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A Story of Texas Cattle and Oil

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The Tin Box

A Story of Texas Cattle and Oil

by

Jerome Aredell Williams

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Chapter One

ALTHOUGH IT WAS NO LARGER THAN A WOMAN'S hand, a little tin box was destined to play a tremendously important role in the life and love of June Meredith, as it plunged violently over the cliff and into the stream, two hundred feet below. Sinking momentarily, it shot back to the surface and quickly floated away on the swiftly flowing waters of the partly dry mountain stream.

Dodging here a log, and there a protruding rock—with which the bed of the small stream was studded—plunging over falls, bumping against the rugged sides of the mountains, it floated day and night.

Finally emerging from the mountainous terrain, it floated into the flat, brushy country where recent heavy rains had turned the small tributaries into raging streams. Riding the crest of these flood waters, the little box was buffeted by floating debris, finally to be whirled out of the swiftly flowing current and picked up by backwaters that overflowed into a stagnant lagoon where it came to rest behind a grassy knoll when the rains ceased and the flood waters receded.

Now, let us go back for a moment to the origin of the little box, and its importance in June's life.

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For a long moment, June Meredith stared at the contract that lay on the table before her. A feeling of hopelessness came over her as, with fingers that trembled slightly, she reached for the pen. With a sigh of resignation, she signed the two copies and shoved them across the desk.

With a smile of satisfaction, Robert Chandler, president and sole owner of a real estate and development company that bore his name, reached for the papers. After signing them and affixing his seal of office, the stocky, clean-shaven, slightly

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graying executive handed one copy to June, and placed the other in a drawer of his desk.

With a quick motion of her hand, June threw her blond curls over her shoulders and rose from her chair. Wade Lucas, the squat, freckled cowboy-ranch owner and neighbor of June's who had accompanied her to the realtor's office, noted the expression of despair on the dimpled, childish face, as she turned to him and said: "Let's be going, Wade."

Signing contracts was a new experience for June. Having been reared a carefree child of the range, she had spent most of the twenty years of her life astride her cow ponies, by her father's side. She knew nothing of responsibilities until the tragic death of her parents placed the burden of running a large ranch directly upon her slender shoulders.

"You don't seem so happy over the signing of that contract, June," Wade remarked as they got into their car and started for home.

"No, Wade. I'm not at all happy," she replied. "In fact, should I ever be forced to yield to the terms of that agreement, I would just about be ruined."

"That's serious." Wade was deeply concerned. "How did you happen to get tied up like that? Would you tell me something about it?"

"It's a long story, Wade," she said, as her thoughts went back to the drouth years of the early 30's, when the first link had been forged in a chain of circumstances that had culminated in her being coerced into signing the contract.

June's father, Tom Meredith, of the fourth generation of Merediths to own the historic old Meredith ranch, with its thousands of acres of verdant grazing lands and its thousands of head of purebred cattle, had been hard hit by this severe West Texas drouth.

Because of the scant rainfall during that period, much of the rich valley land that had formerly grown grass and other vegetation with such abundance had become arid wasteland and was being blown away by the dust storms which plagued that section.

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For the first time since the founding of the ranch by the Meredith pioneers, many years ago, Tom Meredith had been forced to mortgage the old landmark, to obtain money to buy feed and drill additional water wells in an attempt to sustain his fine herds until the rains (which threatened each day) would fall, and relieve the situation. But the clouds came and went, and the situation became more desperate each day as additional hundreds of acres of grazing lands wilted in the blistering sun.

To make matters worse, the mortgage, which had been renewed twice, was due for the third time. The real estate company that held the lien had been advised by an oil company of the possibility that there might be oil on the ranch. They were, therefore, anxious to get the land and were threatening to foreclose.

It was during this desperate situation that Tom Meredith said to his wife at the breakfast table one morning: "Ann, it looks like we're going to be forced to sell some of the cattle to lift the mortgage on our home."

"What did the company say when you asked them for a renewal yesterday?" his wife asked anxiously.

"Said they couldn't stand another renewal; that they had given me two already, and that I shouldn't expect another, also, that they would have to protect their investment by foreclosing if I don't meet the notes."

"That doesn't seem fair, Tom," his wife complained. "I know of several people who have had their notes extended from time to time by that company. Why should they be so anxious to take our home without giving us an equal chance?"

"I can't understand it," her husband said. "There are people right around here who are not even keeping up the interest on their notes, and they are not being foreclosed. For the past several months, they have given me every reason to believe that they were expecting to extend my notes. And now, to about face so suddenly, when I have so little time left, is beyond me.

