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# THE

**BOY RANCHERS**

**IN DEATH VALLEY**

**OR**

*Diamond X and the Poison Mystery*

By

**WILLARD F. BAKER**

Author of "The Boy Ranchers," "The Boy Ranchers at Spur Creek," "The Boy Ranchers in the Desert," "The Boy Ranchers on Roaring River," Etc.

# ***ILLUSTRATED***

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## **THE BOY RANCHERS SERIES**

By WILLARD F. BAKER

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Or Diamond X and the Chinese Smugglers

THE BOY RANCHERS IN DEATH VALLEY

Or Diamond X and the Poison Mystery

*Other volumes in preparation*

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**THE BOY RANCHERS IN DEATH VALLEY**

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## THE BOY RANCHERS IN DEATH VALLEY

### CHAPTER I

#### BAD NEWS

Excited shouts, mingled with laughter, floated on the sunlit and dust-laden air to the ranch house of Diamond X. Now and then, above the yells, could be heard the thudding of the feet of running horses on the dry ground.

"What do you reckon those boys are doing, Ma?" asked Nell Merkel as she paused in the act of laying the top crust on a raisin pie.

"Land knows," answered the girl's mother with half a sigh and half a chuckle. "They're always up to something. And, now that your Pa is away——"

Mrs. Merkel's remarks were interrupted by louder shouts from the corral, and Nell heard cries of:

"Try it again, Bud!"

"You missed him clean, that time!"

"How'd you like that mouthful of dust?"

"Git up an' ride 'im, cowboy!"

Like an echo to these sarcastic exclamations, Nell heard the voice of her brother Burton, commonly known as Bud, answer:

"I'll do it yet! Just you wait!"

"I wonder what Bud's trying to do?" murmured Nell.

"Oh, run along and look if you want to," suggested Mrs. Merkel, with a kind regard for Nell's curiosity. "I'll finish the pie."

"Thanks!" And Nell, not even pausing to clap a hat over her curls, hastened out into the yard, across the stretch of grass that separated the main house from the other buildings of Diamond X and was soon approaching the corral where were kept the cow ponies needed for immediate use by the owner, his family or the various hands on the big estate.

Nell saw several cowboys perched on the corral fence, some with their legs picturesquely wound around the posts, others astraddle of the rails. Among them she sighted Dick and Nort Shannon, her two "city" cousins, who had come west to learn to be cowboys. And in passing it may be said that their education was almost completed now.

"Why, I wonder where Bud is?" asked Nell, as she made her way to the fenced-in place.

A moment later she received an answer to her question, for her brother arose from the dust of the corral and started for the fence. He seemed to have been rolling in the dirt.

"That's a queer way to have fun!" mused Nell.

Without making her presence known, she stood off a little way and watched what was going on. She saw Bud mount the fence near where the two Shannon boys were sitting, though hardly able to maintain their seats because of their laughter.

"Going to try it again, Bud?" asked Dick.

"Surest thing you know!" snapped back the boy rancher.

"Wait till I go in and get you a bit of fly paper!" suggested Nort.

"Fly paper! What for?" demanded Bud.

"So you can stick on!"

"Ho! Ho! That's pretty good!" shouted such a loud voice that Nell would have covered her ears only she knew, from past experience, that Yellin' Kid did not keep up his strident tones long. But this time he went on, like an announcer at a hog-calling contest, with: "Fly paper! Ho! Ho! So Bud can stick! That's pretty good!"

"Go ahead! Be nasty!" commented Bud good-naturedly as he climbed up the top rail and perched himself there in standing position while he looked over the dusty corral that was now a conglomeration of restless cow ponies. "But I'll do it yet!"

"I wonder what in the world Bud is trying to do?" asked Nell of herself.

She learned a moment later. For Bud, after balancing himself on the top rail, looked across the corral to where Old Billee Dobb was holding a restless pony, and the lad called:

"Turn him loose, Billee!"

"Here he comes! All a-lather!" shouted the veteran cow puncher, as he slapped his hat on the flank of the pony and sent it galloping around the inside fence toward the waiting youth. "It's now or never, Bud!"

"It's going to be now!" shouted Nell's brother.

