

COW-COUNTRY

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649557301

Cow-Country by B. M. Bower

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

B. M. BOWER

COW-COUNTRY



Day after day the trail herd plodded slowly to the North.
FRONTISPIECE. *See page 13.*

COW-COUNTRY

BY

B. M. BOWER

Mrs. L. C. Bower

WITH FRONTISPIECE

BY

FRANK TENNY JOHNSON



NEW YORK
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

1921

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

COW-COUNTRY

CHAPTER ONE

AN AMBITIOUS MAN-CHILD WAS BUDDY

IN hot mid afternoon when the acrid, gray dust-cloud kicked up by the listless plodding of eight thousand cloven hoofs formed the only blot on the hard blue above the Staked Plains, an ox stumbled and fell awkwardly under his yoke, and refused to scramble up when his negro driver shouted and prodded him with the end of a willow gad.

"Call your master, Ezra," directed a quiet woman-voice gone weary and toneless with the heat and two restless children. "Don't beat the poor brute. He can't go any farther and carry the yoke, much less pull the wagon."

Ezra dropped the gad and stepped upon the wagon tongue where he might squint into the dust cloud and decide which gray, plodding horseman alongside the herd was Robert Birnie. Far across the sluggish river of grimy backs, a horse threw up its head with a peculiar sidelong motion, and Ezra's eyes lightened with recognition. That was the colt, Rattler, chafing against the slow pace he must keep. Hands cupped around big, chocolate-colored lips and big, yellow-

white teeth, Ezra ~~whoo-ee-ed~~ the signal that called the nearest riders to the wagon that held the boss's family.

Bob Birnie and another man turned and came trotting back, and at the call a scrambling youngster peered over his mother's shoulder in the forward opening of the prairie schooner.

"O-oh, Dulcie! We gonna git a wile cow agin!"

Dulcie was asleep and did not answer, and the woman in the slat sun-bonnet pushed back with her elbow the eager, squirming body of her eldest. "Stay in the wagon, Buddy. Must n't get down amongst the oxen. One might kick you. Lie down and take a nap with sister. When you waken it will be nice and cool again."

"*Not s'eeepy!*" objected Buddy for the twentieth time in the past two hours. But he crawled back, and his mother, relieved of his restless presence, leaned forward to watch the approach of her husband and the cowboy. This was the second time in the past two days that an ox had fallen exhausted, and her eyes showed a trace of anxiety. With the feed so poor and the water so scarce, it seemed as though the heavy wagon, loaded with a few household idols too dear to leave behind, a camp outfit and the necessary clothing and bedding for a woman and two children, was going to be a real handicap on the drive.

"Robert, if we had another wagon, I could drive it and make the load less for these four oxen," she suggested when her husband came up. "A lighter wagon, perhaps with one team of strong horses, or even with a yoke of oxen, I could drive well enough, and relieve these poor brutes." She pushed back her sun-bonnet and with it a mass of red-brown hair that curled

Ambitious Child Was Buddy 3

damply on her forehead, and smiled disarmingly. "Buddy would be the happiest baby boy alive if I could let him drive now and then!" she added humorously.

"Can't make a wagon and an extra yoke of oxen out of this cactus patch," Bob Birnie grinned good-humoredly. "Not even to tickle Buddy. I'll see what I can do when we reach Olathe. But you won't have to take a man's place and drive, Lassie." He took the cup of water she drew from a keg and proffered — water was precious on the Staked Plains, that season — and his eyes dwelt on her fondly while he drank. Then, giving her hand a squeeze when he returned the cup, he rode back to scan the herd for an animal big enough and well-conditioned enough to supplant the worn-out ox.

"Are n't you thirsty, Frank Davis? I think a cup of water will do you good," she called out to the cowboy, who had dismounted to tighten his forward cinch in expectation of having to use his rope.

The cowboy dropped stirrup from saddle horn and came forward stiff-leggedly, leading his horse. His sun-baked face, grimed with the dust of the herd, was aglow with heat, and his eyes showed gratitude. A cup of water from the hand of the boss's wife was worth a gallon from the barrel slip-slopping along in the lurching chuck-wagon.

"How's the kids makin' out, Mis' Birnie?" Frank inquired politely when he had swallowed the last drop and had wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "It's right warm and dusty t'day."

"They're asleep at last, thank goodness," she answered, glancing back at a huddle of pink calico that

showed just over the crest of a pile of crumpled quilts. "Buddy has a hard time of it. He's all man in his disposition, and all baby in size. He's been teasing to walk with the niggers and help drive the drag. Is my husband calling?"

Her husband was, and Frank rode away at a leisurely trot. Haste had little to do with trailing a herd, where eight miles was called a good day's journey and six an average achievement. The fallen ox was unyoked by the mellow-voiced but exasperated Ezra, and since he would not rise, the three remaining oxen, urged by the gad and Ezra's upbraiding, swung the wagon to one side and moved it a little farther after the slow-moving herd, so that the exhausted animal could rest, and the raw recruit be yoked in where he could do the least harm and would the speediest learn a new lesson in discomfort. Mrs. Birnie glanced again at the huddle of pink in the nest of quilts behind a beloved chest of drawers in the wagon, and sighed with relief because Buddy slept.

An ambitious man-child already was Buddy, accustomed to certain phrases that, since he could toddle, had formed inevitable accompaniment to his investigative footsteps. "L'k-out-dahl!" he had for a long time believed to be his name among the black folk of his world. White folk had varied it slightly. He knew that "Run-to-mother-now" meant that something he would delight in but must not watch was going to take place. Spankings more or less official and not often painful signified that big folks did not understand him and his activities, or were cross about something. Now, mother did not want him to watch the wild cow run and jump at the end of a rope until finally

Ambitious Child Was Buddy 5

forced to submit to the ox-yoke and help pull the wagon. Buddy loved to watch them, but he understood that mother was afraid the wild cow might step on him. Why she should want him to sleep when he was not sleepy he had not yet discovered, and so disdained to give it serious consideration.

"*Not s'eeepy*," Buddy stated again emphatically as a sort of mental dismissal of the command, and crawled carefully past Sister and lifted a flap of the canvas cover. A button — the last button — popped off his pink apron and the sleeves rumbled down over his hands. It felt all loose and useless, so Buddy stopped long enough to pull the apron off and throw it beside Sister before he crawled under the canvas flap and walked down the spokes of a rear wheel. He did not mean to get in the way of the wild cow, but he did want action for his restless legs. He thought that if he went away from the wagon and the herd and played while they were catching the wild cow, it would be just the same as if he took a nap. Mother had n't thought of it, or she might have suggested it.

So Buddy went away from the wagon and down into a shallow dry wash where the wild cow would not come, and played. The first thing he saw was a scorpion — nasty old bug that will bite *hard* — and he threw rocks at it until it scuttled under a ledge out of sight. The next thing he saw that interested him at all was a horned toad; a *hawn-toe*, he called it, after Ezra's manner of speaking. Ezra had caught a *hawn-toe* for him a few days ago, but it had mysteriously disappeared out of the wagon. Buddy did not connect his mother's lack of enthusiasm with the disappearance. Her sympathy with his loss had seemed