

DUNRAVEN RANCH.

A Story of American Frontier Life.

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"THE DESERTER," ETC.

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CHAPTER III.



EARLIER Lieut. Perry was riding blithely down the winding trail, totally unconscious that his movements were of the faintest consequence to anybody but himself, and equally heedless of their being a source of speculation. His horse was one he rejoiced in,

full of spirit and spring and intelligence; the morning was beautiful, just cool enough to be exhilarating; his favorite hound, Bruce, went bounding over the turf under the slopes, or ranging off through the cottonwoods along the stream, or the shallow, sandy arroyos, where the grass and weeds grew rank and luxuriant. Every now and then with sudden rush and whirr a drove of prairie chickens would leap from their covert, and, after vigorous flapping of wings for a few rods, would go skimming restfully in long easy curve, and settle to earth again a hundred yards away, as though suddenly reminded of the fact that this was mating time and no gentleman would be mean enough to shoot at such a season.

That marks the western limit," thought Perry to himself, "and doubtless reaches miles away to the south, from what I hear. Now, where does one enter?"

A little farther on he came upon a trail leading from the low bluffs to his left hand. It crossed the winding bridle path on which he rode, though some of the hoof tracks seemed to join, and wheel tracks too. He had marked that between the fort and the point no sign of wheel appeared; it was a hoof trail and nothing more.

Now a light and little travely wagon track came in from the north, and while one branch seemed to cross the Monee and to ascend the opposite slopes close along the wire fence, the other led him and went on down the stream. This he decided to follow.

A ride of a few hundred yards brought him to a point where a shoulder of bluff twisted the trail well in towards the stream, and he, thinking to cross and reconnoiter on the other shore, turned Nolan in that way, and was suddenly brought up standing by the heaviest and most forbidding wire fence he had ever seen. Yes, there it stretched away through the cottonwoods, straight as a die, back to the angle whence started the southward course he first had noted, and, looking down stream, far as the eye could reach, he marked it.

"Well," thought Perry, "I've often heard an Englishman's house was his castle, but who would have thought of staking and wiring in half a county—half a Texas county—in this hogwash way? How far down is the entrance, anyhow?"

Following the trail, he rode down stream a full half mile, and still there seemed no break. Nowhere on the other shore was there sign of bridle path leading up the slopes. Turning to his left in some impatience, he sent Nolan at rapid lop across the intervening "bottom," and soon reached the bluffs, which rose perhaps forty or fifty feet above the stream. Once on the crest, the prairie stretched before him northward, level as a floor, until it met the sky; but it was southward he longed to look, and thither quickly turned. Yes, there it lay—Dunraven Ranch, in all its lonely majesty. From where he gazed the nearest building stood a good long mile away. That it was the homestead he divined at once, for a broad veranda ran around the lower story, and white curtains were visible at the dormer windows of the upper floor. Back of it and on the eastern flank were other buildings, massive looking, single storied affairs, evidently stables, storehouses and corrals. There was a tall windmill there—an odd sight in so remote a region—and a big water tank.

Perry wondered how it ever got there. Then at the southwest angle was a building that looked like an office of some kind. He could see horses tethered there, and what seemed to be human figures moving about. Beyond it all, to the east and south, were herds of grazing cattle, and here and there in the dim distance a horseman moved over the prairie. This reminded him of the stranger who had given him the slip; and he gazed westward in search of him.

Far up the valley, between him and the distant post, he could plainly see a black object just descending the slopes from the southern prairie to the stream. Not another was in sight that his practiced eye did not know to be cattle. That, then, was his horseman, once more going fort-wards in the valley, after having made a three or four mile detour to avoid him. "Now, what sort of a Christian is that fellow?" thought Perry, as he gazed at the distant speck. "Going to the fort, too. By thunder! I'll find out who he is, anyhow. Now I'm going to the ranch."

Down the slopes he rode. Down the winding trail once more he trotted, peer through every gap among the cottonwoods, slaking Nolan's thirst at a little pool in the stream, and then, after

another long half mile, he came to a sudden turn to the right. The road dipped and twisted through the stream bed, rose to the other side, wound through the cottonwoods and then out on the open turf. Huzza! There it stretched up the slope straightaway for the south, straight through a broad gap between two heavy gate posts standing on the stake line of that rigid fence. Nolan broke into a brisk canter and gave a neigh of salutation; Perry's eyes glistened with anticipation as he bent over his charger's neck, keenly searching the odd looking structure growing on his vision as they neared the fence. Then, little by little, Nolan's eager stride shortened and grew choppy. Another moment, and horse and rider reined up short in disappointment. Between the gate posts swung a barrier of cobweb lightness, slender and airy as spider ever wove, but bristling with barbs stiff as "bulldog" and unyielding as steel. One glance showed Perry that this inhospitable gate was firmly locked.

