inspection. Compared with the one rendered by Straw, there was still a difference in Dell's regarding a dun cow, while Joel's list varied on three head. Under the classification the errors were easily located, and summoning the visiting foreman, Forrest explained the situation.

"I'll have to appoint you umpire in deciding this matter. Here's the roll furnished by Nat Straw, and you'll compare it with Dell and Joel's. Of course, old Nat didn't care a whoopee about getting the

list perfect, and my boy may be right on that dun cow. Joel differs on a three-year-old, a heifer, and a yearling steer. Now, get them straight, because we're expecting to receive more cattle this evening. Pass on these brands before you leave to meet your herd this afternoon. And remember, there's a cow and calf at stake for whichever one of these boys first gets the roll correct."

After dinner the three rode away for a final inspection. The cattle were lazy and logy from water, often admitting of riding within a rod, thus rendering the brands readable at a glance. Dell led the way to the dun cow, but before Seay could pass an opinion, the boy called for his list in possession of the man. "Let me take my roll a minute," said he, "and I'll make the correction. It isn't a four bar four, it's four equals four; there's two bars instead of one. The cow and calf is mine. That gives me three."

The lust of possession was in Dell's voice. The reward had been fairly earned, and turning to the other cattle in dispute, Joel's errors were easily corrected. All three were in one brand, and the mere failure to note the lines of difference between the figure eight and the letter S had resulted in repeating the mistake. Seay amused himself by pointing out different animals and calling for their brands, and an envious rivalry resulted between the brothers, in their ability to read range script.

"A good eye and a good memory," said Seay, as they rode homeward, "are gifts to a cowman. A brand once seen is hardly ever forgotten. Twenty years hence, you boys will remember all these brands. One man can read brands at twice the distance of another, and I have seen many who could distinguish cattle from horses, with the naked eye, at a distance of three miles. When a man learns to know all there is about cattle, he ought to be getting gray around the edges."

Forrest accepted the umpire's report. "I thought some novice might trip his toe on that equality sign," said he. "There's nothing like having studied your arithmetic. Dell's been to school, and it won him a cow and calf when he saw the sign used as a brand. I wonder how he is on driving mules."

"I can drive them," came the prompt reply.

"Very well. Hook up the old team. I'm sending you down to the trail crossing to levy on two commissary wagons. Take everything they give you and throw out a few hints for more. This afternoon we begin laying in a year's provisions. It may be a cold winter, followed by a late spring, and there's nothing like having enough. Relieve them of all their dried fruits, and make a strong talk for the staples of life. I may want to winter here myself, and a cow camp should make provision for more or less company."

Seay lent his approval. "Hitch up and rattle along ahead of me," said he. "The wagons may reach the crossing an hour or two ahead of the herds, and I'll be there to help you trim them down to light traveling form."

It proved an active afternoon. The wagon was started for the trail crossing, followed by Seay within half an hour. Joel was in a quandary, between duty and desire, as he was anxious to see the passing herds, yet a bond of obligation to the wounded man required his obedience. Forrest had noticed the horse under saddle, the impatience of the boy, but tactfully removed all uneasiness.

"I have been trying to figure out," said he, "how I could spare you this afternoon, as no doubt you would like to see the herds, but we have so much to do at home. Now that I can hobble out, you must get me four poles, and we will strip this fly off the tent and make a sunshade out of it—make an arbor in front of our quarters. Have the props ready, and in the morning Seay will show you how to stretch a tarpaulin for a sunshade. And then along towards evening, you must drift our little bunch of cattle at least a mile up the creek. I'm expecting more this evening, and until we learn the brands on this second contingent, they must be kept separate. And then, since we've claimed it, we want to make a showing of occupying the range, by scattering the cattle over it. Within a month, our cows must rest in the shade of Hackberry Grove and be watering out of those upper springs. When you take a country, the next thing is to hold it."

