Kent News

SATURDAY, - - - DEC. 5, 1896.

JEFF.

His name was Jefferson Bidwell, but no one called him anything but Jeff.

His father was a cowboy, belonging to the ranch of one of the West's greatest cattle kings. His duty was—along with the other men—to tend cattle brought into corral for the winter, and to ride over the country to see if the line drivers were doing their duty. With Jeff and the other two, he occupied a low, log building, known as the ranch house, consisting of one large, square room and a rough board "lean to" or shed.

The cattle king, who owned this ranch, with several others in different localities, was neither better nor worse than other men of his class. He had thousands of heads of cattle, and counted his yearly income by the tens of thousands of dollars. His herds, in common with those of other cattle kings, roamed the ranges all the long winter through, without food, water or shelter, save what they could procure for themselves—which was very little.

We have said this man was no better nor worse than others of his class; but perhaps he was better, for he had a son studying theology at Princeton; and every autumn, as soon as the winds began to blow cold, he, with his dainty wife and daughter, went East to spend the winter—they could not endure the rigor of the Western climate.

His family occupied a costly pew in one of New York's most fashionable churches, read their prayers out of a gold-clasped prayer book, and occasionally headed a popular public subscription paper with a princely sum.

Whether any vision of his starving, freezing herds ever rose before him, to mar the pleasing picture of his self-righteousness, we cannot say, but presume not — as they were only dumb brutes; what did it matter that they were as capable of suffering as he, so long as they could not tell it? They were his "stock in trade;" each moan of agony had turned to the clink of gold ere it reached his pocket; each mute appeal in their dying eyes, had changed to the glitter of diamonds, ere it gleamed on his daughter's white arms—aye, surely what mattered it?

But to return to Jeff.

His father had not always been a cowboy. When the lad was six years old, his family had moved from the East, and "took up a claim" in Montana. His mother was a delicate, refined woman, wholly unlike her husband, and the little boy was like her.

Two years of hardships, privations and neglect followed, and then at the close of the second severe winter, she meekly folded her tired hands and gave up the unequal struggle; not, however, until she had made the boy promise to try to be good and meet her in heaven.

"I know you will have it hard, Jeffie," she had whispered tenderly, "but I have prayed God not to let you grow up to be a wicked man."

After that the father gave up trying to hold the "claim," and, one chilly spring morning, packed the boy and his few belongings into a crazy old wagon, drawn by two equally unreliable looking horses and set out, he knew not whither.

One longing look Jeff cast back at the lonely, brown mound where his mother lay—then, creeping down into the bottom of the wagon, he gave himself up to his grief.

Three years later we find the father in the service of the cattle king, as chief herdman or cowboy of the ranch. They are far removed from the "lonely mound" now, but the poor boy had not forgotten it.

Poor little Jeff had not a very pleasant life among the rough herdsmen—whom no amount of newspaper eulogizing can make fit companions for children of refined natures.

Our little hero had never heard of Boston, or the society with the long name, (S. P. C. A.,) but no truer love for the dumb creatures which God has made, burned in the soul of the immortal Henry Bergh, than did in this untutored boy's breast.

He knew nothing of the word humane, or its meaning, but he was loving towards all the animals on the ranch—he was their only earthly friend.

"When I get big I'll have a ranch and cattle," he would sometimes say, adding indignantly, "but I won't let 'em starve and freeze, while I am off on a bum."

Then the men would laugh and call him names, but he did not mind, as he was used to it.

No wonder that he dreaded the approach of winter, filled as that season was, and is, with gross neglect and abuse of the helpless cattle by the cowboys; and no wonder that he grew faint and sick when, in the spring-time, he saw the range strewn with carcasses—mute reminders of the slow, terrible tragedies enacted there all the dreadful months through.

Winter set in early the year of which we write. The cattle king and his family hastened to bring out their costly furs, close up their splendid residence, and betake themselves to a milder clime. This man had paid a visit to the home ranch the last thing, giving Jeff's father, and others, strict orders to keep the cattle on the range and see that the line riders did their duty.

