

The Feud in Hickey Township

Begun by a Calf and Ended by Fire.

(R. L. Ketchum in San Francisco Argonaut.)

IT WAS certainly a first-rate feud, and a source of much pride to the settlers in and about Hickey Township, just as a haunted house, or a murder mystery, or a long-lived scandal might have been—only the feud was much more satisfactory, because it had been on for four years, and hardly a month had passed during all that time that had not witnessed some new episode in the affair, and each one seemed more startling than its predecessor. And so it was that the good people of Hickey Township held their heads just a little bit higher than their less fortunate friends who resided in more peaceful portions of the country.

It—the feud—all started on account of a yearling calf—than which, permit me (a stock-raiser of limited but fruitful experience) to interpolate, there never was nor can there ever be a creature more hopelessly, unreasonably "ornery," and one more productive of sinful language and display of sultry temper on the part of its keepers. Yearling calves have caused the recording angel more trouble, broken up more old friendships, produced more family jars, and, in the form of veal, begotten more indigestion and the insomnia resultant therefrom than—but this is not an essay on the sinful, sportive steerlet and his shortcomings.

The Walkers and the Benedicts had been old neighbors for years, "back in Iowa." In fact, the elder Walkers and the elder Benedicts had been married about the same time, at the beginning of the war, and had just settled on adjoining homesteads when the first gun was fired on Sumter. The men enlisted in the same company, fought side by side, ate and slept and suffered together; and at home their young wives waited and wept together. When the little Walkers and the little Benedicts grew large enough to run about, they were playmates and boon companions; the children of one family felt as much at liberty in the home of the other as they did in their own—for twenty-eight years the two families had lived in peace and amity, and then that miserable calf precipitated an irreparable row. It was too bad, all the neighbors said, but it is a noticeable fact that none of them attempted to patch up a peace—life in Hickey Township and Hickey Corners would have been dull, indeed, but for the feud; so everybody sat by and watched each new phase of the affair with nervous, morbid interest, and commented thereon, but not in a manner likely to prove conducive to a truce on the part of the disputants.

It was in this way. The Benedict and Walker houses had been built on adjacent corners of the homestead quarters, and were quite close together; in fact, one well, sunk on the quarter-section line between the two homesteads, had furnished water for both families for the first four years after coming to Dakota, and it was only a short distance from either house.

But it came to pass that on the Walker domain there was born, and grew, and waxed fat and "sassy" a brindle calf, with a right smart chance of white in its eye and a plethora of deep-dyed mischief in its soul—and he (for it was a young gentleman "critter"), while yet of tender age but tough, engendered the feud. He had wandered away the day before, and when he returned at night the gate of the calf-pen was shut against him; and in the morning, when Papa Benedict arose from post-breakfast family prayers and, followed by the younger male Benedicts, hied him toward the stable, he beheld his neighbor's incipient steer nipping in the bud sundry young and toothsome cabbages and kicking out of the earth, in his bovine abandon, all he could not eat.

Then was Papa Benedict wroth, and thereupon did he give way to naughty, profane words while the young Benedicts surrounded the offending calf and brought him up for judgment.

Now, Papa Benedict was a man of hasty temper, but easily calmed; so when the calf was tendered him at the end of a long picket-rope, his wrath had decreased several degrees, and he wound the rope around his hand and started to lead the calf home.

It was while he was pondering on

what to say to the calf's owner that the calf suddenly remembered a previous engagement and started, in some haste, to keep it, heading directly across the croquet ground. Papa Benedict wished to follow with more dignity than the calf desired; and presently his feet were scraped from under him by a wicket and he was being handled the way the vaqueros in South Africa are supposed to make butter—at the end of a lasso. He did not look very neat when, a few minutes later, he reached the Walker residence and called his neighbor out. He was holding the calf up short, but his temper had slipped its tether and caused him to say bad words, to which Papa Walker replied in kind—whereat Papa Benedict seized a convenient neck-yoke and killed the cause of the trouble.