Something to do was a relief to Joel. Willow stays, for the arbor, were cut, the bark peeled off, and the poles laid ready at hand. When the cattle arose, of their own accord, from the noontday rest, the impatient lad was allowed to graze them around the bend of the creek. There was hardly enough

work to keep an active boy employed, and a social hour ensued. "Things are coming our way," said Forrest. "This man Seay will just about rob Blocker's outfit. When it comes to making a poor mouth, that boy Dorg is in a class by himself. Dell will just about have a wagon load. You boys will have to sleep in the tent hereafter."

It proved so. The team returned an hour before sunset, loaded to the carrying capacity of the wagon. Not only were there remnants in the staples of life, but kegs of molasses and bags of flour and beans, while a good saddle, coils of rope, and a pair of new boots which, after a wetting, had proven too small for the owner, were among the assets. It was a motley assortment of odds and ends, a free discard of two trail outfits, all of which found an acceptable lodgment at the new ranch.

"They're coming up to supper," announced Dell to Forrest. "Mr. Blocker's foreman knows you, and sent word to get up a spread. He says that when he goes visiting, he expects his friends to not only put on the little and big pot, but kill a chicken and churn. He's such a funny fellow. He made me try on those boots, and when he saw they would fit, he ordered their owner, one of Mr. Seay's men, to give them to me or he would fight him at sunrise."

"Had them robbing each other for us, eh?" said Forrest, smiling. "Well, that's the kind of friend to have when settling up a new country. This ranch is like a fairy story. Here I sit and wave my crutch for a wand, and everything we need seems to just bob up out of the plain. Cattle coming along to stock a ranch, old chum coming to supper, in fact, everything coming our way. Dell, get up a banquet—who cares for expense!"

It was barely dusk when the second contingent of cattle passed above the homestead and were turned loose for the night. As before, the cripples had been dropped midway, and would be nursed up the next morning. With the assistance of crutches, Forrest managed to reach the opening, and by clinging to the tent-pole, waved a welcome to the approaching trail men.

Blocker's foreman, disdainful of an invitation to dismount, saluted his host. "There's some question in my mind," said he, "as to what kind of a dead-fall you're running up here, but if it's on the square, there goes my contribution to your hospital. Of course, the gift carries the compliments of my employer, Captain John. That red-headed boy delivered my messages, I reckon? Well, now, make out that I'm somebody that's come a long way, and that you're tickled to death to see me, and order the fatted calf killed. Otherwise, I won't even dismount."

CHAPTER V

A FALL OF CRUMBS

An active day followed. The two trail foremen left early to overtake their herds, and the trio at the homestead was fully employed. The cripples were brought up, brands were copied, and the commissary stores assorted and arranged. Before leaving, the men had stretched the sunshade, and the wounded magician sat in state before his own tent door.

The second contingent numbered forty cattle. Like the first, they were a mixed lot, with the exception of a gentle cow. Occasionally a trail foreman would provide his outfit with a milk cow before starting, or gentle one en route, and Seay had willingly given his cow to the hospital on the Beaver.

A fine rain fell during the night. It began falling during the twilight of evening, gathering in force as the hours passed, and only ceased near the middle of the following forenoon. The creek filled to its banks, the field and garden freshened in a day, and the new ranch threw off the blight of summer drouth.

"This will bring the herds," said Forrest, as the sun burst forth at noon. "It's a general rain, and every one in Dodge, now that water is sure, will pull out for the Platte River. It will cool the weather and freshen the grass, and every drover with herds on the trail will push forward for Ogalalla. We'll have to patrol the crossing on the Beaver, as the rain will lay the dust for a week and rob us of our signal."

The crippled man's words proved prophetic. One of the boys was daily detailed to ride to the first divide south, from which a herd, if timing its march to reach the Beaver within a day, could be sighted. On a primal trace, like the Texas and Montana cattle trail, every benefit to the herd was sought, and the freshened range and running water were a welcome breeze to the drover's sail.

The first week after the rain only three herds reached the Beaver. Each foreman paid his respects to Forrest at the homestead, but the herds were heavy beef cattle, purchased at Dodge for delivery on army contracts, and were outfitted anew on a change of owners. The usual flotsam of crippled and stray cattle, of galled and lame saddle stock, and of useless commissary supplies, was missing, and only the well wishes of the wayfaring were left to hearten man and boy at the new ranch.

