

DUNRAVEN RANCH.

A Story of American Frontier Life.

By CAPT. CHARLES KING, U. S. A.,
AUTHOR OF "THE COLONEL'S DAUGHTER," "FROM THE BARRACKS,"
"THE OBSERVER," ETC.

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Following the trail, he rode down stream a full half mile, and still there seemed no break. Nowhere on the other side was there a sign of bridge lead- ing up the slope. Turning to his left in some impetuous way, he crossed the ledge across the intervening "bottom," and soon reached the bluff, 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 he quickly turned. Yes, there it lay—Dunraven Ranch, in all its lonely majesty. From where he stood he could see the 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 chimney 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 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 forth-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 he trotted, peering through every crevice 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 straight away for the south, a straight line through a broad gap between two heavy wooded points, and 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 came to a sudden stop. Disappointment. Between the gate post, swung a barrier of cobweb lightness, slender and airy as spider web, but bristling with barbs, stiff as "bullfinch" 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 looked at the rider. Then, from the glittering barbs came a wistful cry from the enclosed prairie in search of comrade quadruped who could tell him what manner of place this was. Meantime his rider was intently eyeing 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, he held Nolan up for a moment, and the aggressive fence with one hand, he gingerly passed the other through the spike fringed apertures 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 that horseman had come but an hour before. Here were the fresh hoof prints on 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, he looked up 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 fence 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 steed, was left in the fence that, along the fence stream, spanned the northern boundary. Inside the homestead lot all was virgin turf.

Following the southward trail, Perry rode briskly up the long incline. It was east of this fence he had seen the cattle herds and their mounted watchers. It 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 story of their churlish and repellent demeanor. The sun was climbing higher all this time, and he was eager in pursuit of his reconnaissance.

CHAPTER IV.
WEET tempered a fellow as Mr. Perry considered him. Before there was something in the stranger's conduct that galled him inexpressibly. From his handsome countenance, 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 a deliberate intent to avoid, and this was, to Perry's thinking, tantamount to insult. One moment he gazed at the retreating form of the horseman, then clasped his foreleg firmly down upon his head, shook free the rein and gave Nolan the longest 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 sun-burned, curly haired, bulky framed young man had the faintest idea of what was impending, Mr. Perry was reining in his snorting steed alongside and cuttingly accosting him:

"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, ploughing excitedly, but the English horse maintaining his even stride; a stronger contrast of type and style one could scarcely hope to find. In rough tweed shooting jacket and cap, brown Bedford cords fitting snugly at the knee but flapping like shapely 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 burly self reliance which is so characteristic of the race. Above his broad, stooping shoulders were a bill neck, rufous 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 a skilled horseman, but with that angry, stately and repellent demeanor. The sun was climbing higher all this time, and he was eager in pursuit of his reconnaissance.

horse's powerful launch, that the effect was that of neither scouring nor repose. His saddle, too, was the long, flat, oval, Australian model, pig skin, with huge rounded leather cushions, striding from front and over the knees, adding to the cumbersome 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 groom, and the russet reins were soft and pliable, telling of excellent stable management and that strict discipline which Perry couldn't help admiring that, 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 contour 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 every way with the ease of a man at ease, 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's taste, and never, except on actual campaign, rode his troop horse without his brocaded saddle cloth and gleaming boots. All this, and more, the Englishman seemed to note, 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 bailiwick, I suppose."

"All the same, whenever I've been, from here to Assiniboia, men meet like Christians, unless they happen to be road agents or cattle thieves. What's more, I am an officer of the Regiment just arrived here, and from the Missouri down, there isn't a ranch along our trail where we were not welcome and whose occupants were not 'I'll follow 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?"

"Well, here! I've 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 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's the owner?"

"Who's not here now?"

"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 anybody else. He simply wants to be let alone. He bought this tract and settled here because he wanted a place where he could live 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 seems to be sufficient."

"And, 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 me his name."

"Several officers called three years ago, but he refused 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's mustn't quarrel with his breed and butter. I met one of your fellows once on a hunt after strayed 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 good day to you. I'm going back. Possibly I'll see some of your people up at Rossiter when they come to get a horse shod."

"A horse shod? Why, my man alive, we shod only one horse, and that was yours."

"Well, that 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 duffer."

CHAPTER V.
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 prairie 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 Brittanic 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 prairie 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. Being in the point where the wagon track crossed the stream, he crossed 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 tents of the morning there were several things to give him heart 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 subaltern was gliding 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

most of soldierly grace and carriage, and as he drew nearer and his hand went up to the cap visor he said a greeting from his young superior through an instant pressure on the rein, and horse and man became an animated steed. 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's a horse and a throw 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 stabled sergeant ever since we got here, have you not?"

