

# THE WILDCATTERS

## A Tale of the Cobalt Country.

By S. A. White

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## BOOK TWO.

## CHAPTER I.

OVER the foothills of south-western Alberta night was already sending its creeping messengers of shadow. On Ben Doan's ranch two men were riding campward. "Well," said the veteran Westerner to his companion, "what do you think of Doan's acres?"

"Grand!" he replied. "Why the ranches I have seen aren't patches to this." It was the tenderfoot's first day out.

"Right! You have it there. This is the real thing. It is different from the others. The life is different, too. After you have been here a few weeks you will know for yourself. All the thick-backed novels dealing with ranch life and murdering cow-boys will be knocked out of you. We are a rough lot. That's true! But we are not sack-legged, foul-mouthed, shooting horrors, riding cayuses through open saloon doors, and all that sort of thing! You have seen that staged and printed?"

"Yes," the tenderfoot replied, "many a time!"

"That will all go," the grizzled cattleman said. "You will see new and real life and I hope you will like it. I am boss till Doan gets back and I'll try to give you some pointers. Rather set you up to the game! We'll use you just as well as Bar K can do it. It is rough, hard work, with danger thrown in is the bill day after day, but you look fit. You're from Ontario, you said. You're educated, I know."

"Yes, I am from the East."

"You said your name was — what? I've forgotten it again."

"Hooper! Charles Hooper."

"Sure! We once had a man of that name. Billy Hooper, he was called. He went with Jim Darcy, ranch head before me, when Jim started herds of his own," Kirby said. "Darcy was a dickens of a good man and I'll have to step long to fill his tracks."

"You were scarce of men when I drifted along?"

"Right. Doan is away, too. That makes it harder. It reminds me of a year ago. We happened in about the same fix and fastened onto a tenderfoot. I hope, though," Kirby said seriously, "that your experience will not be anything like his."

"What was that?" his companion asked, scenting a story.

"Well, you see, it was like this: The night he joined the Bar K outfit our gang was holding the herds on the South Bend. Most unholy heat had shriveled the bunch-grass brown and muddy coulees were all that was left for water-supply, Smoke River being stone dry. It had been killing work keeping the beasts under control those last few days, for they had the roaming thirst both figuratively and literally, especially at night, when oftentimes river-bred winds from over the border drifted in damp and moist to tantalize their hot nostrils. Some prayed for rain. Some cursed for it. All wanted it. To make matters worse Jim Darcy had got in the way of a rampaging steer early in the week, and Jim paid for his pony's clumsiness with a broken collar-bone. Every cow-puncher who came straying through that district was gobbled up on double pay by the outlying ranges long before he reached the limits of Bar K. The season was heavy. The herds were uncommonly hard to handle and all ranches would have taken on extra men if they could have got them. Bar K suffered most on account of the shortage of hands, so Doan rode through to Rockeley, on the C. A. R. branch of the new road, one fiery morning, to bring back by hook or by crook something of the masculine brand. It was breezless sunset when he returned and went the rounds to see that everything was right.

"Did ye git a man?" asked Old Joe Blake.

"I did," said Doan. "He is a tenderfoot, but he appears quite sound. When he finishes his meal he will go on the night shift."

"Ha!" exclaimed Old Joe. "Ye couldn't git anything but a tenderfoot? I reckon he's soft."

"He can ride and shoot," said the ranch-owner. "He told me he learned that in South Africa some years ago. He seemed hard up and accepted my first offer. I was glad enough to close the bargain. He swung on my extra pony and we came home like jack-rabbits. Searles, Drisdan and some others were in looking for help. I

hustled my man out and gave him no chance to jump his contract. He seemed willing enough, though. He'll go next you on the second night shift."

"Wall, Old Joe drawled. 'I s'pose it will mean more work for me, but somebody has to do it. Heh?"

"Yes, he'll learn more from you. Call the whole camp if there is any storm. It's going to rain before daylight."

"The sun had vanished in a cloud-bank high up above the prairie horizon and long 'wet streaks' told the plainsmen that rain was not far off. They hoped in the bottom of their hearts that it would come quietly. Thunder and lightning meant certain stampede, more certain because of the irritated condition of the cattle.

"Nine o'clock found the first night shift on duty. The tenderfoot was next Old Joe and I held the position on his other side. The night was dark. Far off in the direction of the hills the thunder faintly rumbled. Scudding clouds alternately hid and revealed the stars.

"I smelled the shifting breeze. It was moist. Rain could not be far away. The tenderfoot's first night on guard promised to be an unpleasant one. I could see that he sat his beast well as he rode out with Old Joe. The animal was a finely trained one of Ben's, and the contented way in which Minnie carried him vouched for his horsemanship since the mare could tell a rider from a lubber the minute he put foot in the stirrup. Ben had decked him out in puncher's garb. The lariat was correctly coiled at the saddle-horn. Black pistol-butts stuck out of his holsters, these weapons being now used only for protecting the herds from marauding wolves and also for shooting into the faces of a stampeding bunch when nothing else will turn them. I took up my position and I could hear Old Joe giving him some instructions on what to do.

"Kin ye tune up any?" was the former's parting question.

"What?" the stranger asked.

"Sing! Kin ye sing?"

"A little," Haswell—that was his name, Richard Haswell—responded.

"Wall, then," Joe advised, "if them beasts gits oneasy let yer lungs out a bit. Seems something all-fired comfortin' in a man's voice for them. They like it, 'specially when they're a leetle oneasy."

"And, indeed, they seemed uneasy from the start. Perhaps they smelled the brewing storm. Perhaps their brute instinct prophesied the crash and roar of a thunder tempest. We had to keep our guard keenly and I could hear some of the more distant on the shift liting snatches of old refrains to soothe the herds. All at once the tenderfoot broke out in song with the clearest, sweetest tenor voice I ever heard. That voice would have made him a fortune at any American or European opera, and I wondered how in all the blessed roads of destiny he had drifted out here. His words pealed out like the notes of a clarinet and you could catch every syllable. The milling herds became more quiet even at the first bar of his tune. It was a love song and I can hear him yet as he trilled those lines:

Can I forget those words you spoke,  
The love you gave to me,  
That night of old when stars awoke  
And lit the silent sea?—

"Here his tones ceased abruptly and I could hear only a low, muffled whistling, as if he were bending to adjust the girth or change a stirrup. The horse's faint footfalls on the prairie sod stopped for an instant.

"But in a moment the flute-like notes came out again:

Ah! no, though seas our paths divide  
And set us far apart,  
Still every vow we ever sighed  
Is treasured in my heart—

"Then his voice went up in golden richness to heights that would have turned some of your boosted Eastern soloists green with envy. It went up repeating the last line:

Is treasured in my heart.

"As he launched into the chorus his tone grew to indescribable sweetness, and I involuntarily checked my pony.

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