The second week brought better results. Four of Don Lovell's herds passed within two days, and the nucleus of cattle increased to one hundred and forty odd, seven crippled horses were left, while the commissary stores fairly showered, a second wagon load being necessary to bring up the cache from the trail crossing. In all, during the week, fifteen herds passed, only three of which refused the invitation to call, while one was merely drifting along in search of a range to take up and locate with a herd of cattle. Its owners, new men in the occupation, were scouting wide, and when one of them discovered Hackberry Grove above the homestead, his delight was unbounded, as the range met every requirement for establishing a ranch.

The tyro's exultation was brief. On satisfying himself on the source of the water, the splendid shade and abundance of fuel, he rode down the creek to intercept the trail, and on rounding a bend of the Beaver, was surprised to sight a bunch of cattle. Knowing the value of the range, Forrest had urged the boys to nurse the first contingent of strays up the creek, farther and farther, until they were then ranging within a mile of the grove. The newcomer could hardly control his chagrin, and as he rode along, scarcely a mile was passed but more cattle were encountered, and finally the tent and homestead loomed in sight.

"Well, I'm glad to have such near neighbors," affably said the stranger, as he dismounted before the tent. "Holding down a homestead, I suppose?"

Only Joel and Forrest were at home. "Not exactly," replied the latter; "this is headquarters ranch of Wells Brothers; range from the trail crossing on Beaver to the headwaters of the same. On the trail with cattle, I reckon?"

"Just grazing along until a range can be secured," replied the man. "I've found a splendid one only a few miles up the creek—fine grove of timber and living springs. If the range suits my partner, we'll move in within a few days and take possession."

"Notice any cattle as you came down the creek?" politely inquired Forrest.

"Just a few here and there. They look like strays; must have escaped from some trail herd. If we decide to locate above, I'll have them all rounded up and pushed down the creek."

Joel scented danger as a cub wolf scents blood. He crossed the arbor and took up a position behind Forrest's chair. The latter was a picture of contentment, smiling at the assurance of his caller, and qualifying his remarks with rare irony.

"Well, since you expect to be our neighbor, better unsaddle and stay for dinner," urged Forrest. "Let's get acquainted—at least, come to some friendly understanding."

"No, thank you. My partner is waiting my return to the herd, and will be anxious for my report on the range above. If possible, we don't care to locate any farther north."

"You ought to have secured your range before you bought your cattle. You seem to have the cart before the horse," observed the wounded man.

"Oh," said the novice, with a sweeping gesture, "there's plenty of unclaimed range. There's ample grass and water on this creek to graze five thousand cattle."

"Wells Brothers estimate that the range, tributary to the Beaver, will carry ten thousand head the year round," replied Forrest, languidly indifferent.

"Who are Wells Brothers?" inquired the newcomer.

Forrest turned to the stranger as if informing a child. "You have the name correct," said he. "The brothers took this range some time ago, and those cattle that you met up the creek are theirs. Before you round up any cattle and drive them out, you had better look into the situation thoroughly. You surely know and respect range customs."

"Well," said the stranger explosively,—they mustn't expect to hold the whole country with a handful of cattle."

"They only took the range recently, and are acquiring cattle as fast as possible," politely replied Forrest.

"They can't hold any more country than they can occupy," authoritatively asserted the novice. "All we want is a range for a thousand cows, and I've decided on that hackberry grove as headquarters."

"Your hearing seems defective," remarked Forrest in flute-like tones. "Let me repeat: This is headquarters for Wells Brothers. Their range runs from the trail crossing, six miles below, to the headwaters of Beaver, including all its tributaries. Since you can't stay for dinner, you'll have time to ride down to the crossing of the Texas and Montana trail on this creek. There you'll find the posted notice, so that he who runs may read, that Wells Brothers have already claimed this range. I'll furnish you a pencil and scrap of paper, and you can make a copy of the formal notice and show it to your partner. Then, if you feel strong enough to outrage all range customs, move in and throw down your glove. I've met an accident recently, leaving me a cripple, but I'll agree to get in the saddle and pick up the gauntlet."