"Keep the herds moving; I can't afford heavy losses this season," was his parting injunction; and Jeff, looking after him as he rode away, muttered: "Yes, that's all ye care; ye wouldn't turn round 'ter save the lot from starv'n, only fer yer own money pouch. Wonder how ye'd like to be put on the range now, ter pick yer own livin' under two feet of snow, till warm weather again. I ain't sure but I wish yer had ter."

At the home ranch they had brought in about one hundred head—or perhaps more—head of cattle, intending to feed them the wild hay they had put up, until it was gone; then of course, they would have to shift for themselves, as the thousands beside do from the first.

"It's a goin' to be a tough winter," one of the cowboys had said, "and we may ez well keep up these choice uns fer a while," and so they did.

The horses were all turned loose to live as best they might, except the half dozen broncos needed by the men for riding over the range.

By Christmas, the hay intended for the cattle was almost gone, and Jeff heard his father say, "They'll soon have ter hussel for themselves."

A great blizzard came on, raging with relentless fury for three days, then the sun came out and the mercury dropped to 40° below zero.

All this time the poor animals in their corral had tasted nothing but snow, and their piteous bellowing and cries, fell on indifferent ears—save Jeff's.

The men had procured some liquor just before the storm began, and with this and a greasy wack of cards, they beguiled the time except when asleep.

When the sun came out, Jeff, from the top panes of the window, could catch glimpses of the suffering, writhing mass, showing dark against the white ness everywhere despite their ice-covered backs.

How he pitied them!

Before noon the men were all stretched out on their hard straw pallets, in drunken slumber.

Poor Jeff, watching with tear-dimmed eyes, from the window, turned suddenly and surveyed the sleepers.

"Thy're done fer fer three good hours," he muttered at last, "and if any un does it I must."

Then he piled logs on the fire, buttoned his dirty jacket about him, tied on a bit of an old blanket that served him for a comforter, took up his ragged mittens, and passed quietly into the shed. This place was used chiefly for storing fuel.

Near the roof was an opening, used in summer for a window, but in winter it was boarded up.

Leaving the middle door ajar to admit some light, Jeff hunted about until he found a shovel, an ax and a pair of snow shoes. Then he paused, looking doubtfully at the boarded-up window.

"I can't git out the door, nor tother windows," he muttered, "so I've got to go through there."

The house was banked with snow, nearly to the top of an ordinary window, so in order to get a start on the snow shoes, he must get out above the snow; but he had to be careful, for if one of the men should wake, his scheme would be thwarted.

After two or three ineffectual efforts he succeeded in climbing up on the wood, and gaining sufficient footing to enable him to pry and dull at the boards, one, to his relief, yielded at last, making an opening sufficient for his slight form.

Securing the shoes, shovel and ax, he pushed them through the aperture, dragging himself after.

The next feat to be achieved, was to keep a position there while he strapped on his snow shoes, and this was no small undertaking, considering the temperature; but Jeff was a plucky little fellow, used to hardships, and success finally crowned his efforts.

The snow was banked to within a foot of the opening, so he had only to step off—when once he had the shoes on.

Of course he floundered a little at first, but was soon skimming over the glittering crust, carrying the tools with him.

On he went, the piteous cries of the starving herd acting as a stimulus, and in his anxiety to reach and help them, he forgot the hardships ahead.

At last he reached the shed containing the horses. Poor creatures; their neighings had been drowned by the storm and the multitude of voices without.

The boarded side of the shed had, in a measure, protected them from the fury of the blast, but they had gnawed the poles of their manger almost off.

There was hay for them in a rick just back of the boards, and Jeff chopped away manfully until he had cut two of them away; then, with his shovel, he succeeded, after prolonged effort, in making a narrow path to the hay; and carried it in armfuls to the trembling beasts.

As soon as their wants were in a measure supplied, he turned his attention to the cattle in the corral; theirs seemed a hopeless case, with only one pair of puny arms and benumbed hands between them and a terrible death. There was but one way, and that was to chop out a portion of the corral fence; giving them a chance—if they were strong enough to use it—to get to the hay racks.

