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THE

BOY RANCHERS

OR

Solving the Mystery at Diamond X

By

WILLARD F. BAKER

Author of "The Boy Ranchers in Camp,"
"The Boy Ranchers on the Trail," etc.

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THE BOY RANCHERS SERIES

By WILLARD F. BAKER

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or Solving the Mystery at Diamond X

THE BOY RANCHERS IN CAMP
or The Water Fight at Diamond X

THE BOY RANCHERS ON THE TRAIL
or The Diamond X After Cattle Rustlers

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THE BOY RANCHERS

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THE BOY RANCHERS

CHAPTER I

"SOME RIDIN'!"

Two riders slumped comfortably in their saddles as the ponies slowly ambled along. The sun was hot, and the dust stifling, a cloud of it forming a floating screen about the horsemen and progressing with them down the trail.

One of the riders, a tall, lanky and weather-beaten cowboy, taking a long breath, raised his voice in what he doubtless intended to be a song.

It was, however, more a cry of anguish as he bellowed forth:

"Leave me alone with a rope an' a saddle,
Fold my spurs under my haid!
Give me a can of them sweet, yaller peaches,
'Cause why? My true-love is daid!"

"Bad as all that; is it, Slim?" asked the other, who, now that he had partly emerged from the cloud of dust, could be seen as a lad of about sixteen. He, like the other, older rider, was attired cowboy fashion.

"Eh? What's that, Bud?" inquired the lanky one, seeming to arouse as if from a day dream. "See suthin'?"

"Nope. I was just sort of remarking about that sad song, and——"

"Oh, shucks! *That* wa'n't sad!" declared Slim Degnan, foreman of the Diamond X ranch. "Guess I wa'n't really payin' much attention to what I was singin', but if you want a real sad lament——"

"No, I don't!" laughed Bud Merkel, whose father was the owner of Diamond X ranch. "Not that I blame you for feeling sort of down and out," he added.

"Oh, I don't feel *bad*, Bud!" came the hasty rejoinder. "We did have more'n a ride than I figgered on, but I don't aim to put up no kick. It's all in the day's work. You don't seem to mind it."

"I should say not! We had a bully time. I'd spend another night out in the open if we had to. I like it!"

"Yes, you seem to take to it like a duck does to water," added Slim. "But it's a shame to mention ducks in the same chapter with this atmosphere! Zow hippy! But it's hot an' dusty an' thirsty! Come along there, you old hunk of jerked beef!" he added to his pony, giving a gentle reminder with the spurs and pulling on the reins. The pony made a feeble attempt to increase its gait, but it was no more than an attempt.

The animal that was ridden by Bud—a pinto—started to follow the example of the other.

"Regular mud-turtle gallop," commented the foreman.

"They'll go faster when they top the rise, and see the corral," commented Bud.

"An' smell water! That's what I want, a long, sizzling, sozzling drink of water!" cried Slim, whose name fitted him better than did his clothes. Then he broke forth again with:

"Oh, leave me alone with a rope an' a saddle——"

Slowly the riders plodded along. The sun seemed to grow more hot and the dust more thick. As they approached a hill, beyond which lay the corral and ranch buildings of Diamond X, Bud drew rein, thus halting his pony.

"Let's give 'em a breather before we hit the hill," he suggested to the foreman.

"I'm agreeable, son," was the foreman's easy comment as he slung one leg over the saddle and sat sideways.

Slim Degnan and Bud had ridden off to look for a break in one of the many long lines of wire fences that kept the stock of Diamond X somewhat within bounds, and it had taken longer to locate and repair the break than they had counted on.

They had been obliged to remain out all night—not that this was unusual, only they had not exactly prepared for it—and, in consequence, did not have all the ordinary comforts. But, as Bud had said, he had not minded it. However, the ponies were rather used up, and the riders in the same condition, and it was with equal feelings of relief that they came within sight of the last hill that lay between them and the ranch.

"Well, might as well mosey along," spoke Slim, at length. "Sooner we get some water inside us, an' th' ponies, th' better we'll all be."

"I reckon," agreed Bud. "But I don't believe Zip Foster could have done the job any quicker than we did."

"Who?" queried Slim, with a quizzical look at his companion.

"Zip Foster," answered Bud.

"Never heard of him. What outfit does he ride for?" asked the foreman, but he saved Bud the embarrassment of answer by suddenly rising in his saddle and looking off in the distance.

Bud had his own reasons for not answering that seemingly natural question, and he was glad of the diversion, though he was not at once aware of what had caused it. But he followed the direction of the foreman's gaze, and, like him, saw arising in the still air, about two miles away, a thin thread of smoke—a mere wisp, as though it had dangled down from some fleecy cloud. But the smoke was ascending and was not the beginning of a fog descending.

"Can't be any of our boys," murmured Slim. "They aren't out on round-up yet. An' it's too early for grub."

"Indians?" questioned Bud. Sometimes the bucks from a neighboring reservation felt the call of the wild, and slipped out to have a forbidden feast on some cattleman's stock, only to be brought up with a round turn by the government soldiers.

"Don't think so," remarked Slim. "They don't have much chance t' practice their wiles, but, with all that, they know enough not t' make a fire that smokes. Must be some strangers. If it's any of them ornery sheep men," he exclaimed, "I'd feel like——"

"They wouldn't dare!" exclaimed Bud, for being the son of a cattle-ranchman he had come to dislike and despise the sheep herders, whose flocks ate so closely as to ruin the feeding range for steers. The sheep would crop grass down to the very roots, setting back its growth for many months.

"No, I don't reckon it would be sheepers," murmured Slim. "Wa'al, mebbly they know at the ranch. We'll be headin' home now, I guess. Come on there, you old tumble-bug!" he called to his horse, and then he raised his voice and roared:

"Leave me alone with a rope an' a saddle,
Fold my spurs under my haid!
Give me a can of them sweet, yaller peaches,
'Cause why? My true-love is daid!"

Slim's horse started off on a lope, freshened by the rest, and Bud's followed. They topped the rise, and, then as the animals came within sight and smell of their stables, and caught the whiff of ever-welcome water, they dashed down the slope toward the green valley in which nestled the corral and buildings of Diamond X ranch.

"If I wasn't so doggoned tired," said Slim to Bud as they prepared to pull up on reaching the corral, "I'd ride over after supper, and see what that smoke was. I don't perzactly like it."

"Maybe I'll go," offered Bud. "If it *should* happen to be sheepers, dad'll want to know it."

"He shore will, son. But—Zow hippy! What's going on here?" cried Slim. He pointed toward the corral of the ranch—a fenced-off field where the cowboys kept their string of ponies when the animals were not in use. Here, too, spare animals were held against the time of need.

Just now a crowd of cowboys surrounded this corral. Some were perched on the rails of the fence, and others leaned over. Some were swinging their hats as though in encouragement, and one was rapidly emptying his gun on the defenseless air, which was further torn and shattered by wild yells.

As the two wayfarers neared the corral, there dashed from among the cattle punchers surrounding it an exceedingly fat cowboy, whose face, wreathed in smiles, was also wet with perspiration. He swung his hat around in a circle and yelled shrilly:

"Some ridin', boys! Some ridin'! Go to it!"

"What's the matter, Babe?" asked Slim, of his assistant who had thus given vent to his feelings.

"Go look! It's so good I don't want to spoil it!" laughed the fat one. "Two tenderfoots—Oh, my—Hole me up, somebody!" he begged. "Some ridin'!"

Bud had a glimpse, in the corral, of a youth about his own age, flying rapidly around the enclosure on the back of a bucking bronco. The lad was holding on with both arms around the horn of the saddle.

"Get him off!" cried Bud in a high pitched voice, as he recognized the pony to which the strange lad was clinging. "Tartar will kill him! Get him off!"

CHAPTER II

A CALL FOR HELP

Without waiting for his pony to come to a stop, Bud fairly flung himself out of the saddle, and with his rope, or lariat, coiled on his arm he ran toward the corral.

"What's matter?" demanded Babe Milton, the assistant foreman, pausing in his repeated exclamations of:

"Some ridin'! Some ridin'!"

"Don't you fellows know any better than to let a tenderfoot ride Tartar?" cried Bud. "That horse is next door to an outlaw, and you wouldn't get on him yourself, Babe!"

"You said an earful!" came the quick response. "I wouldn't!"

"Then how'd you come to let this fellow on? Who is he, anyhow?" cried Bud, as he slipped through a hunch of cowboys who opened to let him pass.

"Fresh tenderfoot," some one said.

"He would ride!" added another.

"Says he's your cousin," added a third ranch hand.

"My *cousin*!" cried Bud. Then he did not stop to do any more talking. He leaped the fence of the corral, and, as he did so he became aware of another stranger—a tenderfoot like the lad on Tartar—standing within the fenced-off place. This lad, who bore all the marks of a newly-arrived Easterner, was rather short and stout—not to say fat. He stood beside an ancient and venerable cow pony, which was never ridden when there was anything else in the corral to throw a saddle on. And this lad was gazing with fear-widened eyes at the figure of the other lad.

"Get off, Nort! Get off!" cried this stout lad.

"Don't tell him to do that!" ordered Bud sharply. "He'll break his neck sure! Stick, and I'll rope Tartar!" he shouted, trying to make his voice heard above the thunder of the feet of the half-maddened horse, and the now somewhat subdued shouts of the cowboys.

Bud Merkel knew his business. He had not lived all his sixteen years on his father's ranch not to learn how to throw a skillful rope, and he now took his position just within the corral, and at a place where he could intercept the dashing outlaw, Tartar, as the animal came around again with the flapping lad clinging to his back.

"Can you manage, Bud?" called Slim, from his cross seat in his saddle, where he was looking on.

"I'll get him!" was the grim answer.

Many thoughts were shooting through the mind of Bud Merkel, not the least of which was the remark of Babe Milton to the effect that the lad on Tartar was Bud's cousin.

"Then the other must be, too," thought Bud as he swung his rope and directed a quick glance at the fat lad now hugging the inner rails of the corral fence. "But how'd they get here, and what made him try that outlaw?"

However, this was no time to spend in asking oneself questions. There was need of action, and it came a moment later.

Hissing and swishing through the air, the coils of Bud's lariat fell around the neck of the plunging, rearing, running Tartar. In another instant Bud had taken a turn or two around a post, and, by carefully applying a snubbing pressure, the pony was brought to a stop.

"Get down—quick!" ordered Bud when the horse was quiet enough to permit of this. And as the other lad obeyed, and shook himself together, limping over toward Bud the latter asked: "Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit," was the laughing answer. "I could 'a' stuck on. He couldn't throw me."

"Don't you fool yourself!" exclaimed Bud, while some of the cowboys went into the corral and loosened his lariat from the neck of the now subdued animal. Tartar, once the offending stranger was

no longer on his back, seemed normal. "Don't you fool yourself! You couldn't have stayed on a second longer."

"Betcher I could!" came the quick response. "If you'll rope him again——"

"Cut it out, Nort!" came from the fat lad, who looked enough like the daring rider to be his brother, as, indeed, he was.

"Oh, let me alone, Dick!" snapped the other. "I can ride!"

"Some ridin'! Oh, boy, some ridin'!" murmured the fat assistant foreman of Diamond X, while his companions grinned.

"You may know how to ride an ordinary horse," admitted Bud with a smile, as he coiled the rope which one of the men handed to him. "But Tartar isn't a regular pony. He's an outlaw, and even Del Pinzo won't take a chance on him. I don't see how they come to let you," he added, gazing somewhat reproachfully at the assembled cowboys.

They had begun to slink away, for they recognized the pseudo-authority held by the son of the ranch owner. Still they could justify their action, somewhat.

"He *wanted* to ride," declared Babe Milton. "Would have it so, and we roped Tartar for him. I told him your pa wouldn't like it if he was here, but——"

"I reckon you thought you'd see some fun," said Bud, half smiling, for though he realized that the strange lad had been in some danger, he also realized that the cowboys, fond as they were of fun and practical jokes, would not have allowed the matter to go too far.

"It's up to me!" declared the slim lad, trying to brush some of the dust and horse hair from his clothes. "'Tisn't their fault at all."

"Good kid," murmured some of the cowboys, glad to be thus vindicated.

"I told him to keep off," said the fat lad, following Bud and the daring rider from the corral. "I told him to pick a quiet horse, but he said he wanted a buckler."

"He shore got it," chuckled Slim Degnan, as he ambled along. "He shore did!"

"Well, I'm glad you're not hurt," exclaimed Bud. "I guess you're my cousins; aren't you?" he asked, holding out his brown, muscular hand to grasp the rather thinner and whiter palm of the lad who had been on Tartar.

"Yes, I'm Nort," was the response. "This is Dick, my brother. We're going to stay all summer—if you'll keep us," he added, with a whimsical smile. "And after this I'll let you pick my horses for me."

"It'll be safer, until you learn to ride," said Bud. "I mean learn to ride western cow ponies," he added quickly, for he did not want to assume this other lad could not ride.

"I guess I don't know so much as I thought I did," confessed Nort. "Though I did ride a lot at the Academy."

"Well, come on to the house," invited Bud. "Dad's away, but mother's there. Have you met her?"

"No," answered Nort. "We just got here. You see we came ahead of time. Happened to meet one of your wagons over at the depot, and rode out here in it. I sort of lost my head when I struck the ranch and wanted a ride right off the bat. I had it, too!" he added with a smile.

"Dad said something about you moseying out this way before snow flew," spoke Bud, as he walked with his cousins toward the main ranch house, which stood in the midst of a number of low red buildings, itself of the same structure and color. "But I didn't expect you so soon, or I'd 'a' been over to the station."

"It was all right—we didn't want any fussing," said Nort. "And, as I say, we started sooner than we expected. Didn't even write."

"No, I guess you didn't," admitted Bud. "Dad sort of mentioned, casual like, that you'd be along sooner or later, but he didn't get any word from you recently."

"Well, we're here, anyhow," spoke Dick, the fat youth, with a sigh of evident relief, as he looked back toward the corral.

"I just got in myself," said Bud. "Been away two days mending fence. Had to sleep out one night, and we weren't exactly prepared for it. But I'm mighty glad you've come! We can have some corking times. I'll get you ponies that'll be—er—better to ride than Tartar," he said, substituting the word "better" for that of "safer" which, at first, he had intended to use.

"That's good!" exclaimed Dick. "I don't claim to be any rider, though I can stick to the saddle once I land there," and he shot a side glance at his more impulsive brother.

"Oh, I could 'a' stuck if there'd been a *saddle*," declared Nort.
"That was the trouble. I'll ride Tartar yet!" he cried.

"Better go slow," advised Bud. "But there's mother in the door now, and I can smell grub. She'll be surprised to see you."

"Who's that girl?" asked Dick, as he noticed one standing beside the stout, motherly-looking woman in the doorway of the ranch house.

"That's my sister Nell," remarked Bud.

"Nell! Say, she has grown!" cried Nort. "I didn't know she was that big!"

"Oh, this is a good country for growing up in!" laughed Bud. "Here's Nort and Dick, Mother!" he called.

"Well, land sakes! I never expected to see *you* two!" cried Mrs. Merkel, hastily wiping off her mouth with the corner of her apron, preparatory to kissing her nephews. "Land! But you've grown!"

"Not any more than Nell!" declared Dick, as he kissed his aunt and girl cousin, an example gladly followed by Nort. For once the fat lad had beaten his slim brother to it.

"Why didn't you write? We didn't know you were coming for a month yet! Where's your trunks? How'd you get here? Come in and wash up and we'll have supper!"

All this Mrs. Merkel showered on the two "tenderfeet" in a breath, at the same time fairly "shooing" them into the house as a motherly hen might direct her chickens toward the feeding coop.

"Oh, we just pulled up stakes and lit out," laughed Nort. "We got tired of the East. Oh, but it's great here!" he exclaimed, as he looked back before entering the house, and saw, through the clear air, the wonderful blue sky, and, in the distance, a range of mountains. "It's just what I dreamed it would be," he softly murmured.

"Glad you like it! We'll have some swell times!" voiced Bud. "But you want to get those duds off," he added, as he glanced at his cousin's clothes.

"We sure do!" declared Nick. "We've got outfits in our trunks. They're in the wagon. Maybe they aren't just the proper clothes for a ranch, but they're old things—"

"The older the better!" interrupted Bud, and he was about to follow his cousins inside when Nell exclaimed:

"Some one is coming! Look!"

They all turned to observe a solitary horseman riding at top speed for the group of ranch buildings. He came from the direction where Bud and the foreman had seen the slim wisp of smoke about an hour before, and as he rode, the man shouted above the thundering thuds of his horse's hoofs:

"Help! Help! Can't you send help!"

CHAPTER III

A MYSTERIOUS SEARCH

Nort and Dick Shannon, Bud's "city cousins," seemed to realize, as did the young rancher, his mother and sister, that something was wrong. Prepared as Nort and Dick were for strange and sensational happenings in the west, they sensed that this was out of the ordinary.

The solitary rider had also attracted the attention of the cowboys who, the excitement at the corral being over, had turned toward their bunk house to prepare for the evening meal. Slim Degnan, the foreman, Babe, his assistant, and one or two others started forward as if to intercept the horseman. But a cowboy on foot is like a sailor off the deck—out of his element. They wore high-heeled shoes—boots made especially for the use of spurs, and they were not capable of rapid progress except on their steeds.

The lone rider was past them in a flash, turning into the lane that led toward the ranch house, where Bud and the others could not be seen, having turned at the call for help.

"What's the matter of him—locoed?" asked Babe.

"Looks that way," murmured Slim. "But Ma Merkel will know how to handle him, and Bud has his gun. Still, I don't know but we'd better mosey up that way, so as to sort of back the boy up, as long as his dad's away."

"My idea coincides," murmured Babe. "We'll prospect along up there," he called to the other cowboys, some of whom seemed to show a desire to rush to a possible rescue. "It'll be all right."

By the time the foreman and his assistant had reached the porch on which stood the two tenderfeet eastern lads, with Bud, his mother and sister, the lone horseman had dismounted, not with any degree of skill, however, but slipping off as though greatly fatigued, or rendered limp from fright.

"Can you send help to him?" he gasped, pointing back in the direction whence he had come. "If you don't they may kill him! Oh, such men! Such men!"

"Kill who? What's the matter? What sort of help do you need?" asked Bud quickly, while Nort and Dick looked at the excited man. He bore none of the marks of the west. His garb was of the East as his riding had been, though he sat a fairly good saddle, or he never could have ridden at the speed he did. But he had a good horse. Even Dick and Nort knew enough about animals to tell that. The pony, his sides heaving and his nostrils distended, gave this not altogether mute evidence of his race against time.

"It's Professor Wright," came the panting answer. "He's off there—with his prospecting party. I'm his assistant!"

"I thought he looked like a professor," murmured Dick to Nort.

"Keep still!" sharply commanded Nort.

"I am Professor J. Elwell Blair," went on the still greatly excited rider, "an assistant to Professor Wright. We are camped about three miles from here, over there," and he waved his hand toward where Bud and Slim, on their homeward ride, had seen the wisp of smoke. "Some Mexicans threaten to attack us," went on the man who called himself Professor Blair. "In fact they had already started when Professor Wright bade me ride for help. We knew there was a ranch over in this direction. Can you send us help?" he asked anxiously.

"Sure!" exclaimed Bud.

"Oh, if your father were only here!" murmured Mrs. Merkel.

"Our boys are enough!" declared Nell, with sparkling eyes. "I wish I might go!" she added. "Can't I?"

"No indeed!" declared her mother. "The idea! You must take Slim with you!" she called after Bud, for he was already half way down the lane leading to the corral, calling on Professor Blair to follow, and shouting to Nort and Dick:

"Come on, if you want to see some lively doings!" Bud invited.

"We sure do!" yelled Nort.

"Hadn't we better change our clothes?" asked the slower Dick.

"Change nothin'!" cried Nort. "Leave your coat off if you want to! I'm going to shed mine!" and shed it he did, dropping it on the ground as he leaped forward.

"What is it, Bud?" asked Slim Degnan, as he and Babe, on their way to the house, met the fleeing young rancher, who had even distanced Professor Blair, though the latter had again mounted his tired horse.

"Don't know—exactly," came the answer. "He's a stranger," and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder back toward the professor. "He and a party are camped over in the hills—where we saw the smoke a while back," he explained further. "He says a bunch of Greasers are trying to do up his boss. Wants help!"

"Wa'al, he come to th' right place," remarked Babe Milton briefly, as, with more speed than you would have believed he possessed, he ran toward the corral.

Already several cowboys, sensing that something was wrong, had begun to catch and saddle enough ponies to provide mounts for Bud, the foreman and his fat helper.

"Give my cousins Baldy and Gimp!" cried Bud to one of the cowboys who were in the corral. "You can ride those, even if you haven't got your old clothes on," he added.

"Lively now!" cried the foreman, assuming, as was his right, command of the little cavalcade. In less time than it takes to tell it, they were riding along the trail, directed by Professor Blair, whose horse seemed, somehow, to have recovered its wind sufficiently to keep pace with the fresher steeds.

"Are you all right, fellows?" Bud called back to his cousins, as he, himself, spurred ahead alongside Slim and Babe. Nort and Dick formed the rear guard with the professor.

"Sure!" declared Nort. "Oh, boy! A fight the first day we get here, Dick!" he yelled to his brother.

"Don't be too sure," called back Bud. "These Greasers may hit the trail as soon as we head into sight."

"Greasers are Mexicans, aren't they?" asked Dick.

"Yes," answered Professor Blair, who rode between the two easterners. "We had to engage some, and I believe a few Indians, also, in our prospecting work. Our own men are all right, but we were attacked by some strange Mexicans and Indians—or we were about to be attacked, when I rode off for help."

"What started the row?" asked Bud.

The question seemed to embarrass Professor Blair.

"The Mexicans seem to think we have something of value, or at least know where valuables may be," he answered. "I believe they think we are after desert gold, and though we have found some——"

"You have found *gold!*" cried Bud.

"No! No! It is a false rumor!" hastily declared the professor. "But Professor Wright has been obliged to keep secret the object of his search, and perhaps the mystery surrounding it has been misconstrued by the ignorant men. They declare we are after gold, but it is something far more valuable, though I am not allowed to disclose what——"

He was interrupted by the sound of distant shooting, followed by faint yells. Bud Merkel clapped spurs to his horse and shot forward, while Professor Blair excitedly exclaimed:

"Oh, they are killing him! They are killing him!"

CHAPTER IV

SUSPICIONS

With distinct feelings of joy, and no alarm whatever, Nort and Dick watched the hands of Slim and Babe slide toward their holsters, where nestled their .45 guns. Bud had taken his off, on reaching the house, and his two "city" cousins found themselves wishing that they wore those ugly but effective weapons.

It was not that Bud was a "gun man," nor was either the ranch foreman or his fat assistant. But as the classical saying has it:

"You don't always need a gun out West, but when you do need it you need it mighty bad, and mighty sudden!"

The guns, by which are meant revolvers of heavy calibre, were used for many other purposes than shooting at human beings. They were almost a necessity for a lone rider to signal for help, or indicate the need of certain action, and more than one cowboy owed his life to his gun, either in turning aside a stampede of steers, or against some human or animal enemy.

It had been the hope of Norton, and Richard Shannon, as soon they learned they were to spend some time at their uncle's ranch, to "pack a gun," but their advent and arrival had been so sudden, and their time so crowded since reaching Diamond X, that they had to dispense with these luxuries, or necessities, according to the way you regard them.

But the two eastern lads grinned happily at one another as they galloped along, and saw the foreman and his fat helper with their heavy weapons out of their holsters.

"Left mine home!" muttered Bud, as his hand, too, instinctively sought the leather sheath. Professor Blair, as he had called himself, did not seem to be armed.

"They shore is some row going on!" exclaimed Slim, as he clapped spurs to his already well-doing horse, and shot ahead of the others. "How many in your bunch?" he called to the professor.

"There are four of us—Professor Wright, myself and two helpers, Edward Newton and Silas Thorpe," was the answer. "But the other day we engaged some Mexicans and burros, so our party is now about eight."

"And how many are trying to rush you?" asked the foreman, slightly checking his horse to accommodate its pace to the slower gait of the professor's animal.

"I don't know. There seemed about a dozen who were threatening Professor Wright when he told me to go for help."

"Not such bad odds," murmured Bud.

"Is it a real fight?" asked Nort, his eyes sparkling.

"Sounds like it," commented the western ranch lad. "But we'll have to lay low. No guns," he added regretfully.

Dick turned to look back toward the ranch buildings, now out of sight owing to the uneven nature of the country. He might have been calculating whether it would be possible to go back and get weapons.

But he said nothing on this score, though he did let out an exclamation:

"There's another bunch coming along the path."

"Don't say *path*—it's a *trail*," corrected Bud with a smile. "And that's some of our bunch," he added. "Cowboys from Diamond X. Guess mother sent them after us, thinking we'd tackled too big a job alone."

"And it does sound like a lively fracas," observed Babe Milton, wiping his wet and glistening face with the big handkerchief that adorned his neck, and the neck of every cowboy that Nort and Dick had so far observed since coming to the "cow country."

These sometimes gaudy handkerchiefs were not mere ornaments. They served the same purpose to which Babe was then devoting his, and as the eastern lads learned later, the silk or cotton squares formed very effective protection to nose and mouth while riding range in the thick, heavy dust stirred up by the feet of thousands of cattle. So, like the "chaps," the high-heeled boots, the handkerchiefs and the guns, each part of the equipment of a cowboy, has its use.

"Hi! They's some shootin'!" cried Slim, as he spurred forward again, having learned what he wished of the professor.

"Oh, don't let them kill him!" begged the scientist. "It is all a mistake—thinking we are after gold—but they'll make any excuse to try to rob us and get the secret."

"What secret?" asked Bud, but just then a renewed outburst of shots, punctured by shrill yells, told of the need of action as against words.

"They'll kill him! They'll kill him!" moaned Professor Blair.

"'Tain't all one sided!" declared Slim Degnan to Bud, Nort and Dick, as the three boys managed to get their ponies on a line with the sturdy beast of the foreman. "There's two sets of shootin' goin' on there!"