"I tried to reason with them," he continued. "Told them

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that my cattle were not ready for market, and to sell them at this time would mean to sacrifice them. I tried to explain to them that should a rain fall within the next ten days or within a couple of weeks, my cattle would pick up to the extent that I wouldn't have to sell so many of them to meet my obligations."

"Did you tell them about those men who have been testing out those oil instruments on some of the ranches around here?"

"Yes. But they give very little credence to anything those fellows say. They say there is no such thing as being able to locate oil from the top of the ground; that the only real test is the drill, and that it is too expensive to risk at this time, here. They said that so far as oil is concerned, we might as well forget about that."

"What can we do?" His wife looked at him inquiringly.

"There is only one thing left for us to do. If we are to save our home—which also means the saving of most of our livestock—we will have to pick out the best of our herd and send them to market."

"Had you thought of trying to borrow the money from some of the ranchers around here?"

"Yes, I had. But they all face about the same situation that we do. I've talked to several of them during the past few weeks, to see if any of them had that much cash. I talked to Hiram Lucas in town yesterday, but he said he couldn't possibly raise that much cash. He said he thought Wade might have it. But since June so coldly turned down Wade's proposal of marriage, I'd hate like blazes to approach him for a loan."

"No, I wouldn't mention it to Wade. Not if there is any other way to get the money," his wife agreed.

"It was in anticipation of just such an emergency that for the past several months I've been picking up my best steers and putting them in the three-mile pasture, where I can get them on short notice. I've got about six hundred head of the best ones in the herd in that pasture now. And I'm sure they will bring more than the twenty thousand dollars I owe. I told

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Chandler yesterday that I have enough choice steers in that pasture to take care of the mortgage. And if they wouldn't, I'd sell every hoof and horn I own before I'd let him take my home. I figure those steers should bring around thirty-five dollars each."

"When do you plan to sell them?"

"Well, I've got until Friday before he can file suit for foreclosure. So I'm going to start Jack and the boys out tomorrow to bring them in. With the two trucks, I can haul forty head to the yards at a load and make three loads a day. That'll give me five days to get them on the market. And I'm sure they will be sold as fast as I can get them in there.

"In the meantime, I'm going in, perhaps tomorrow, and arrange with Randall Scott to take care of the sales as fast as they come in. The last ones will be on the market Wednesday morning, and Thursday, which will be the last day before our days of grace expire, I'll go in, pay off the mortgage and get my papers."

"I want to go in with you, Tom," his wife said. "I want to get a few things that we've been needing so long for the house. And I also want to witness the clearing of our home."

"All right, Ann. I was just going to ask you if you didn't want to go along."

Chapter Two

FOR MORE THAN A MONTH, OIL SCOUTS OF THE Bluge Oil Corporation, one of the largest oil companies doing business in the state, had been prospecting on the ranch. The company's laboratory had started elaborate tests of sample cores of earth brought in by the field operators, had made a thorough study of charts obtained from instruments used in

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the tests, and sent a report of their findings to the executive office of the company, when one of the executives called on Robert Chandler, in his office on the second floor of the Chandler building, a three-story office building on the main street of the little mountain town of Labesia.

"Good morning, Robert," Jim Robertson, president of the Bluge Oil Corporation, said as he entered the real estate office.

"Good morning, Jim," the realtor greeted him, smiling. "Sit down." Robertson drew up a chair to the end of the desk. "I have some very interesting news for you," he began. "We have just finished the analysis of the core samples taken from the Meredith ranch and the study of the charts brought in by our field crews, so I am ready to make a final report that the prospects for an oil field of major potentialities on the ranch are very flattering. These charts," he continued, as he unrolled half a dozen charts and maps and spread them out on the desk, "were made on widely scattered locations of the ranch, and practically every test proved extremely encouraging. I am willing to gamble that on the Meredith ranch will be discovered one of the greatest and most productive oil fields in the entire state."

"Well, I'll say that's interesting news." Chandler beamed.

"Do *you* think you'd be willing to gamble on a test if, say, I owned it?"

"I'm ready to locate and proceed with a thorough test any time the papers can be drawn and executed," the oil executive assured him.

"At about what depth do you think oil might be found there?" Chandler asked.

"Very shallow. I'd say that the first pay sand should be found not deeper than nine hundred to a thousand feet."

"Then that should make wildcatting extremely economical —as wildcatting goes—and take a great deal of risk out of the venture," the realtor surmised.