The novice led his horse aside as if to mount. "I fail to see the object in claiming more range than one can occupy. It raises a legal question," said he, mounting.

"Custom is the law of the range," replied Forrest. "The increase of a herd must be provided for, and a year or two's experience of beginners like you usually throws cattle on the market. Abundance of range is a good asset. Joel, get the gentleman a pencil and sheet of paper."

"Not at all necessary," remarked the amateur cowman, reining away. "I suppose the range is for sale?" he called out, without halting.

"Yes, but folks who prefer to intrude are usually poor buyers," shouted the crippled Texan.

Joel was alarmed and plied Forrest with a score of questions. The boy had tasted the thrill of ownership of cattle and possession of a range, and now the envy of others had threatened his interests.

"Don't be alarmed," soothingly said the wounded man. "This is like a page from life, only twice as natural. It proves two things: that you took your range in good time, and that it has a value. This very afternoon you must push at least one hundred cattle up to those springs above Hackberry Grove. Let them track and trample around the water and noon in the shade of the motte. That's possession, and possession is nine points, and the other fellow can have the tenth. If any one wants to dispute your rights or encroach on them, I'll mount a horse and go to the trail for help. The Texans are the boys to insist on range customs being respected. It's time I was riding a little, anyhow."

Dell returned from scouting the trail, and reported two herds due to reach the Beaver that evening. "I spent an hour with one of the foremen around the ford," said he to Forrest; "and he says if you want to see him, you had better come down to the crossing. He knows you, and makes out you ain't much hurt. He says if you come down, he'll give you a quarter of beef and a speckled heifer. He's one of Jess Pressnell's bosses."

"That's the word I'm waiting for," laughed Forrest. "Corral the horses and fix up some kind of a mounting block. It'll take a scaffold to get me on a horse, but I can fall off. Make haste, because hereafter we must almost live on horseback."

The words proved true. Forrest and Dell, the latter bareback, returned to the trail, while Joel rode to drift their cattle up the Beaver, in order to be in possession of Hackberry Grove and its living springs. The plains of the West were a lawless country, and if its pioneers would not respect its age-old pastoral customs, then the consequences must be met or borne.

Three weeks had passed since the accident to Forrest, the herds were coming with a vengeance, and the scene of activity changed from the homestead to the trail crossing. Forrest did not return for a week, foraging on the wagons, camping with the herds, and never failing to levy, to the extent of his ability to plead, on cattle, horses, and needful supplies. As many as five and six herds arrived in a single day, none of which were allowed to pass without an appeal: if strangers, in behalf of a hospital; if among friends, the simple facts were sufficient. Dell was kept on the move with bunches of cattle, or freighting the caches to the homestead, while Joel received the different contingents and scouted the threatened range.

Among old acquaintances there was no denying Forrest, and Dell fell heir to the first extra saddle found among the effects of a trail outfit. The galled horses had recovered serviceable form, affording each of the boys a mount, and even the threatened cloud against the range lifted. The herd of a thousand cows crossed the Beaver, and Forrest took particular pains to inform its owners of the whereabouts of unclaimed range the year before. Evidently the embryo cowmen had taken heed and inquired into range customs, and were accordingly profuse with disclaimers of any wrong intent.

The first three weeks of July saw the bulk of the herds north of the Beaver. Water and range had been taken advantage of in the trailing of cattle to the Northwest, fully three hundred thousand head having crossed from Dodge to Ogalalla. The exodus afforded the boys an insight into pastoral life, brought them in close contact with the men of the open, drove false ideas from their immature minds, and assisted in the laying of those early foundations on which their future manhood must rest.