The sound of fighting, and yells, whether of defiance or fear, increased in volume now, and came from a little glade at the base of the wooded foothills, which formed a sort of stepping stone to the grim mountains behind them, along the base of which flowed a river. These hills, or part of them, marked one of the limits of Diamond X ranch, though at another point the holdings of Bud's father extended well to the summit of one of the mountains.

Urging on their horses by heels and voices, the little party swept into the glade, following a path, or "trail," as it should be called. This trail had been worn by countless cattle going to the river to drink, and the feet of the ponies now clattered along it.

A moment later, swinging around a little clump of trees, greasewoods and sagebush, Bud and his cousins saw a sight which thrilled them through and through, though perhaps Bud was more accustomed to such stirring scenes than were the city lads.

In the midst of an encampment of tents, several men were kneeling down, using packs and baggage as a barricade. They were firing over this line of defense at objects unseen, but which, as the white puffs of smoke showed every now and then, were easily guessed to be humans, with more or less sinister motives.

There was a regular fusillade, as the party of cowboys approached, and in addition a series of sharp and wild yells which, now that the scene was reached, could be heard as arising from the underbrush outside the camp.

The attackers of Professor Wright, for he later proved to be the owner of the camp, were using their voices as well as their weapons to intimidate the defenders.

"Greasers and some Indians!" cried Slim, as he swept on along the trail. "Come on, boys!" he yelled and instantly his gun was in action, as was that of Babe Milton.

"Oh, why didn't I bring mine?" mourned Bud.

"Tough luck!" exclaimed Nort.

The advent of the rescue party had an instant effect. No sooner had Slim and Babe begun firing than there was silence on the part of the attackers. A few scattering shots were fired, one or two more wild yells smote the air and then there was more silence.

"That settles 'em," grimly observed Slim, as he began to reload his weapon, an example followed by Babe. At the same time those in the little camp, who had had their backs turned toward the rescue party, swung about with evident signs of relief on their faces.

A tall, slim man, with prematurely gray hair, stepped forward, resting the butt of his rifle on the ground as he surveyed the newcomers. Then his eyes sought those of Professor Blair.

"I see that you found help," he remarked quietly. "And just in time, too. They were about to rush us, I fear."

"I'm glad we came in time," the other scientist remarked. "I don't know your names, gentlemen," he went on, turning to Bud and the others, "but this is my chief, Professor Hendryx Wright."

"I shall take some other occasion to thank you," spoke Professor Wright, with a smile that included all the rescuers from Slim to Dick. "But just now one of my men, possibly two, need attention from a doctor. They have been shot."

"Better let me have a look at 'em," suggested Slim. "I'm not a doctor, but that brand isn't plenty out here. If they're too bad, we can take your men to the ranch. Where are they?"

Professor Wright waved his hand toward one of the tents, and while Slim dismounted to make his way there, Bud and his cousins had time to look about them.

In addition to four white men, which included the two professors, and two who were apparently assistants, there were several Mexicans or half-breeds. These were all armed and had, in common with their white employers, been firing at the attacking party. Of the latter no glimpse had been had. They seemed to have vanished into the forest with the approach of the rescuers.

"Do you have things like this happen every day, Bud?" asked Nort, with sparkling eyes, as the foreman disappeared into the tent where the wounded men lay.

"No, indeed. This is as much a surprise to me as it is to you fellows."

I didn't even know this camp was here."

"What do you reckon it is?" asked Dick.

"Give it up," answered Bud. "I reckon even Zip Foster couldn't make anything of this."

"Who's Zip Foster?" asked Nort.

"That's what a lot of us would give a deal to know, son," chuckled Babe, who was rapidly making a survey of the camp. "He's a secret friend of Bud's, an'——"

"Oh, cut it out!" exclaimed Bud, and even his tan did not altogether hide the blood that surged into his face.

While the two professors were conversing together in low tones, and their helpers, including two white men (evidently the Ed Newton and Silas Thorp spoken of by Professor Blair) were putting to rights the somewhat disrupted camp, Slim, the foreman, came from the tent.

"They're not much hurt," he declared. "Only flesh wounds, but they ought to be treated with some dope I've got at the ranch house. They can ride over, and I'll fix 'em up as best I can," he offered.

"You are very kind," murmured Professor Wright. "But it might be dangerous for them to do so."

"Dangerous!" exclaimed Slim.

"Yes, I mean it might inflame their wounds."

"Oh! Yes, it might," agreed the foreman after a moment of thought. "Wa'al, I can send one of the boys back for the medicine. Here they come now," he added, as, with whoops of delight at the prospect of a fight, a troop of other cowboys from the Diamond X ranch rode up. As Bud had surmised, his mother had sent them after the advance party.

"What's the row?" cried "Yellin' Kid" Watson, as he unlimbered his gun. It needed but one utterance of his to establish his nickname. He shouted almost every word he used.

"All over," said Slim, succinctly. "Don't know just what it's about, but it's all over."

The newcomers rode their horses into the camp, and Yellin' Kid, whose animal was a bit restive, nearly brought down one of the small tents. As it swayed, a flap opening because of the breaking of one of the ropes, Professor Wright sprang forward with a sharp cry.

"Don't go in there! No one must enter that tent!" sharply commanded the scientist.

"I wasn't aimin' to," remarked Yellin' Kid somewhat tartly and in rather grieved tones. "Come out of that, you soap footer!" he cried to his steed. "What do you mean, slippin' all over creation?"

He backed his animal away, but Professor Wright, summoning to his side Professor Blair, quickly fastened the tent shut again, paying no heed during this operation, to the cowboys.

"Seems mighty much afraid we'll see something we hadn't a right to," commented Bud to his cousins.

"Yes, he does act queer," agreed Dick.

"Suspicious, I call it!" whispered Nort. He was impulsive, and much more prone, than was his brother, to ascribe motives to others. "Maybe, after all, they have gold in there!" he said.

CHAPTER V

HITTING THE TRAIL

Bud Merkel shook his head as Nort Shannon offered this possible explanation of the action of Professor Wright.

"Never's been any gold found in these regions all the years I've lived here," he said.

"There's always a first time," countered Nort, while the cowboys gazed about them, talking in low

voices.

"It must be something else," said Bud. "This is a prospecting bunch, it's easy to see that, but they're not after gold. These two professors are from some eastern college, I take it," he went on. "They may be after specimens of plants, or stones. Using their vacation this way. I've heard of it being done."

"That's right!" chimed in Dick. "Two of the professors from our Academy spent all one summer in the Adirondacks, getting material for a new geology book they were writing. Maybe that's what these professors are doing," he suggested.

"Then why are they keeping so blamed secret about it for?" asked Nort, impulsively. "There's no crime in getting rock specimens, or in making up a new geology, only I wouldn't want to do it," he finished with a grin. "I get enough of study all winter. We came out here to have fun!"

"And we've started in right!" declared his brother. "Fun and excitement."

"I reckon we'll have to let these fellows have their way," murmured Bud. "They aren't on our ranch, and this is a free country. They may have permission from the Double Z people to look for specimens here."

"Is this Double Z land?" asked Dick.

"Right about here is," answered Bud. "Our line runs over there, and back where we came from," and he motioned toward the ranch buildings. "Better be hitting the home trail too, soon," he commented. "It'll be dark in no time, and I'm as hungry as they make 'em!"

"You said something then!" declared Babe. "I don't see that we can do anything more here—they don't appear to want us overly much," he added.

Perhaps Professor Wright was aware that a little feeling had arisen over his hasty warning to Yellin' Kid, for he hastened toward the foreman and said:

"I shall be most grateful to you if you will send over something for the two wounded men. I don't like to let them go to your place, hurt as they are, and I don't like to deplete my force. Those rascals may return."

"That's right," agreed Slim. "Wa'al, I reckon we can accommodate you. I'll send one of the boys back with a bottle of antiseptic stuff right after grub. Wash out the wounds, pour some of this stuff on and bind 'em up. The men'll be all right. Greasers don't mind a little thing like a bullet through the arm or leg. You know 'em?"

"No, I only hired them three days ago to help with our camp outfit. Some of my men deserted, and I have reason to believe it was some of them who led the attack on us."

"Any special reason why they should shoot you up?" asked Slim. "That is if it isn't askin' a personal question," he added, mindful of the reception accorded Yellin' Kid.

"It is all due to a foolish mistake," said Professor Wright, with a quick glance at his assistant, Professor Blair. "We are here on a scientific mission, as perhaps Professor Blair told you, and a few of the deluded men I engaged to help me make some excavations imagine I am after gold. That is far from the truth, for——"

"It is far more valuable than gold!" exclaimed Professor Blair.

"Eh—well, yes, in a way," said the chief, as Bud caught a look of warning flashed at the man who had ridden for help. "But that is neither here nor there," went on Professor Wright. "The point of the matter is that I had to discharge the leader of my uneducated helpers because he persisted in trying to find out what we were after. He took some of the men with him, necessitating the hiring of others. Then the climax came this afternoon, when, unexpectedly, we were attacked. In my wanderings I had seen your ranch buildings, and I ventured to hope you would send us help when I dispatched my assistant to you."

"Wa'al, we did what we could," said Slim. "Of course you know your own business best, but I wouldn't take any chances with Greasers. They may come back, if you have any valuables here."

"We have," said Professor Wright, with a glance at the tent, the flaps of which he had tightly closed. "But I do not fancy they will again attack us soon. We wounded some of them before you came, and we shall now be on our guard. If I can have the antiseptics for those two men, I shall be grateful."

"I'll send 'em over later," promised Slim, and then he called to the cowboys: "Don't 'pear to be much further need of us, boys. Let's mosey back!"

And while the cavalcade was on the trail leading to Diamond X ranch, Bud's cousins had a chance to tell him how it was they had come West so unexpectedly.

They had long been promised by their parents that they might spend a summer in the great open, but, for one reason or another, the visit had been postponed from time to time.

But about a week back Mr. Shannon found that his business called him to South America. He decided to take his wife with him, and this would break up their home for the time being.

"So he decided to let us hit the train for here," explained Nort, whose name, as you may have guessed, was Norton. "We didn't take time to write—just packed up and came on," he added.

"We did telegraph," said Dick. "But we knew we could find you, whether you met us or not, Bud."

"I never got your message, and I don't believe dad did, either," remarked the young rancher. "But he may have for all that. He's been terrible busy lately, arranging for a big shipment of steers, and our telephone has been out of order, so maybe they tried to 'phone the message to us and could not raise us, and it got laid aside. But I'm sure glad you're here now."

"So are we!" exclaimed Dick.

"Do you mean to say you have a telephone?" asked Nort, with something of disappointment in his voice.

"Of course!" laughed Bud. "This is a big ranch, and we couldn't get along without a 'phone. We're hooked up with other ranches, and we have a private line of our own from one ranch to the other. We're on the long distance, too. Oh, we couldn't manage without the wire."

"It doesn't seem like the wild west, if you have a *'phone*," complained Nort.

"Oh, you will find it wild enough!" declared Bud. "Didn't you get your fill on Tartar, and haven't you seen a real man-fight first crack out of the box?"

"Yes, I had all I wanted on Tartar," confessed Nort with a smile. "I hope your dad won't think I was too fresh, getting on one of his horses without having permission," he said.

"Tartar was the one who was fresh," laughed Bud. "But the boys shouldn't have allowed you on him."

"That was my fault," confessed impulsive Nort. "As I told you, Dick and I arrived at the station without being expected by you, as it now turns out. We scouted around, and found one of your wagon outfits there, and of course the driver was decent enough to bring us in.

"I saw that corral full of ponies first shot, and as I can ride—a little——" he quickly qualified his statement, "I just hopped aboard the liveliest pinto in the pack."

"You sure did pick a lively one!" chuckled Bud. "I don't see how you stayed on as long as you did. Tartar is next door to an outlaw. He's a buckner and a roller, and they do say he killed a man once. I don't see why dad keeps him. There aren't two men around here who can ride him."

"Well, I'm not going to qualify," declared Nort. "But, as I said, when Dick and I arrived we didn't stop to do any thinking. We hit the corral, and though some of the men did warn me, I was foolish enough to try and stick on that wild colt. You came along just in time."

"Yes, there might have been trouble," agreed Bud. "You'll have all the riding you want if you stick around here. We don't know what walking means on Diamond X, though dad does talk of getting a flivver. I wish he would."

"There's lots of level country around here," observed Dick.

"Plenty, and the other kind too," added Bud nodding toward the hills at their backs. "Well, we sure will have good times."

"We want work, too," declared Nort. "We want to learn to be ranchers."

"You'll have that chance, too," declared his western cousin. "But now let's lope along a little faster. If we don't get to the table the same time as the boys there won't be a smell left. Supper's going to be late to-night."

For a time the pace forbade conversation. The only sounds were the beating of hoofs on the ground, the clatter of buckles and the squeak of damp leather. Then the cowboys, and the young ranchers,

trotted down the slope that led to the corral, and Nort and Dick had a glimpse, in the doorway of the ranch house, of their aunt.

A quick survey of the party told Mrs. Merkel that there had been no casualties, and, with a satisfied sigh, she went back in the house, and began to put the supper on the table, with the assistance of Nell and two women workers.

"The boys'll eat us out of house and home to-night," she remarked to Nell.

"It's lucky we have plenty," commented Bud's pretty sister.

And plenty there was, as Dick and Nort amply testified to a little later, as they drew chairs to a long table at which they sat with the ranch hands, who had made hasty toilets after their fast ride.

For a time there was heard only the rattle of table utensils, but, with the sharp edge of appetites dulled, talk and joking retort ran about the board. Bud took his part, but the two easterners were silent, preferring to listen and learn. And they picked up many a gem of slang from the repartee that flashed forth.

"Any of you boys ever see that outfit before?" asked Bud's mother, when an account of the professor's camp had been given.

No one had, but "Snake" Purdee, so called because of his deadly fear of rattlers that were occasionally met with, remarked, after disposing of a mouthful of biscuit:

"Some of the Double Z boys was tellin' me of a locoed tenderfoot who was grubbin' for diamonds, or suthin' like that, an' I reckon this is him."

"Shouldn't wonder," commented Mrs. Merkel. "You say you're going to send over some liniment?" she asked the foreman.

"I was aimin' to do it," he answered. "That is if you——"

"Oh, of course!" interrupted Mrs. Merkel. "One of the boys can ride over this evening. I don't want anybody to suffer when I can help."

Nort nudged Bud under the table.

"Can't we go, too?" asked the city lad.

Bud hesitated a moment and then answered:

"Why, yes, I reckon so." To his mother he said: "I'll ride over, too, with Nort and Dick."

"Will it be safe?" asked Mrs. Merkel, with a quick look at the foreman.
"I wish Mr. Merkel would come."

"Oh, it'll be *safe* enough," the foreman answered. "Those Greasers won't come back, especially after dark. They'll lay low. I'll send Babe over with the boys."

"Oh, joy!" murmured Nort, and the eyes of Dick sparkled. This was living life as they had dreamed it—a night ride to a camp that had been attacked by savage men!

"Get on some other clothes," suggested Bud to his cousins, as they left the table. "You'll spoil those in no time, on a horse."

"All right," agreed Dick, and soon he and his brother had made the change. If not exactly attired as were the cowboys, their outfits were sufficiently practical for the time being.

"Can't we have guns?" asked Nort, while some of the ranch hands were saddling ponies for the little party that was to take the antiseptics to the wounded men.

"Know how to shoot?" asked Babe, who felt his responsibility at taking two tenderfeet on the trail at night.

"A little," admitted Nort, and Dick nodded in agreement.

"Wa'al, I don't reckon you'll have any use for 'em," said the assistant foreman, "but it's just as well to pack 'em. I'll get you a couple guns," and he started toward the bunk house while Bud and his cousins mounted their ponies and prepared to take the trail.

"They'll do," Babe said to Bud in a low voice, after passing to Dick and Nort the guns. "Lots to learn, but they've got the grit, and they ain't too much set up. They'll do."

Then they hit the trail.

CHAPTER VI

THE RUSTLERS

Diamond X ranch was one of the largest in that part of the country. Mr. Merkel's holdings were in one of our western states, not far from the Mexican border, which fact was not altogether pleasing to him. It made it too easy for cattle thieves to operate, and more than once Diamond X had suffered from depredations of the "rustlers," as they were called, doubtless from the fact that they "rustled" or "hustled" cattle that were not their own, off lawful ranges.

But it was all part of the day's work, and Mr. Merkel's ranches were too valuable to be disposed of easily, even though their proximity to Mexico, the home of lawless "Greasers" and half breeds, was too close for ease of mind.

Diamond X, like many other western ranches, took its name from the brand used to mark the cattle that fed on its succulent grass and drank its abundant water. The brand was a diamond with the letter X in the centre, a mark easily recognized, even at a distance. Other marks were used on other and adjoining ranches, Mr. Merkel owning two others, one of which went by the name Square M, from the fact that the distinguishing brand was a square with the letter M inside. The other's mark was a triangle with a B in it, that ranch being known among the cowboys as the Triangle B.

Double Z was a ranch adjoining that of the Diamond X on the north, Hank Fisher being the proprietor, while to the west was the Circle T ranch, its cattle being marked with a large circle, in which the letter T appeared, it being owned by Thomas Ogden, a friend of Mr. Merkel.

"Gosh! But your father has a lot of cows!" exclaimed Nort, as he and his brother rode along through the early evening, beside Bud. "Must be a million of 'em," added the city youth as, from a rise, he caught a glimpse of many herds, some restrained from wandering by fenced ranges, and others being slowly driven along by cowboys, who waved to Babe, Bud, and the city lads.

"Not quite a million!" laughed Bud. "And we don't call 'em *cows*, though some of 'em are, of course. They're cattle, or steers. Mother keeps a cow or two for the sake of the milk, and of course our men are called cowboys, or punchers, and this is cow country. But we don't speak of 'em as herds of cows."

"Glad you told me," murmured Nort. "I'm going to be a ranchman some day, and I want to learn all I can."

"Same here!" commented his brother.

It was a wondrously beautiful night, calm and clear, with the stars shining overhead more brightly than Nort and Dick had ever before seen them. It is the clearness of the atmosphere in the West that renders objects so plain at a distance, that brings out the beauty of the stars and which also enables such wonderful moving pictures to be made. In the East the day is rare when there is not some haze. It is just the reverse in the West.

Through the silent night rode the boy ranchers, for Nort and Dick were beginning to think of themselves in that class. The cousins rode together, with Babe in the rear, lugging the bottles of antiseptics that were destined for the injured men.

"What are those cowboys riding around the cattle for?" asked Nort, as they turned aside from a large herd restlessly moving amid a constant dull rumble.

"They're driving 'em over to the railroad, to be shipped," explained Bud. "That's what dad raises cattle for—ships 'em away for beef. This bunch has been fattened up on a range we keep specially for that. This is a good time to sell now, prices are high, so we're disposing of as many as we can."

"The cowboys will drive 'em to the railroad, taking their time, so as not to run all the fat off the steers. The heavier they are the more money we get for 'em. I guess they won't go much farther tonight, though," he added, with a look back at the herd they had passed. "This is the first day they've been driven, and we always go a bit slow at first."

"Say, but it's great! Wonderful!" exclaimed Nort, half rising in his stirrups and breathing deep of the pure, keen air, for it was now chilly.

"You said an earful!" commented his brother. "I wouldn't have missed this for anything!"

"Glad you like it," murmured Bud.

"What's that—a wolf? A prairie wolf?" asked Nort, suddenly as a sort of whine broke the silence of the night, punctuated otherwise only by the soft footfalls of the horses.

"Wolf? No!" chuckled Bud. "Don't let Babe hear you say that. It's him—singing! Lots of the men do it."

As Bud's whisper died away, the assistant foreman let his voice soar from a whine into a more or less of a roar, as he intoned:

"Oh, sing to me not of the joys of a city
Where innocent cowboys are left in a trance.
Give me a hoss, an' some room to do ridin',
When I am daid bring me back to the ranch!"

"Does he get that way often?" asked Dick in a whisper, as the cowboy began on the second verse of what promised to be a lengthy song.

"More or less!" answered Bud. "The cowboys sing a lot, and some haven't half bad voices. The songs, too, are corkers, some of 'em. They sing 'cause it's lonesome ridin' line, and then, too, it seems to sort of soothe the cattle. Dad has told us, lots of times, where a stampede has been stopped just by the bunch singing songs."

"Good idea," commented Nort. "Oh, but this is the life for me!" he chanted.

"Only this ride isn't lasting long enough," said Dick. "That's the camp, down in there; isn't it?" he asked his cousin, pointing ahead toward where, in the light of the newly risen moon, could be observed some white objects.

"Those are the professors' tents," declared Bud. "We got here sooner than I expected. Talking to you chaps made the time pass quickly."

"What do you think of those fellows, anyhow?" asked Nort, in a low voice of his cousin. It was evident he referred to the two scientists who had been attacked that afternoon.

"I don't know what to think," admitted Bud, frankly. "I never heard of anything in this part of the country, more valuable than gold, that was worth prospecting after. There hasn't even any gold been found, as far as I know, though there were rumors that once a prospector made a lucky strike about ten miles from here. But these men do seem to have something they're afraid will be taken from them."

"Well, it needn't worry us," commented Dick. "We're going to be cow punchers—not miners."

"You said it!" declared Nort.

By this time they were within the range of several fires gleaming in the midst of the camp of the scientists, and a moment later Professor Blair emerged from the tent that had been so jealously guarded during the day.

"Oh, it's you; is it?" he asked as he recognized the boys and Babe.
"It is very kind of you, to take this trouble."

"Sall right," remarked the assistant foreman, as he handed over the bottles of medicine. "Tell th' boss to use it just as it is—don't need any dilutin' with water."

"Oh, you mean Professor Wright," said the other, so translating the cowboy's use of the word "boss."

"Yep," answered Babe. "Tell the boss to use it straight."

"Well, he isn't here just now," said the other. "The men who were shot seem to be doing well, however. I'll attend to them myself. Thank you again."

His voice was cultured and his manner pleasant. But it was evident that he invited no confidences.

Little could be made out, even in the moonlight and the gleam of the fire, save the usual scattered camp outfits, and the white tents.

The boy ranchers and Babe had done what they set out to do—deliver the medicine, and no incident had marked their trip, unless the singing of the assistant foreman can be called such.

"Some of us'll ride over to-morrow," promised Babe, as he and the boys turned to take the trail back to the ranch.

"Thank you, but we may not be here," remarked Professor Blair. "We may move on. But thank you, just the same."

"Don't mention it," begged Babe, slightly sarcastic of the other's cultured accent and words. "We aim to please, an' be neighborly."

"Of which you have given ample evidence," was the rejoinder.

"Guess that'll hold him for a while," murmured Bud to his cousins.

"Good-nights" were called and the outfit from Diamond X ranch was on its way again. Nort and Dick were eagerly questioning Bud about western matters, learning to their delight that there would be chances to go hunting and fishing after the big round-up, and Babe was beginning on about the forty-seventh verse of his favorite song, when Bud suddenly stopped in the midst of telling some incident, and gazed intently across the rolling range.

"What's the matter?" asked Dick in a whisper, for the silence of the night, and the strangeness of their surroundings, seemed to call for whispers.

"I thought I saw cattle moving," said Bud. "Yes, I do!" he went on, quickly. "Look, Babe!"

Babe broke off his song at a point where a dying cowboy was begging to be "toted back to the chuck house," and looked to where the boy rancher pointed.

"That's it, shore as rattlers!" the assistant foreman said. "It's about time they tried suthin' like this! Got your guns, boys?"

"What for?" asked Nort, a thrill of excitement leaping through his veins. "What is there to shoot?"

"Rustlers!" said Bud, grimly. "Somebody—Greasers, likely—are trying to run off some of our fat steers! Come on, we'll ride 'em down!" He clapped spurs to his horse, an example followed by Nort and Dick, but, quick as they were, Babe had shot ahead of them, and in the moonlight the city lads caught the gleam of his gun as he pulled it from the holster.

CHAPTER VII

A CRY IN THE NIGHT

Needless to say that Nort and Dick were thrilled through and through. Having lived in a city nearly all of their lives, though with the usual city lad's dreamings of adventures in the open, of camps, of desperate measures against desperate men, they had never hoped for this.

"Crickity! Think of it!" hoarsely whispered Nort to his brother as they galloped along side by side. "We haven't been here a day yet, and we're run into cattle rustlers!"

"Great!" commented Dick. "Oh, boy!"

"We haven't run into 'em yet, that's the trouble," spoke Bud grimly, as his pony worked in between the two brothers. "But we will in a little while—Babe'll fix 'em."

"Can't we take a hand?" asked Nort eagerly, as his hand sought the weapon at his side.

"We may have to," Bud admitted, "but dad doesn't think I'm old enough, yet, to mix up in a man-sized fight. Maybe he's right, but he always tells me to hold back until I'm needed."

"We can take a hand *then*, can't we?" asked Nort eagerly.

"Sure thing!" exclaimed Bud. "But there may not be any need of a scrap. These rustlers know they're caught now, and they may run for it. They can't get away with the steers, anyhow, without a fight. Of course if they get Babe covered—and us—they'll make their getaway, but he may bluff 'em off."

"What does it all mean, anyhow?" asked Dick, as the assistant foreman spurred off through the night, following the trail of the now running steers. If there were rustlers driving the cattle away the men themselves gave no sign, but remained hidden.

"It means cattle rustlers—that's all," explained Bud, as he led the way for his cousins to follow, since the young representative of the Diamond X ranch knew the trail. "Rustlers are just men who take other folk's cattle, drive 'em off, change the brands and sell 'em wherever they can. Sometimes they get away with it and sometimes they don't!"

"And are they running off your dad's cattle now?" asked Nort.

"Looks that way," admitted Bud, "though I haven't seen any of the men doing it. You know some of our cowboys drove in a bunch of fat steers from one of dad's distant ranches the other day. They're being taken over to the railroad to be shipped. Not the station where you fellows came in, but another, about two days' trip from here. It's a bunch of these cattle that's being hazed away from us, I reckon."