"Then if anybody besides members of the troop had horses shod 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 a pained look hovering about his bright blue eyes. Yet his manner was self restrained and full of respect.

"Don't think I'm intimating anything to the contrary, sergeant, Gwynne. No soldier in my regiment, I'm sure, holds the confidence of his captain—of all the officers—than you. I was not thinking of that. But somebody down there at that big ranch below us had his horse shod by a cavalry farrier—it may have been done while the Eleventh were here—and, while I knew you would not allow it at our forge, I thought it possible that it might be done in your absence, sir."

"It's the first time I've been out of sight of the stables since we came to the post, sir, and the captain gave me permission to ride down the valley this morning. May I ask the lieutenant why he thinks some ranchman is getting his shoeing done here at the post?"

"I've been down there this morning, and met a man coming up. He avoided me, and rode over to the south side, and so excited my curiosity, and entirely forgot that whole party enclosed in a fence, and he had evidently come out of the north gate, I was struck by the sight of the hoof prints; they were perfectly fresh there on the trail, and plain as day. There's no mistaking the shoe, you know. By the way, he rode up to the fort, and probably entered at your side of the garrison; did you see him?"

"No, sir, and, except for breakfast—just after reveille—I have been at stables all the morning, there when the lieutenant got his horse."

"Yes, I remember. Then no one rode in from the valley?"

"No civilian—no ranchman, sir. The only horsemen I've seen were some Cheyenne scouts during the last two hours, and Dr. Quin—just before sick call."

"Dr. Quin—the post surgeon? Are you sure, sergeant?"

"Certainly. The doctor rode into the post just about an hour after the lieutenant left—coming up the valley. He went right around to his own stable, over towards the hospital."

A look of amazement and stupefaction was settling on Perry's face. Now for the first time he recalled Mrs. Lawrence's intimations with regard to the doctor, and his connection with the signal lights. Now for the first time it occurred to him that the secret of those cavalry hoof prints at the gate was that no ranchman, but an officer of the garrison, had been the means of leaving them there. Now for the first time it flashed upon him that the Englishman's astonishment and concern on hearing of those hoof tracks indicated that the story of a mystery at Dunraven in which the doctor was connected amounted to something more than a garrison rumor. Now for the first time an explanation occurred to him of the singular conduct of the horseman who had dodged him by crossing the prairie. Never in his young life had he known the hour when he was ashamed or afraid to look any man in the eye. It stung him to think that here at Rossiter, wearing the uniform of an honorable profession, enjoying the trust and confidence of all his fellows, was a man who had some secret enterprise of which he dared not speak and of whose discovery he stood in dread. There could be little doubt that the elusive stranger was Dr. Quin, and that there was grave reason for the rumors of which Mrs. Lawrence had vaguely told him.

For a moment he sat, dazed and irresolute, Nolan impatiently pawing the turf while, then, far across the prairie and down the valley there came floating, quick and spirited, though faint with distance, the notes of the cavalry trumpet sounding "right into line." He looked up, startled.

"They're out at battalion drill, sir," said the sergeant. "They marched out just as I left the stables."

"Just my infernal luck again!" gasped Perry, as he struck spur to Nolan and sent him tearing up the slope; "I might have known I'd miss it!"

CHAPTER VI.
The soft swish of trailing skirt being insufficient to attract his attention as they arrived nearly opposite the stabled veranda, a silvery peal of laughter broke the stillness of the early evening. Mrs. Belknap's laugh was delicious—soft, melodious, rippling as a canary song, and just as spontaneous. Neither lady had said anything at the moment that was incentive of merriment; but if Mrs. Lawrence had given utterance to the quaint, odd, most whimsical conceit imaginable, Mrs. Belknap's laugh would have been more ready, and her great dark eyes shot a sidelong glance to note the effect. Down went the paper, and up, with considerable propping from his muscular arms, came the burly form of the post commander. Two sweet, smiling faces beamed upon him through an aperture in the leafy screen, and Mrs. Belknap's silvery voice hailed him in laughing salutation.

"Did you spoil your siesta, colonel? How can I make amends? You see, you were so hidden by the vines that no one would dream of your being there in ambush."

"Oh, indeed, I assure you I wasn't asleep," answered the colonel, hastily. "Won't you come in, ladies, and sit here in the shade awhile?"

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