For a moment he sat in saddle, studying the situation, while Nolan poked his head over the topmost strand of wire and keeping at respectful distance from the glittering barbs gazed wistfully over the inclosed prairie in search of comrade quadruped who could tell him what manner of place this was. Meantime his rider was intently eying the heavy padlock that was secured on the inner side of the gate. It was square in shape, massive and bulky—something utterly unlike anything he had ever seen among the quartermaster's stores. Dismounting and holding Nolan well back from the aggressive fence with one hand, he gingerly passed the other through the spike fringed aperture and turned the padlock so as to get a better view. It was of English make, as he surmised, and of strength sufficient to resist anything short of a trip hammer. Evidently no admission was to be gained here, he reasoned, and yet it was through here that horsemen had come but an hour before. Here were the fresh hoof prints in the trail, and it was evident that the rider had dismounted, opened the gate, led his horse through, closed and fastened it, then remounted and ridden away. Perry was plainsman enough to read this from the hoof prints. Studying them carefully, a look of surprise came into his face; he bent down and closely examined the two or three that were most clearly defined upon the trail, then gave a long whistle as a means of expressing his feelings and giving play to his astonishment.

"Johnny Bull holds himself too high and mighty to have anything to do with us blasted Yankees," it seems, except when he wants his horses shod. These shoes were set at the post blacksmith shop, or I'm a duffer," was the lieutenant's verbal comment. "Now, how was it done without the quartermaster's knowing it? That's the cavalry shoe!"

Pondering over this unlock for revelation, Mr. Perry once more mounted and turned his disappointed steed again down stream. At last, full half a mile farther on, he saw that a wire fence ran southward again across the prairie, as though marking the eastern boundary of the homestead inclosure, and conjecturing that there was probably a trail along that fence and an opening through, even if the southward line should be found fenced still farther, he sent Nolan through the Monee to the open bank on the northern side, cantered along until the trail turned abruptly southward, and, following it, found himself once more at the fence just where the heavy corner post stood deeply imbedded in the soil. Sure enough, here ran another fence straight up the gentle slope to the south, a trail along its eastern side, and a broad cattle gap, dusty and tramped with the hoofs of a thousand steers, was left in the fence that, prolonged down stream, spanned the northern boundary. Inside the homestead lot all was virgin earth.

Following the southward trail, Perry rode briskly up the long incline. It was east of this fence he had seen the cattle herd and their mounted watchers. He was far beyond the ranch buildings, but felt sure that once well up on the prairie, he could have an uninterrupted view of them and doubtless meet some of the ranch people and satisfy himself what there was in the stories of their churlish and repellent demeanor. The sun was climbing higher all this time, and he, eager in pursuit of his reconnaissance, gave little heed to fleeting minutes. If fair means could accomplish it, he and Nolan were bound to have acquaintance with Dunraven Ranch.

Ten minutes' easy lop brought him well up on the prairie. There—westward now—was the mysterious clump of brown buildings, just as far away as when he stood, baffled and disappointed, by the gateway on the Monee. Here, leading away towards the distant buildings, was a bridle path. Here in the fence was a gap just such as he had entered on the stream, and that gap was barred and guarded by the counterpart of the first gate and firmly secured by a padlock that was the other's twin. Mr. Perry's comment at this point of his explorations was brief and characteristic, if not objectionable. He gave vent to the same low whistle, half surprise, half vexation, that had comforted his soul before, but supplemented the whistle with the unnecessary remark: "Well, I'll be damned!"

Even Nolan entered his protest against such incredible exclusiveness. Thrusting his lean head far over the topmost wires, as before, he signaled long and shrill—a neigh that would have caught the ear of any horse within a mile—and then, all alert, he waited for an answer. It came floating on the rising wind, a responsive call, a signal as eager and confident as his own, and Nolan and Nolan's rider whirled quickly around to see the source from whence it rose. Four hundred yards away, just appearing over a little knoll in the prairie, and moving towards them from the direction of a distant clump of grazing cattle, another horse and rider came trotting into hailing distance; and Perry, his bright blue eyes dilating, and Nolan, his dainty, sensitive ears pricked forward, turned

promptly to meet and greet the new arrivals.