"I didn't know they hazed steers, like they do college Freshmen," ventured Dick.

"Hazing cattle means to sort of work 'em along easy like—drive 'em where you want to go," explained Bud. "We have to do a lot of hazing when we have the round-up—that's when the cattle owners send their cowboys to collect the animals that have been feeding on the open range during the year. Each man separates into a bunch the cattle with his brands, and also the little calves, or the mavericks, and hazes them toward his corrals."

"What's mavericks?" asked Nort. He could not forbear the question, even though considerable excitement seemed just in the offing. He wanted to learn all he could about ranch life.

"A maverick gets its name from an old Texas ranchman named Sam Maverick," answered Bud. "He didn't brand his cattle, and one day, during a stampede, his steers mixed in with a lot more that were branded. He and his men cut them out and hazed over to his range all cattle that weren't branded. Every cow, calf or steer that didn't have a brand on was called one of Maverick's, and so we call, now, any unbranded animal a 'maverick.' Anybody who finds it can brand it and claim it as his, though; in some places all the mavericks are bunched together and divided. But say, I wonder what Babe's doing, anyhow? I haven't heard a shot, and he must be up to that bunch of rustlers now, if that's what they were."

"What else could they be?" asked Nort.

"I don't know," Bud replied. "Anyhow, here's some of the cattle. Look out you don't run into 'em!" he called sharply, as he pulled in his pony.

He spoke just in time to warn Nort and Dick, for, in another instant, they found themselves among the tail-enders of a bunch of cattle that had run from them at first.

No men were in sight—not even Babe—and there was a haze of clouds over the moon now, and a sort of fog close to the ground, that prevented clear vision.

"Are these your cattle?" asked Dick.

"Tell you in a minute," responded the young cattleman. He rode up alongside one of the animals and focused on its rump the gleam from an electric flash light. Bud carried one of these mighty handy pocket articles, which are much more effective than matches for making observations at night. In the bright gleam of the little light the boy ranchers saw, plainly branded in the hide of the animal, a large diamond, with the letter X in the centre.

"Dad's stock—all of 'em, I reckon!" exclaimed Bud, as he flashed his torch on others in the bunch, revealing more of the Diamond X brand.

"But where are the rustlers?" asked Nort, in a tense whisper, and his hand sought the holster where his newly-acquired weapon rested.

"I don't know," began Bud. "They may have ridden off, or it may be that——"

He stopped suddenly and listened. Dick and Nort heard, as did Bud, the rapid approach of a

horseman. In an instant Bud had switched off his pocket electric light, and then in the half hazy light of the partly obscured moon he and his cousins peered forward. Nort and Dick had drawn their guns, an example set them by Bud.

"Don't do any shooting until you hear me," ordered Bud. "There may be no need of it!"

The rider, unseen as yet, was coming nearer and nearer, the thud of his horse's feet pounding hard on the turf. He seemed to be approaching from the direction in which Babe had disappeared.

In another instant the rider was pulling his horse to a quick stop beside Bud's animal, and when a beam of misty moonlight flashed out from beneath a cloud it was seen that the assistant foreman of Diamond X ranch had returned.

"Oh!" exclaimed Nort, and there was almost a note of disappointment in his voice because the rider did not develop into a cattle rustler.

"Did you see any of 'em?" asked Bud eagerly.

"Not a hair," answered Babe Milton, who proved that he could be active enough when occasion called for it, in spite of his size and weight. "But I heard some one riding off down the gully, and if it was any of our boys, or any of the fellows around here, they wouldn't have run. Besides, these steers belong to the bunch Happy Day is hazin' over to the railroad. They didn't get cut out by themselves."

"Not much," agreed Bud, while Nort and Dick listened eagerly.

"So I'm going on a little farther," said Babe. "You fellows stay here, and if I don't get back in an hour—well, you'll know something happened."

"Can't we come?" asked Dick, eagerly.

"You'd better stay here," advised Babe. "Somebody'll have to ride herd on these steers, and I can deal with those rascals better'n you boys—though I may need your help later. Anyhow, Bud, you stay here, and herd 'em in till I get back—if I do."

"And if you don't?" asked Bud. There was a world of meaning in those few words, for cattle rustlers were desperate men.

"If I don't, ride back to the ranch an' tell the boss," spoke Babe simply, as if it was all in the day's work—or night's.

"All right," agreed Bud. He realized that though he was the son of the owner of Diamond X ranch, in this case the word of Babe exceeded even his heritage.

Turning his horse quickly, after a brief examination of his saddle girths, Babe spurred away into the haze of the cloudy moonlight, leaving the boy ranchers to guard the cattle. The animals, after their run, were content to remain quiet now, moving about a bit uneasily, and rumbling as if in protest now and then. They were all full-grown beasts, ready for the market, and valuable.

"S'pose he'll get any of 'em?" whispered Nort.

"Can't say," answered Bud, briefly. "Babe generally does get what he goes after, though." This was significant.

In silence, broken only by the occasional lowing of the cattle, the boy ranchers waited—waited for they knew not what. And then, as suddenly as an explosion, came a cry in the night—and such a cry!

An unearthly noise of long drawn out howling notes, mingled with roars, the crescendo effect ending in a peal of weird yells that were like the cries of a laughing hyena, mingled with the sardonic wails of a baboon.

CHAPTER VIII

"THE PROFESSOR!"

Loud and long drawn out was that weird cry of the night. It sent shivers down the spines of Nort and

Dick, and they both confessed, afterward, that if they had not been wearing the heavy range hats, supplied them by Bud, that their hair would surely have risen and stood up straight.

Then, as suddenly as it had come to them out of the half darkness, the fiendish noise ceased, dying away in what seemed to be sobbing, insane laughter. With a swallow or two, to wet his parched lips and fear-dried throat, Dick asked in a whisper:

"What—what was that?"

Like an echo came his brother's question:

"Was somebody killed?"

Bud's hearty laugh relieved the tension.

"It was only a coyote," said the boy from the ranch.

"A *coyote!*" repeated Nort and Dick in unison.

"Yes; you'll see plenty of 'em, and you must have heard of 'em. Little animals, sort of half wolf, half dog. They hang about for something to eat, and they sure can howl!"

"*Howl!*" exclaimed Nort. "If that's a *howl* I want to know it! Of all the infernal noises——"

"You said it!" exclaimed his brother. "Was that his death cry, Bud? Did Babe shoot one?"

"No, of course not. It isn't as easy to shoot one of the pesky coyotes as you'd think, and it isn't much use. They don't do any particular harm around here. Besides, you didn't hear any shooting; did you?"

Dick was forced to admit that he had not, and he reproved himself for not using his faculties to better advantage. He was beginning to realize that if he was to be a westerner, an outdoor lad and a rancher, he must learn to observe, something that Bud had already acquired in large measure.

"Do they always howl that way?" asked Nort, as he shoved back into his holster the gun he had half drawn again.

"Not always—lots of times it's worse!" chuckled Bud.

"*Worse!*" cried Dick. "I don't see how it could be. What do they do it for?" he asked, as, once again, that strange cry welled forth on the night.

"Oh, just to keep each other company, I reckon," answered Bud. "Same as dogs bark. This may be a lone coyote calling to his mate; or he may be summoning the pack to feed on a dead calf, or something like that. I reckon they always howl pretty free on moonlight nights. We're used to 'em."

"Don't believe I'd get used to that if I lived here a hundred years," commented Dick, as, for the third time, the cry rose and fell, even louder and more horrible than before.

"The cattle don't mind 'em," said Bud. "In fact it seems to sort of soothe 'em. Look, some of the steers are lying down."

This was so. In the clearer moonlight which prevailed for a few moments, the lads from the city saw numbers of the bunch of cattle resting easily on the grass. They were either tired out from the rapid pace at which they had been driven, or had concluded that they were to stay there for the night.

"Come on," suggested Bud, a moment later, as he urged his horse forward. "Hit it up!"

"Where?" asked Dick.

"We'll ride herd for a few minutes, to make sure none of 'em stray off. I can't see just how many there are in this bunch, the light is so uncertain."

Nort and Dick followed their cousin, slowly circling the bunch of cattle on which an attempt had been made to drive off. There were about fifty, as Bud roughly estimated, when he and his cousins had completed the circuit, thus "riding herd," as it is called, to distinguish it from "riding line," when the cowboys move slowly up and down along the line of fences that enclose the more modern ranches.

Diamond X ranch consisted of both sorts. Mr. Merkel owned a number of large expanses of land, completely fenced in, and on these grazed thousands of cattle.

He also took advantage of the open range, letting some of his animals mingle on those vast expanses in common with steers and cows from other ranches. Some of the open range was richer in grass than the fenced-in portions, but there was a certain amount of additional work attached to the use of the open range. It meant round-ups twice a year, and the branding of cattle which were claimed as the property of the different owners.

In places where there were no fences to keep the animals from straying it was often necessary to "ride herd." That is, the cowboys, night and day, rode slowly around the bunch of steers, keeping them from straying or stampeding. At times they were "hazed," or driven to other feeding places, or to water, until such time as they were collected and driven to the railroad to be shipped.

Where stout wire fences held the cattle within bounds the work of the cowboys was easier, but even here "riding line" was necessary, as one could never tell when a break might be made in the fence, or when rustlers might cut the wire, to enable them to drive off a choice herd, or part of it.

So the boy ranchers rode herd, in a fashion, the two city lads gazing off through the half darkness, across the rolling prairies where, for all they knew, Babe might be trailing the rustlers or engaged in a desperate fight with them.

"Though I reckon he didn't come up to 'em," ventured Bud, after a wait of half an hour, during which no sign or sound had come from the assistant foreman.

"Will he come back here?" asked Nort.

"Sure—if he can," answered Bud, significantly.

"How long'll we wait?" asked Dick.

"Can't say—exactly," answered Bud. "But say, I forgot about you fellows," he went on, quickly. "You've traveled all day, and must be tired. It isn't far back to the ranch, and I can start you on the plain trail. I don't mind staying here alone—I've done it before."

"Go back? I guess not!" exclaimed Nort.

"Forget it!" advised Dick. "This is just what we want!"

"Well, if you like it," began Bud, "I s'pose——"

"Like it?" cried the two city lads in unison. "It's just what we came out for," added Nort.

"Well, morning'll come, sooner or later, though I expect Babe'll be back long before then," Bud went on. "Those rustlers have probably given him the slip, and——"

"Hark!" suddenly whispered Nort. "I hear some one coming."

The noise of an approaching horse could be made out. It was approaching slowly, seeming to stumble now and then. There was an uneasy movement among the cattle, and the boys peered eagerly forward, their hands on the butts of their guns in the holsters.

"Is it Babe?" whispered Dick.

"I don't know," answered Bud. "Doesn't ride like him, but——"

A moment later, from out of the shadow cast by the cattle, a solitary horseman rode, almost stumbling along. At first he could not clearly be made out but suddenly the haze cleared from the moon, and with startled eyes the boys recognized the rider.

"The professor!" gasped Bud, and Nort and Dick knew the horseman for the scientist from the mysterious camp they had recently left—Professor Hendryx Wright!

CHAPTER IX

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

Mutual recognition, followed by half suppressed and surprised exclamations, followed the advent of

Professor Wright on the scene. He had been pursuing his way, whether peaceful or otherwise the boy ranchers could not determine, until he unexpectedly stumbled on Bud, Nort and Dick riding herd—said herd being the bunch of Diamond X cattle some one had tried to haze away.

"Oh!" murmured Professor Wright, as the growing illumination, caused by the moon coming out more clearly, revealed him to the boys and them to him. "Were you—er—looking for me?" he asked in his usual cultured tones.

"Not exactly," replied Bud. "We were just over to your camp, to leave the stuff for the men, and you weren't there."

"No, I had to leave," said the professor, smoothly. "I am going back now. I am sorry I missed you."

"You didn't!" Bud said grimly to himself. And then the scientist seemed to realize this for he added:

"I mean I am sorry I was not there to thank you. It was very kind of you to help the men. I'm sorry this trouble occurred."

"Oh, we're always glad to help," spoke Bud. "Out west you never know when you're going to need help yourself, so it's always a good plan to have a balance in your favor."

"Yes, I should say that was so," spoke the professor thoughtfully. "You found everything all right, at my camp?" he asked, rather than stated.

"All right—yes," answered Bud. "We left the stuff with Professor Blair. He said you were out."

"Yes, I had to make a little trip. But aren't you off your road?" he asked the boys. "I mean doesn't your ranch lie over there?" and he pointed in the proper direction.

"It does," assented Bud. "But we've got to look out for these cattle."

"Oh, I see. You are 'riding herd,' as I believe it is called."

"In a way—yes," spoke Bud and then he went on boldly: "Some rustlers tried to haze this bunch over the river, but we caught 'em!"

"Caught them?" repeated the professor quickly.

"Well, our assistant foreman is after 'em now," Bud explained. "We're waiting here for him to come back. We thought you were Babe as you came along, but as soon as I heard your horse I knew it couldn't be him. He doesn't ride—er—just that way."

"I realize that I shall never become a horseman," said the professor dryly, and with a little half smile, visible in the moonlight. "But I can ride enough for my purpose."

Bud, as well as Nort and Dick, found themselves wondering just what the professor's "purpose" was. However he did not seem inclined to disclose it, for he pulled up his horse, which was idly cropping the grass, and said:

"Well, I must be going. Thank you, again, for your kindness. I hope we may meet again. Good-night!"

He urged his animal onward, and a moment later was lost in the darkness, as a thicker cloud than any that had yet obscured it, covered the moon.

For several seconds the three boy ranchers remained, looking off in the gloom which had swallowed up the mysterious scientist. For that he was mysterious none of the lads could deny.

"Wonder where he had been?" mused Bud in a low voice, for in that silent, dark open place voices carried almost as clearly as across water, and he was cautious.

"Search me!" declared Nort.

"Guess he didn't expect to see us," added Dick.

"Say!" suddenly exclaimed Nort, urging his horse against Bud's in his eagerness and excitement, "maybe he was one of the cattle rustlers, Bud! He circled around and rode back after he found he couldn't get away with the steers, and that Babe was on his trail. That's what it is!"

"No," spoke Bud, quietly. "There's something queer about that man—Professor Wright as he calls himself—but he isn't the kind that rustles cattle. Cattle thieves don't make a permanent camp. They're

wanderers—mostly Greasers, Indians and half breeds, with a bad white man mixing in—and they don't stay long in one place."

"Don't you think he had anything to do with trying to drive off your cattle?" asked Nort.

"Well, you can't be altogether sure of anything in this world," half drawled Bud, "but it doesn't seem reasonable."

"But he came from the direction to where those men ran that were driving away the cattle," said Dick. "Wonder if he met Babe?"

"You can ask him," said Bud. "Here comes Babe now."

The two other lads were not aware of the approach of the assistant foreman of Diamond X, but Bud's quick ears had caught the faint sound of the horse's feet approaching, and in another moment Babe rode up from a little clump of greasewood shrubs, which growth, to the eastern lads, had resembled sumac at first.

"Find 'em, Babe?" asked Bud in a low voice.

"Nope! They razzled off 'fore I could get up to 'em. All right here?" he asked, though a look convinced him there had been no serious trouble, at least.

"All serene," answered Bud. "Did you meet the professor?" he inquired.

"The professor?" Babe's tone of voice, indicating surprise, was answer enough. But Bud went into particulars, telling how the scientist had ridden up on them a little while before.

"No, he didn't come nigh me!" declared Babe. "Mighty funny, too," he went on.

"Could he be one of the rustlers?" asked Nort, eagerly.

"Oh, he *could*, I reckon," admitted Babe. "But it doesn't seem reasonable. Guess he wouldn't head back this way if he'd tried to run off some Diamond X stock. I'd like to know where those fellows slipped to," he said, musingly.

"Well, they didn't get anything, anyhow," declared Nort.

"Not much, that's a fact, son," drawled Babe, as he eased himself down off his pony, for he wanted to stretch his legs. "Course I don't know how many there ought to be in this bunch," and he looked over the small herd that had now settled quietly for the night. "But they didn't get away with much. You fellows might as well ride on back, and send out some of the boys," he added. "Your ma'll be wondering about you, Bud."

"Yes, I reckon she will, 'specially as I have some tenderfeet with me," and he laughed good-naturedly.

"Don't go back on our account!" exclaimed Nort. "We can camp out here all right."

"It'll be pretty dry camping," chuckled Babe, "an' there's no need of it. Slim will be wanting to know how we made out, and he may get a report on the rustlers, not knowing that we headed 'em off. So it's just as well for you lads to go back. You can send out some of the night men, and I'll follow you as soon as I'm relieved," he added.

This seemed the best plan and back toward the ranch headquarters rode Bud, Dick and Nort, leaving Babe in charge of the small herd, a task easy to fulfill now, as the animals were quiet.

The weird howls of the coyotes followed the lads almost to the ranch houses, and the advent of the three, with the story they told, created no little excitement. Cattle rustling was not common enough to be a regular part of the day's work.

"Zing zowie!" exclaimed Slim Degnan as he heard the particulars. "You fellows landed feet first right into some doin's!" he added, looking at Nort and Dick.

"We sure did!" exclaimed the city lads, much pleased in spite of being weary.

A little later, while Bud and his cousins were eating what might be called a midnight lunch that Mrs. Merkel set out for them in the cozy living-room of the ranch house, two cowboys rode off to relieve Babe.

"And now it's time for you tenderfeet to turn in," said Mrs. Merkel to Nort and Dick. "I told your mother I'd look after you as I would Bud, if she'd let you come out, and, now you're here, I'm going to

keep my word. Turn in, all three of you!"

And, for once in their lives, the boys were glad to go to bed without arguing, for the tenderfeet, at least, were dog tired.

No further trace of the cattle rustlers was discovered, if indeed there had been any. All the evidence there was lay in the sight Bud and the others had caught of a stray bunch of steers being hazed over toward the river, across which lay open range. The cowboys who relieved Babe reported nothing out of the ordinary as having happened during their night vigil.

Mr. Merkel came home that day, the second of the eastern boys' stay at Diamond X ranch, and the cattleman warmly welcomed his nephews.

"We'll fit you out to be regular ranchers!" he declared, and in less than a week Nort and Dick felt that they were, indeed, on their way to this enviable goal.

They were provided with sheepskin chaps, such as Bud and the other cowboys wore—chaps being in the nature of overalls, and affording much needed protection to the legs when riding amid a bunch of milling steers.

The eastern lads were given complete outfits, from the rather awkward high-heeled boots to the broad-brimmed range hats, and they wore their handkerchiefs, or "neckerchiefs," most proudly.

These neckerchiefs were more than ornaments. In the choking dust, often strongly alkali, the squares, pulled up over nose and mouth, gave needed relief and protection.

"Suppose we ride over and see if there's been any more trouble at the professor's camp?" suggested Nort to Bud one day.

"Good idea!" declared Dick.

"All right, if you want to," assented Bud. "Dad was sort of mentioning that he'd like to hear how the shot men were getting on. We can make it easy before supper."

Together the boy ranchers trotted over the gently rolling land toward the foothills, in the midst of which the camp lay. As they drew near Bud scanned the horizon for a sign of smoke, such as he and Slim had observed once before. But there was no trace.

"Shouldn't wonder but what they'd vamoosed," he said.

"Lit out, you mean?" asked Nort.

"Yeppie! There doesn't seem to be any signs of life."

And as they rode into the site of the camp the reason for this became plain. The camp was deserted. The tents were down, and all that remained were emptied tin cans, broken boxes and the cold ashes of the fires. But over on the side of the hill, where there was an outcropping of red sandstone, curious marks showed. They were the marks of digging and excavating on rather a large scale, and as Bud caught sight of these mute evidences of operations he uttered a low whistle of surprise.

"What does it mean?" asked Nort.

CHAPTER X

DEL PINZO

Characteristic it was of Bud Merkel not to answer at once the sharp and excited question of his cousin. Living all his life in the West, as he had done, and most of it having been spent on his father's ranches, Bud had unconsciously acquired the valuable habit of observation—and quiet observation at that. He wanted to look about and notice the "sign" before he gave his opinion. In this he was like the Indians, whence, doubtless, our own plainsmen developed the habit of looking twice before they spoke once.

I don't mean to say that Bud was not a regular fellow, or that he was not at times almost as impulsive

as Nort. He was like the majority of boys, but on this occasion, when it appeared that something unusual was afoot, Bud held back his opinion for a moment.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Nort again, as eagerly as before. "Doesn't this look like they'd been digging for gold?"

"I should say it did!" cried Dick, no less eager, now, than his brother. "Those professors saying they weren't after the yellow boys was all bunk and bluff! They did it to throw us off the track, so we wouldn't try to have a hand in it. They've been mining here, Bud, as sure as guns!"

Bud slowly shook his head.

"Why not?" asked Nort, seeing his cousin's denial of the theory that fitted in so well with his own ideas.

"Well, they don't mine this way—that is, I've never seen any done in this fashion, and I've been in several mining localities," spoke Bud. "This looks more like they'd been prospecting for water, digging here, there and everywhere. But there wasn't any need of that, for here's a good spring of water, and the river isn't so far away. This is a good watered country, and that's what makes it so valuable for cattle—you've got to have grass and water and we've got that on Diamond X."

"But what do you s'pose this all means?" asked Nort again, as he slipped from his saddle, and, by pulling the reins forward, over his pony's head, thus gave that animal the universal sign of the plains that it was not to wander.

"I don't know," Bud was frank to say, as he shook his head. "They sure have been tearing up the ground," he added, as he noticed on the side hill, where there was an outcropping of red sandstone, that many excavations had been made.

"If it isn't gold maybe it's silver," suggested Dick, willing to accept a theory of less valuable metal. "Or diamonds!" and his eyes gleamed as he overmatched his brother's guess.

"Nothing doin'!" laughed Bud. "Of course there are silver mines not far from here, down Mexico way, and diamonds have been found in the United States, but not around this locality."

"Well, what's your theory?" asked Nort of the more experienced boy rancher. "Here we've been gassing along, saying what we thought, and we don't know any of the ins and outs of the matter. You're right on the ground, and you've lived here all your life, so you ought to have some idea of what it all means."

"But I don't!" exclaimed Bud. "Wish I did," he added, as he joined his cousins on foot, walking about the debris of the camp, while the ponies sniffed, here and there, sometimes finding a choice morsel which they daintily lipped before eating.

"You'd say they were hunting for something, wouldn't you?" asked Nort.

"Yes, I'd go that far," admitted Bud.

"And they didn't find it," put in Dick.

"What makes you think so?" asked the young rancher quickly.

"Well, there isn't any hole, or any excavation, where they could have taken out a treasure chest, or bags of hidden gold; not to say mined gold," went on Dick. "In all the stories of recovered treasure I ever read, they always left a hole where they took out the stuff. There isn't any hole like that here, though there's enough to show that plenty of digging went on."

"I don't believe they've been after any gold, or anything like that," declared Bud. "That professor man said so, but——"

"But was he telling the truth?" asked Nort. "That's what we got to figure on."

"I s'pose," agreed Bud. "And from what I know of the country and sizing up this outfit, I'd say he was—they aren't after gold."

"What then?" asked Dick. "A man—two men like Professor Blair and Professor Wright don't hire an outfit such as they had, and prospect for nothing!"

"You are right," quietly agreed Bud. "They're after something, but I reckon it's something we don't know anything about."

"Maybe they were trying to run off some of your cattle, or some steers from the Circle T," suggested Nort. "Cattle rustlers; eh, Bud?"

"If they're cattle rustlers they're a new kind," said the ranch boy. "But of course it's possible. It may be they've gone into cattle rustling on a new scale, to throw everybody off the track, and finding out we were on to their curves, or maybe on account of having a fight among themselves, they couldn't turn the trick."

"That's right!" exclaimed Nort, in his impulsive way. "Maybe instead of being attacked by Greasers and Indians, who thought they could get some gold, the professor's bunch had a fight among themselves, and that's how those two men got hurt."

"It's possible," admitted Bud. "But, as Zip Foster would say, I don't believe that's the right of it either."

"Would Zip Foster know what all this meant?" asked Dick, waving his hand toward the deserted camp.

"Maybe," murmured Bud, turning quickly aside. "But there's no use staying here any longer. We can't learn anything here. Might as well get back to the ranch. If you fellows are ever going to learn to throw a rope, you've got to do some practicing."

"What's the matter with doing it here?" asked Dick. "We've got ropes with us."

To each saddle was looped the cowboy's most dependable friend aside from his horse and his gun—the ever-present lariat. Bud was an accomplished swinger of the rope, and Dick and Nort had been practicing hard since coming to Diamond X.

"Yes, we can try a few throws here," said Bud, as he walked toward his horse. "I'll sit up here and watch you two," he went on, as he leaped to his saddle, and pulled up his pony which had, as was usual, started off the moment he felt a weight on his back. "I can see you better up here," Bud went on. "Try it standing first. Tackle some of those stumps, and for cat's sake remember to keep your palms up when you shoot the rope out. You'll never be accurate until you do."

The brothers tried, one after the other, and Bud encouraged them by saying that they were improving.

"Now you show us," begged Nort, when his arm began to ache, for throwing a long coiled rope is no easy task.

"All right," agreed Bud. "But I'll try it from the saddle. It comes more natural to me that way, and nine times out of ten you do all your roping from the saddle. Of course this isn't regular, for you don't generally rope standing objects," he went on. "Sock isn't used to that, and he expects a pull on the rope after I fling it. But I'll try for that stump you fellows have been mistreating," and Bud laughed.

He rode Sock, his pinto pony, off a little way, coiling his rope in readiness as he did so. Then, wheeling quickly, and with a wild, inspiring "Yip-yippi!" the young rancher came riding fast toward a low, broad stump the two other lads had, more or less successfully, been trying to rope.

His right hand shot out, palm up, his cousins noticed, and the rope went twisting and turning through the air, lengthening out like a long, thin snake, and almost hissing like one. Instinctively, as though roping a steer, Bud prepared himself for the pull that always followed.

