

CLASSICS TO GO

# THE FLYING U RANCH



B. M. BOWER

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# CHAPTER I.

## The Coming of a Native Son

The Happy Family, waiting for the Sunday supper call, were grouped around the open door of the bunk-house, gossiping idly of things purely local, when the Old Man returned from the Stock Association at Helena; beside him on the buggy seat sat a stranger. The Old Man pulled up at the bunk-house, the stranger sprang out over the wheel with the agility which bespoke youthful muscles, and the Old Man introduced him with a quirk of the lips:

“This is Mr. Mig-u-ell Rapponi, boys—a peeler straight from the Golden Gate. Throw out your war-bag and make yourself to home, Mig-u-ell; some of the boys'll show you where to bed down.”

The Old Man drove on to the house with his own luggage, and Happy Jack followed to take charge of the team; but the remainder of the Happy Family unobtrusively took the measure of the foreign element. From his black-and-white horsehair hatband, with tassels that swept to the very edge of his gray hatbrim, to the crimson silk neckerchief draped over the pale blue bosom of his shirt; from the beautifully stamped leather cuffs, down to the exaggerated height of his tan boot-heels, their critical eyes swept in swift, appraising glances; and unanimous disapproval was the result. The Happy Family had themselves an eye to picturesque garb upon occasion, but this passed even Pink's love of display.

“He's some gaudy to look at,” Irish murmured under his breath to Cal Emmett.

“All he lacks is a spot-light and a brass band,” Cal returned, in much the same tone with which a woman remarks upon a last season's hat on the head of a rival.

Miguel was not embarrassed by the inspection. He was tall, straight, and swarthily handsome, and he stood with the complacency of a stage favorite waiting for the applause to cease so that he might speak his first lines; and, while he waited, he sifted tobacco into a cigarette paper daintily, with his little finger extended. There was a ring upon that finger; a ring with a moonstone setting as large and round as the eye of a startled cat, and the Happy Family caught the pale gleam of it and drew a long breath. He lighted a match nonchalantly, by the artfully simple method of pinching the head of it with his fingernails, leaned negligently against the wall of the bunk-house, and regarded the group incuriously while he smoked.

“Any pretty girls up this way?” he inquired languidly, after a moment, fanning a thin smoke-cloud from before his face while he spoke.

The Happy Family went prickly hot. The girls in that neighborhood were held in esteem, and there was that in his tone which gave offense.

“Sure, there's pretty girls here!” Big Medicine bellowed unexpectedly, close beside him. “We're all of us engaged to `em, by cripes!”

Miguel shot an oblique glance at Big Medicine, examined the end of his cigarette, and gave a lift of shoulder, which might mean anything or nothing, and so was irritating to a degree. He did not pursue the subject further, and so several belated retorts were left tickling futilely the tongues of the Happy Family—which does not make for amiability.

To a man they liked him little, in spite of their easy friendliness with mankind in general. At supper they talked with him perfunctorily, and covertly sneered because he

sprinkled his food liberally with cayenne and his speech with Spanish words pronounced with soft, slurred vowels that made them sound unfamiliar, and against which his English contrasted sharply with its crisp, American enunciation. He met their infrequent glances with the cool stare of absolute indifference to their opinion of him, and their perfunctory civility with introspective calm.

The next morning, when there was riding to be done, and Miguel appeared at the last moment in his working clothes, even Weary, the sunny-hearted, had an unmistakable curl of his lip after the first glance.

Miguel wore the hatband, the crimson kerchief tied loosely with the point draped over his chest, the stamped leather cuffs and the tan boots with the highest heels ever built by the cobbler craft. Also, the lower half of him was incased in chaps the like of which had never before been brought into Flying U coulee. Black Angora chaps they were; long-haired, crinkly to the very hide, with three white, diamond-shaped patches running down each leg of them, and with the leather waistband stamped elaborately to match the cuffs. The bands of his spurs were two inches wide and inlaid to the edge with beaten silver, and each concho was engraved to represent a large, wild rose, with a golden center. A dollar laid upon the rowels would have left a fringe of prongs all around.