Of course there was a fight and considerable ill-chosen language; then, as soon as possible, Papa Benedict sued Papa Walker for the damage to his cabbages, and Papa Walker sued Papa Benedict for the value of the calf. After that they prosecuted each other for assault and battery; the younger members of both houses "sassed" each other at every available opportunity; Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Benedict did no more "neighborin'"; and Mort Benedict and Nellie Walker "busted up" with each other. That is, Nellie broke with Mort, who, for his part, had a wholesome contempt for feuds and such nonsense and would feign have ignored the state of affairs, so far as Nellie was concerned, except for the opposition any overtures from him would have received on all sides, and especially from Nellie. So he had to grin and bear it, leaving, however, all hostilities to the others, and speaking pleasantly to any of the Walkers he chanced to meet.

But finally, through a rash act of his own, he was forced into the feud. There was a husking-bee of the good old fashioned sort at Thompson's one night and the younger members of the hostile houses attended. During the evening Mort found a red ear in his pile, and—he never knew what impelled him to do it, unless it was that Nellie looked so pretty and tempting—he took his former sweetheart in his arms and kissed her, not once, but three times.

As soon as it could be done without the girls knowing of it, Bud Walker and Harvey Free invited Mort and Pel Horner out into the moonlit pasture, where Bud insisted on "having it out." Mort demurred, but in vain, and, much to his regret, was forced to "lick" to a standstill not only the man he hoped some day to call his brother-in-law, but the latter's second as well; Pel Horner being a cripple and unable to accommodate young Free, who was "pinin'" on account of his principal's defeat.

That settled it. Thereafter even tender-hearted Mrs. Walker—who, like Mrs. Benedict, sincerely but silently regretted the trouble that kept her apart from her old-time friends these four long years, and who had always had a pleasant greeting for all the family, especially for Mort, who was a great favorite of hers—cut him dead when she happened to meet him, and even the frigid inclination of the head with which Nellie had been wont to recognize his presence on those rare occasions on which they met was now denied him.

All this cut Mort deeply, but he was made of too tough a fibre to show it; so till the end of the feud he tried to act as though he did not care—just as did Nellie, who, however, was obliged to confess to herself once in a while that she did care, "lots."

The spring of 188— is a memorable one in the history of many portions of the Dakotas. The amount of rain in the fall and the snowfall of the winter preceding had been very slight indeed, and there were no spring rains to encourage the farmers. The creek-beds and coules were dry; the lake-beds and sloughs were as innocent of water as powder magazines; and the matted grass and reeds standing in them were as dry as was the grass on the prairies. Everything invited the fire-fiend, whose work on the plains is so swift and thorough—and he accepted the invitation.

From the wheat regions up north came tales of his deadly work—of counties almost entirely laid waste, of hun-

dreds made homeless and penniless, with nothing left, even wherewith to wring their bread out of the soil.

In C— County and its neighbors, however, all felt secure; the fires were far north of them, and being gradually exterminated. Besides they were in the Jim River Valley; it is curious how much confidence the proximity of a river will give to the settler who is threatened by prairie fires.

Mort Benedict and his father were returning from the county town one day, having been in to leave "mother" for a two days' visit and to have the breaking plow repaired. For a day or two there had been rumors of fires only twenty miles or so to the north, and they were talking of this as they crossed the bridge, four miles from home. As they reached the top of the hill on the west side of the river Mort glanced at the northern horizon, which was not distant, on account of a range of hills running east and west, and—

Did his eyes deceive him, or was that smoke, just rolling up above the line of hills?

"Look, father!"

Startled, the elder man did so.

"Great God, Mort! She's a-comin', an' comin' t' beat hell, too! We got t' race, t' save anything!"

And race they did, but the fire was racing, too; and when they drove their panting horses into the dooryard, the flames were only a few miles away and coming down at lightning speed.

