

Wells Brothers

by

Andy Adams

Web-Books.Com

Wells Brothers

Waifs Of The Plain	3
The Hospital On The Beaver	10
The Bottom Rung	18
The Brothers Claim A Range	25
A Fall Of Crumbs	32
Sunshine And Shadow.....	38
All In The Day's Work.....	45
The Lines Of Intrenchment	51
A Wintry Crucible	58
Good Fighting	65
Holding The Fort	72
A Winter Drift	80
A Welcome Guest.....	88
An Ill Wind.....	93
Water! Water!.....	99
A Protected Credit.....	106
"The Wagon"	113
An Open Winter	118
An Indian Scare	125
Harvest On The Range	130
Living In The Saddle	138
Independence	145

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, kittening 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."

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

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