He bent over his sacked riding outfit, and undid it, revealing a wonderful saddle of stamped leather inlaid on skirt and cantle with more beaten silver. He straightened the skirts, carefully ignoring the glances thrown in his direction, and swore softly to himself when he discovered where the leather had been scratched through the canvas wrappings and the end of the silver scroll ripped up. He drew out his bridle and shook it into shape, and the silver mountings and the reins of braided leather with horsehair tassels made

Happy Jack's eyes greedy with desire. His blanket was a scarlet Navajo, and his rope a rawhide lariat.

Altogether, his splendor when he was mounted so disturbed the fine mental poise of the Happy Family that they left him jingling richly off by himself, while they rode closely grouped and discussed him acrimoniously.

“By gosh, a man might do worse than locate that Native Son for a silver mine,” Cal began, eyeing the interloper scornfully. “It's plumb wicked to ride around with all that wealth and fussy stuff. He must 'a' robbed a bank and put the money all into a riding outfit.”

“By golly, he looks to me like a pair uh trays when he comes bow-leggin' along with them white diamonds on his legs,” Slim stated solemnly.

“And I'll gamble that's a spot higher than he stacks up in the cow game,” Pink observed with the pessimism which matrimony had given him. “You mind him asking about bad horses, last night? That Lizzie-boy never saw a bad horse; they don't grow 'em where he come from. What they don't know about riding they make up for with a swell rig—”

“And, oh, mamma! It sure is a swell rig!” Weary paid generous tribute. “Only I will say old Banjo reminds me of an Irish cook rigged out in silk and diamonds. That outfit on Glory, now—” He sighed enviously.

“Well, I've gone up against a few real ones in my long and varied career,” Irish remarked reminiscently, “and I've noticed that a hoss never has any respect or admiration for a swell rig. When he gets real busy it ain't the silver filigree stuff that's going to help you hold connections with your saddle, and a silver-mounted bridle-bit ain't a darned bit better than a plain one.”

“Just take a look at him!” cried Pink, with intense disgust. “Ambling off there, so the sun can strike all that silver and bounce back in our eyes. And that braided lariat—I'd sure

love to see the pieces if he ever tries to anchor anything bigger than a yearling!”

“Why, you don't think for a minute he could ever get out and rope anything, do yuh?” Irish laughed. “That there Native Son throws on a-w-l-together too much dog to really get out and do anything.”

“Aw,” fleered Happy Jack, “he ain't any Natiff Son. He's a dago!”

“He's got the earmarks uh both,” Big Medicine stated authoritatively. “I know 'em, by cripes, and I know their ways.” He jerked his thumb toward the dazzling Miguel. “I can tell yuh the kinda cow-puncher he is; I've saw 'em workin' at it. Haw-haw-haw! They'll start out to move ten or a dozen head uh tame old cows from one field to another, and there'll be six or eight fellers, rigged up like this here tray-spot, ridin' along, important as hell, drivin' them few cows down a lane, with peach trees on both sides, by cripes, jingling their big, silver spurs, all wearin' fancy chaps to ride four or five miles down the road. Honest to grandma, they call that punchin' cows! Oh, he's a Native Son, all right. I've saw lots of 'em, only I never saw one so far away from the Promised Land before. That there looks queer to me. Natiff Sons—the real ones, like him—are as scarce outside Calyforny as buffalo are right here in this coulee.”

“That's the way they do it, all right,” Irish agreed. “And then they'll have a 'rodeo'—”

“Haw-haw-haw!” Big Medicine interrupted, and took up the tale, which might have been entitled “Some Cowpunching I Have Seen.”

“They have them rodeos on a Sunday, mostly, and they invite everybody to it, like it was a picnic. And there'll be two or three fellers to every calf, all lit up, like Mig-u-ell, over there, in chaps and silver fixin's, fussin' around on horseback in a corral, and every feller trying to pile his rope

on the same calf, by cripes! They stretch 'em out with two ropes—calves, remember! Little, weenty fellers you could pack under one arm! Yuh can't blame 'em much. They never have more'n thirty or forty head to brand at a time, and they never git more'n a taste uh real work. So they make the most uh what they git, and go in heavy on fancy outfits. And this here silver-mounted fellow thinks he's a real cowpuncher, by cripes!”