While Tom and Roy saddled their ponies and rounded up the livestock, Mrs. Benedict and the three elder boys and Bessie in an incredibly short space of time put into the two wagons everything that it was possible to save, after which Hal and George saddled their ponies, joined Tom and Roy with the herd, and the whole procession, headed by the two wagons, driven by Mort and his father, moved off at a rapid pace toward the river.

Then, and only then, did Mort notice that there was no sign of human life about the Walker place. His heart gave a leap.

"Bess!" he said, sharply; "did—did they git away? Did ye notice 'em movin' round?"

The girl's eyes opened wide. "Oh, Mort! I haven't heard or seen a sign of 'em all day!"

"Take them reins. I'm goin' back an' see."

He leaped from the wagon and ran back, noting as he did so how hot the air had become and how near the big wave of smoke was.

Mrs. Walker, singing softly as she bustled about the kitchen, was a bit startled to see who her unannounced visitor was.

"Mis' Walker, where's all your men-folks? No, I didn't come fer trouble—only th's a prairie-fire only a little ways off, an' comin' down like mad!"

Mrs. Walker sank into a chair. "Oh, heavens! An' father sick a-bed an' all th' boys over t' Berry's on a breakin'-bee!"

"Good Lord! Ain't I glad I come back! Where's th' hosses?"

"Oh, Mort! They're all loose in the pasture!"

"Git what things ye wantuh save t'gether real quick! They ain't no spare time." And Mort tore out of the house like a madman, and down to the pasture, not noticing that Nellie had entered the kitchen and was staring at him open-eyed.

Both Mr. Walker's wagon-teams were composed of animals usually as docile as lambs; but today, bunched together in a corner of the pasture, they sniffed the coming flames, and it seemed to put wild imps into their lumbering carcasses, and it was a long, trying time before Mort could catch two of them, swear, pray, try as he might—and the great fire rolled swiftly nearer. The wind had shifted from northeast to

northwest. Mort saw, with sinking at his heart, that there was an even chance of getting cut off from the river.

Mr. Walker was on a feather-bed on the floor of the wagon and Mrs. Walker crouched beside him. Nellie ran back into the house for the family Bible, then climbed up beside Mort.

"Git up! Clk!" The heavy whip came down hard on the horses' flanks, and the race was begun.

Faster came the flames; the billow of smoke rolled over them, now and then dropping feathery grass-cinders as it passed; they could hear the roar of the fire and feel its hot breath whenever the wind increased in velocity—and Jim River so far away!

Nearer came the great wave of flame; the air was dense and suffocating. Mort in his frenzy lashed the now running horses incessantly, cursing, praying, saying he knew not what. Mrs. Walker wept and prayed; Mr. Walker now and then gave a feeble moan; Nellie, on the seat beside Mort, kept her lips tight closed and said nothing, only clinging to the seat more desperately as the wagon bounced and lurched.

Mort looked at her; her silence angered him. "Git off'n th' seat!" he roared. "How d'ye think I c'n drive with you sittin' thar?"

The girl obeyed, and fell, rather than climbed, back into the box.

Mort Benedict's recollections of what occurred after that are very dim. He remembers driving deeper and deeper into the terrible heat and smoke, of tearing through a volume of flame that seemed endless—flame that burned his eyes, his nostrils, his throat, and scorched his hair and eyebrows—then, with a final leap, the horses dashed down the slope into the shallow river, and he knew no more.

When Mort awoke he could not for some time realize where he was, and lay for some minutes trying to remember. Oh, yes; he was in Will Berry's room. He remembered the antlers on the wall, and the white curtains at the windows. Some one came in softly from the next room.

"Who is it?" he asked.

It was Nellie, and she came and leaned over him. "It's me, Mort. I've be'n here all th' time. I thought ye knew me, sometimes. You've be'n sick."

"Are ye here t' stay, Nell—always, I meant?"

She sat down on the edge of the bed and put her hands on his shoulders.

"If ye want me to, Mort."

He drew her face down to his, but put her at arm's length presently.

"But how about th' feud, Nell?"

"They ain't no more feud, Mort."

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