"Yes, such prospects are very attractive to oil producers. When did you see Tom Meredith?"

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"He was in here yesterday; tried to get me to extend his notes."

"You didn't, did you?" Robertson eyed the realtor anxiously.

"I'll say I didn't. If prospects are as bright as you say they are, I can use that ranch mighty handy myself," Chandler replied, rubbing his hands together, a bright smile on his face.

"What did he say when you refused to renew his notes?"

"Oh, he pleaded with me, begging for a chance to save the old ranch home that has been in the family for so many years."

"Poor old fellow," the oil man sighed. "I hate to see him lose the old place. They tell me it has been owned by the Merediths for nearly a hundred years."

"Not getting soft, are you, Jim?" Chandler asked, a sarcastic grin on his face. "You know as well as I do that if Tom Meredith retains ownership of that ranch, neither you nor anyone else will ever get a chance to develop it, and as a result, all this land around here, worth maybe millions of dollars, will go undeveloped, because of the sentiment and shortsightedness of one man. Just as Tom Meredith's forefathers pioneered and founded that ranch, Tom can start another. There are millions of acres of good, rich land that are better suited to ranching than that land he has now, and can be bought for less than I loaned him on that property. So you had better pray that I get possession of that ranch, so you can proceed with its development."

"Why, of course I'm in favor of your getting possession of the ranch. I only said that I know how he must feel about the place. Did he threaten to make any last minute effort to stave off the foreclosure?"

"Yes. Said he'd sacrifice every head of livestock he owned before he'd give it up," Chandler replied.

"Well, that land down by the gulf coast is waiting. You know the offer I made you. There are twenty-five thousand acres of that land that my company can get in fee. I'll give you that entire tract, and five dollars per acre bonus, besides an eighth royalty on all the oil produced on the ranch. The five

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dollars per acre bonus alone will amount to almost twenty-five times what the ranch is costing you. And besides," Robertson continued, "you will be getting twenty-five thousand acres of good, rich gulf coast land that in itself may be worth a fortune."

"Yes, I'll admit your offer sounds pretty good. But we'll go into further detail if and when I get possession of the ranch," Chandler said.

When Jim Robertson left the realtor's office, Chandler turned and gazed out the window in the direction of the Meredith ranch. "I'll name my own terms, once I'm in possession of that gold mine," he mused with a throaty laugh. "I've always wanted to be in a position to dictate terms to these big boys, and now that I'm going to get that chance, don't think, Jim Robertson, that you or anyone else is going to say what you'll give me. You're going to ask me for terms."

Placing his feet upon the window sill, he leaned back in his swivel chair and, with his thumbs stuck in the armholes of his vest, closed his eyes and allowed his imagination to soar to exalted heights as he mused: "Robert Chandler. Real estate broker, oil magnate with a capital O. Guess that'll make these big boys who said I'd never make a go of this business sit up and take notice."

It was a beautiful fall morning in the mountainous section of West Texas. Although no rain had fallen since spring, yet the air was pregnant with a crisp, penetrating tang that seemed to imbue nature with new life. Everywhere the ranchers were busy getting in their feed, and redistributing their livestock to the best advantage, in preparation for the anticipated hard winter months ahead.

Tom Meredith had arisen at four o'clock—his usual hour—and after having given his foreman Jack Doyle ("Uncle Jack," as he was affectionately called by everyone in that area) final instructions on just what herds to gather (from which the steers that were to be sold would be selected), was in his car and on his way to the stockyards at Labesia. He was in a sullen, defiant mood as he drove over the treacherous mountain

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road with its many sharp turns and steep grades, as it paralleled Sawaya Creek, a partly dry mountain stream. "That scoundrel may think he'll take my home, but he'll never do it as long as there's life in my body," he said to himself.

His troubled thoughts drifted to a huge, crudely fashioned cross, constructed of rocks, in the front yard of the Meredith ranch home. That cross was a shrine to the many generations of the Meredith family. And a legend was connected with it that every Meredith related with pride. Josiah Meredith, a Tennessee farm boy, so the legend went, was seized with a wanderlust. Leaving his beloved Tennessee hills, he drifted to Texas, where he volunteered to join the army of stout-hearted pioneers, who were fighting desperately to wrest their freedom from the Mexican government. After the victorious battle of San Jacinto, where Texas' independence was born, he again sought adventure. Purchasing a horse from a rancher near the battle grounds, he set off across the prairie. Arriving at Indianola a few weeks later, he joined up with a wagon train, bound for Mexico, through San Antonio. At San Antonio he bade adieu to the wagoners, and headed in the general direction of California.