The Happy Family laughed at the idea; laughed so loud that Miguel left his lonely splendor and swung over to them, ostensibly to borrow a match.

“What's the joke?” he inquired languidly, his chin thrust out and his eyes upon the match blazing at the end of his cigarette.

The Happy Family hesitated and glanced at one another. Then Cal spoke truthfully.

“You're it,” he said bluntly, with a secret desire to test the temper of this dark-skinned son of the West.

Miguel darted one of his swift glances at Cal, blew out his match and threw it away.

“Oh, how funny. Ha-ha.” His voice was soft and absolutely expressionless, his face blank of any emotion whatever. He merely spoke the words as a machine might have done.

If he had been one of them, the Happy Family would have laughed at the whimsical humor of it. As it was, they repressed the impulse, though Weary warmed toward him slightly.

“Don't you believe anything this innocent-eyed gazabo tells you, Mr. Rapponi,” he warned amiably. “He's known to be a liar.”

“That's funny, too. Ha-ha some more.” Miguel permitted a thin ribbon of smoke to slide from between his lips, and gazed off to the crinkled line of hills.

“Sure, it is—now you mention it,” Weary agreed after a perceptible pause.

“How fortunate that I brought the humor to your attention,” drawled Miguel, in the same expressionless tone, much as if he were reciting a text.

“Virtue is its own penalty,” paraphrased Pink, not stopping to see whether the statement applied to the subject.

“Haw-haw-haw!” roared Big Medicine, quite as irrelevantly.

“He-he-he,” supplemented the silver-trimmed one.

Big Medicine stopped laughing suddenly, reined his horse close to the other, and stared at him challengingly, with his pale, protruding eyes, while the Happy Family glanced meaningly at one another. Big Medicine was quite as unsafe as he looked, at that moment, and they wondered if the offender realized his precarious situation.

Miguel smoked with the infinite leisure which is a fine art when it is not born of genuine abstraction, and none could decide whether he was aware of the unfriendly proximity of Big Medicine. Weary was just on the point of saying something to relieve the tension, when Miguel blew the ash gently from his cigarette and spoke lazily.

“Parrots are so common, out on the Coast, that they use them in cheap restaurants for stew. I've often heard them gabbling together in the kettle.”

The statement was so ambiguous that the Happy Family glanced at him doubtfully. Big Medicine's stare became more curious than hostile, and he permitted his horse to lag a length. It is difficult to fight absolute passivity. Then Slim, who ever tramped solidly over the flowers of sarcasm, blurted one of his unexpected retorts.

“I was just wonderin', by golly, where yuh learnt to talk!”

Miguel turned his velvet eyes sleepily toward the speaker. “From the boarders who ate those parrots, amigo,” he

smiled serenely.

At this, Slim—once justly accused by Irish of being a “single-shot” when it came to repartee—turned purple and dumb. The Happy Family, forswearing loyalty in their enjoyment of his discomfiture, grinned and left to Miguel the barren triumph of the last word.

He did not gain in popularity as the days passed. They tilted noses at his beautiful riding gear, and would have died rather than speak of it in his presence. They never gossiped with him of horses or men or the lands he knew. They were ready to snub him at a moment's notice—and it did not lessen their dislike of him that he failed to yield them an opportunity. It is to be hoped that he found his thoughts sufficient entertainment, since he was left to them as much as is humanly possible when half a dozen men eat and sleep and work together. It annoyed them exceedingly that Miguel did not seem to know that they held him at a distance; they objected to his manner of smoking cigarettes and staring off at the skyline as if he were alone and content with his dreams. When he did talk they listened with an air of weary tolerance. When he did not talk they ignored his presence, and when he was absent they criticized him mercilessly.