Sock, the intelligent pony, braced his feet to hold back as soon as he sensed that Bud had thrown the rope. For Sock had been taught that he must always do this when a steer was being roped, and though he could distinguish between a stump and an animal, Bud's action seemed to call for co-operation on Sock's part.

The coils of the lariat whirled through the air, and, just as they were about to settle over the stump, there was a sudden movement in a leaf-filled hole beside the remains of what had once been a big tree.

Up out of this burrow, or hole, where he had been lying asleep among dried leaves and grass that concealed him from the boys, rose a human figure. He was so close to the stump and he rose up in such a manner leaning slightly over, as if dazed from too sudden awakening from a sound slumber, that he received the noose of Bud's rope fairly about his shoulders!

So suddenly did the man appear, popping out of the hole beside the stump like a Jack in the Box, that Sock was startled, and pranced back, exactly as he would have done in order to drag a refractory steer off its feet. And this was just what took place with the man.

The noose tightened about his middle and he was dragged over the flat top of the stump, yelling and shouting in protest.

Nort and Dick did not know what to think—whether it was an accident, or a bit of play arranged for their benefit by their cousin. But a look at Bud's face was enough to convince them that he was as much surprised as were they.

There was a series of shrill yells of protest from the roped man—shrill language which Nort and Dick recognized as Mexican-Spanish, and then, as Bud stopped his pony, and the rope loosened, the man stood up. He scowled at the boys—a menacing figure of a Greaser, dirty and unkempt.

"Del Pinzo!" gasped Bud, as he recognized the fellow. "Del Pinzo! I didn't know you were near that stump!"

The man's answer was a deeper scowl, and his hand went toward the holster at his hip—a holster that Nort and Dick noted with relief was empty. For Del Pinzo's gun had fallen out as he was dragged by Bud's lasso from the hole beside the stump where he had been hiding.

CHAPTER XI

BAD BUSINESS

"My mistake, Del Pinzo! My mistake!" exclaimed Bud, smiling as good-naturedly as possible under the circumstances. The young rancher leaped from Sock (so called because he had one white foot that looked exactly as if he had on a sock) and approached the Mexican, who had begun to loosen the lariat from around his body.

"I sure didn't know you were there, Del Pinzo," went on Bud, soothingly. "I was just showing these tenderfeet how to throw a rope, *pronto*,—when up you sprout, and get the benefit of it. Hope I didn't ruffle you any?" asked Bud.

"Hum! Too much *pronto*!" muttered the man, but his face lost some of its scowl as he realized it had been an accident.

"What's *pronto*?" whispered Dick to Nort, noting that his brother had half drawn his gun, though there was no need of this action.

"Means quick," translated Bud, who overheard the question. "I was a little too quick with my rope. But I didn't know anybody was behind that stump."

"Nor I," said Dick, while Bud began gathering in the length of his lariat.

"I—sleep!" said the Mexican; with some of the gutturalness of the Indian. "No got a right to sleep?" he asked, half sarcastically, as he recovered his gun from where it had slipped from its holster.

"Sure you got a right to sleep," admitted Bud cheerfully. "This isn't Diamond X land, nor yet Double Z," he added, with a quick glance around. "Not that you wouldn't have a right to take a snooze if it *was* Diamond X," Bud went on. "Well, I reckon we'll mosey along," he said slowly, making a sign to Dick and Nort to mount their ponies. "Got to get back to the ranch."

"Um!" was all the remark Del Pinzo made as he brushed himself off. Bather a useless proceeding it would appear, for he was always dirty and unkempt to the last degree.

"Who is he?" asked Dick of Bud as the three boy ranchers rode along the homeward trail, now out of earshot of the man Bud had so unceremoniously roped.

"Oh, he's a sort of Mexican half breed," was the answer. "Not very safe to have on the range during round-up."

"Why not?" asked Nort, as he turned to catch a last glimpse of the Mexican slinking off amid the foothills.

"Well, he and his kind don't stop to look at the brand on a steer if they happen to feel hungry," explained Bud. "They'll cut one out of the herd, or appropriate a maverick, or an unbranded calf, and

feast up on it. They'll skin it, salt down the hide after they blur the brand, and get away with it."

"What's blurring a brand?" asked Dick.

"Putting a hot iron on it over the brand that's already there," explained Bud. "Some brands can be changed from one to another without much trouble, but when this can't be done a cattle thief will simply make a botch of the brand, and it's a pretty slick ranchman who will swear, out of hundreds of steers and calves, that any particular one is his, if he can't make out the brand or earmarks clearly."

"Earmarks?" questioned Nort.

"Sometimes we clip a piece out of a calf's ear," explained Bud, "as well as branding 'em. Each ranchman has his own particular earmark for his cattle. But either may be botched or blurred by a thief if he's cute enough."

"And does this Del Pinzo do that?" asked Nort, a little thrilled at having been in such close association with a cattle thief.

"I wouldn't put it past him, and the gang he hangs out with," Bud answered. "Maybe that's what he was up to when I roped him."

"Where does he hang out?" asked Dick.

"He's supposed to work on the Double Z ranch—Hank Fisher's place," was the reply. "And Hank doesn't bear any too good a reputation around here."

"Maybe he was one of the men the professors hired, and who afterward turned against them," suggested Dick.

"Maybe," assented Bud. "I'd like to know what that camp meant," he murmured as he rode on with his cousins.

"If they aren't after gold, they're after something, and they're making a secret of it," declared Nort. "And meeting Professor Wright the night an attempt was made to steal some of your cattle, Bud, makes it look as if the whole outfit might be trying to rustle off stock."

"Yes, it might, and again it might not," said the western lad. "I'd hate to think two decent-looking men, like Professor Blair and Professor Wright, would be cattle thieves. But you never can tell. Their learned appearance may be all bluff. I'd sooner think it was Del Pinzo and his gang. But he may be working with the professors. Anyhow, they haven't got away with anything yet, and they won't if dad's boys keep their eyes open. Only I would like to solve the mystery of that camp," and he looked back toward the deserted one, where some strange excavations had been made.

"Maybe we can trail 'em and find where they've gone," suggested Dick.

"Oh, we could find 'em if we wanted to," said Bud. "An outfit like that can't travel along in a ranch country and not leave a trail like an old buffalo wallow. But will it be worth while—that's the question? We'll soon be busy with the round-up at Diamond X, and no time for trailing mysteries."

"Well, the round-up won't last forever," said Nort, "and when it's over we can see what all this means. It'll be a pack of fun!"

"It sure will!" agreed his brother, "and we can stay here till snow flies."

"And then you'll want to hit the trail for home," laughed Bud. "Though we don't get as severe storms as they do farther north, nor do they come so early. But it's bad enough, sometimes."

"What's that?" suddenly asked Dick, rising in his stirrups and pointing to two or three figures of horsemen, down in a little swale, or valley. They were evidently engaged in some lively occupation, for they were riding rapidly to and fro, and from a fire, about which knelt three figures, a curl of smoke arose.

"They're stealing some of your cattle now!" cried Nort. "Come on! We'll capture 'em!"

He spurred his horse forward, an act instinctively followed by his brother. Bud, too, rode after them at a fast pace, but there was a smile on his countenance.

"Keep your shirts on, fellows!" he advised. "That's only some of the Diamond X outfit branding stray calves they come across. But it'll give you a chance to see how it's done."

Riding rapidly across the open plains, where, here and there as they topped little hills the boys could see cattle grazing, the boy ranchers approached the group in the swale. After a quick inspection of the oncomers, the cowboys about the fire went on with what they were doing.

Two of them held down on the ground a struggling calf, while the cow-mother of the little beast, lowing and shaking her head, endeavored to break past two other cowboys who were heading her away from the scene of the branding operations.

For that is what was going on. Some of the Diamond X cowboys had come upon an unbranded calf with its mother as they rode across the prairies. As they were on their employer's land they knew the unmarked animal must belong to him, and it ought to be at once permanently identified as Mr. Merkel's property.

It was the work of but a moment for one of the cowboys to lasso the little bawling creature, and drag it to where he wanted it.

While some of the cowboys held the calf, not taking the time to "hog tie" the creature, others headed off the frantic cow-mother. Then a fire was made of greasewood twigs, and the branding iron, which one of the cowboys carried at his saddle, was put in the flames to heat. When hot enough it was pressed on the flank of the calf, burning into the hair and slightly into the hide, the diamond with the X in the centre—the mark of Bud's father's cattle.

As the men released the calf, it staggered to its feet, uttered a feeble bawl or two, and ran to its mother, who at once began to lick with her tongue the branded place.

"Where you headin', Bud?" asked Yellin' Kid Watson, one of the cowboys who had been engaged in the impromptu branding operations.

"Headin' home," answered the rancher's son.

"Then you haven't heard the news?" asked Snake Purdee.

"What news?" asked Bud, while Nort and Dick listened eagerly.

"Bad business," went on Yellin' Kid. "A lot of your dad's choice stock was run off from the far range a while ago. Tar Blake just rode in and give notice. Bad business!"

"I should say so!" agreed Bud. "Who did it; Greasers or some of that outfit?" and he motioned back to the camp he and his cousins had just left.

CHAPTER XII

RIDING HERD

Yellin' Kid, Snake and the other cowboys stamped out the brands of the grease-wood fire, coiled their lariats and mounted their ponies before anyone answered Bud's question. He did not repeat it, knowing the character of the men to whom he was speaking. Then, as Old Billie Dobb, who might have been a foreman a dozen times over if he had only proved more reliable, spoke up and said:

"We don't know who did it, Bud; an' your paw don't neither! Tar just rid in with th' news, as we rid out to do some fence mendin'. We wanted to stop an' hear th' particulars, but your paw said for us to mosey over this way, an' we done so. He said if we seen you boys to send you home."

"We're heading that way," Bud answered. "We were just over to the camp where they had trouble the other night, but they've vamoosed."

"Can't see what they ever come here for," spoke Yellin' Kid. "An' it wouldn't s'prise me a bit if them fellers proved to be the cattle rustlers."

"Nor me," declared Nort, impulsively, thus drawing attention to himself.

"Well, you know all we do, Bud," spoke Billie Dobb. "Maybe your paw'll have more news by th' time you get there. Tell him you met us an' that we'll be back as soon as we find th' break an' fix it. It's a big bust, the report has it, an' he don't want th' cattle to stampede out."

"All right, we're going," declared Bud. "Come on, fellows," he called to his cousins, and they galloped away toward the ranch headquarters, while the cowboys rode on their way, Yellin' Kid singing at the top of his voice. The boy ranchers passed the newly branded calf, its mother still licking the burned place, but the little creature did not seem much to mind what had happened, for it was eating grass.

"Who broke the fence?" asked Nort, as he and Dick rode along on either side of Bud, whose horsemanship they were trying to imitate.

"Hard to say," was the answer. "Sometimes it's Greasers, and again Indians, who hope to get a few cattle in the confusion if a herd gets out. Then again something may have frightened the cattle themselves, and in a rush they may have broken through. Generally it's the cattle themselves, and then we have to rush a bunch of cowboys to mend the break, some of 'em stringing new wire while others keep the steers, cows and calves from coming out on the open range."

"Say, there's been a lot of excitement since we came here!" declared Nort, his eyes shining in delight at the prospect of more.

"Oh, there's always more or less going on like this," said Bud. "If it isn't one thing it's another, though I must say we haven't had anything like those queer professors in some time."

"I'd like to know what their game really is," remarked Dick.

"So would I!" exclaimed his more impulsive brother. "And I'd like to catch 'em at it when I had my gun loaded," and he tapped significantly the .45 on his hip.

"Don't be too fast with gun play," advised Bud calmly. "You'll find, if you ever become a rancher, that you'll use more powder on coyotes, rattlers and in driving cattle the way you want 'em to go, than you will on humans. There isn't so much shooting out here as the writers of some books would make out."

"Well, if there's only a little, I'll be satisfied," said Nort.

They reached the headquarters of Diamond X ranch without mishap, save that Dick's pony stepped into a prairie dog's hole, and threw his rider over his head. But Dick was rather stout, and cushioned with flesh as he was, a severe shaking-up was all the harm he suffered.

"They're nasty things at night—prairie dogs' burrows," said Bud. "But mostly a pony can see 'em in time to side-step. Yours just didn't—that's all."

"Yes, he—didn't!" laughed Dick, as he climbed back into the saddle.

There was enough excitement at Diamond X ranch to please even excitable Nort. As the other cowboys had said, one of Mr. Merkel's men from a distant ranch—Square M, to be exact—had ridden in to report that during the early morning hours several head of choice steers, that were being gotten ready for a rising market, had been driven off by rustlers. Leaving his companions in charge of the remaining cattle, Tar Blake—who got his name from his very black whiskers—had ridden to headquarters to give the alarm.

"Well, we'll see if we can trail these scoundrels!" declared Mr. Merkel, as Bud and his cousins rode up.

"Can't we go, dad?" asked Bud, as eagerly as Nort would have spoken. "Maybe it's the bunch from the queer professors' camp. Let us trail along!"

"Nope!" was the short answer from Mr. Merkel. "I've got other plans for you," he added quickly, and in a tone that took the sting out of his refusal. "You'll have plenty of excitement," he went on, "so don't look so down in the mouth, son. Get something to eat, and then pack your outfit for a few days. You've got to ride herd, while I pull in as many men as I can spare to trail these rustlers."

"What herd, dad?" asked Bud. "Over by Square M?" and he named the ranch where the thieving had taken place that morning.

"No, I want you to help haze that bunch from Triangle B over to the railroad yard. They've been showing signs of uneasiness, and I don't want 'em to bolt when they're on the last stretch. You'll find 'em over by the bend. Ride there, and tell Charlie Smith and Hen Wagner to come in. You'll relieve them. Dirk Blanchard will be with you, and so will Chot Ramsey, and you three ought to be able to bed 'em down to-night. Drive 'em along easy. Dirk knows how to do it, and there's plenty of water along the way. Don't hurry 'em; if you do they'll work off all their fat, and beef is too high now to waste it by running it off the hoof. Mosey along now!" and the ranchman turned from Bud to give other orders.

Nort and Dick, with one accord, started forward, but their cousin anticipated their appeal.

"Can't Nort and Dick come with me, dad?" asked Bud.

"Sure thing—if they want to," answered Mr. Merkel.

"As if we wouldn't want to!" murmured Nort. "Oh, boy!"

"Say! It'll be great—riding herd!" exclaimed Dick.

Several hours later found the boy ranchers within sight of the four hundred or more steers and cows they were to guard, and gradually head over to the railroad stock yards, whence they would be shipped to a distant city, there to be sold to the profit of Mr. Merkel.

"Whoop-ee!" came a distant hail from one of the cowboys left to guard the Triangle B cattle.

"Zip-sippy!" yelled Bud in answer, and a little later he was introducing his cousins to the cowboys.

"Oh, boy! Rustlers!" cried Charlie Smith, when informed that he and Hen Wagner were to form part of the pursuing posse.

"Just my rotten luck, I have to stay here!" complained Dirk, while Chot, to voice his disapproval of having to remain behind, slapped his pony with his hat and rode off over the prairie, only to return as fast as he went. It was his way of letting off steam.

The two cowboys, who were to join the bunch from Diamond X ranch, departed in haste, and then Bud and his cousins made preparations for spending several nights and days in the open, riding herd and hazing the cattle to their destination.

It was the season of warm nights, as well as days, though there was a certain coolness after dark. No tents were set up. Each man, or boy, was provided with a canvas tarpaulin, which was all the protection needed. The prairie itself would be their beds, their saddles their pillows and the grass a combination mattress and spring. They had packed enough food with them, and, if needed, a calf could be killed and eaten. There were water holes in plenty—in fact, they could live off the land.

Over a fire of greasewood, while the hobbled ponies rolled on the ground, the bacon was soon sizzling and the coffee brewing.

"Gosh, but I'm hungry!" cried Nort.

"You said something!" declared his brother, while Bud and the others smiled at the fresh enthusiasm of the easterners.

There was really not much to do after darkness had settled down, for the cattle were comparatively quiet, and after a full day of eating the sweet grass, having drunk their fill of water, they were content to lie under the silent stars.

But in order that none of the steers might start to stray away, and start a stampede, also in order that no thieves might sneak up in the darkness and "cut out" choice cattle, by this very operation also starting a panic, it was necessary to "ride herd."

That is, the cowboys, of whom Nort and Dick now counted themselves two, took turns in slowly riding around the bunched cattle during the night hours. As the early hours were always the ones when it was most likely trouble would happen, the two veteran cowboys volunteered for this service, leaving Bud and his cousins to make their beds, such as they were, near the little fire. The boy ranchers would relieve the others after midnight.

So, wrapped in their tarpaulins, their heads resting on their saddles, and their feet to the fire, the three boys looked up at the silent stars. They talked in low voices at first, for the voice of man is soothing to cattle. Now and then some cow lowed, or a steer snorted or bellowed. But, in the main, the animals were silent. And to this state Bud and his cousins soon came, for they were tired with their rather long ride late that afternoon.

"I wonder if any rustlers will come here?" spoke Dick to his brother, when Bud's regular breathing told that he had fallen asleep.

"Don't know—wish they would," Nort answered, half drowsily.

"Well, I'm ready for 'em," murmured Dick, as he felt of his gun where it lay in its holster at his side, though he had loosened his belt to lie down.

The night became more silent and colder. The two other cowboys were on the far side of the herd now, working around in opposite circles, meeting and passing one another. It would soon be time for them to turn in, and Bud and his cousins to turn out.

Nort was turning over to get into a more comfortable position, when he heard something hiss through the air with a swishing sound. For an instant he thought of rattlesnakes, but almost at once it was borne to his mind that he had heard this sound before—the swish of a lariat through the air.

He sat up quickly, straining his eyes in the direction of the sound. Just then a piece of the greasewood burned up brightly, and revealed to Nort this sight.

From somewhere in the darkness, beyond the circle of light, a lariat had coiled in among the lads. And as Nort looked, the coils settled over the head of his brother Dick. Before Nort could cry a warning, or scramble from under his tarpaulin, the rope tightened and Dick was pulled from his resting place near the fire out into the darkness, his frightened yells awakening the echoes, and startling the cattle into uneasy action.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ATTEMPT FOILED

It was only a moment that surprise held Nort motionless, sitting up there by the small fire of greasewood twigs, with the bunch of cattle moving uneasily in the darkness. Then, with a yell that had in it both warning and encouragement, Nort scrambled to his feet and made a grab for Dick, who was being dragged off in the loop of a lariat, the other end being manipulated by some one unseen.

"Hold it, Dick! Hold it!" cried Nort, as, many a time he had thus shouted encouragement to his brother on the football field. "Hold it!"

But Dick was unable to do this. Taken at a disadvantage, awakened from a half-sleep as he was, and dragged from a fairly comfortable bed, he was puzzled and confused, not to say frightened.

But he was capable of yelling, and this he did to the best of his ability.

"Here! Quit that! Let up! What you doing?" shouted Dick, for, as he said afterward, he thought it was one of the cowboys playing a trick on him, hazing a tenderfoot, perhaps, though Dick proudly imagined that he was fast graduating from that class.

The yells of the two brothers naturally awakened Bud who, being more used to sleeping in the open than were his cousins, had almost at once gone soundly to sleep. But it did not take the young rancher long to rouse himself.

"What's the matter? What's going on?" shouted Bud, and Nort had a glimpse of his cousin with his gun in his hand. This reminded Nort that he had left his weapon under his tarpaulin, and he made a dash to get it, mentally blaming himself for not proving more true to his idea of the traditions of the West, and having his revolver always with him.

With a quick motion of his foot, Bud shoved some unburned sticks of greasewood into the blaze. They flared up, and the young ranchman wheeled quickly, and tried to pierce the gloom into which Dick had been dragged.

But that lad had not been idle during this strenuous time. He had felt the lariat tightening about the upper part of his body, and he had let out a frightened yell. But he had done more than yell. He had grasped the rope with both hands, in a quick, upward motion, and had succeeded in slipping it off, over his head, a task he would have been unable to perform had his enemy had daylight in his favor. But, as it was, Dick succeeded in escaping the noose.

"Who is it? Who did that?" yelled Dick, as he managed to get to his feet, and staggered back toward his tarpaulin, evidently with the intention of seeking his gun.

But there came no answer out of the gloom.

Bud and Nort hurried over to Dick, who was rather dazed and ruffled up from the experience he had undergone.

"Hurt?" asked Nort, quickly.

"Not to speak of," answered Dick. "Was that one of the boys?" he asked, turning to Bud.

"One of our cowboys? No, they don't do such things," was the answer.

"It must have been——"

He was interrupted by the rapid thuds of hoofs and, an instant later, there dashed into the circle of light Dirk and Chot, two of the men who had been left when the others rode away to get on the trail of the rustlers.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed Dirk, reining in his pony so suddenly that the animal slid with his forefeet almost in the embers of the fire.

"Somebody tried to rope Dick," answered Bud. "I didn't see it, but I had a glimpse of him being dragged off on the end of a lariat."

"I saw it come shooting in from out there," and Nort waved his hand toward the darkness.

"I *felt* it!" grimly declared Dick. "I just managed to slip it off in time."

"You were lucky," commented Chot. "Let's see who it was," he added. "Couldn't have been any of our lads," he said in a low voice. "I've known 'em to do such tricks, but not at a time like this. Might have been some fresh puncher from Double Z, but if it was——"

"Come on!" interrupted Dirk, satisfied from a glance that no harm had befallen Dick. Dirk wheeled his horse and rode off into the darkness, in the direction where the end of the lariat had disappeared, when the unseen thrower had pulled it to him after Dick's escape.

The two cowboys, who had been on the far side of the herd, had ridden hurriedly in on hearing the cries of the startled boys. And now they rushed off in the darkness, trying to find out who it was that had displayed such evil intentions.

For it was a desperate thing to do. A little higher up and the rope would have encircled Dick's neck, and it would have taken only a short time of pulling him across the ground to have choked him. He, himself, did not realize his danger until later.

For a few moments, after the arrival of Dirk and Chot from the far side of the resting herd, and their subsequent dash off into the darkness, Bud, Nort and Dick did nothing. They stood there around the greasewood fire, trying to understand clearly what had happened.

Then, from the herd of cattle came unmistakable signs of some disturbance. There were snorts and bellows, the mooing of cows and the stamping of hoofs. At the same time, from the far side, whence Dirk and Chot had ridden in, there came the murmur of voices.

"Rustlers!" cried Bud, understanding at once what it all meant now.

"Dirk! Chot! Come on back! The rustlers are here! It's a trick!
Come on back!"

"Rustlers!" exclaimed Nort.

"Yes!" shouted Bud. "That's their game! They tried to scare us so they could work in from the other side, and run off a bunch of steers. Dirk! Chot!" he cried again, making a megaphone of his hands, and sending his cry out into the night.

"Whoo-oo!" came faintly back to the boys, and then the thud of rapidly moving hoofs mingled with the movement of the cattle. For the steers and cows that were being hazed to the railroad yard were now in motion.

"Put some more wood on!" cried Bud. "If they stampede this way it may hold 'em back!"

"Will they stampede?" asked Dick.

"No telling. Somebody's in among 'em, over on that side, trying to cut out a bunch. We've got to hold 'em in if we can! Get on your ponies!"

It was the work of but a few seconds to do this. The ponies had been staked out not far from the fire,

which was now burning brightly from the amount of greasewood piled on it. Bud was first in the saddle, but his cousins were not far behind him.

And, as they mounted, and started to ride around the herd, to hold the now frightened and uneasy animals in check, Dirk and Chot galloped in out of the distant darkness.

"What's the matter?" shouted Dirk.

"Rustlers!" yelled Bud. "They tried that lasso stunt to draw you in from the far side, and now they're over there trying to cut out some steers."

"Well, I guess we'll have something to say about that!" grimly observed Chot. "Come on!"

Clapping spurs to his pony, he and Dirk began the work of milling the cattle—that is, getting them to move around in a circle rather than dash off in a straight line stampede. This turning of the herd, into a circular instead of a straight movement, is the only way to save the lives of the animals, or prevent them from being driven off by thieves.

Dick and Nort had been on Diamond X ranch long enough to understand what was being attempted, and they joined with Bud in the work. As Chot and Dirk rode back to take the stations they had left, firing their guns and shouting to turn the leaders, Bud and his cousins did the same in their locality.

As yet they had caught no sight of the rustlers, but it was very evident that these unscrupulous men were at work, trying to drive off some of the valuable animals, all fattened and ready for market. Confused shouts came from the direction where Chot and Dirk had ridden.

"Lively, boys! Lively!" cried Bud to the two easterners, and he fired his gun in the air as he rode toward the cattle that seemed inclined to dash past the circle of firelight.

Following their cousin, Dick and Nort dashed in, also firing, and the five cowboys—for Dick and Nort were now entitled to be called that—finally succeeded in milling the cattle, and preventing the stampede.

But it was hard work and it was nearly morning before the steers were quieted down after the excitement. The attempt of the rustlers had been foiled, for that time at least.

CHAPTER XIV

THE STAMPEDE

"Well, what do you make of it?" asked Bud of Dirk and Chot, when all five had the first moment of respite from the strenuous work of quieting the excited cattle. They had met near the fire, which was only glowing dully, now that its flame was not needed to head off the steers.

"Don't just know what to say," answered the older cowboy. "It all came so sudden."

"There must be two bands of rustlers around here," observed Chot. "That is, unless those your dad is after, Bud, gave him the slip and tried to operate here."

"Maybe there's only one gang, divided up for the night," suggested Nort.

"Well, of course it's only guesswork," stated Bud, "but I think this was an altogether different gang trying to put one over on us. And another thing—it was a Greaser who roped Dick."

"A Greaser!" cried Chot. "What makes you think so?"

"I had a glimpse of the noose," said Bud. "It wasn't tied the way any cow puncher ties his. It was a Greaser or I'll never speak to Zip Foster again!"

"Oh, you and your Zip Foster!" scoffed Chot. "But it may be that it was a sneakin' Mex trying his hand with the rope. You didn't see him, did you?" and he turned to Dick.