After more than a month of travel, he came upon a spot that was so beautiful and arresting that he stopped. Turning in his saddle, he viewed the panorama before him.

The spot where he stood was a clearing of about five acres.

Situated on a general slope, it was encircled by giant oak trees that grew in such a perfect circle they might have been planted by man. A hundred yards to the west, a lazy brooklet trickled peacefully along, between banks of wooded grandeur, from which there rose a beautiful valley to meet a chain of forest-covered foothills a mile away. A mountain range beyond cut off his further view to the west. Some miles to the south, the terrain began a gentle ascent to a plateau rimmed by a continuation of the range of mountains that cut off his view to the west.

To the north, a vast expanse of wooded valleys, hills and towering mountains extended as far as the eye could see. It

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was early fall, and various shades of yellow, red and brown intermingled with the green foliage. The place seemed to abound with game, for as he sat there on his horse, a flock of wild turkeys that were feeding on nuts and berries along the brook became inquisitive, and approached within a few feet of the intruder before wandering off across the stream, while herds of deer could be seen grazing in the valleys. "This," said Josiah to himself, "is my Eden, the end to my wanderings." Dismounting, he gathered rocks together, and with them fashioned a huge cross.

Kneeling at the foot of the cross, he implored Almighty God to bless this spot, and to give him the strength and courage to make this his home. And that it might always be a home for the Meredith generations.

Arising, he mounted and reined his horse in the direction from which he had come. Retracing his route, he marked the trail by the hills, streams and trees, drawing a map on a sheet of paper, that he might be able to find it again. At the end of each day's journey, he cut a number on a tree. And if there were no trees near, he would gather rocks and with them fashion a number, thus indicating the number of days he had traveled on his return.

Back in Tennessee, he told his childhood sweetheart of the wonderful new world he had found in the west and asked her to join him in a pioneering adventure to this land of enchantment. She consented; in the following spring they were married, and started back to Texas together. Finally arriving, they built their home near the cross of rocks, which became a shrine. And as each succeeding generation came into possession of the ranch, they knelt at the cross and beseeched Almighty God to help them to carry out the wishes of Josiah Meredith.

Tom Meredith recalled the "legend of the cross" as he thought: "To think that as long as this ranch has stood in the name of Meredith, a name that has always meant honor and leadership in the community, that I, of the fourth generation

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to call it my home, must suffer the humiliation of sacrificing this family heirloom. Never! Never!" he shouted aloud.

When the rancher reached the commission house of Randall Scott and company, to which he consigned all his livestock, it was yet early. Because of the continued drouth, and the dust storms that had already started to blow, many of the ranchers were anticipating an unusually hard time in keeping their herds together and averting heavy losses during the coming months. Many of them had obtained loans on their land or livestock, and as their notes came due, in an effort to economize in the upkeep of their ranches during the winter, were rushing their cattle—those that had withstood the drouth in fair shape—to market.

The offices and sales pens of the various commission companies doing business at the Labesia stock yards were beehives of activity. Many buyers of other cities and states, having heard of such unusual bargains to be found at that yard because of the emergency, were there to take advantage of the situation, and to buy and ship to their places these drouth cattle, to be fed and marketed later, when conditions had improved and the flow of cattle to market been checked.

"Good morning, Randall," the rancher called to Randall Scott, a cattle broker who sat at a desk busily going over some business transactions of the day before.

"Why, good morning, Tom." Scott, a tall, lean suntanned middle-aged ex-rancher, whose spurred boots were as much a part of his dress as his shirt or trousers, showed surprise as he arose to shake the rancher's hand. "What brings you to town so early this morning?"

"Oh, just felt like taking an early morning ride," the rancher replied.

"Ah, come now, Tom. This is entirely too early for you to be here unless you're having something brought in. You're always busy around the ranch at this time of morning." Looking straight into the rancher's eyes, Scott continued: "Tom, you look worried. Come, tell me what's on your mind. Something's bothering you."

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"Yes, you're right," the rancher admitted. "Something is bothering me, Randall. I haven't been able to sleep for nights."

"That serious?" Scott was deeply concerned. "Why, I never knew you to worry like that, Tom. What's the nature of your troubles?"

"My ranch."

"Your ranch? I don't understand," Scott was puzzled.

"Randall, I've never told you this," the rancher said soberly, "but I'm about to lose my ranch."

"What did you say, Tom?" Scott asked in amazement. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes, I do. As I said, I've never told anyone except my wife, not even my daughter June.