They let him ride unwarned into an adobe patch one day—at least, Big Medicine, Pink, Cal Emmett and Irish did, for they were with him—and laughed surreptitiously together while he wallowed there and came out afoot, his horse floundering behind him, mud to the ears, both of them.

“Pretty soft going, along there, ain't it?” Pink commiserated deceitfully.

“It is, kinda,” Miguel responded evenly, scraping the adobe off Banjo with a flat rock. And the subject was closed.

“Well, it's some relief to the eyes to have the shine taken off him, anyway,” Pink observed a little guiltily afterward.

“I betche he ain't goin' to forget that, though,” Happy Jack warned when he saw the caked mud on Miguel's Angora chaps and silver spurs, and the condition of his saddle. “Yuh better watch out and not turn your backs on him in the dark, none uh you guys. I betche he packs a knife. Them kind always does.”

“Haw-haw-haw!” bellowed Big Medicine uproariously. “I'd love to see him git out an' try to use it, by cripes!”

“I wish Andy was here,” Pink sighed. “Andy'd take the starch outa him, all right.”

“Wouldn't he be pickings for old Andy, though? Gee!” Cal looked around at them, with his wide, baby-blue eyes, and laughed. “Let's kinda jolly him along, boys, till Andy gets back. It sure would be great to watch 'em. I'll bet he can jar the eternal calm outa that Native Son. That's what grinds me worse than his throwin' on so much dog; he's so blamed satisfied with himself! You snub him, and he looks at yuh as if you was his hired man—and then forgets all about yuh. He come outa that 'doby like he'd been swimmin' a river on a bet, and had made good and was a hee-ro right before the ladies. Kinda 'Oh, that's nothing to what I could do if it was worth while,' way he had with him.”

“It wouldn't matter so much if he wasn't all front,” Pink complained. “You'll notice that's always the way, though. The fellow all fussed up with silver and braided leather can't get out and do anything. I remember up on Milk river—” Pink trailed off into absorbing reminiscence, which, however, is too lengthy to repeat here.

“Say, Mig-u-ell's down at the stable, sweatin from every pore trying to get his saddle clean, by golly!” Slim reported cheerfully, just as Pink was relighting the cigarette which had gone out during the big scene of his story. “He was cussin' in Spanish, when I walked up to him—but he shut up

when he seen me and got that peaceful look uh hisn on his face. I wonder, by golly—”

“Oh, shut up and go awn,” Irish commanded bluntly, and looked at Pink. “Did he call it off, then? Or did you have to wade in—”

“Naw; he was like this here Native Son—all front. He could look sudden death, all right; he had black eyes like Mig-u-ell—but all a fellow had to do was go after him, and he'd back up so blamed quick—”

Slim listened that far, saw that he had interrupted a tale evidently more interesting than anything he could say, and went off, muttering to himself.

## CHAPTER II.

### “When Greek Meets Greek”

The next morning, which was Sunday, the machinations of Big Medicine took Pink down to the creek behind the bunkhouse. “What's hurtin' yuh?” he asked curiously, when he came to where Big Medicine stood in the fringe of willows, choking between his spasms of mirth.

“Haw-haw-haw!” roared Big Medicine; and, seizing Pink's arm in a gorilla-like grip, he pointed down the bank.

Miguel, seated upon a convenient rock in a sunny spot, was painstakingly combing out the tangled hair of his chaps, which he had washed quite as carefully not long before, as the cake of soap beside him testified.

“Combing—combing—his chaps, by cripes!” Big Medicine gasped, and waggled his finger at the spectacle. “Haw-haw-haw! C-combin'—his—chaps!”

Miguel glanced up at them as impersonally as if they were two cackling hens, rather than derisive humans, then bent his head over a stubborn knot and whistled La Paloma softly while he coaxed out the tangle.

Pink's eyes widened as he looked, but he did not say anything. He backed up the path and went thoughtfully to the corrals, leaving Big Medicine to follow or not, as he chose.

“Combin'—his chaps, by cripes!” came rumbling behind him. Pink turned.

“Say! Don't make so much noise about it,” he advised guardedly. “I've got an idea.”