"No. The first I knew I was being snaked off, and I was mighty scared."

"Naturally," said Dirk dryly. He wanted to let the tenderfoot know that it was not considered unmanly to show signs of fear under the circumstances.

"Did you get a look at 'em, Chot?" asked Bud, turning to the cowboys.
"I mean when you rode out there just before they tried to stampede us."

"Didn't see hide nor hair of 'em," was the answer.

"Well, they didn't get away with what they started after," declared Dirk. "And now, since it's so near morning, there isn't much use turning in until we have something to eat."

"I'll make coffee and sizzle some bacon," offered Bud, for he realized that he and his cousins had had some rest during the fore part of the night, while the cowboys were riding herd before the disturbance happened.

"And can't we circle around the cattle?" asked Nort.

"We could keep 'em quiet while you ate," suggested Dick.

"They seem to be fairly quiet now," remarked Dirk, "but it wouldn't do any harm to circle around 'em. If you have trouble, though," he added quickly, "fire your guns."

"We will!" exclaimed Nort, as he and Dick sprang for their horses. The boy ranchers were eager thus to take their first tour of duty alone, and they were much disappointed when nothing happened. The steers were quiet, after their tiresome racing around in a circle. But that was better than having them stampede, with the possible killing of many.

Slowly the light grew in the east, turning from pale gray to rose tints, and then the sun came up, making the dew-laden grass sparkle brightly. The cattle, many of which had been lying down, got up, rear ends first, which is what always distinguishes the manner of a "cow critter" arising from that of a horse.

Across the range blew wisps of smoke from the greasewood camp fire, and then came the smell of bacon and coffee, than which there is no aroma more to be desired in the world.

"Um!" murmured Nort, sniffing the air.

"Isn't that great?" cried his brother.

"It will be, if we can get some," said Nort, chuckling.

But he need not have worried, for, a few minutes later, there floated to the ears of the boy ranchers the call of Bud:

"Come an' get it!"

The cattle, around which they had been slowly riding, needed no attention now, and in a short time the five cowboys—for Nort and Dick could truly be called by this name now—were eating an early breakfast.

"One good thing came out of this fracas, anyhow," observed Chot, as he passed his plate for more flapjacks and bacon, and replenished his tin cup with coffee.

"What's that?" asked Dick, feeling his neck where the rough rope had broken the skin slightly.

"Well, we'll get an early start," answered the cowboy, "and that's a lot when you're hazing steers to the railroad. Every pound counts for the boss, and you can easily run off a thousand dollars by driving 'em along during the heat of the day. We can let 'em rest at noon if we start now."

"That's the idea," said Bud.

A little later, the remains of the camp fire having been carefully stamped out, to prevent dry grass from catching, packs were slung up behind the saddles—said packs consisting of sleeping canvas, a few utensils and grub—and the start was made.

The cattle were gradually headed in the direction it was desired that they should take—the shortest route to the railroad. Nort rode up ahead with Chot, while Dick, Bud and Dirk kept to the rear to haze along the stragglers.

There was not much trouble. The cattle had been watered and fed, and were in prime condition. At noon a halt was made to save the animals during the excessive heat, but toward evening they started

off once more, and traveled until darkness fell. Camp was made again out in the open.

During the day no signs were seen of any rustlers, or other suspicious characters, and at night the young ranchers and the older cowboys took turns riding herd and standing guard.

But nothing of moment occurred, the only sounds, aside from those made by the cattle themselves, being the unearthly yells and howls of the coyotes.

In less than three days the bunch of cattle was safely delivered at the yards, where the responsibility of Bud and his companions ended, the buyer taking charge of them for shipment.

"Did you get the rustlers, Dad?" asked Bud as he and his cousins, with Dirk and Chot, rode up to the ranch buildings after their successful trip.

"No," answered Mr. Merkel, who was out waiting for his son and the others. "They got clean away."

"Did you see who they were?" asked Dirk.

"Well, I have my suspicions," answered the ranchman. "And I'm not through yet. How'd you make out, boys?"

They told him of the night scare and Dick's narrow escape, and the eyes of Bud's father glinted in anger.

"Up to tricks like that, are they?" he exclaimed. "Well, I'd like to catch 'em at it!"

"Do you know what I think?" exclaimed Bud with energy.

"Well, son, I can't say I do," spoke his father. "You generally skip around so like a Jack rabbit, it's hard telling where you are. But shoot! What's your trouble?"

"My trouble is," said Bud slowly, "that I don't know enough about those professors and their gang!"

"The professors!" exclaimed Nort and Dick.

"That's what I said," went on Bud. "I think their pretended search for something is only a bluff. They're high-grade cattle rustlers, that's what I think!"

No one said anything for a few moments, and then Mr. Merkel remarked:

"Well, maybe you're right, Bud. Stranger things have happened. It might pay us to trail these fellows. Certainly there was something queer about them."

"Mighty queer," agreed Bud. "I began to suspect them after they tried to lasso Dick."

"Do you think one of those men—Professor Wright or Professor Blair—tried to snake me off?" asked Dick.

"Well, no, not one of them, personally," admitted Bud. "They couldn't throw a rope over a molasses barrel. But they set some one up to it, I'll say!"

"Maybe," spoke Mr. Merkel musingly. "We'll have a look at their trail, if we can pick it up. But we've got a lot else to do first."

Indeed Diamond X ranch was a busy place in those days. Dick and Nort could not have come at a better time, and they were such apt pupils that they soon acquired many of the ways of the cowboys, who were willing and anxious to teach them. In a comparatively short time the two "tenderfeet" were no longer called that. They could shoot fairly well, though they were not "quick on the draw," and they were becoming more and more expert with the rope every day.

It was about two weeks after their experience with the unknown user of the lariat that Bud and his cousins were sent to ride herd at the Square M ranch, which was one of Mr. Merkel's holdings. He was planning to get a bunch of steers there ready for shipment, and a buyer was to come and look them over when they had been headed in from the open range to a large corral. Bud and his cousins were to help drive the animals in.

Square M ranch, so called because the brand was the letter M in a square, was a good two days' ride from Diamond X. But the boys had a fine time going, and found plenty to do when they arrived. Gradually the cattle were gathered up, and worked toward the corral.

They were within a day's ride of this haven, when, one afternoon, as Bud, Dick and Nort were moving

on ahead of the bunch, which was driven by several cowboys, Bud looked back and let out a yell.

"What's the matter?" cried Nort.

"Stampede!" was the answer, "Oh, boy! Now look out for trouble!"

CHAPTER XV

LOST

Nort and Dick had heard and read so much about a cattle stampede, and heard such a calamity discussed at the ranch house so often, that they rather welcomed, than otherwise, the announcement that one was being staged near them. This was before they realized the full import of it, and saw the danger.

It was like a prairie fire—they had not realized it could be so terrible and menacing until they actually saw it. And see it they did.

There was needed but a quick backward glance to show that a great fear, or rage, which is almost the same, had entered into the three hundred steers (more or less) that were being driven onward.

At one moment the cattle had been progressing in what might be termed orderly fashion. Now and then a steer would try to break out of the line of march, only to be quickly hazed in again by one of the cowboys, or one of the trio of boy ranchers. But now the whole herd had suddenly been galvanized into action, and that action took the form of running forward at top speed.

It would not have been so bad, perhaps, if the stampede had started from in front. If the forward ranks of cattle had begun to race onward, those behind would simply have followed, and there would gradually have been a slackening up. Of course then there would have been some danger, for the front steers might have slowed down first, while those at the rear still came on, trampling under their sharp hoofs those who were unlucky enough to fall.

But, as it happened, the fright had first seized on the rear bunches of cattle and these had started to run, charging in upon those in front of them, who, in turn, were hurled forward until now, a few seconds after Bud had shouted the alarm, the whole herd was in wild motion.

"Come on!" yelled Bud. "Ride for it! Oh, zowie, boy! Ride for it! Ride like Zip Foster would!" and with voice, reins and spurs he urged his pony forward.

"What do you aim to do?" shouted Dick in his cousin's ear as the two thudded along side by side.

"We've got to get far enough ahead so we can try to turn 'em!" yelled Bud. "It's our only chance. Ride straight ahead!"

Nort spurred up alongside of his cousin and brother, and, as he did so he yelled:

"What you s'pose started 'em off, Bud?"

"Haven't any time to do any s'posin' now!" was the grim answer. "Ride on and say your prayers that your pony doesn't step in a prairie dog's hole. If he does—and you fall—good night!"

The recent tenderfeet knew, without being told, what was meant. To go down before a herd of wild cattle, infuriated because they were frightened, would mean sure death and in horrible form.

As Nort looked back, to see what distance lay between himself and comrades, and the foremost of the herd, he saw several figures on horseback at one side of the running animals. At first he imagined these were Diamond X cowboys who had been in the rear of the steers, and he thought they had ridden up to help the boy ranchers turn the stampeded animals. But another look showed him the men who had been in the rear still in those positions, though they were spurring forward at top speed.

"Look, Bud!" cried Nort. He pointed to the four figures—there were no more than that—at the left of the galloping herd.

"Rustlers—Greasers!" shouted Bud. "They started this stampede!"

"What for?" Dick wanted to know. "They can't hope to run off any under our eyes, can they?"

"They're doing it to get fresh meat!" declared Bud, who never ceased, all this while, to urge his pony forward, an example followed by his cousins with their horses. "They think some steer, or maybe half a dozen, will fall and be trampled to death. Then they'll have all the beef they can eat—for nothing. They started this stampede, or I'll never speak to Zip Foster again."

By this time, knowing Bud as they did, Nort and Dick had ceased to ask about the mysterious Zip Foster. But Nort could not forego the question:

"How'd they do it?"

"Do what?" grunted Bud, as he skillfully turned his pony away from a prairie dog's hole.

"Start this stampede."

"Hanged if I know. They might have been lying in wait for us to come along—hidden out on the range, and they may have all jumped up with whoops, waving their hats, and setting the steers off that way, when we didn't happen to be looking. But that's where the disturbance came from all right!"

With snorts, bellows and heavy breathing the steers came on. Some were old Texas longhorns, but many of the cattle on the Diamond X ranch, and the adjacent possessions of Mr. Merkel, had been dehorned. It was found that more animals could be packed in a car when they had no interfering horns, and the practice is becoming general of taking the horns off western stock.

But even though some were without horns, this herd was sufficiently dangerous. The first thought of Bud and his cousins was to put all the distance possible between them and the foremost of the steers. This they had now done. And it was becoming evident that unless some of the leaders tripped and went down, there was to be no disastrous piling up of animals one on the other. The leaders ran well, and the others followed.

The rustlers, if such they were, seemed to realize that their desperate plan had failed, for, so far, not a beef had fallen. And the Greasers, off to one side, dared not try to cut out, and run off, any animals. To have ventured into the midst of that charging herd would have been madness.

"Come on! Let's see if we can turn 'em!" urged Bud, drawing his gun, an example followed by Nort and Dick. Led by the son of the owner of Diamond X, the boy ranchers charged down on the oncoming herd, from which they had just ridden away. But now they had the advantage. They stood a better chance. If they could turn the leaders, sending them in a circle, the other animals would follow, and soon the whole bunch would be "milling," which is the most desired way to stop a stampede.

"Come on! Come a ridin'! Whoop-ee!" shrilly cried Bud, yelling, waving his hat in one hand and firing in the air with his gun. Nort and Dick did likewise. Straight at the cattle they rode.

It was a desperate chance, but one that had to be taken. Bud knew, if the others did not, that about a mile beyond lay a gully, led up to by a cliff, and if the steers and cows reached this, the leaders unable to stop, while the rear ranks pushed on, there would be a mass of piled-up, dead cattle to tell the story.

"We've got to stop 'em!" shouted Bud.

And stop them, or, rather, turn them, the boy ranchers did. Just when it seemed that the wild animals would rush over, and trample down the three lads, the foremost of the steers turned at a sharp angle, their hoofs skidding in the soil, and swung around.

"Now we've got 'em!" cried Bud. "Make 'em mill! Make 'em mill!"

And this is what the cattle did. Around and around they ran, in a big, dusty circle, while the other Diamond X cowboys rode up.

"That was touch and go," said one of the older riders, when the herd was comparatively quiet. "What started 'em off, Bud?"

"Didn't you see that bunch of Greasers?" asked the rancher's son.

The cowboys had not, it developed, and now, when the three boys tried to point out the rascals the quartette was not in sight. However, something else took the attention of Bud and the older cowboys. This something was a small bunch of steers, galloping off by themselves, but not being hazed by any riders.

"We can't lose them!" shouted Bud. "They belong to dad! Got to get 'em back!"

"We'll go after 'em," offered Nort and Dick. "We can bring 'em back."

"Yes, I reckon you can, while we ride herd on these," said Bud. "I don't want to take any more chances with 'em. Haze the outlaws back this way, fellows!"

Eager to have this responsibility, and to do something "on their own," Dick and his brother spurred away. And before they realized it, Nort and Dick found themselves down in a depression, whence they could catch sight neither of the small knot of cattle they had started out to haze back, nor the main herd.

"Say, where are we?" asked Dick, slowing up his pony, and looking about him. He and Nort were down in a green valley, with hills all around, but no sign of life—animal or human. "Where are we?"

Nort paused a moment before replying. Then, as he drew rein and listened, he said:

"Lost, I reckon!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE VISION

Though Nort spoke with an appearance of calmness, there was something in his voice that made Dick catch his breath. It was not that the younger lad was exactly afraid, but he was on the verge of becoming so.

"Lost, eh?" repeated Dick. Then, as he saw a half smile on Nort's face, and looked about on what was really a beautiful scene, his little worry seemed to vanish as mists roll away in the sun. "Well, if we're lost it isn't such a bad place to be in, and I reckon we can easily find our way back. 'Tisn't like being lost in the woods, as we once were."

"No," agreed Nort, "it isn't." They had gone camping once, with their father, and had wandered off in a forest, being "lost" all night, though, as it developed later, not far from their own folks.

"And I don't see why we can't easily ride back the way we came," went on Dick.

"We can, if we find the way," agreed Nort. "But I seem all turned around. And I don't like to go back without those cattle. We offered to ride off after 'em and bring 'em back, and we ought to do it."

"But where are they?" asked Dick, "and where's the main herd? That isn't so small that you could hide it in one of these valleys!"

They were, as I have said, in the midst of a rolling country, where swales or valleys were interspersed with hills. One moment they had held in view the small bunch of steers that had wandered away from the main herd, but, in another instant, there was no sign of them.

"Listen, and see if you can hear anything," suggested Nort.

Quietly the boy ranchers sat on their horses; the only sounds being the creaking of the damp saddle and stirrup leathers as the animals moved slightly. But there was no sound of lowing cows or snorting steers, and there came to the ears of Nort and Dick no distant shouts of Bud and the cowboys, though the main herd, with the men in charge, could not have been more than two miles away. But, for all that, our heroes were as completely isolated as though a hundred miles distant from civilization.

"I can't understand it!" murmured Dick.

"Nor I," said Nort, "It's just as if those cattle had dropped out of sight in a hole in the ground. Maybe they did, Dick."

"What do you mean?" asked his brother.

"I mean maybe those mysterious professors have been digging big mining holes around here, and that bunch of steers we were chasing just naturally slipped into one. We'd better look out, or we'll drop out of sight ourselves!"

Though he spoke half jokingly, there was some seriousness in Nort's voice, and Dick realized it.

"Those professors sure are queer, with their digging operations," Dick agreed. "I'd like to know what they are after, and why they're hanging around Diamond X."

"Well, I'd like to know that, too," said Nort, "but first of all I'd like to know our way out of this place. There must be some way out, as we didn't have any trouble finding a way in."

"Of course we can get out," Dick answered. "There aren't any trees to amount to anything, and we aren't fenced in. We can ride in any direction we like, and I say let's ride somewhere."

"I'm with you," spoke his brother. "But the only trouble is we might be riding farther and farther away from Bud and the rest of the fellows. Why not try to locate that bunch of cattle we're after? They'll be heading directly away from the main herd, I take it, and if we locate them all we'll have to do will be to drive them right about face, and we'll get back where we belong."

"All right, let's find the steers," assented Dick.

They started their ponies, which, doubtless, had been glad of the little breathing spell. But it was one thing to say find the missing steers, and another to do it. One swale seemed to so melt in with an adjoining one, and one hill to merge with its mate, that they all looked alike to the boys, who, as it developed afterward, kept working their way farther and farther off from their friends.

"Hang those steers! Where are they, anyhow?" exclaimed Nort after half an hour of search, during which no signs had been seen.

"Let's try over this way," suggested Dick, turning to the left.

Though it might seem that in a fairly open country, composed of hills and vales, it would be hard to hide a bunch of cattle, still Nort and Dick, to their chagrin, did not find it difficult. They were completely baffled, and the longer they searched the more puzzled they were.

"Well, there's one thing about it," remarked Dick, when they drew rein, "we shan't starve right away, and if we have to stay out all night we have the same accommodations we have had before," and he tapped the tarpaulin which formed part of his saddle pack.

"Oh, yes, we can camp out if we have to," agreed Nort, "and I shan't mind that. But it's our failure to do the first job we tackled 'on our own' that gets my goat. Bud will sure think we're tenderfeet for fair!"

"Yes, that is bad," agreed Dick. "But it can't be helped. I never did see anything like the sudden way those cattle disappeared, and how we got lost."

For that they were now completely lost, amid the low hills, was an accepted fact to the boys. They had ridden here and there, until, in mercy to their ponies, they pulled reins. Yet they had gotten no farther on their way, nor had they seen sign of the cattle. It was growing late, too, and they realized that soon they must find a camping place for the night, unless they located the homeward trail.

Of course to Bud, or any of the older cowboys of Diamond X ranch, the problem that puzzled Nort and Dick would have been easy to solve. Knowing the country as they did, the cowboys could easily have sensed which way to ride, even though the bunch of cattle might have eluded them.

But the two easterners did not even know which way to head to get back to their friends. They were completely lost and turned about, and their situation was growing more desperate.

I say "desperate," yet that word is used only in a comparative sense. They were in no immediate danger, for they were in the clean, open country, and not in a tangled forest or jungle. There were no wild beasts near, only peaceful cows and steers. They had coverings for the night, and greasewood shrubs, as well as a tree here and there amid the foothills, offered fuel for a fire. They had a small amount of "grub" with them, and they had passed several springs of water, so they would not thirst, and they had the means of making coffee, though no milk was at hand. So, all in all, their situation was not at all "desperate," though it was perhaps annoying.

"Let's fire our guns!" exclaimed Nort suddenly. "We forgot all about them. Bud told us they were mainly used for signaling out here, and we might let him and the rest know where we are by firing a few shots."

"Sure! Go to it!" agreed Dick. "But don't fire too many cartridges," he added.

"Why not?"

"Well, there's no telling when we may want the shells, and we haven't any too many."

"That's so," agreed Nort. "Well, we'll each fire two, at intervals."

This they did, but such echoes were aroused amid the hills by the reverberations of the reports that the lads doubted whether Bud and the other cowboys could accurately determine whence the sound of the firing came.

"We've done our best," said Nort, after the fourth shot had gone echoing among the hills. "Now let's ride on a little, and if we don't get out, or find those cattle, we'll pick a good place to camp for the night."

This struck Dick as being the best thing to do and they urged their tired ponies forward. Dick was casting his looks about, seeking for a suitable place to make the night camp, when he was attracted by a shout from Nort, who was off to one side.

"Did you find 'em?" cried Dick, eagerly. "The cattle or our cowboys?"

"No, but look!" yelled Nort. "We're coming to a city!"

He pointed toward the east and there, on the far side of a green valley, amid green hills, was the vision of a small city, on the banks of a good-sized river. As the boys watched they saw a steamer come up to a dock and stop, though the scene was too far away to give them more details.

"Now we're all right!" yelled Dick.

But, even as he spoke the vision faded from the eyes of the startled boys. It melted from sight as do some moving pictures, when the "fade out" is used. It was as though a veil of mist came between the vision and the boys, or as if some giant hand had wiped it from a great slate with a damp sponge.

CHAPTER XVII

THE NIGHT CAMP

"Well, what do you know about that?" exclaimed Nort, as he turned to look at his brother, when the vision of the city on the river bank had disappeared.

"Were we dreaming, or did we really see something?" asked Dick, passing his hand over his eyes in dazed fashion.

"We saw something all right," asserted Nort, "and I'm wondering if I saw the same thing you did—a city—the steamer and——"

"I saw it, too," declared Dick, interrupting his brother's recital. "But where did it go? A fog must have rolled up between us and it. But now we know which way to ride. I don't know what town that was, but they can tell us how to get back to Diamond X ranch."

"It's queer," murmured Nort, as Dick urged his horse in the direction of the vision they had just beheld.

"What's queer?" asked Dick.

"Seeing that town," his brother went on. "Bud never said anything about the ranch being so near a place where they had a river steamer. There isn't a boat of that size on the river around here."

"No," assented Dick. "This must be farther down. Anyhow, let's hit the trail for there. We aren't lost any more, I reckon."

"Doesn't seem," murmured Nort. But, even as the two brothers urged their tired, broncos forward, another strange thing happened. In the very same place where they had seen the vision of the town and the steamer, only to witness it vanish, there appeared in sharp detail a large ranch, with its corrals, its bunk house and main buildings.

"There! Look!" cried Dick. "There's Diamond X!"

Nort shaded his eyes with his hands, and peered long and earnestly.

"Diamond X!" he murmured. "That isn't our ranch! Our bunk house isn't so near the corral, and, besides——"

Then, even as he spoke, this vision vanished as had the other, being wiped out of sight; fading slowly as if some unseen operator in a movie booth had cut off his light.

The brothers turned and stared at one another. Suddenly the truth dawned upon them.

"A *mirage!*" exclaimed Nort.

"That's what!" assented Dick. "Two mirages! We saw one after the other, a city and a ranch in the same place!"

And that is what the visions had been—mirages, those strange phenomena of the west—of desert places—natural occurrences in localities where the air is abnormally clear, and where conditions combine to transpose distant scenes.

Of course the explanation is simple enough. Of the mirage the dictionary says it is "an optical illusion arising from an unequal refraction in the lower strata of the atmosphere, causing images of remote objects to be seen double, distorted or inverted as if reflected in a mirror, or to appear as if suspended in the air."

The word comes from a Latin one, meaning "to look at," and that is about all you can do to a mirage—look at it. It is as unsubstantial as the air in which it is formed.

There are many varieties of mirages seen in the West, and if the boys had seen a double one, or had the vision of the city and ranch been inverted, they might have sooner guessed the secret of it. But the particular mirages they had viewed had, through some trick of air refraction, been imposed on their eyesight rightside up, and wonderfully clear.

I do not suppose all the stories that have been written of mirages are true, but it is certain that many strange tricks have been played on the eyesight of observers by these phenomena, and more than one luckless prospector, or cattleman, has followed these visions, only to be tantalized in the end by finding, just as Nort and Dick did, that they merely vanished, dissolving into nothing.

Telling of their experiences afterward, Nort and Dick declared that when they had visualized the steamer moving up to her dock, they had actually seen figures disembarking.

"That *couldn't* be!" declared Bud. "Your eyes must have been blinking and you *thought* you saw figures. I've been fooled by mirages myself, but though you might make out something as large as a steamer moving, I never yet saw one of these visions clear enough so that you could make out people moving about. You can see a town, or a ranch, sometimes right side up, and sometimes upside down, but you can't make out people. I won't say that it is impossible, but I've never seen it, nor heard of anyone who has," the boy rancher concluded.

"Well, it was wonderful enough as it was," declared Nort, and even those who have seen many mirages will agree with this, I think.

"Well, that sure was queer!" exclaimed Nort, rubbing his eyes again. "And to think we might have ridden off, and tried to get to that ranch, or city."

"I thought sure it was Diamond X," declared Dick.

"Well, I knew it wasn't, as soon as I saw how the buildings were located. But I thought it was some ranch. Bud told me about these mirages, though I never thought they were as plain as that."

"They sure do fool you!" laughed Dick. "And now, before we get led astray by any more, let's get settled for the night. It looks as if we'd have to stay here."

"Yes, it does," agreed Nort. He looked in the direction where the strange images had appeared in the air, seemingly suspended between the heaven and the earth. There were no more of the visions, the declining sun doubtless being in such a position as no longer to produce the necessary refraction, or bending of the light rays.

"Here's water," spoke Nort, pointing to a spring bubbling out of the side of the hill. "We'll make a fire, and cook what we have."

"But not all of it," stipulated Dick. "We've got to save some for to-morrow. No telling how long we may be out on our own."

"That's right," agreed Nort. "Though when our bacon and flour give out we can get one of those fellows—maybe," and he pointed to a big jack rabbit, almost as large as a dog, loping away.

"Yes, Bud says they're good eating," assented Dick. "The only thing is, can we knock one over with our guns?"

"I'm not much of a shot, yet, but then a fellow ought to hit one of those jacks—when he isn't running," qualified Nort, for the speed of these rabbits of the plains is almost beyond belief. Indeed they put the speediest horse on his mettle, and a greyhound, or a similar breed of dog, is the only canine that can compete with them.

"Yes, no use shooting when they start racing," agreed Dick.

The lads slipped from their ponies, taking off the saddles which, later, they would use as pillows. And immediately the cow horses were relieved of their back burdens, they started to roll. This is the ideal recreation for the steeds of ranch or plain, for they get little of the rubbing down or care bestowed on other horses. Their daily roll in the grass and dust keeps their coat in good condition.

The ponies were pegged out by means of the lariats, which allowed them to graze or roll as they pleased. They were tied near a water hole, formed below the spring, so the animals had the three most desirable requisites—food, water and a place to disport themselves.

Nort and Dick proceeded to make their camp. It was a simple operation. All they had to do was to gather some greasewood for the fire, and start to cook. Later they would roll in their tarpaulins, with their heads on the saddles, and get what rest they could.

