

little expense, a number of children had been born to the soil, while the natives were as loyal to their master as subjects in the days of feudalism. there was but one thing lacking to fill the cup to overflowing--the ranchero was childless. possessed with a love of the land so deep as to be almost his religion, he felt the need of an heir. "birthdays to a man of my years," said uncle lance over easter dinner, "are food for reflection. when one nears the limit of his allotted days, and looks back over his career, there is little that satisfies. financial success is a poor equivalent for other things. but here i am preaching when i ought to be rejoicing. some one get john's loot and read it again. let's see, the nineteenth falls on saturday. lucky day for las palomas! well, we'll have the padre here, and if he says barbecue a beef, down goes the fattest one on the ranch. this is the year in which we expect to press our luck. i begin to feel it in my old bones that the turning-point has come. when father norquin arrives, i think i'll have him preach us a sermon on the evils of single life. but then it's hardly necessary, for most of you boys have got your eye on some girl right now. well, hasten the day, even rascal of you, and you'll find a cottage ready at a month's notice." the morning following easter opened bright and clear, while on every hand were the signs of spring. a vaquero was dispatched to the mission to summon the padre, carrying both a loot and the compliments of the ranch. among the jobs outlined for the week was the repairing of a well, the walls of which had caved in, choking a valuable water supply with debris. this morning deweese took a few men and went to the well, to raise the piping and make the necessary repairs, caving being the most important. but while the foreman and santiago ortez were standing on a temporary platform some thirty feet down, a sudden and unexpected cave-in occurred above them. deweese saw the danger, called to his companion, and, in a flash laid hold of a rope with which materials were being lowered. the foreman's warning to his companion reached the helpers above, and deweese was hastily windlassed to the surface, but the unfortunate vaquero was caught by the falling debris, he and the platform being carried down into the water beneath. the body of ortez was recovered late that evening, a coffin was made during the night, and the next morning the unfortunate man was laid in his narrow home. the accident threw a gloom over the ranch, yet no one dreamt that a second disaster was at hand. but the middle of the week passed without the return of either of the absent boys. foul play began to be suspected, and meanwhile father norquin arrived, fully expecting to solemnize within a few days the marriage of one of the missing men. aaron scales was dispatched to the vaux ranch, and returned the next morning by daybreak with the information that neither quayle nor cotton had been seen on the rio recently. a vaquero was sent to the booth ranch, who brought back the intelligence that neither of the missing boys had been seen since they passed northward some two weeks before. father norquin, as deeply affected as any one, returned to the mission, unable to offer a word of consolation. several days passed without tidings. as the days lengthened into a week, the master, as deeply mortified over the incident as if the two had been his own sons, let his suspicion fall on quayle. and at last when light was thrown on the mystery, the old ranchero's intuition proved correct. my injured foot improved slowly, and before i was able to resume my duties on the ranch, i rode over one day to the san miguel for a short visit. tony hunter had been down to oakville a few days before my arrival, and while there had met Clint Dansdale, who was well acquainted with quayle and cotton. Clint it appeared, had been in san antonio and met our missing men, and the three had spent a week in the city chumming together. as dansdale was also on horseback, the trio agreed to start home the same time, traveling in company until their ways separated. cotton had told dansdale what business had brought him to the city, and received the latter's congratulations. the boys had decided to leave for home on the ninth, and on the morning of the day set forth, moneyless but rich in trinkets and toggery. but some where about forty miles south of san antonio they met a trail herd of cattle from the aransas river. some trouble had occurred between the foreman and his men the day before, and that morning several of the latter had taken french leave. on meeting the travelers, the trail boss, being short-handed, had offered all three of them a berth. quayle had accepted without a question. the other two had stayed all night with the herd, dansdale attempting to dissuade cotton, and quayle, on the other hand, persuading him to go with the cattle. in the end quayle's persuasions won. dansdale admitted that the opportunity appealed strongly to him, but he refused the trail foreman's blandishments and returned to his ranch, while the two las palomas lads accompanied the herd, neither one knowing or caring where they were going. when i returned home and reported this to my employer, he was visibly affected. "so that explains all," said he, "and my surmises regarding theodore were correct. i have no particular right to charge him with ingratitude, and yet this ranch was as much his home as mine. he had the same to eat, drink, and wear as i had, with none of the concern, and yet he deserted me. i never