For fifty yards or so the stranger rode confidently and at rapid trot. Perry smilingly watched the outturned toes, the bobbing, "bent over" seat, and angular elbows that seemed so strange and out of place on the broad Texan plain. He could almost see the "crop" in the free hand, and was smiling to himself at the idea of a "crop" to open wire gates, when he became aware of the fact that the stranger's men had changed; confidence was giving place to hesitancy, and he was evidently checking the rapid trot of his horse and throwing his weight back on the cantle, while his feet, thrust through to the very heels in the gleaming steel stirrups, were braced in front of the powerful shoulders of the bay. The horse wanted to come, the rider plainly wanted to stop. Another moment, and Perry could see that the stranger wore eyeglasses and had just succeeded in bridging them on his nose and was glaring at him with his chin high in air. They were within two hundred yards of each other by this time, and to Perry's astonishment, the next thing the stranger did was to touch sharply his horse with a barbed heel, whirr him spitefully about, and go bobbing off across the prairie at lively canter, standing up in his stirrups, and bestriding his steed as though his object were not so much a ride as game of leap-frog.

It was evident that he had caught sight of Perry when Nolan neighed, had ridden at once to meet him, expecting to find some one connected with the ranch, and had veered off in disgust the moment he was able to recognize the uniform and horse equipments of the United States cavalry.

CHAPTER IV.



WEET tempered a feeling as low as Mr. Perry confessedly was, there was something in the stranger's conduct that galled him inexplicably. From his hand-mountain, his garb and his general appearance, Perry set this stranger down as one of the Englishmen residing at the ranch. It was not fear of arrest and capture that sent him scowling away across the prairie; it was deliberate intent to avoid, and this was, to Perry's thinking, tantamount to insult. One moment he gazed after the retreating form of the horseman, then clapped his forage cap firmly down upon his head, shook free the rein and gave Nolan the longed for word. Another instant, and with set teeth and blazing, angry eyes he was thundering at headlong speed, swooping down upon the unconscious stranger in pursuit. Before that sunburned, curly haired, bulkily framed young man had the faintest idea of what was impending, Mr. Perry was reining in his snorting steed alongside and cuttingly accosting him:

"I beg your pardon, my good sir, but may I ask what you mean by trotting away when it must have been evident that I wanted to speak with you?"

The stranger turned slightly and coolly eyed the flushed and indignant cavalryman. They were trotting side by side now, Nolan pluming excitedly, but the English horse maintaining his even stride; and stronger contrast of type and one could scarcely hope to find. In rough tweed shooting jacket and cap, brown Bedford cords fitting snugly at the knee but flapping like shapeless bags from there aloft to the waist, in heavy leather gaiters and equally heavy leather gloves, the stocky figure of the Englishman had nothing of grace or elegance, but was sturdy, strong, and full of that sturdy self reliance which is so characteristic of the race. Above his broad, stooping shoulders were a bull neck, reddened by the sun, a crop of close curling, light brown hair, a tanned and honest face lighted up by fearless gray eyes and shaded by a thick and curling beard of lighter hue than the hair of his massive head.

He rode with the careless ease and supreme confidence of the skilled horseman, but with that angularity of foot and elbow, that roundness of back and bunching of shoulders, that incessant rise and fall with every beat of his horse's powerful haunch, that the effect was that of neither security nor repose. His saddle, too, was the long, flat seated, Australian model, pig skin, with huge rounded leather cushions circling in front and over the knees, adding to the cumbrousness of his equipment and in no wise to the comfort; but his bit and curb chain were of burnished steel, gleaming as though fresh from the hands of some incomparable English groan, and the russet reins were soft and pliable, telling of excellent stable management and discipline. Perry couldn't help admiring that bridle, even in his temporary fit of indignation.

As for him—tall, slender, elegantly made, clothed in the accurately fitting undress "blouse" of the army and in riding breeches that displayed to best advantage the superb molding of his powerful thighs, sitting like centaur well down in the saddle, his feet and lower legs, cased in natty riding boots, swinging close in behind the gleaming shoulders of his steed, erect as on parade, yet swaying with every motion of his horse, graceful, gallant, and to the full as powerful as his burly companion, the advantage in appearance was all on Perry's side, and was heightened by Nolan's

spirited action and martial trappings. Perry was an exquisite in his soldier taste, and never, except on actual campaign, rode his trooper horse without his braided saddle cloth and gleaming bosses. All this, and more, the Englishman seemed quietly noting as, finally, without the faintest trace of irritability, with even a suspicion of humor twinkling about the corners of his mouth, he replied:

"A fellow may do as he likes when he's on his own half-track, I suppose."

"All the same, wherever I've been, from here to Assiniboina, men meet like Christians, unless they happen to be road agents or cattle thieves. What's more, I am an officer of a regiment just arrived here, and, from the Missouri down, there was not a ranch along our trail where we were not welcome and whose occupants were not 'hail fellow well met' in our camps. You are the first people to shun us; and, as that fort yonder was built for your protection in days when it was badly needed, I want to know what there is about its garrison that is so obnoxious to Dunraven Ranch—that's what you call it, I believe?"

"That's what it is called."