Fortunately the two boys had with them some cooking utensils, and also some bacon and flour with a supply of coffee. The flour was of the "prepared" variety. Mixing it with water gave them batter for flapjacks, which were baked in the same skillet in which the bacon had first been fried. Water for the coffee was at hand, and they had sugar for that beverage, though no milk, which might seem strange so near a ranch on which were many cattle. But ranches are for the raising of beef, and are not dairies, so milkless coffee was no hardship to the boys, though at Diamond X milk was plentiful enough.

The smell of the burning greasewood, the aroma of the bacon and coffee, not to mention that of the flapjacks, added zest to the appetites of the boys, if zest were needed, and soon they were eagerly eating.

Then, as night settled down they gathered a quantity of wood for the fire, looked to the fastenings of their ponies and stretched out under the light of the bright stars. They were—except for their ponies—alone amid the foothills, how far from Diamond X ranch they could only guess.

CHAPTER XVIII

QUEER OPERATIONS

"Feel sleepy?" asked Nort of Dick when they had stretched out under their canvas blankets, which might keep off the dew, but which were not very comfortable.

"Not specially," answered Dick. "I'm thinking too much of all that's happened lately."

"So 'm I. But I'm not worried because we're here; are you?"

"Not a bit of it! This is only fun! We wanted to see real western life and we're seeing it," Dick went on. "This is what we came out here for. It isn't like anything else we ever did, and it only makes me all the more want to be a rancher."

"You said it. Only there are one or two things I'd like to know more about."

"Such as what, for instance?" asked the younger lad.

"Well, I'd like to know who it was that tried to snake you away with a lasso. I'd like to do the same to him. And I'd like to know more about those two strange professors, and what they're after."

"I'm with you there," spoke Dick, as he raised on one elbow to look toward where he had tethered his

horse, the animal seeming to be suddenly excited about something.

"Only a coyote," remarked Nort, as he caught sight of a slinking figure under the light of the stars. The boys had become used to these creatures which acted as scavengers of the plains.

"I wonder if, after all, those professors can be hunting gold?" mused Dick, when his horse had quieted down and resumed grazing.

"According to what Bud says there isn't any gold here and never has been," declared Nort. "But there is a mystery about them and I'd give a lot to solve it. You see we tenderfeet don't count for much out on a ranch—that is, yet. We don't know much about roping or shooting or riding herd. Of course we're learning, and Bud and the others are as nice about it as they can be, but I can see they don't think overly much about our abilities; and I don't blame them.

"But if we could solve this mystery about those professors, and maybe connect 'em up with some of the cattle rustling, why it would show Bud we easterners amounted to something after all. I sure would like to get on the track of this mystery!"

The time was to come, and soon, when Nort and Dick vividly recalled these words.

"Well, we're here—not that we know where it is—but we're here, and not in such bad shape," spoke Dick. "We're lost, but I reckon Bud will find us in the morning, or we'll come across the cattle we're looking for, or else Diamond X ranch.

"I hope so," mused Nort. "I'd like to show these cowboys that we can pull off a trick or two ourselves."

"Well, I'm with you," and Dick's voice took on a drowsy note. In spite of the fact that he had said he was thinking of many things, the riding of the day soon began to tell on both lads.

"What's that?" suddenly called Dick to Nort, when they had, perhaps, been sleeping two or three hours. A wild, weird cry had echoed out in the silent night.

"Coyote," was the answer, sleepily given.

"Howlin' in a new way," murmured Dick.

Indeed, accustomed as the boys were becoming to the voices of these animals, part fox, part dog and part wolf, there were always new elements seeming to enter into their cries.

Again the strange call was repeated, to be answered by the mate of the coyote farther off, and then came a perfect chorus of wild yells. The horses snorted, as if in contempt and the boys covered themselves with their tarpaulins and tried to slumber. But it was some little time before the echoes died away and quiet reigned.

Nort and Dick did not awaken again that night, but their eyes opened when the sun shone on them, and, rather lame and stiff, they arose to get a frugal breakfast.

Their first look was to their horses, for to be without a mount in the vast distances of the West is almost a tragedy. But Blaze and Blackie, the two favorite steeds of Nort and Dick, were safely tethered.

Cowboys, on range or ranch, usually have a "string" of ponies, or broncos. This is needful, as there is such hard riding necessary at times (particularly at the round-up) that one horse could not stand the pace. So at the beginning of work several horses are assigned to each cow-puncher. Of course he may own a horse of his own, and usually does, in fact, and this horse is his favorite. But he has several others to pick from.

When Nort and Dick declared that they were going to be regular ranchers, or cowboys as a start, they were given a string of horses to pick from. But of these Blaze, so called from a white streak down his head, was the favorite of Nort. Blackie was Dick's choice, and the selection of the name was due to the color of the horse, it being almost perfect black.

Blaze and Blackie were safe at the ends of their tether ropes—the lariats the boys carried coiled on their saddle horns during the day.

Breakfast over—and it was not a very substantial meal—the boys saddled their steeds and then looked at one another.

"What are we going to do?" asked Dick.

"Hit the trail—for somewhere," answered Nort.

"The trouble is there doesn't seem to be any trail to hit," spoke Dick, rather grimly. "It would be easy, if there was only a cow path, to ride along it until we came to some place. But here, as soon as we ride out of one swale we're in another, and we don't get a sight of Bud or the cattle we set out to haze back."

"I wonder what he thinks of us?" mused Nort.

"Oh, he must have sized up the situation, and so knows what has happened to us," declared Dick. "He's probably out now, with some of the cowboys, looking for us."

"I hope they bring something to eat," spoke Nort. "We'll be on mighty short rations at noon, unless we can eat grass, the way the ponies do."

"Or knock over a jack," added Dick. "They seem to be plentiful."

As he spoke, one of the long-legged and longer-eared rabbits shot past, having paused to look at the strangers, who, doubtless in his mind, were usurping his land.

"Tell you what we ought to do," suggested Nort as they mounted, having made fast their packs and trampled out the fire.

"What?" asked Dick.

"We ought to ride to the top of the highest hill, and take a look. That ought to show something besides a mirage. I s'pose, if we had our wits about us, we'd know whether we ought to ride north, south, east or west," Nort went on. "But, as it is, I don't know which way Diamond X lies."

They urged Blaze and Blackie up the slope of what they judged to be the highest hill in their vicinity. And as they gained the summit, and looked down into a valley on the other side, they saw something that caused them to both exclaim in surprise.

"Look!" cried Nort. "There's some of our bunch!" He pointed to men and horses in a camp, of which white tents formed a part.

"That isn't our crowd!" exclaimed Dick. "That's the outfit of the two professors, and they're up to some mighty queer doings!"

"Digging for gold!" declared Nort.

But, as he spoke, there was a loud report down near the valley camp. Men were seen running, as if from danger, and as the boys looked they saw a cloud of smoke roll up, and part of a side hill slide down.

CHAPTER XIX

PRISONERS

"Would you look at that!" shouted Nort, pointing down into the valley. "They must be under bombardment! It's a battle, Dick!"

"Nonsense!" cried the younger lad, not as impulsive as his brother. "They're blasting; that's what they're doing! Trying to locate a pocket of gold, I reckon. But now we're all right, Nort. They'll tell us how to get back to Diamond X, even if they can't put us on the trail of the cattle we so stupidly missed."

"Well, maybe they can, and then again, maybe they can't," said Nort slowly.

"What do you mean?" asked Dick.

"Well, they may be able to tell us the way to Diamond X, but maybe they won't want to tell us where the missing cattle are."

"You mean they may have taken 'em *themselves*?" asked Dick, and there was surprise in his voice.

"It's possible," declared Nort. "But we can't find out much by staying up here. Let's ride down and see what's going on. I reckon it's as you say—they have been blasting."

At first no one paid any attention to the approach of Dick and Nort. The men who had run away as the blast let loose, now hurried back to peer into the excavation made by the explosion. And among those who thus eagerly sought to see the inner secrets of the earth, our heroes recognized Professors Blair and Wright. These two scientists were foremost among the men standing on the edge of the hole that had been torn in the earth.

"No success!" Dick and Nort heard Professor Wright say as he turned aside from the hole. "We must try lower down."

"Higher up, I should say," spoke Professor Blair.

"Oh, no. You must remember that the deposits are weighty, and would be brought lower and lower each year by gravity, as well as by the sliding action of the hill under the influence of erosion."

"Yes, you are correct, Professor," admitted Mr. Blair, and then the two turned and beheld Dick and Nort at hand.

Surprise, and no very pleased surprise at that, was manifest on the faces of the two scientists as they viewed the boys. Grouped around the professors were several Mexicans, or Greasers, a Chinese, evidently the cook of the "outfit," and a number of workmen, unmistakably American. These last looked at the boys with scowling faces, though the two professors tried to force smiles to their lips.

"Oh, you are from Circle T ranch, are you not?" asked Professor Blair of Dick and Nort. "You are the boys who were so kind as to bring the antiseptics for the wounded men, who, thanks to that treatment, are now doing well."

"Glad to hear it," said Nort. "Only we're not from Circle T. We hail from Diamond X."

"Strange names," murmured Professor Wright. "I don't see how you remember them, though I do recall, now, that Diamond X is the proper term. We—er—I hardly expected to see you again," he said, haltingly.

"Nor we you," spoke Nort, who seemed to be doing the talking for his brother and himself. "We started after some cattle, but they got away from us and we lost ourselves. You haven't seen them; have you? A bunch of steers with the Square M brand on."

"And if you've seen anything of Diamond X ranch itself, up among these hills, I wish you'd tell us how to get to it," added Dick, with a whimsical smile.

"Cattle! Of why should we know of your cattle!" exclaimed a harsh voice behind the boys, and Dick and Nort, turning in their saddles, saw fairly glaring at them Del Pinzo, the unprepossessing Mexican half breed.

"Do you think we have your steers—that we are *rustlers*?" demanded Del Pinzo fiercely.

"No," said Nort, seeing into what error he might be drawn. "I was only asking."

"Well, we haven't seen any of your cattle!" declared the Mexican, or half breed, to give his correct title. "And we don't want you around here when we're——"

"Just a moment, Del Pinzo," interposed Professor Wright, and Dick noticed a peculiar look pass between the two scientists. "You must excuse the zeal of one of our helpers," went on Mr. Wright. "He is doubtless afraid that you might get hurt in a blast."

"Yes! Yes! Blasts are dangerous!" said the half breed quickly, and it seemed as if he spoke in answer to a signal given by one of the scientists. "We are going to set off another."

"It is just some research work we are undertaking," said Professor Blair, as he saw Nort and Dick looking around. "We have absented ourselves from our college to do some investigating, and it is necessary to blast, in some cases, to get at the lower deposits."

Both Dick and Nort said to each other, afterwards, that they did not believe these statements.

"Perhaps you boys had better come down to the tents," suggested Professor Wright. "As Del Pinzo says, blasts are dangerous, and the men are going to set off another. Come to the tents," and with a wave of his hand he indicated the camp site, a level place amid the little and big hills all about.

"Thanks," murmured Nort. "But are you going to be able to direct us how to find Diamond X ranch?"

"Doubtless some of our men can tell you," said Mr. Wright. "Have you eaten?" he asked.

"We had a little," Dick replied. "But——"

"You can eat more, I have no doubt!" laughed Professor Blair, but his merriment seemed to be forced. "Well, fortunately our larder is well stocked. Come down and have something. How are all your friends?"

"Well, as far as we know, not having seen them since yesterday," answered Dick. "You see we're not regular ranchers or cowboys yet, we're just learning."

"One need not be told *that!*" sneered Del Pinzo, who had followed our heroes and the two professors down the slope.

Professor Blair turned and looked sharply at the half breed. Then the scientist, speaking, said:

"Del Pinzo, perhaps you had better return and watch that the next blast harms no one. We would not want an accident."

The half breed hesitated for a moment, and then murmured:

"*Si, senor!*" ("Yes, sir!")

He turned back up the hill, Dick and Nort continued down it toward the tents.

"Picket your horses and come in," invited Professor Wright, as he held open the flap of what was, evidently, the private dining tent of himself and his college companion. "I'll have Sing Wah fix you up a little feed."

"This is mighty kind of you," murmured Dick, as he and his brother sat at the folding camp table and ate hungrily.

"And now all we want is to be put on the trail to Diamond X," said Nort, as they finished. "We'll let the cattle go, for the time being."

He rose to leave the tent, followed by his brother, but, as the boys neared the flap a man, who, they remembered, had been called Silas Thorp, interposed his ugly bulk in front of them.

"Don't be in a hurry to leave, boys," he sneered.

"Why not?" hotly demanded Nort.

"Because we'd like to keep you here a while," Thorp went on. "I guess the professors would like to have you accept their hospitality a little longer."

"Is this true?" cried Nort. "Are we prisoners?"

"Well, that is rather a harsh word to use," said Professor Wright. "But we feel we must detain you—at least for a while!"

CHAPTER XX

THE DIAMOND X BRAND

Nort and Dick admitted to one another, afterward, that at first they believed the two professors to be joking. They imagined that the cultured scientists were merely indulging in a bit of fun, from much of which they were necessarily barred while in the class room. But a sharp look at the faces of the men who were at the head of an expedition, conducting a mysterious search, showed the boys that earnestness was the keynote.

"You—you're going to keep us here?" questioned Dick.

"For a while, yes," said Professor Wright, and there was more snap and decision in his voice than before.

"It is much your own fault," added Professor Blair.

"*Our* fault!" spluttered Nort, his temper rapidly rising. "Why, what have we done except to help you when you needed it? And now all we ask is that you put us in the way of getting back to Diamond X."

"That is just it," said Professor Wright. "We don't want you to go back to Diamond X at once."

"Why not?" hotly demanded Nort. "What right have you got to hold us here? You can't! We'll get away in spite of you!" and his hand, half unconsciously, perhaps, moved toward his holster. But he was surprised to find his wrist seized in a firm grip, while he was violently swung around, his weapon being removed by some one who had come silently up behind him. And this some one was Del Pinzo, into whose sneering, crafty, swarthy face Nort angrily gazed.

Before he could say anything, Nort saw Silas Thorp slip up to Dick, and take that lad's weapon out of the holster. Dick had no time to draw it, even if such had been his intention, which, the lad said later, it was not.

"What do you mean? What's this game anyhow? What right have you to keep us prisoners here and take our guns?" shouted Nort. He took a step toward Del Pinzo, but there was something so sinister in the attitude of the half breed, albeit he did not menace the boy with the weapon, that Nort shrank back.

"I think you had better submit quietly," said Professor Blair. "We intend absolutely no violence, or ill-treatment of you, unless you make that necessary. We admit that perhaps we are acting illegally, and in an unusual manner, but, in a way, you brought this on yourselves, boys. You will not be detained long. In fact, if our plans work out right, you may depart for your ranch this evening."

"Acting illegally!" spluttered Nort. "I should say you *were*! We'll have you arrested for this, you—you—big—"

Then Nort stopped, for he realized that, though he might apply some well-deserved slang names to the two professors, neither of them was "big." They were small men—at least in stature.

"But you haven't any right to hold us here prisoners!" declared Dick, feeling that he must back up his brother in a firm protest. "We haven't done anything to you."

"Except to turn up where you aren't wanted!" broke in Silas Thorp. "If you'd minded your own business, and stayed away—let us alone—we wouldn't have to do this!"

In surprise at such a statement, Nort and Dick looked at the two professors.

Mr. Wright, with a wave of his hand toward his helper, to enjoin silence, made this statement:

"Mr. Thorp has put the matter rather crudely, perhaps, but that is the state of the case. Without going into details, boys, we are in this part of the country on a secret mission. We have almost accomplished what we are after, and, on the verge of the discovery, we do not wish to be balked. You happen to have stumbled upon us just when we are about to complete a wearisome search, which at least promises to be successful.

"We have enemies who would be glad to frustrate our schemes, and it is to prevent these enemies from obtaining knowledge of our movements, of our location, and the location of that which we are seeking, that we are forced to detain you. We hope soon to end our mission, and, once we have gained possession of what we are after, we shall be most happy to restore you to liberty."

He took breath after this somewhat lengthy address, and Nort and Dick looked at one another, more puzzled than before. What did it all mean? What was the queer secret of the professors, a secret that, somehow, seemed to involve Diamond X?

"Do you mean that you're keeping us here because you're afraid we'll tell something about you?" burst out Nort.

"Yes," answered Professor Blair. "We simply must keep our secret safe, now that we are on the verge of discovery."

"But we wouldn't tell!" declared Nort. "In fact we don't know anything about you—except that we've seen you once or twice. We don't know what your secret is—that is, we can only *guess* at it."

"That's just it!" interrupted Professor Wright. "You are the sort of lads who would make a correct guess, and then, when word of it got out, we would lose the fruits of many weary years of research."

"But we wouldn't tell anyone!" promised Dick. "All we know about it is that you're supposed to be

prospecting for gold. There isn't any great crime, or secret, in that, unless you're trying to get gold off land that doesn't belong to you."

"No, it isn't gold, nor anything like gold," spoke Professor Wright, in rather dreamy tones. "It is much more valuable than gold. I never would have endured the hardships I have for mere gold."

"Nor I," said his partner, and then, for the first time the same thought came to Nort and Dick—that these men might be lunatics, obsessed with a strange idea, and that they were searching for something that might be likened to a fading mirage.

The boy ranchers looked at one another. If this was the explanation their position might be more dangerous than appeared. To be held captives by men who were mentally irresponsible, aided by an unscrupulous gang, of which Del Pinzo was a fair specimen, was not at all a reassuring thought. But Nort and Dick were not the ones to give up easily.

"Just what are you going to do?" asked Nort, when it was evident that, unarmed as they were, resistance was out of the question for the time being.

"Simply hold you here for a few days—not more than a week at most," answered Professor Blair.

"Suppose we don't stay?" asked Nort, sharply.

"Well, if you refuse to promise not to try to escape, we shall be forced to detain you as best we can," was the calm reply. "But we have no wish to use violence, and I think you will agree to submit quietly. Be our guests, so to speak."

"What if our friends come to rescue us?" asked Dick.

"Well, we have thought of that," spoke Professor Wright. "If they come we shall have to do our best to—er—persuade them to go away again—that is unless we can bring our task to an end sooner than we expect, and that is possible. If we can bring that about—make the discovery we hope for—you will be at liberty to depart at that moment. Otherwise you must stay here!"

"Well, we won't promise not to try to escape," declared Nort, hotly. "We'll do our best, not only to get away, but to bring the police down on you, or bring whatever authority they have out here. If you're going to act this way we'll be justified in doing our worst!"

"Naturally," agreed Professor Wright, smoothly. "Now that we have been made aware of your intentions we shall act accordingly. We shall be obliged to keep you under guard, but I assure you that if you do not act roughly neither will our guards. I am sorry you would not agree to our plan, and see matters in our light. It would have been so much more comfortable. And when we have explained, as we hope to do soon, you would appreciate our attitude."

"Well, all I can say now is that we *don't* appreciate it!" snapped Nort, "and we'll leave at the first opportunity!"

"Then we'll see that you get no opportunities!" sneered Silas. "Let's take 'em out, Del!"

As it was evident that the two professors meant what they said, and that the boys would be roughly handled if they did not submit quietly, they followed their captors out of the dining tent, in answer to signals from Silas and the half breed that this was what was wanted.

"Here's going to be your stopping place," said Silas, with another sneer, as he stopped in front of a small tent. "And let me tell you it will be best for you to take it easy. You may get into trouble if you try to leave!"

To this Nort and Dick answered nothing. They were too angry to know what to say, but that they intended to submit quietly to this indignity was not in their natures. They cast quick glances about the camp before entering the tent, the flap of which Del Pinzo pulled back. The tent contained two cots and some small packing boxes for tables and chairs.

"All right!" said Nort, as he sized up the situation, and glanced back at the men who were his own and his brother's guards for the time being. "You can do your best to keep us here, and we'll do our best to get away. It'll be a fifty-fifty proposition!"

Nort was startled by an exclamation from Dick. The latter was gazing at some commotion on the far side of the camp. Looking out from the opened tent Nort saw being driven, along the bank of a small brook that ran through the swale, several big steers. They were being hazed along by Greasers on horses, and as the cattle splashed into the water, stopping to drink thirstily, the boy ranchers caught

sight of the brands on their flanks.

It was the mark of the Diamond X ranch!

CHAPTER XXI

THE ESCAPE

"Get inside, you fellows, now!" roughly commanded Silas Thorp. "If you're going to act nasty we can do the same. You can make it easy or hard for yourselves, just as you choose."

"We'll make it hard for you, before we finish!" threatened Nort.

At the sight of the steers bearing the Diamond X brand, Del Pinzo had stepped out of the tent, but his place as guard, if such he might be called, was taken by another Greaser, even less prepossessing in appearance, and apparently of less intelligence, but with as evil intentions. He scowled at the boys, and squatted down at the entrance to the canvas shelter.

"Here's where you're going to stay, though you can have the freedom of the camp if you promise not to try to leave," said Silas.

"We won't promise!" declared Nort.

"Not on your life!" added Dick, warmly.

"Then stay here, and there'll be trouble if you try to leave," threatened the man, who seemed to be a dried-up specimen of a museum attendant, which character, so Nort said afterward, he forcibly called to mind.

He spoke something, evidently in Spanish, or the Mexican variety of that language, to the fellow who had replaced Del Pinzo, and the man, who was making himself comfortable at the entrance of the tent, murmured:

"Si, senor!"

"Which means he'll do as he was told," spoke Nort to Dick in a low voice as Silas passed out. "Stick us with his knife or jab the business end of his gun in the small of our backs."

"We mustn't give him the chance," spoke Dick.

"I should say not! We'll get away before he knows it."

The brothers spoke together in low tones, but loudly enough for the guard to hear. However he showed no interest in what they said, from which they concluded he either understood no English, or pretended not to.

"But we won't take a chance," decided Nort. "We won't discuss anything we don't want him to overhear. It's likely they thought they could fool us by putting in a man we would evidently think couldn't understand our talk."

"I get you," said Dick, briefly. "But what do you think of those cattle?" and he nodded toward where could be heard the noise made by camp attendants driving the Diamond X steers whither they were wanted to go.

"Just what I've been thinking all along," declared Nort. "This outfit is a bunch of high-class cattle thieves!"

He shot the words out forcibly, and looked keenly at the Greaser guard to see if they made any impression on him. However, the Mexican was either a perfect actor, or he did not understand what was said, for he gave no sign, and appeared to be in a brown study as he sat hunched up on the ground at the flap of the tent.

"Wonder what's going on?" mused Dick, as the noise increased, the shouts of men mingling with the snorting and bellowing of cattle. "I'm going to take a look."

He stepped forward to part the flaps of the tent, they having fallen together, but as he did so the Greaser ripped out something fiercely in his own tongue, and his hand went toward a sheathed knife at his belt.

"Oh, keep your shirt on!" burst out Dick. "I'm not going to run away—not just now," he added as a qualifying phrase.

Whether the man understood the words, or guessed that Dick had no intention of escaping, was not made clear, but he offered no further objection to the act of the boys in pulling aside the flaps of the tent and looking out.

They saw that the cattle which had been taken from the Diamond X ranch—stolen as Dick and Nort believed—were being driven into a small, and evidently hastily-constructed corral, where they could get to the stream to drink.

"They've got a regular system," remarked Nort, as he saw the cattle being quieted down, once they were inside the improvised pen.

"Making a business of it," agreed Dick. "But you wouldn't think such men as these two professors would frame it up to be cattle rustlers; would you?"

"That isn't all they are," said Nort. "That digging and blasting means something!"

He pointed to where, on the side hill at the scene of the first explosion, the two scientists were evidently directing operations looking to another blast. Professor Wright and his aide seemed to pay no attention to the cattle that had been brought in.

"This is a queer sort of game," said Dick to his brother, as they went back in the tent and sat down on boxes at the heads of their cots. "I can't see to the bottom of it."

"Nor I, except that these fellows are doing something they don't want known. Rustling cattle isn't all of it, by any means, but if the other isn't digging for gold, or something valuable, I give up."

"But if they were after gold, why would they deny it?" asked Dick.

"You've got me!" admitted Nort. "It sure is queer. But I wonder if they're going to starve us; and what's become of our ponies?"

The last question was answered first, for Dick pointed to where, off to one side, Blaze and Blackie were contentedly grazing, being pegged out, as were a number of other horses.

And, an hour or so later, came the answer to the other question, for a man, who evidently acted as camp cook, came to the tent with a pot of coffee, some tin cups, and the head of a barrel used as a tray, on which was piled some food.

Had the viands been most uninviting, Dick and Nort would have eagerly welcomed them, for the boys were hungry. But, as a matter of fact, the food was clean, and well cooked. The two professors, whatever might be their game, evidently insisted on adequate culinary operations.

"Sail in!" exclaimed Nort, as he smelled the appetizing odor of the hot coffee, and what appeared to be some Mexican dish, cooked with plenty of beans, and more red peppers than the boys cared for.

But, as I have said, they were hungry, and this is the best sauce in the world. None of the condiments so freely used by the Mexicans was needed, and soon there was silence in the prisoners' tent, broken only by the clatter of knives and forks on the tin camp dishes.

Once or twice the Greaser guard looked at the boys in what Dick and Nort both agreed, later, was a hungry style. The pot of coffee was much more than the boys needed, though they ate up all the food. And it was while feeling in his pockets for a toothpick that Nort's fingers touched something which played a very prominent part in subsequent events.

Slowly Nort drew forth a small bottle, and held it up so Dick could see it, but so that it was concealed from the Greaser at the tent entrance. And then Dick noted that Nort held up a four ounce flask of paregoric. Nort had been suffering from toothache the past few days, though for some reason it had not bothered him since he and Dick had become "lost." Perhaps the excitement following that incident quieted the nerves. At any rate Nort carried the bottle of paregoric with him, for one of the cowboys had recommended that this household mixture of opium, rubbed on the gums, would give relief.

Nort found that it did, and since then he had carried the bottle with him, pending the time he expected to visit a dentist. He now held this phial of paregoric up so Dick could see, at the same time

pointing first to the Greaser and then to the coffee pot.