"I borrowed twenty thousand dollars on my ranch three years ago, to pay taxes and buy feed to try and save my cattle until enough rain fell to bring the range back to normal. I hoped to be able to take care of the notes as they came due by selling off some of the cattle as they rounded into shape. But, because of the prolonged drouth, they have been in no shape to sell, and I have hesitated to sacrifice them, except a few head at a time now and then, to meet the interest on the notes and take care of the upkeep of the ranch.

"I've had the notes renewed twice, and I went the other day to see about having them renewed a third time, but there was nothing doing. Said they would have to have their money, or would be forced to foreclose."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Scott said sympathetically. "Who holds the lien on your ranch?"

"Robert Chandler."

"I see. And he wouldn't give you a third renewal? Why, I've known him to renew notes half a dozen times."

"So have I. And that's why I went to him for the loan, instead of the government. I figured he'd give me every chance to pay off the mortgage if conditions got serious with me. But for some reason he seems anxious for his money."

"You know, Tom," Scott said as he leaned back and clasped

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his hands behind his head, "for some reason, I've never liked that fellow."

"Oh, Chandler's all right. After all, it was his money I borrowed. And I guess he needs it. He's given me a pretty fair chance to pay off the lien, and of course, it's not his fault that it hasn't rained."

"Yes, of course that's the business way to look at it. But personally, I've just never been able to like him. I don't know, but sometimes you meet a man and for some unexplainable reason you just can't like him. Not that he has done anything to you, you just don't trust him. There is something about him that doesn't appeal to you, and that's the way it is with me about him.

"I don't know of anything he's ever done that wouldn't stand investigation, but I've always felt that if given a chance (where he thought he might get away with it), he wouldn't be above taking advantage of a situation. What do you intend to do about the situation, Tom?"

"There's only one thing I can do; sell enough of my cattle to take care of it."

"But that means to sacrifice them, Tom. Cattle are way down and dropping every day. Unless your cattle are in mighty good condition, you'd have to sell many a head to bring you twenty thousand dollars," Scott warned him.

"The market seems active enough this morning, Randall. And cattle usually bring a fair price on an active market such as this," the rancher argued.

"While, generally speaking, that is true, yet you'd be surprised to know at what prices some of these cattle are changing hands," Scott said. "Suppose we walk down to the sales pens for a few minutes," Scott suggested. "We might be able to witness the sale of some of these cattle."

The sales yards where livestock was received, bought and sold was a rambling affair covering about ten acres and consisting of many stock pens of various sizes ranging from small ones that would hold from one to four head up to much larger

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ones built to accommodate, without crowding, a hundred head or more.

Scattered throughout the yards were the scales on which the livestock was weighed. And the entire setup was criss-crossed by a system of corridors or runways, through which the animals were moved from one pen to another or to the scales.

Along one side of the yards was a long receiving platform up to which a number of trucks were backed, discharging their loads of livestock, while on another side were several carloads of cattle sidetracked on a spur, waiting to be unloaded.

When the two men reached the yards, business was in full sway. Cattle and other livestock were being moved from every section of the yards to the scales, after salesmen and buyers had agreed on prices.

The din of lowing cows and bawling calves made conversation difficult. As the men reached the first runway near the spur, a herd of mixed cattle was being driven up a ramp and into a railway car. One large bull refused to take the ramp, and turned and charged one of the handlers. The stockman, always wary and alert when handling cattle, sprang to the fence, where he held on with one hand while he gave the animal a sharp rap across the nose with a staff he carried in the other.

"That's one thing about these Brahmans," Scott remarked, "they may be as gentle and docile as lambs, ordinarily. But once you get them aroused, they'll charge anything in sight."

"Yes, they're fine cattle, but very mean at times," the rancher replied.

As the men reached the sales pens of Randall Scott and Company, several buyers were looking over a pen of a hundred choice steers. A salesman was endeavoring to sell the entire lot to a buyer who seemed particularly interested in them but was unable to agree on a price. "That's Felix Hobson, buyer for a large Kansas firm," Scott informed the rancher. "He started buying at this yard only about a month ago. He usually pays a little more than the market quotation.

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Suppose we step up a little closer," Scott suggested. "Maybe we can hear what he's offering on those steers."

"Yes, I know that prices are dropping, Mr. Hobson," the salesman argued, "but these are choice steers. There are not many steers like these coming to the market these days. These steers should bring not less than three and a half to four cents per pound."

"Three or four cents," Meredith said in a low voice. "Do you think that salesman will let those steers go for as little as four cents?"