Dell spent every chance hour with the trail men. He and Forrest slept with the wagons, met the herds, and piloted them in to the best water. The fact that only experienced men were employed on the trail made the red-headed boy a welcome guest with every herd, while the wide acquaintance of his crippled sponsor assured the lad every courtesy of camp and road. Dell soon learned that the position of point man usually fell to a veteran of the range, and one whose acquaintance was worthy of cultivation, both in the saddle and around the camp-fire.

"I'm going to be a point man," Dell confided to Forrest, on one of their trips up to the homestead. "He don't seem to have much to do, and nearly always rides with one leg across his horse's neck."

"That's the idea," assented Forrest. "Aim high. Of course, you'll have to begin as a drag man, then a few trips to Montana in the swing, and after that you have a right to expect a place on the point. The trouble is, you are liable to slip back a notch or two at any time. Here I've been a foreman in other years, and this trip I was glad to make a hand. There's so many slips, and we can't be all point men and bosses. Cooks and horse wranglers are also useful men."

The first serious cloud to hover over the new ranch appeared early during the last week in July. Forrest's wounds had nearly healed, and he was wondering if his employer would make a further claim on his services during that summer, which was probable at the hands of a drover with such extensive interests. He and Dell were still patrolling the ford on Beaver, when one evening a conveyance from the railroad to the south drove up to the crossing. It brought a telegram from Don Lovell, requesting the presence of Forrest in Dodge City, and the messenger, a liveryman from Buffalo, further assured him that transportation was awaiting him at that station. There were no grounds on which to refuse the summons, indefinite and devoid of detail as it was, and preparations were immediately made to return with the liveryman. What few cattle had been secured during that trip were drifted up the creek, when all returned to the homestead for the night.

To Dell and Joel the situation looked serious. The crippled man, helpless as he was at first, had proven their rock of refuge, and now that he was leaving them, a tenderness of unnoticed growth was revealed. As an enforced guest, he had come to them at a moment when their poverty had protested at receiving him, his unselfishness in their behalf had proven his friendship and gratitude beyond question, and the lesson was not lost on the parentless waifs.

On the other hand, Forrest lightened all depression of spirits. "Don't worry," said he to the boys. "Just as sure as water runs and grass grows, I'll come over this trail again. So far in life, I've never done any good for myself, and I'm going to play this hand out and see if you lads land on your feet. Now, don't get the idea that I've done any great feat in rustling you boys a few cows. It's one of the laws of life, that often we can do for others what we can't do for ourselves. That sounds like preaching, but it isn't. Actually, I'm ashamed of myself, that I didn't get you double the number of cattle. What we did skirmish together was merely the flotsam of the trail, the crumbs that fall from the supper table, and all obligations to me are overpaid. If I could have had just a few tears on tap, with that hospital talk, and you boys being poor and orphans—shucks! I must be getting doty—that plea was good for a thousand strays and cripples!"

The brothers took courage. So far their chief asset was a fine range. Nearly three hundred and fifty cattle, imperfect as the titles to many of them were, had been secured and were occupying the valley. A round dozen cow ponies, worthless for the present, but which in time would round into form, were added to the new ranch. Every passing commissary had laughed at the chance to discard its plunder and useless staples, and only the departure of the man behind the venture, standing in the shadow as it were, threw a depression over the outlook.

Funds, with which to pay his reckoning, had been left with Forrest. The boys had forgotten the original agreement, and it was only with tact and diplomacy that a snug sum, against his protest and embarrassment, was forced on Joel. "It don't come off me," said the departing man, "and it may come handy with you. There's a long winter ahead, and the fight ain't near won yet. The first year in starting a ranch is always the hardest. But if you boys can only hold these cattle until grass comes again, it's the making of you. You know the boy is father to the man, and if you are true-blue seed corn—well, I'll bet on two ears to the stock."

Forrest's enthusiasm tempered the parting. The start for the railroad was made at daybreak, and in taking leave, each boy held a hand, shaking it heartily from time to time, as if to ratify the general advice. "I'll make Dodge in two days," said the departing guest, "and then I'll know the meaning

of this wire. It means something—that's sure. In the mean time, sit square in your saddles, ride your range, and let the idea run riot that you are cowmen. Plan, scheme, and devise for the future. That's all until you hear from me or see my sign in the sky. Adios, señors."