"Now?" asked Dick, in reply to Nort's obvious statement that he intended to administer some of the soporific to their guard.

"To-night," was Nort's answer, and then he put the bottle back in his pocket.

Dick's eyes lighted up. He knew the effect of a large dose of paregoric, comparatively harmless as it is in small quantities, or as Nort used it.

Now a way seemed opened for the boys. If only they could command the other elements necessary for success.

Nort made sure of one, by pouring out a cup of coffee, liberally sweetening it with sugar from the barrel head tray, and setting the beverage to one side on the ground under his cot.

The camp cook came to carry away what the boys had left—which was not much—and if he missed one cup he said nothing about it. Perhaps this was because, just then, some of the cattle tried to break out of the corral, and there was a shout raised for help—to which the cook responded. But the Greaser guard did not leave his place. Evidently his orders were imperative.

"When are you going to try it?" whispered Dick to Nort, as the shadows began to lengthen, and night settled down on the camp.

"Not until after dark—say about ten," replied Nort in a low voice. "It will take about two hours for him to fall asleep, and then we can get out, get aboard our ponies and trust to luck."

"If he only goes to sleep," sighed Dick.

"I'll give half the bottle full," whispered Nort.

The Greaser paid no attention to their talk, but sat immobile at the tent flaps. During the time the boys had been held prisoners no one had come to their canvas shelter save the cook, who brought them a plentiful supper, and also another barrel-head tray for the guard. The day had passed with several blasts having been set off, though the effect of them, and the object, was concealed from the boy ranchers.

In accordance with their plan, Nort and Dick dawdled over their night meal, having consumed only part of it when the cook, at about eight o'clock, came to remove the dishes.

"Git 'em mornin'," he said, as he turned to go out, evidently meaning that he was going to turn in, and the boys could keep what they had until the next day. This exactly suited them, and just before they were ready to lie down, pretending to be sleepy, Nort produced the cup of coffee he had saved out. Quickly he emptied into it half of the bottle of paregoric, and, stirring it to mix the opium concoction well with the beverage, offered it to the Greaser.

If the latter had suspicions he made no show of them, but, with a grunt accepted the unexpected refreshment, and drained the coffee at one tilt of his head. Then he passed the empty cup back to Nort, and proceeded to smoke another cigarette, an occupation that had been pretty much his whole task that day.

"Well, I'm going to turn in," said Nort in a loud voice, pretending to yawn.

"Same here," remarked Dick. Without undressing, they stretched out on the cots, not being afraid of soiling white sheets with their big boots, for there were no sheets to soil. Blankets alone formed the coverings, and these the boys drew over them.

There was no lantern in the tent, but the moon sent a stream of light in a little later, and by its gleam, in less than an hour after the dose had been administered, Nort and Dick saw the Greaser's head bent forward, while he had slumped down in a heap at the foot of the front tent pole.

Nort coughed loudly, two or three times, but the guard did not stir.

"Dead to the world!" whispered Dick gleefully. "We could walk all over him." He arose from the cot slowly, to silence as much as possible the rattle and squeak, and started for the front of the tent.

"The back way!" whispered Nort. "We'll cut the canvas! If we go out in front some one may see us. The back way!"

Dick comprehended, and turned around, picking up his range hat, an example followed by Nort. The

latter had opened his pocket knife, which contained a large, keen blade, and, a moment later, a right-angled cut was made in the back wall of the canvas house.

Before emerging, Nort looked carefully through the opening he had made. The moon gave good light, but, fortunately, the tent was in the shadow of some trees and the way of escape seemed clear.

"Come on!" whispered Nort to his brother. They paused a moment, listening to the heavy breathing of the opium-stupefied Greaser and then stepped out of the opening.

An instant later they stood beneath the starry canopy of the sky, having accomplished the first part of their escape from the camp of mystery.

CHAPTER XXII

BACK TO THE RANCH

Perhaps, after all, it was due to the peculiar natures of the two professors that Nort and Dick were enabled to make their escape as easily as the lads did. Primarily Professor Wright and Professor Blair were scientists, whatever else our heroes accused them of in their own minds. And though the men surrounding the mysterious prospectors might be scoundrels, in a sense, they did not have orders to be extra vigilant after Dick and Nort had been placed in the tent; so no general guard was kept over the camp.

Thus it was, that as soon as the lads stepped out of the cut tent, they found no one to oppose their progress. Too much dependence had been placed on the Greaser guard. Who would have supposed that Nort carried a bottle of paregoric?

Or, granting that it was known he had it, would you have imagined that he would use it as he did? The whole affair was so ridiculously simple that perhaps this offered a reason for its success.

For it did succeed.

Stepping softly over the rough ground back of the tent, the boys made their way some little distance from it before they hardly dared breathe freely. Then as they were aware of the silence of the night, wrapping everything in its somber robe, slashed here and there with insertions of gleaming moonbeams, their hearts beat higher with hope.

They looked toward the other tents where, doubtless, the professors and their helpers were sleeping. Then Nort and Dick caught the snorting of the cattle in the improvised corral—Diamond X cattle unlawfully taken.

"Wish we could let 'em out—stampede 'em," whispered Nort.

"Don't think of it!" cautioned Dick to his more impulsive brother. "If we can get our horses away without raising a racket we'll be mighty lucky."

The boys had, earlier in the evening, noted where Blaze and Blackie were tethered, and now they paused long enough to get their bearings, and then made off in the direction of their ponies. They dared not stop to look for their saddles or bridles. If they got away at all they must ride bareback, and with only the loop of a lariat around the necks of their steeds.

Fortunately Blackie and Blaze were gentle ponies—not too gentle—but, in comparison with a bucking bronco, they were as carriage horses to a racer. The boys knew they could manage their mounts once they were on their backs.

Step by step, moving cautiously, hardly daring to breathe, Dick and Nort made their way to the ponies.

"Take it easy at first," cautioned Nort to Dick, as he slid his hand along the lariat, intending to follow it up until he reached the peg, which he could pull out.

"Which way you going to ride?" asked Dick.

"North," was the answer, for Nort had sensed that point of the compass. "After we get some distance

away we can figure out which trail we ought to take."

"Anything to get away," murmured Dick.

Working quickly and silently, the boy ranchers soon released their ponies from the tethering ropes and managed to mount them, though it was not easy, owing to the lack of stirrups. But eventually they were on the backs of their mounts, and, looping a bight of the rope around the heads of Blaze and Blackie, made a sort of bridle.

Luckily the animals were not hard to guide, and a little later Dick and Nort were urging them along on the grass-covered ground, which provided so soft a cushion for their feet that scarcely a sound resulted.

"I think we're going to make it!" whispered Dick to Nort as they moved along, the horses climbing up out of the swale in which the mysterious camp was located. The moonlight gleamed down on the white tents, including the one from which the boys had cut their way.

"Don't be too sure—don't crow—we're not out on the open range yet," cautioned Nort, this time less inclined to haste than was Dick.

But their departure did not seem to be noticed. Any noise the horses made must have been covered by the lowing, snorting and occasional bellowing of the cattle in the corral.

And so it came about that Dick and Nort, by the exercise of their wits, with which our American youth are so richly endowed, had outwitted their enemies. Though why they should have been detained as prisoners they could not fathom.

"Guess we can take it a little faster now, can't we?" asked Dick, as they came to a fairly level, open place. The mysterious camp was now out of sight, though not out of mind.

"Yes, we can chance it, though without a saddle and bridle we are taking a chance."

The boys were never so glad as now that they knew fairly well how to ride, and that their steeds were not like many of the wilder western horses. Blaze and Blackie seemed to know that their young masters were at a disadvantage, and they trotted along as though under full guidance.

"I wonder what it all means—back there?" voiced Dick, as he rode along beside his brother. Nort did not have to ask what Dick referred to—it was the mystery camp.

"I don't know," Nort answered. "But I'm sure of one thing. As soon as we can get back to Diamond X we'll organize a raid on that outfit. It's the headquarters of the rustlers—or one gang of 'em—I'm positive."

"Looks so," agreed Dick.

They rode on at good speed now, though they were totally at a loss to know whether or not they were proceeding in the right direction to bring them to Diamond X ranch. Nort found himself regretting the capture of his gun, when Dick, who was a little ahead, suddenly pulled up his horse, as best he could with the improvised reins, and called:

"Hark!"

Nort stopped and listened. To the ears of the boy ranchers was borne the unmistakable sound of galloping horses.

"If they're coming after us!" said Dick sharply, "I'm going to——"

"It can't be that bunch," interrupted Nort, evidently referring to the professor's camp. "They're behind us. This sound comes from in front."

"Maybe it's Bud looking for us!" exclaimed Dick, and before his brother could comment, they both saw riding toward them in the moonlight, up from a little valley, several cowboys. The form of more than one was familiar to Dick and Nort, but as they saw their cousin in the front rank they cried out:

"Bud!"

"There they are!" yelled Bud in answer, and a moment later our heroes were among their friends.

"Where have you been? What happened? Are you hurt?"

These were only a few questions fired at the escaped prisoners, and as they managed to tell their

story there were ominous growls and comments from the cowboys with Bud.

"The scoundrels! Rustling our cattle!" cried Bud. "We'll fix 'em!"

"They're doing something else besides rustling your cattle," declared Nort. "Let's go back to Diamond X and organize a crowd to raid this camp! We haven't enough men here, and Dick and I haven't any guns," he added.

"All right," assented Bud, after a moment's thought. "We can do better in daylight, anyhow. Back to the ranch it is!"

And as the rescue squad turned to go back Nort and Dick rode with them, their thoughts busy with many topics.

CHAPTER XXIII

CLOSING IN

"Now let's have the whole yarn," urged Bud Merkel.

The rescue party of cowboys had returned to Diamond X ranch, after meeting Nort and Dick who were riding their saddleless horses on their way of escape from the mysterious camp.

Thereupon the two brothers told everything that had happened since they rode off together two days before, to haze back the bunch of wild steers.

"Hum! That's quite a yarn," commented Bud's father who, with Slim Degnan, Babe Milton and several of the cowboys, had listened to the lads' story.

"Did they harm you at all?" asked motherly Mrs. Merkel.

"No, they were very polite about it," answered Nort. "But of course we weren't going to stay with them on that account."

"I should say not!" chuckled Bud. "So you put paregoric in the Greaser's coffee! That was rich! Even Zip Poster couldn't have done better!"

"Oh, Zip! He'd 'a' drugged the whole camp, and brought 'em away one at a time on his shoulder," said Slim, with a wink at the others.

"Hum! You know a lot—don't you?" murmured Bud, but it was easy to see he did not like any fun poked at Zip Foster, a very mysterious personage, it appeared.

"How'd you come to find us?" asked Nort, when his own tale, and that of his brother, had been sufficiently told.

"Well, it was mainly luck, in a way," Bud answered. "After you two rode off that time, we didn't pay much attention to you for a while, as we had our hands full with the cattle. Then we didn't worry, even when it began to get dark, for we figured that the steers had given you more of a run than usual. We didn't worry, for I told dad that you were getting to be real ranchers."

Nort and Dick smiled proudly at this tribute.

"But," resumed Bud, "when you fellows didn't come back in the early hours of the morning, we did begin to get a little leery. And then we started off to look for you as soon as it was light. We needn't say we didn't find you. But we kept on hunting, and we were just about to give up again, and ride off in another direction, when we saw you heading for us."

"That camp of the professors' is pretty well hidden," spoke Nort. "I wonder if we can find it again?"

"Bet your boots!" cried Bud. "I could find it in the dark, but we won't wait until then to close in on the rustlers!"

"That's what they are!" cried Nort "They're cattle rustlers, and something else! Why, they had the nerve to drive some of our Diamond X branded cattle right in under our noses, and they never even

apologized!"

"Such fellows don't generally beg your pardon," commented Mr. Merkel, dryly. "But have you any idea what their game is, boys?" he asked the two brothers.

"They're digging, blasting and excavating for something that's hidden in the ground," answered Nort. "Whether it's gold or diamonds I don't know."

"I don't see how it can be either," said Bud, with a shake of his head. "Nothing like that has ever been found around here."

"There's always a first time," said Mrs. Merkel, with a smile. "And wouldn't it be wonderful if there should be a diamond mine on our ranch? I'd rather it would be diamonds than gold," she went on, "as it doesn't take so many diamonds to amount to a fortune."

"Well, all I've got to say is that if those rascals rustle off enough of my steers they'll be making a fortune that I ought to have," commented the head of Diamond X ranch. "I think it's time we closed in on 'em, boys!" he added sharply. "Up to now we didn't have any direct evidence. But if Nort and Dick saw some of our cattle driven into their camp, and held there, that's proof enough of what they are."

"That's what I say!" cried Bud. "Let's get after the rustlers, Del Pinzo and the rest! I always did suspect that slick Greaser, and now we've got the goods on him. Shouldn't wonder but what that Double Z outfit was mixed up in this, too."

"Don't go jumping too fast," counseled his father. "Zip Foster wouldn't like it!"

"Oh—er—well, you'll see if I'm not right!" said Bud, somewhat confused.

It was planned, in the light of what Nort and Bud had seen and heard, to close in and raid the mysterious camp of the professors' the next day. This talk had taken place during the night and early morning hours, following the meeting of the refugees with the rescue party.

"Maybe we ought to close in on 'em this morning," suggested Bud, as the conference broke up, when the first streaks of dawn were coming in the ranch house windows.

"No," decided his father. "Nort and Dick want to get a little sleep, and we want them with us when we close in. Then, too, I want to circulate the word around a bit, and have some deputies from the sheriff's office on hand to see that everything is done regular. Of course I'd have a right to go in there, right off the reel, and take my cattle. But I'd rather do it regular."

So it was planned. Nort and Dick, indeed, were glad to get some sleep and rest, for they had had a hard time during the last two days. But they were hardy, healthy lads, and their life almost continually in the open since coming to Diamond X ranch had made them able to endure hardships they could not, otherwise, have stood. So, after a short rest and sleep, they were as eager as Bud and the cowboys to start on a raid.

Meanwhile Mr. Merkel had not been idle. He had sent word of what had happened to several adjoining ranches, being careful, however, not to let news of what was afoot trickle through to Hank Fisher, owner of the Double Z. As a matter of fact, while there was no evidence to directly connect Hank with the mysterious operations at the professors' camp, this man was believed to have been involved in more than one cattle rustling operation.

It was hinted that he branded more mavericks than were rightfully his, and on several occasions cattle with "blurred brands" had been found on his ranch. But he always managed to explain matters, though his association with Del Pinzo, who gave it out that he was officially attached to Double Z, did not raise the value of Hank Fisher's reputation. So it was thought best not to include him or his cowboys in the raid.

But others from adjoining' ranches assembled at Diamond X on the morning selected for the start, and by this time saddles and bridles had been provided for Blaze and Blackie, and Nort and Dick sported new guns in their holsters.

"Now do be careful, won't you?" pleaded Mrs. Merkel, as the cavalcade started off, with none of the usual whooping and yelling that marked many cowboy affairs. This was thought too serious to be decorated with horse play.

"We'll be careful," promised her husband. "But I don't imagine there'll be any serious trouble. We'll surround the place and if those fellows have any sense they'll give up and take what's coming to them."

"Look out for the boys!" she said in a lower voice, nodding toward her own son, and Nort and Dick.

"I will," promised Mr. Merkel. "But from what I've seen," he added, with a twinkle in his eyes, "they're middlin' well able to look after themselves. Paregoric for that Greaser! That's pretty good!" and he chuckled as he rode off with the others.

The plans had been carefully made and each cowboy knew what he was to do. The idea was to surround the camp, if possible without arousing the suspicions of the inmates, and then make a sudden rush on it from all sides. This would be comparatively easy to do, since the camp was in the valley, with hills all around it. It was simple enough to follow the trail to the point where Nort and Dick had been met with as they were escaping. And when this point was reached, it was left to the two young ranchers themselves to say which way to go, since the camp was not in sight, nor were there any known trails leading to it.

"Well, as near as I can tell this is the way we came," said Nort, after studying over the matter a bit, and consulting with Dick.

"All right," decided Mr. Merkel. "You lead a party that way, and I'll take Dick, and bear off more to the south. It may be you haven't just hit it, and this will give us two shots at it. We'll keep within sight of one another as long as we can, and the first one who sights the right trail, leading in, will build a fire and send up smoke puffs."

This much settled, two parties rode off, Nort leading one and Dick the other.

They were closing in on the mysterious camp.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIGHT

The boy ranchers, meaning this time Nort and Dick, as distinguished from Bud, felt that they were on their mettle—that they were being put to a severe test. They had ridden out from the mysterious camp of the professors, and now they were to ride back to it, leading the raiding party. True, they had come out at night, and under the stress of excitement, so that it was not easy to determine the trail back.

But as the boys rode alone, each at the head of a cavalcade that was beginning to diverge, they felt the full measure of responsibility. One of them must make good—must pick up the obscure trail leading to the rendezvous of the cattle rustlers.

It was Dick who proved the lucky one this time. The party led by Nort was out of sight among the many hills and swales, when Dick, riding past a water hole, stopped suddenly.

"The trail goes in that way," he said. "I'm sure of it. Blackie stopped here when we were riding out, to get a drink."

"Are you sure he stopped here?" asked Babe, who was with Dick's party.

"Positive! He stopped in such a hurry that I slid off and fell, and this excited him so I had quite a job holding him."

In an instant one of the cowboys was out of his saddle and looking carefully at the ground.

"The kid's right!" he exclaimed. "There's been some sort of a fracas here."

In that country, where rains were infrequent, and travel light, marks remained for a long time on the dry ground.

"I'm sure it was here," declared Dick, "and we came out that way." He pointed toward some distant hills.

"Well, we'll take a chance on it," said Babe. "Light a fire, fellows."

In a few minutes a column of smoke was ascending, and two of the cowboys, holding a blanket over it, moved the cloth to one side at intervals, so that puffs of the dark vapor arose and floated upward.

"That'll call 'em," observed Babe, who sat on his horse directing operations, at the same time scanning the horizon for answering signals from Nort's party.

"Won't the rustlers see these and skip out?" asked Dick, as the smoke puffs went up thick and fast.

"Don't believe so," spoke Babe. "If they do see 'em they'll only think they're camp fires, or round-up blazes."

"We'll do the rounding-up," grimly commented Snake Purdee. "But of course these fellows may be on the lookout. Can't hardly expect much else after they come to know that their prisoners have skipped, and the Greaser has gone back to his baby days, eating paregoric! Oh, my spurs! That was slick!"

"There they are!" suddenly cried Dick, as he descried other smoke signals going up, about three miles away. And in a short time there rode up to the waiting ones the members of the other party.

"Dick says this is the trail in," remarked Babe, detailing our hero's reasons for his statement.

"Yes, he's right," assented Nort. "We did come this way."

"All right then! Go to it, boys!" commanded Mr. Merkel, and the party rode off.

As they advanced, the configuration of the ground became more and more familiar to the two boys. They passed places which they had ridden over in approaching the half-hidden valley, before they fairly stumbled on it and were captured.

"I reckon we're getting warm," decided Mr. Merkel, after several hours of cautious riding. "Some of you fellows better take it on foot for half a mile or so, and see what you can locate. We'll wait for you here."

Two cowboys, leaving their horses rather reluctantly, formed an advance scouting party, and the others waited down in a little swale. In less than half an hour the two scouts had returned, and their manner showed suppressed excitement.

"We located 'em," said one. "They're in the next valley."

"What are they doing?" asked Bud.

"We didn't stop to see that," was the answer. "As soon as we saw the white tents we came back."

"All right," said Mr. Merkel grimly, "now we've got 'em! Spread out, boys, and don't do any shooting unless it's absolutely necessary. We just want to capture the rascals. But be sure your guns are in working order."

Most of the cowboys knew this without looking, but Bud, Nort and Dick made a careful inspection of their weapons.

Proceeding cautiously, the cavalcade approached. Some had been sent on in advance, to circle about and approach the valley from the far side, thus enabling it to be surrounded.

Two shots, fired at a brief interval, was to be a signal from the advance party, led by Slim, that they were in place, and ready to attack.

"There! One shot!" suddenly cried Bud, as a sharp report cut the air.

It was followed, almost immediately, by another.

"Come on, boys!" cried Mr. Merkel, and there was a general leaping to saddles. Bud and his cousins were not a bit behind the cowboys and a little later, amid shouts, the two parties rode at a fast clip down the slopes toward the mysterious camp.

"Look! There are your cattle!" cried Nort to Mr. Merkel, as several steers were seen, standing in a bunch near some queer piece of apparatus that looked like a derrick.

"That's right!" shouted the cattleman, for he had caught sight of the animals bearing the Diamond X brand. "But what in the name of sour dough biscuits are they doing?" he asked. "If these are rustlers they're the queerest ones I ever saw!"

"Well, they're rustlers all right!" yelled several of the cowboys. "Come on, fellows! Let's get at 'em!"

"Right you are, Buddy!" rang out savage, exultant yells on all sides. The cowboys wished for nothing

better than to come to hand grips with lawless men who stole the fruit of others' labor." "Treat 'em rough!"

"Sit tight and ride hard!" called Bud to Nort and Dick. "There's going to be some hot work!" and he spoke to his pony, which leaped forward as if he, too, wanted to get into the fight.

"Will we need our guns?" asked Dick.

"Better have 'em handy!" advised Nort, as his hand went to the leather holster at his hip.

"Look at 'em!" shouted Bud. "They're going to fight us all right!"

Indeed, it did appear that the party in the camp established by the professors, taken by surprise as they were, meant to resist to the utmost. Men could be seen running back to the tents, whence some reappeared with guns or big .45s. Others, including the two professors themselves, remained at the scene where some of the Diamond X cattle were attached by ropes to the apparatus that looked like the derrick.

"Are they trying to brand your cattle over again, Bud?" asked Dick as he and his cousin rode alongside of the young rancher.

"I don't know," was the answer. "If they are, they're going about it in a new way. I wonder what they are up to, anyhow?"

Well might he ask that, for as the raiding party made its rush into the valley several men near the professors, were urging forward the steers that were harnessed, or yoked together in some manner, to cause them to act as a lifting force. By means of ropes rigged over the derrick-like structure, something heavy was being hoisted from a great hole in the ground.

The steers, unused to this work, for which gentle oxen might have been admirably fitted, were acting wildly, and the Greasers, and other campers, were having their hands full. This with the shouts of the attacking party, the thud of the feet of many galloping horses and the firing of shots into the air by the wildly enthusiastic cowboys from Diamond X, made the place one of great confusion.

"Rout 'em out, boys!"

"Haze 'em into the brook!"

"Cut out our cattle!"

"Rope 'em an' hog-tie 'em!"

These were only a few of the many directions that were yelled at the tops of voices as the boy ranchers and their friends swept onward down the valley, converging on the band of men they believed to be cattle rustlers, if not something worse.

"Hands up, there!"

"Drop those guns!"

These commands came sternly from Mr. Merkel, Babe and Slim, while Dick and Nort, riding beside Bud, felt a wild thrill as they realized that they were to have a part in this strenuous fight. To possible danger they gave not a thought.

But if the attacking party thought everything was to be easy, it was not long before this idea vanished. After the first surprise, the Greasers, and other rough characters in the camp of the professors, regained their nerve, and prepared to fight. There were shouts in hissing Spanish, and Del Pinzo was observed to be rallying his followers.

Bud and his cousins had a glimpse of this wily Mexican leaping on his horse, and, surrounded by a number of evil-looking men, riding straight for the invaders.

"They're coming!" cried Nort.

"I see 'em!" muttered Dick.

"Keep together!" advised Bud in a wild cry. "Stay with me, and we'll ride right through 'em!"

Several weapons popped, and two or three saddles were emptied, one on the side of the Diamond X forces. Nort and Dick heard bullets whistling in the air over their heads, and though they may have ducked, instinctively, they did not after the first two or three of these nerve-racking experiences.

"Come on! Come on!" yelled Bud to his cousins, as they saw Del Pinzo and his gang of Greasers spurring toward them.

Nort and Dick touched their horses lightly, and the spirited ponies sprang forward. Dick had a glimpse of the two professors, and one or two other men, standing by the derrick structure as though dazed at the sudden turn in affairs. Some of the helpers were endeavoring to quiet the harnessed cattle.

"Ride 'em down, boys! Ride 'em down!" yelled Mr. Merkel.

"You said it!" shouted Slim Degnan, and Babe added his voice to the din, the while starting one of the verses of his cowboys' song.

"Crack!"

That was a gun going off close to the ear of Dick. He leaned over slightly in his saddle, fearing he had been hit. But in another instant he realized that Bud had fired, with a pistol held so close to the eastern lad's ear as nearly to deafen him.

"Well, I got him, anyhow!" yelled Bud, and Dick saw a man who had been riding at Del Pinzo's side drop his gun and clasp his right hand in his left. "That's what I wanted to do—disarm him. No need to shoot to kill!" Bud went on.

Dick saw a Mexican riding straight at him, and the boy endeavored to bring his weapon to bear as Bud had done. But just as the boy rancher was going to pull the trigger something else happened. He felt himself flying over the head of his pony, and the next moment came heavily to the ground, while blackness closed his eyes. Dick was out of the fight.

The battle between the cowboys and the Greasers now waged hotly. Guns cracked on both sides and more than one saddle was emptied. This before the two forces actually came together. And come together they did, with the thud of horses and men meeting, as when two rival football elevens clash on the gridiron. Only this was more desperate.

Nort had a glimpse of Dick being unhorsed and left behind in a silent, huddled heap on the ground. A wave of sorrow, and then a wild feeling of revenge, swept through Nort's heart. He sent his pony ahead with a rush, endeavoring to wheel him to attack the man at whom Dick had been riding when unseated.

"Look out!" Bud yelled.

Nort turned in time to see Del Pinzo himself bearing down on him astride of a powerful black horse. The Greaser was yelling and waving his gun, from the muzzle of which smoke floated.

"I'll get him!" yelled Nort, savagely. He swerved his own weapon, bringing it to bear on the evilly smiling Mexican, and Nort's own face lit up in a grim smile, for he thought to revenge Dick.