He was getting so cold! But he must make the effort; chopping and shoveling would warm him—so bravely he went at it.

By the aid of the snow shoes he reached the enclosure, and then set to work shoveling awhile and then using the ax.

He worked quite fast at first; then his arms ached so! His strokes became slower and finally it seemed he must sit down and rest. But there were those poor brutes—he must push on. A few more strokes; and then his arms refused to move and his hands unclasped from the ax-handle. Twice he essayed to pick it up, then—then—

"He's a goner!"

It was one of the cowboys who spoke, taking the stiff little form in his arms.

"And he was trying to let the brutes out, just as we orter done," said the other.

"Guess that'll sober the old man off. Shan't I tote him a spell? Poor little Jeff!"

The rough fellow rubbed his mitten across his face, then turning suddenly, said: "If yer thinks yer can manage him, mebby I better finish this job—just to please him."

"Go ahead," was the terse rejoinder, as the first speaker, carrying the boy out in front of him, in order to keep his balance, skimmed along towards the house. He had been awakened by a draft of cold air coming in from the shed, and as soon as he missed Jeff, and saw the opening, he understood.

Hurriedly he awakened his companion—not Jeff's father—and together they went out the same way as the boy had gone in search of him.

"Here, you old brute, wake up," cried Bill roughly, shaking Jeff's father, who was, by far, the worst intoxicated of the three.

A growl was the only answer. One or two more efforts he made, then gave up, and turned his attention to the boy.

Vainly he rubbed and warmed the body, vainly he tried to force a drop of warm spirits down his throat.

"No use; 'tis just as I sed; he's a goner. Poor little Jeff; 'nd he was such good a boy! I'm all fired sorry I ever poked fun at him, 'nd to think we wus all drunk, 'nd ne out doin' our work!"

"Tain't no use Jake," he said, a while later, when the other came in, "he died for his principles, he b'lieved in bein' kind ter the creeters, ez he sed, ez couldn't talk fer 'emselves."

"Ole Bill 'nd us killed him—the same ez—"

"I know it."

Together, they made another effort at restoration, but in vain; and when the drunken creature on the floor became conscious, and essayed to rise, called thickly for a "drink," Bill's scared, white face bent over him, and Bill pointed without a word, to the rigid form in the dirty jacket, stretched out on a wooden bench. There was a woolen blanket under him, but they had purposely left him uncovered to meet his father's gaze. With something between an oath and a groan, the man sat up and stared.

"You helped, ye miserable critter," muttered Jake, as if glad to have some one to lay it on.

Then Bill briefly told the now thoroughly sober man, the story; causing the latter to sink back on his pallet, and cover his face with his hands.

To their credit be it said, they spent a sober night, and in the morning they removed a hay rick, and dug him a shallow grave over which the wretched father shed a few tears.

"Poor little Jeff!" muttered Bill again, as he shoved in the frozen clods.

"Pity he couldn't a lived!"

We do not agree with him. The dying mother had prayed that her boy might not grow up a wicked man, and now he was out of danger—had died a hero, too.

Some day, that little ragged cowboy will stand once more, face to face, with the pompous cattle king—some day.

Hicks' December Forecast.

From the 2d to the 4th of December there are reasons to expect very severe disturbances. The period will begin with warm wave starting in the far west storms of rain, snow and wind developing as the low barometer and warm wave move eastward. December 27th a Mars equinox is central. Venus is central on the 23d and Mercury on the 26th, with winter solstice from about 9th to 28th. From 8th to 12th will prove one of the periods that should be watched. Be prepared for blizzards at this time, and all December periods, with intense cold following in the north, and more or less severe southward. The 14 and 15 will bring renewed storm activity. The 19th to 23 will be at the center of the winter solstice, with a regular storm period greatly intensified by Venus and Mercury. There will be terrific winter storms, or phenominal freaks of temperature and earthquake. The 26 to about the 59th will really be the crisis of all the causes that bring extra pressure on most of the month.

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