"I think he'll take less than that," Scott replied.

"They are choice steers, all right," the buyer agreed, "and it's a pity that such animals are not bringing much more than four cents. But as you know, the market on choice steers is only two cents. However, I'm willing to go a little above the market, and give you two and a half cents, but that's my limit."

"Well, all right, Mr. Hobson," the salesman said. "You're getting a bargain."

"Oh, Mr. Hobson," Scott called as the buyer and salesman turned away from the pen, "I want you to meet a friend of mine, Tom Meredith. Tom, this is Felix Hobson." Greetings were exchanged. "Mr. Meredith is a breeder of fine cattle. His ranch is out twelve miles north of here."

"Do you mean the Tom Meredith who is known all over the country for his fine herds?" Hobson asked.

"Yes. Mr. Meredith has an enviable record as a breeder of some of the finest thoroughbred cattle to be found anywhere," Scott said.

"Do you have anything on the yards this morning?" the buyer asked.

"No, nothing this morning," Meredith replied.

"Tom is expecting to have quite a herd on the yard within the next few days. I'll let you know just what day he'll start to send them in," Scott told the buyer.

"Good, and I'll be here if it is at all possible," Hobson said.

"You see, Tom," the broker said when they were again in his office, "in a situation such as confronts us now, because

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of the drouth and the resultant shortage of feed, many of the ranchers, like you, are forced to sacrifice their stock to meet some emergency. Anything sold under such circumstances is always bought at a bargain, and it is such cases that these buyers are looking for now. I'll tell you right now that they are looking for bargains only. When are you expecting to send your cattle in?"

"I expect to send the first ones in Saturday. Using my two trucks, I can put a hundred and twenty head in here each day for five days. That will be six hundred head. And stretching them over a period of five days, I figure you can get a better price on them than you could if they were sold in one lot."

"Yes, without doubt. But get them in within the week, because the way prices are dropping, there's no telling where they'll be by another week."

For six months, Jack Doyle and his cowhands had worked the mountains and valleys of the vast Meredith ranch, picking up the best steers to be found, and putting them in the "three-mile" pasture—so called because of its distance from the ranch home—where they would be available on short notice in just such an emergency. And it was from these cattle that Tom Meredith had instructed the foreman to bring enough to the pens for a day's hauling, just before leaving for Labesia that morning.

Doyle had sent some of his men on ahead, and as he followed on half an hour later, he met two of the men returning at a stiff gallop. Stopping when they met the foreman, they held a brief conference, then turned and rode hurriedly back, while the foreman reined his horse around and hurried back to the ranch, and to the telephone.

Meredith and Scott had just completed arrangements for handling the cattle as they were brought in, and the rancher had arisen from his chair and started to leave the office to return to the ranch, when the telephone rang.

"Is this the Scott Commission Company?" came the excited voice of Uncle Jack, in answer to Scott's hello.

"Yes."

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"Is Mr. Meredith there?"

"Yes, just a moment. It's Jack. He wants to talk to you, Tom," Scott said as he handed the receiver to Meredith.

"Wonder what he wants," the rancher asked curiously.

"Don't know. Sounds like he's excited."

"Hello, Jack?" the rancher spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Yes, Mr. Meredith. Somebody has driven all those steers out of the three-mile pasture."

"What's that?" the rancher asked excitedly.

"Somebody has let the fence down and taken horses and scattered those steers everywhere. Come on out as soon as you can. I've got the boys rounding up what we can find."

"All right, Jack, I'll be right out."

"Something wrong, Tom?" Scott asked as the rancher hung up the receiver.

"Yes, there is. Jack says that somebody has let those steers out that I had planned to sell."

"That's strange. Who do you suppose did it?"

"I have no idea. I can't understand why anyone would want to interfere with them."

"You didn't, by any chance, mention having those steers in that pasture, to Chandler, did you?" Randall asked as if suspecting something.

"Why, yes, I did. When he refused to renew my mortgage, I remarked that if it came to the worst, that I had enough choice steers in that pasture to take care of the debt. You don't think he had anything to do with it, do you?" Meredith asked, seemingly much perturbed.

"Does he know the location of your three-mile pasture?"

"Yes, he does. When I first made application for the loan, he came out, and I showed him most of the ranch, including that pasture."

"Well, then I'm afraid to say. But I wouldn't put it above him. Since he's acting so differently in your case from what he's been known to do in extending leniency to others who have borrowed money from him and have gotten behind with their notes, it may be that he's got something up his sleeve

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