CHAPTER VI

SUNSHINE AND SHADOW

An entire week passed, during which the boys were alone. A few herds were still coming over the trail, but for lack of an advocate to plead, all hope of securing more cattle must be foregone. Forrest had only taken his saddle, abandoning for the present all fixtures contributed for his comfort on arriving at the homestead, including the horses of his employers. The lads were therefore left an abundance of mounts, all cattle were drifted above the ranch, and plans for the future considered.

Winter must be met and confronted. "We must have forage for our saddle horses," said Joel to his brother, the evening after Forrest's departure. "The rain has helped our corn until it will make fodder, but that isn't enough. Pa cut hay in this valley, and I know where I can mow a ton any morning. Mr. Quince said we'd have to stable a saddle horse apiece this winter, and those mules will have to be fed. The grass has greened up since the rain, and it will be no trick at all to make ten to fifteen tons of hay. Help me grind the scythe, and we'll put in every spare hour haying. While you ride around the cattle every morning, I can mow."

A farm training proved an advantage to the boys. Before coming West, their father had owned a mowing machine, but primitive methods prevailed on the frontier, and he had been compelled to use a scythe in his haying operations. Joel swung the blade like a veteran, scattering his swath to cure in the sun, and with whetstone on steel, beat a frequent tattoo. The raking into windrows and shocking at evening was an easy task for the brothers, no day passing but the cured store was added to, until sufficient was accumulated to build a stack. That was a task which tried their mettle, but once met and overcome, it fortified their courage to meet other ordeals.

"I wish Mr. Quince could see that stack of hay," admiringly said Dell, on the completion of the first effort. "There must be five tons in it. And it's as round as an apple. I can't remember when I've worked so hard and been so hungry. No wonder the Texan despises any work he can't do on horseback. But just the same, they're dear, good fellows. I wish Mr. Quince could live with us always. He's surely a good forager."

The demand for range was accented anew. One evening two strangers rode up the creek and asked for a night's lodging. They were made welcome, and proved to be Texas cowmen, father and son, in search of pasturage for a herd of through cattle. There was an open frankness about the wayfarers that disarmed every suspicion of wrong intent, and the brothers met their inquiries with equal candor.

"And you lads are Wells Brothers?" commented the father, in kindly greeting. "We saw your notice, claiming this range, at the trail crossing, and followed your wagon track up the creek. Unless the market improves, we must secure range for three thousand two-year-old steers. Well, we'll get acquainted, anyhow."

The boys naturally lacked commercial experience in their new occupation. The absence of Forrest was sorely felt, and only the innate kindness of the guests allayed all feeling of insecurity. As the evening wore on, the old sense of dependence brought the lads in closer touch with the strangers, the conversation running over the mutual field of range and cattle matters.

"What is the reason," inquired Joel, "that so many cattle are leaving your State for the upper country?"

"The reasons are numerous and valid," replied the older cowman. "It's the natural outgrowth or expansion of the pastoral interests of our State. Before the opening of the trail, for years and years, Texas clamored for an outlet for its cattle. Our water supply was limited, the State is subject to severe drouth, the cattle were congesting on our ranges, with neither market inquiry or demand. The subjection of the Indian was followed by a sudden development of the West, the Texas and Montana cattle trail opened, and the pastoral resources of our State surprised the world. Last year we sent eight

hundred thousand cattle over the trail, and they were not missed at home. That's the reason I'm your guest to-night; range has suddenly become valuable in Texas."

"There is also an economic reason for the present exodus of cattle," added the young man. "Our State is a natural breeding ground, but we can't mature into marketable beef. Nearly twenty years' experience has proven that a northern climate is necessary to fatten and bring our Texas cattle to perfect maturity. Two winters in the North will insure a gain of from three to four hundred pounds' extra weight more per head than if allowed to reach maturity on their native heath. This gain fully doubles the value of every hoof, and is a further motive why we are your guests to-night; we are looking for a northern range on which to mature our steer cattle."

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