But the next instant he felt a burning, stinging pain across his forehead and a second later his eyes saw nothing, while he was conscious that they were filled with blood that streamed from his wound.

"I'm shot!" was the thought that flashed through Nort's mind.

He endeavored to pull up his pony, conscious that he was losing control over the animal. He wanted his eyes to see where he was heading.

By a great effort of will Nort caught up his gun in his bridle hand, and with his right wiped away as much of the blood as he could from his eyes. A great emotion of thankfulness passed over him as he found that he could still see, though dimly.

He caught sight of Del Pinzo still spurring toward him, but the next moment a curious change took place.

"Let me have him!" Nort heard Bud yell, seemingly from a great distance, though, in reality from a position directly behind him. Then as his vision dimmed again, Nort caught a fleeting sight of a lasso whirling and writhing through the air toward the Greaser.

Del Pinzo tried in vain to dodge it, but his horse was traveling too fast. Then, as darkness again closed down on poor Nort he had a vision of the Greaser, covered with blood, shouting and wildly jerking his arms and legs, being pulled from the saddle to the ground, his gun going off harmlessly as he was yanked along.

"Bud got him!" was the thought that flashed through Nort's mind, and then all became black, and he

felt some one helping him down out of his saddle.

"Where's Dick? I'm not much hurt!" Nort heard himself murmuring, though, to tell the truth, he did not know for certain whether he was mortally wounded or not. "Look after Dick! Are they beating us?" he asked, though he could not see to whom he was talking.

"Dick's all right," answered a voice that Nort recognized as that of Babe. "It's you we're worried about."

"Nothing much the matter with me," spoke Nort, as his hand again went to his head. Then he found that a bullet had creased its way across his forehead, cutting a long gash, but making a wound that was only superficial, though it bled profusely.

"Are we getting licked?" demanded Nort anxiously, as more shots resounded in the valley, and he could hear the yells of cowboys, the clashing of bodies one against the other and the lowing of the cattle.

"No, we've got 'em on the run!" exulted Babe. "Come on, till I lead you to water, and you can wash off that blood. You look bad that way, even if you aren't hurt much!"

"Are you sure Dick's all right?" Nort asked.

"Sure! His horse stumbled and threw him. He's limping over this way now."

"Good!" murmured Nort, and his heart felt better.

But the fighting was not over yet. Driven partly from the valley at the first rush of the boy ranchers and their friends from Diamond X, the Greasers and Mexican cowboys returned with a rush. This took place when Nort was trying to rid himself of some of the blood that had flowed freely from the gash on his head.

"There goes Yellin' Kid!" cried Babe, as he darted away from Nort's side.

"Killed?" asked the boy, who could not see just then, as some water got in his eyes.

"Killed? Shucks, no!" yelled Babe exultantly. "He rode into one Greaser and knocked him seven ways from Sunday, and roped another, yankin' him out of the saddle! Oh, boy!" and with a yell Babe ran to join in the fray.

Nort cleared his face of blood and water long enough to see Snake Purdee keel over out of his saddle as a bullet struck him, though it afterward developed that the cowboy was not badly hurt.

Slim was slightly wounded, and Mr. Merkel had a narrow escape. But though the Diamond X bunch took hard knocks they gave harder ones. Nor did the professors escape scathless, for Mr. Wright was grazed by a spent bullet, and his helper was horned by one of the wild steers.

"There they go! We've made 'em run for cover!" shrilly cried Yellin' Kid as he spurred after the last of the lawless men. "Yip! Yippy! There they go!"

And go the rascals did—that is, those who were not wounded or captured.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TRICERATOPS

Diamond X cowboys were in complete possession of the mysterious camp of the two professors. The fight had been won by the Merkel forces, and at no very great sacrifices on their part. One or two of the cowboys had been wounded, but not seriously, though two horses had been killed, and also one steer. On the other hand, the enemy, as represented by the Greasers and some cowboys who were in the pay of the two professors, were in need of hospital treatment in several cases; one serious. But they had brought the trouble on themselves by their lawless acts.

Babe helped Nort tie a bandage around the bullet-cut on his forehead, and then, with his eyes cleared

of the blood, Nort was able to see that victory had come to Diamond X.

Bud's quick act, in lassoing Del Pinzo, just as the latter was about to ride down Nort, had been one of the turning points in the fight. When the Greasers saw their leader pulled from his saddle they turned and would have fled, but for the cowboys who surrounded them, compelling them to surrender with the grim words:

"Hands up!"

Nort saw Del Pinzo, and several of the others, being roped and tied on ponies, and then his attention was attracted to Dick, who came limping up with a rueful face.

"Hurt?" asked Nort of his brother.

"No, but wasn't it rotten that my horse had to stumble just as I was going to pot one of 'em?"

"Yes, but *you* might have been potted instead! We're well out of it, I think."

"They got you, though!" said Dick, a bit anxiously.

"Only a scratch," Nort answered, though his whole face was beginning to feel stiff from the effects of the bullet wound.

"Well, we seem to have made a clean sweep," remarked Mr. Merkel as he rode up, with Bud and some of the cowboys, to where Nort and Dick stood. "You boys all right?" he asked quickly.

"Sure!" exclaimed Nort. "But have you found out what it's all about?"

"We're going to," said Bud's father, grimly. "The two professors, as they call themselves, didn't take any part in the fight. They're over near that hole in the ground, with some of my steers yoked up to that derrick. I'm going to find out what it means. Keep those fellows well tied, boys!" he commanded his cowboys who had charge of Del Pinzo and his followers.

"Don't worry," drawled Babe, as he rolled a cigarette. "We've hog-tied 'em!"

Indeed, it did seem impossible for Del Pinzo or any of the Greasers to get loose, but their bonds were looked to again, while some of the cowboys busied themselves with the wounded. Then Mr. Merkel, followed by his foreman and the boy ranchers, approached the little knoll on which stood the two professors and the uneasy cattle. The animals had been prevented from stampeding during the fight because of the ropes that bound them to the derrick.

Riding up to the scientists, who seemed dazed by what had taken place, Mr. Merkel sternly demanded:

"What does this mean?"

He pointed to the harnessed cattle—his own Diamond X steers, which were now more quiet.

"I might ask you the same," retorted Professor Wright, and there was considerable excitement in his voice and manner. "By what authority do you ride into our camp, attacking our men, and interfering with our work which we have permission from the United States government to carry out?"

"I don't know anything about *that*," said Mr. Merkel, "but I do know that you have some of my cattle, and even the permission of the government doesn't cover the rustling of animals from the Diamond X ranch."

"*Cattle rustling?*" murmured Professor Blair.

"Your cattle?" added Professor Wright, falteringly.

"Yes!" was the snapped-out answer. "Those are my steers you have hitched to that derrick."

"Oh—those!" exclaimed Professor Blair, with an air of relief. "We merely borrowed them. They will be returned to you soon."

"But what are you after, anyhow?" burst out Bud, unable longer to restrain his curiosity. "What are you pulling out of that hole?"

The two professors turned toward it as the boy rancher pointed, and Nort and Dick, forgetting the pain of their wounds and bruises, followed their gaze to the excavation.

"We are pulling out ten million years," answered Professor Wright, slowly, in rather solemn tones. "Ten million years! We are pulling out a creature that walked the earth ten million years ago!"

There was a gasp from the listening cowboys, and Babe murmured:

"His brain sure is cracked!"

"Ten million years!" murmured Mr. Merkel. "But what has that to do with rustling Diamond X cattle?"

Before anyone could answer, there was some movement at the far end of the valley camp, and into it came rushing several more steers bearing the Merkel brand. They were being driven by several Mexican Greasers, who seemed very much surprised at the scene that met their gaze. In vain did Del Pinzo attempt to signal them to retreat.

It was too late. On they came, and with yells the Diamond X cowboys rushed for these latest arrivals.

"More rustling!" cried Bud. "We've caught 'em right at their game!"

"Go get 'em, boys!" commanded his father.

And in a few minutes, after the exchange of a few shots, the other Mexicans were captured, with the exception of one or two at the rear of the bunch of steers. They managed to ride off in the confusion.

"Oh, boy!" murmured Bud, as he threw his hat up in the air. "This is great! Even Zip Foster couldn't beat this!"

"He'll not get the chance, I guess!" murmured Nort, laughing.

"Looks like we'd corralled the whole bunch," said Slim. "Now let's take a look at this ten million year old creature the professors seem to have bagged."

The prisoners were now secured and the boy ranchers, with Bud's father and his cowboys, drew near the great hole in the ground—the hole over which leaned an improvised derrick. From this derrick ran a long rope, rigged over pulleys, and it was to the pulling end of this cable that the Diamond X steers were hitched. The lifting end of the rope extended down into the excavation.

"Just what sort of game is going on here?" demanded Mr. Merkel, and Bud knew when his father spoke in this tone that there was likely to be trouble for some one. "What does it all mean?"

"The explanation is a long one," began Professor Wright, "but——"

"It doesn't take very long to size up that you've been rustling our cattle!" said Slim, sharply.

"Rustling!" murmured the professor. "Rustling? Oh, I see, a western term for borrowing."

"*Borrowing!* Oh, Zip Foster!" murmured Bud, but his father motioned for him to remain quiet.

But Professor Wright had caught Bud's remark, and it seemed to give a new light to the scientist. He stepped forward, having seen to it that the rope, by which something, "ten million years old," was being hoisted from the earth, was made fast. The steers, which had been straining to lift the weight, were now comparatively quiet, and the second bunch, driven in by Del Pinzo's men, were cropping grass near the stream.

"There seems to have been some mistake," said Professor Wright. "We intended to pay you for the use of your cattle, Mr. Merkel, as I understand your name to be. And, now that we have almost accomplished our search, we shall have no further need of your beasts. I don't know why my helper sent after more, for those we have are amply able to lift out the fossils. We shall be through with your animals in a few hours, and will then pay anything in reason for their borrowed use."

A light seemed also to break over Bud's father, and the boy ranchers looked at one another with a new understanding.

"Do you mean to say," began the owner of the Diamond X ranch, "that you only wanted to use my cattle as you might use oxen—as draft animals?"

"Of course," said Professor Blair. "That is all we wanted them for. Did you think we intended to *keep* them?"

"Well—er—you'll excuse me saying so, but we certainly *did!*" declared Bud's father. "Rustling, we call it here, and it means driving off another man's branded stock. It isn't all clear to me yet. What are you after, anyhow? What's down in that hole, and what is it that is ten million years old?"

"A Triceratops," answered Professor Wright. "We have been on the track of one for a long time, and now we have found it. Almost the only complete remains of the most perfect Triceratops it has ever been the fortune of anyone to discover! If you will only have a little patience, and grant us the use of your steers a short time longer, until we hoist from its ancient bed the remains, you may soon look upon one of nature's wonders—a Triceratops!"

"Triceratops!" murmured Babe Milton. "Is that one of them slidin' *horns* you blow your lungs out on?"

"You're thinkin' of a trombone," said Snake Purdee, laughing.

"Or a saxophone," said Bud.

"No," said Dick, "I remember now. A Triceratops is one of the ancient Dinosaurs, or lizard animals, that roamed the earth millions of years ago. We studied a little about them in the Academy."

"You are right, young man, a Triceratops is one of the most wonderful of Dinosaurs," said Professor Wright. "For many years I have been seeking a perfect specimen, and now I have found it. In a little while you may gaze upon its skeleton remains, or at least most of them. Have I your permission to continue the use of your cattle as a hoisting medium?" he asked Mr. Merkel.

"Shucks! Yes!" exclaimed the ranchman. "I don't know what you're driving at, except that it's something scientific, but you're more than welcome, and I'm sorry there was all this fuss over it. If we had only known what you were after we could have helped."

"I did not dare let the object of my expedition become known, until I was sure of success," said Professor Wright. "A rival college has sent some of its scientists into this same field, and only by strategy have we been able to elude them and reach our wonderful success."

"Oh, so that's what all the secret was about!" exclaimed the ranchman. "Well, was he in the secret, too?" he asked, pointing to the bound and scowling Del Pinzo.

"He knew we were after something of this sort; yes," answered the scientist, "but he has no comprehension, of course, of what a Triceratops is. I believe he told his Mexican and Indian helpers, who assisted us from time to time, that we were after *gold*."

"Oh, so that's how that rumor got abroad," murmured Mr. Merkel.

"Did you send Del Pinzo's men off to get more of our cattle just now?" asked Slim, pointing to the second batch of Diamond X steers.

"No, and we never sent him, or them, to any special place to get animals to use on our pulley ropes," said Professor Wright. "We left that to him, merely stipulating that he was to hire animals, and we would pay for their use."

"Then I see his game!" cried the foreman of the ranch. "He took this chance to rustle some cattle on his own account, thinking you wouldn't know the difference, and that you'd be blamed for it. You slick Greaser!" he cried, shaking his fist at Del Pinzo. "This makes it all clear, now!"

"We certainly never intended to do more than hire a few of your powerful steers, to use as oxen," said Professor Wright. "But I can see, now, that we should have made this clear from the first, and not have left it to one who, evidently, does not bear a good reputation with you."

"You got off an earfull that time," commented Babe Milton, dryly.

"But why were my two nephews held as prisoners in your camp?" asked Mr. Merkel. "There doesn't seem to have been any excuse for that."

"Only our zeal to avoid discovery, and to keep our plans secret from a rival college expedition," said Professor Wright. "For this I must apologize to the boys. They stumbled in on our camp just when we had located the bones of the Triceratops, and we feared they had come from our rivals. I offered them all the freedom possible, if they would give me their parole, but they saw fit not to, and I thought the end justified the means."

"I see, now, that I made a mistake in trying to keep the boys prisoners, though it would have been only for a short time. But they got away."

"They sure did—with *paregoric*!" chuckled Bud.

"Well, no great harm was done," said Professor Wright. "And now that explanations have been made, and the guilty caught," and he looked at Del Pinzo, "we will proceed to lift out the Triceratops."

"Ten million years old!" murmured Slim. "Whew!"

"And perhaps older," said Professor Blair.

"Get ready, men!" he called to those in charge of the harnessed steers.

Then began a strange scene. The powerful animals from Diamond X ranch, acting for the time being as beasts of burden, leaned forward in the improvised yokes. There was the creaking of pulleys, the straining of ropes and the squeak of wood under pressure.

Then from the great hole that had been dug, and blasted, in the earth, there arose a mass of bones, imbedded in rock—part of the skeleton of an ancient and prehistoric Triceratops.

This fragment of an animal—one of the Dinosaurs that roamed the western part of America from ten to twenty-five million years ago—before the Rocky Mountains were even formed—this fragment gave little idea of the weird beast itself.

I have not time, or space, to tell you more about it than can be sketched in a few words. But those of you who have seen the restoration of these monsters, in museums, will bear me out when I say that they must have been among the wonders of the ancient world.

The Triceratops resembled a rhinoceros as much as anything else, but was much larger. He had comparatively short legs, a short heavy tail and, doubtless, a very thick skin.

His skull was his most remarkable feature. On top were three horns, the one directly over the end of his snout being short, the middle one long and the rear slightly shorter. Back of the last horn extended a huge, bony plate, not unlike the back shield on the helmet of a fireman, and over each eye was another protective plate of bone, doubtless intended, as was the rear one, to guard vital organs.

The Triceratops was the largest animal of his kind, more than twenty-five feet long, and while he may not have matched the Brontosaurus, or Thunder Lizard, which was from forty to sixty feet long, from ten to fourteen feet high, with thigh bones measuring six feet in length (the largest single bones known to science)—while, I say, the Triceratops may not have been a match for the Thunder Lizard, he was a Dinosaur to be reckoned with.

And as the remains of this prehistoric monster, that had lived, walked, eaten and fought on earth from ten to twenty-five million years ago, rose out of the pit, even the workaday cowboys could not repress a cheer.

"That's the idea, boys!" cried Professor Wright, who was quite a different person, now that his work was crowned with success. "I feel like cheering also! This is the culmination of my life's ambition, and that of my helper, Professor Blair!"

When the wounded had been cared for and the prisoners had been sent to the nearest jail, the remains of the skeleton of the Triceratops, part of the bones imbedded in rock, were carefully hoisted out and laid to one side. When I tell you that the skull, alone, of one of these monsters, imbedded in rock, weighed, when boxed for shipment to a museum, over three tons, you may form some idea of the magnitude of this sort of relic collecting, and understand why many powerful steers were needed, with tackle, to raise specimens out of a deep pit.

That the boy ranchers were intensely interested in the remaining work of restoring to science the lost Triceratops, goes without saying. When it was made plain that the two professors and their men were not cattle rustlers, Mr. Merkel gave them every assistance in his power, assigning some of his cowboys to help with the labor of excavating the remaining bones, not all of which could be found.

For it is rare that a complete skeleton of these monster Dinosaurs is recovered. While our western states, in certain places, are rich in fossil remains, there is very seldom a complete skeleton unearthed. At best there are but a few bones, or the impressions of bones, in the sandstone rocks or shale. But from these bones, from the impressions of those that have been eaten by time, and by their knowledge of what sort of anatomy was needed to keep these wonderful creatures on earth, it is possible for scientists to almost completely and perfectly restore them, in some medium like papier-maché.

"We shall be the envy of all our colleagues!" declared Professor Wright, as the work progressed from day to day, the boy ranchers becoming eager helpers. Professor Wright and Professor Blair labored with their men, and as hard.

There was one exception to this—Silas Thorp. He of the sour face and hangdog manner, it was discovered, had acted with Del Pinzo in stealing cattle, intending to sell them for their own profit, after they had "borrowed" the animals from Diamond X ranch, letting the two professors think the steers had

legitimately been "hired."

Silas made his escape during the fight, but Del Pinzo and most of his men were captured. Not all of the professors' employees were confederates of the Greasers, Del Pinzo and Silas Thorp. Some were as ignorant as the scientists themselves that anything wrong was going on. These men were soon freed, and helped in the work of excavating the Triceratops.

There really were some cattle rustlers engaged in operations around Diamond Z ranch when Nort and Dick happened to come on their visit. This fact was discovered later when some of the cattlemen organized a posse, and after a fight, in which several on both sides were slain, arrested a notorious gang.

It was Del Pinzo who had tried to rope Dick that night, hoping, it was surmised, that in the confusion, he might be able to steal some steers.

But the mission of the professor, that same night, was perfectly legitimate. He had heard that some rival scientists were "on his trail," and he rode off alone to see if this might be true. He found nothing, however, but his suspicions were ever on the alert. As a matter of fact he learned, later, that his rivals had never been near him. But he took all precautions, some needless, as it afterward developed.

That some of the Double Z outfit, and perhaps even the owner of that ranch, Hank Fisher himself, were involved in cattle rustling, was suspected, but not proved—at least for some time.

With the discovery that the professors were really scientists, and not cattle rustlers, all suspicion of them vanished. They had come west to hunt for the fossil relics and bones of the Triceratops. The reason they headed for Diamond X ranch was because, some time previous, another scientist, connected with the same college to which Professor Wright and Professor Blair were attached, had been given, by a Mexican guide, a bone from that strange monster—the Triceratops.

By dint of much questioning this professor learned that the bone had been found on land near Diamond X ranch. Professors Blair and Wright secured government permission to prospect on unclaimed land, and thus began a search for the complete skeleton, a search that ended so dramatically.

The two professors had hired an outfit, and planned to spend the entire summer looking for the remains of the prehistoric monster Dinosaur. Their actions were misunderstood by some of the Mexicans and Indians they hired, these ignorant men thinking gold was the object of the search. Hence the attack on the camp at the time Bud and his friends warded it off.

On the occasion when Ridin' Kid rode his horse against the tent, which seemed to conceal something valuable, there was, inside the canvas shelter, some bones that, later, proved to be part of the very skeleton which Bud, Nort and Dick helped to raise from its ten-million-year-old bed. The professors were afraid there would be a premature discovery of what, to them, were valuable relics, so guarded the tent jealously.

But eventually the bones and fossils were hoisted out of the hole, which had to be blasted larger to enable this work to go on, and the scientists departed for the East and their colleges, parting on the best of terms with the Diamond X outfit.

"Saddle up, boys!" called Mr. Merkel to Bud, Nort and Dick one day, about a month after the fight in the valley camp.

"What for—have we got to quiet a stampede?" asked Dick, who had recovered from his injuries, as had Nort.

"No, we've got to ride in to town, to give evidence against Del Pinzo and his gang," answered Bud's father. "Their trial comes off to-day. They've been in jail ever since we roped 'em!"

"More excitement!" yelled Bud as he raced for the corral to saddle his pony, an example followed by Nort and Dick.

The boy ranchers, with some of the older men, rode off over the prairies to the distant seat of the local government, where the trial of the cattle rustlers was to be held.

And, as they rode into the small town, a typical western ranch settlement, they became aware of something exciting that was going on.

Through the main street rode a number of cowboys, with drawn guns in their hands. Several of these horsemen knew the Diamond X outfit, and when one man clattered past on his horse Mr. Merkel cried:

"What's up?"

"Jail delivery!" was the answer. "Those cattle rustlers broke out just now! We're after 'em! Come on!"

"Not Del Pinzo and his gang!" cried Bud.

"You said it!" shouted the man—a deputy sheriff. "A lot of Greasers rode in just now, started shootin' up promiscus like, and in the excitement Del Pinzo and his crowd managed to get out of the calaboose! We got to get a new one, I reckon! But come on! We may land 'em yet!"

"Oh, Zip Foster!" yelled Bud, as he urged his horse forward.

"More exciting fun!" commented Nort. "Got your gun, Dick?"

"Sure!" was the answer.

Through the main street of the town rode the boy ranchers, following the trail of the posse of officers and men who were trailing the escaped prisoners.

As they turned into a cross thoroughfare the sound of rapid firing came to the ears of Bud and his cousins.

"Watch your step!" counseled Mr. Merkel. "Wait a minute!"

But the boys did not wait. On they rushed, only to come into action at the tail end of the fight. Some cowboys and members of the sheriff's hastily organized posse were shooting at some Greasers who had turned to make a stand. But the Mexicans saw that they were outnumbered, and fled off in disorder, firing and being fired at.

However, there were no casualties, and when one of the deputies explained that this "bunch" was not Del Pinzo and the escaping men, but some others, Bud and his friends rode back.

"They tried to draw us off the trail of that slick Greaser," explained one of the deputies.

"Can't we join the posse?" asked Nort of Mr. Merkel.

The ranchman shook his head.

"There's enough after 'em without you," he said. "And as long as Del Pinzo has taken matters into his own hands, and succeeded in postponing his trial, we might as well get back to Diamond X."

Bud, Nort and Dick rather regretted this, but when they learned, later, that the sheriff and his men rode hard all night after the prisoners, only to lose them among the hills near the Mexican border, our heroes decided it was just as well they had not gone.

"So Del Pinzo got away after all, did he?" asked Babe, when the boy ranchers rode back to put their ponies in the corral. "That Greaser sure is a bad one! He'll make trouble yet!"

And Del Pinzo did. He was of a vindictive nature, and he associated much of his trouble with Diamond X ranch. So, naturally, he watched his chance to be revenged on those connected with it, including Nort and Dick.

But for the details of this I must refer you to the succeeding volume of this series.

"Well, fellows, are you satisfied with what you saw and what you did, for a start?" asked Bud of his cousins, two or three days after the escape of Del Pinzo.

"We sure have had some summer!" exclaimed Nort.

"Never one like it!" agreed Dick. "It's a shame to have to go back to school!"

"Well, you wouldn't like it out here in winter as much as you have this summer," spoke Bud. "It's pretty fierce, sometimes. But can't you come out next year?"

"You said it!" cried Nort. "From now on we're going to be ranchers in the summer, and students in the winter. And the summer can't come any too soon for me!"

"Well, just at present, grub can't come any too soon for me!" laughed Bud, as he urged his pony onward. The boys had been out on a last ride, mending a broken fence. For, by this time, Nort and Bud were almost as expert cowboys as was their western cousin.

"I made a pie for you!" called Nell, Bud's pretty sister, as they rode up to the corral, and turned their horses in. "I hope you'll like it!"

"Couldn't help it!" said Nort, gallantly. "Pie! Yum! Yum! Where have I heard that word before?"

"It does seem to savor of happy days," remarked Dick.

"Oh, cut out the poetry!" advised Bud with a laugh. "Let's figure how long it will be before you can come back."

For Nort and Dick did come back to Diamond X ranch. Their further doings will be told of in the next volume of this series to be called "Boy Ranchers in Camp, or the Diamond X Fight for Water." In that you may learn what Bud, Dick and Nort did, and more about mysterious Zip Foster and the wily Del Pinzo.

As Bud, Nort and Dick entered the house, escorted by the smiling Nell, who was well pleased at the tribute to her pie-making, there was a rattle of hoofs, and a bunch of the cowboys clattered in, having been out riding herd.

"Grub ready?" cried Babe, as he slumped off his weary pony—Babe was heavy enough to make almost any pony weary.

"Come on!" cried Mother Merkel.

"Don't tell them about the pie!" whispered Nort to Nell.

"Oh, there's enough for all of them—mother and the women baked a lot, but I made one specially for you boys," Nell answered.

And what the boy ranchers said I leave you to guess.

Up the lane leading from the corral to the house came the hungry cow punchers, to wash the dust and grime from hands and faces, and then to eat with appetites that even a Triceratops might envy. And as they splashed at the washing bench, Slim raised his voice in what, doubtless, he intended for song and warbled:

"Leave me alone with a rope an' tobaccy,
Then let the rattlers sting!
Give me a sweet, juicy apple to chaw on,
Then when I'm sad I will sing."

There was a rattle of tin wash-basins, the swish of water as it was heaved at the singer, and then a howl of dismay from Slim.

"Take that soap out o' my mouth!" he bawled, and amid a chorus of laughter he ran around the corner of the porch, to escape the attentions of his jolly friends.

"Come on to grub!" sang out Bud, and no second invitation was needed. And while the boy ranchers are thus insured of at least temporary happiness, we will say, with the Spaniards:

"Adios!"

THE END

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