"Well, here! I've no intention of intruding where we're not wanted. I simply didn't suppose that on the broad prairies of the west there was such a place as a ranch where one of my cloth was unwelcome. I am Mr. Perry, of the—th cavalry, and I'm bound to say I'd like to know what you people have against us. Are you the proprietor?"

"I'm not. I'm only an employee."

"Who is the owner?"

"He's not here now."

"Who is here who can explain the situation?"

"Oh, as to that, I fancy I can do it as well as anybody. It is simply because we have to do pretty much as you fellows—obey orders. The owner's orders are not aimed at you any more than at anybody else. He simply wants to be let alone. He bought this tract and settled here because he wanted a place where he could have things his own way—see people whom he sent for and nobody else. Every man in his employ is expected to stick to the ranch so long as he is on the pay roll, and to carry out his instructions. If he can't, he may go."

"And your instructions are to prevent people getting into the ranch?"

"Oh, hardly that, you know. We don't interfere. There's never any one to come, as a rule, and, when they do, the fence sees to be sufficient."

"Amply, I should say; and yet were I to tell you that I had business with the proprietor and needed to ride up to the ranch, you would open the gate yonder, I suppose."

"No; I would tell you that the owner was away, and that in his absence I transacted all business for him."

"Well, thank you for the information given me at all events. May I ask the name of your misanthropical boss? You might tell him I called."

"Several officers called three years ago, but he begged to be excused."

"And what is the name?"

"Mr. Maitland—is what he is called."

"All right. Possibly the time may come when Mr. Maitland will be as anxious to have the cavalry around him as he is now to keep it away. But if you ever feel like coming up to the fort just ride in and ask for me."

"I feel like it a dozen times a week, you know; but a man mustn't quarrel with his bread and butter. I met one of your fellows once on a hunt after stray mules, and he asked me in, but I couldn't go. Sorry, you know, and all that, but the owner won't have it."

"Well, then there's nothing to do for it but say good day to you. I'm going back. Possibly I'll see some of your people up at Rosser's when they come to get a horse shod."

"A horse shod! Why, man alive, we shoe all our horses here!"

"Well, fellow who rode out of your north gate and went up towards the fort about an hour or so ago had his horse shod at a cavalry forge, or I'm a dog."

A quick change came over the Englishman's face; a flush of surprise and anger shot up to his forehead; he wheeled about and gazed eagerly, lowering, back towards the far away buildings.

"How do you know there was—What fellow did you see?" he sharply asked.

"Oh, I don't know who he was," answered Perry coolly.

"He avoided me just as pointedly as you did—galloped across the Monee and out on the prairie to dodge me; but he came out of that gate on the stream, locked it after him, and went on up to the fort, and his horse had cavalry shoes. Good day to you, my Britannic friend. Come and see us when you get tired of prison life."

And, with a grin, Mr. Perry turned and rode rapidly away, leaving the other horseman in a brown study.

Once fairly across the Monee he ambled placidly along, thinking of the odd situation of affairs at this great prairie reservation, and almost regretting that he had paid the ranch the honor of a call. Reaching the point where the wagon tracks crossed the stream to the gateway in the boundary fence, he reined in Nolan and looked through a vista in the cottonwoods. There was the Englishman, dismounted, stooping over the ground and evidently examining the hoof prints at the gate. Perry chuckled at the sight, then whistling for Bruce, who had strayed off through the timber, he resumed his jaunty way to the post.

In the events of the morning there were several things to give him abundant cause for thought, if not for lively curiosity, but he had not yet reached the sum total of surprises in store for him. He was still two miles out from the fort, and riding slowly along the bottom, when he became aware of a trooper coming towards him on the trail. The sunbeams were glinting on the polished ornaments of his forage cap and on the bright yellow chevrons of his snugly fitting blouse. Tall and slender and erect was the coming horseman, a

model of soldierly grace and carriage, and as he drew nearer and his hand went up to the cap visor in salute a gesture from his young superior brought an instant pressure on the rein, and horse and man became an animated statue. It was a wonderfully sudden yet easy check of a steed in rapid motion, and Mr. Perry, a capital rider himself, could not withhold his admiration.

"Where did you learn that sudden halt, sergeant?" he asked. "I never saw anything so quick except the Mexican training; but that strains a horse and throws him on his haunches."

"It is not uncommon abroad, sir," was the quiet answer. "I saw it first in the English cavalry; and it is easy to teach the horse."

"I must get you to show me the knack some day. I've noticed it two or three times, and would like to learn it. What I stopped you for is this: You've been a stable sergeant ever since we got here, have you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then if anybody besides members of the trooper had horses shot at our forge you would be pretty apt to know it."

"I know that no one has, sir." And a flush was rising to the young sergeant's face and