Fascinated, as any true girl of the west would be, by the spirited scene, Nell saw Bud poise himself for a leap. Then she understood what was about to take place.

"He's going to jump from the top rail of the fence and try to land on the back of the pony when it gallops past him!" murmured Nell. "Regular circus trick that is! I wonder if he can do it? But from the looks of him I should say he'd already fallen two or three times. Billee gave him a fast one this round."

Nell referred to the horse. And it was characteristic of her that she was not in the least afraid of what might be the consequences of her brother attempting the aforesaid "circus trick." Nell was as eager to see what would happen, as were any of the cowboys perched on the corral fence, and in furtherance of her desire she drew nearer.

By this time the pony, started on its way by the slapping from Billee Dobb's hat, was running fast. And its speed was further increased by what Dick, Nort and their companions, perched up there like rail birds, did and said. For the punchers, old and young, yelled and yipped at the steed.

"Come on there, you boneyard bait!" shouted Snake Purdee.

"Faster there, you spavin-eyed son of a Chinaman!" roared Yellin' Kid.

Nort gave vent to a shrill whistle, while Dick, drawing his big revolver, fired several shots in the air.

All this had the effect of further alarming the already startled pony and when it neared the place where Bud was perched on the top rail, ready to make a flying leap, the animal was, as Old Billee had said, "all a-lather."

"Bud is crazy to try anything like that!" exclaimed Nell in a low voice. Nevertheless she did not call out to stop him, and her cheeks showed rosy pink and her eyes were sparkling in the excitement of the moment.

"Go on, now! Ride 'im, cowboy!" came in stentorian tones from Yellin' Kid.

"Oh, I hope he makes it!" voiced Nell, clenching her hands so tightly that the nails bit into her palms.

A moment later, as the pony rushed around the confused bunch of its fellows in the center of the corral, Bud leaped for its back, for the animal was now opposite him. The pony carried only a blanket strapped around its middle. And there was nothing for the venturesome rider, or would-be rider, to cling to but this strap or blanket.

"If there was a saddle, Bud could make it!" whispered Nell in her excitement. "I guess that's why he must have fallen the other times."

For upon his clothes and person Bud Merkel bore unmistakable signs and evidences of having fallen not once but several times in the corral dust.

"Wow!" yelled Dick Shannon.

"He's on!" cried his brother Nort.

"And off ag'in!" roared Yellin' Kid.

Bud had made the leap from the fence, his hands, for a moment, had grasped the strap around the pony and then his fingers had slipped off. Likewise the one leg he managed to throw over the steed's back seemed to be about to slide off.

But just when it seemed that Bud would fall to the ground, his fingers, in a last, despairing grip, caught a fold of the blanket. By a supreme effort he pulled himself up, managed to get one leg over the ridge-like backbone of the pony and, a moment later, he was sitting upright on the saddle blanket, both hands under the strap, while his heels played a tattoo on the sides of the steed, urging him forward at even faster speed.

"By golly, he done it!" cried Old Billee.

"He sure enough did!" echoed Yellin' Kid, reaching for his cigarette papers and muslin bag of tobacco.

"That ought to get him something at Palmo," commented Snake Purdee, referring to a coming rodeo in a nearby town close to the Mexican border. "Can't do a much more hair-raisin' trick than that!"

"I didn't think he could do it!" commented Old Billee coming around from the far side of the corral to join his friends.

"Well, he tried hard enough before he managed to stick," exclaimed Nort.

In the excess of her enthusiasm Nell clapped her hands. And Dick, turning to ascertain the source of the noise, chuckled:

"Look who's here!"

"Got a ticket, little girl?" asked Bud, who, having demonstrated that he could do what he had said he could—leap from the corral fence to the back of a passing pony—was now slowing down his steed and riding him back to where the other punchers were perched.

"I'm a reporter," responded Nell with a smile. "I'm writing this rodeo up for the papers."

"Then we'll have to make a press box for you," said Nort.

He and his brother, with the half score of cowboys, and Nell were offering their congratulations to the daring boy rancher when a new voice, floating toward the corral from the direction of the house, called to ask:

"What's all the excitement about?"

"Oh, hello, Dad!" cried Bud, waving his hat toward a well set-up, bronzed specimen of a western ranchman who was walking slowly toward the fence. "Did you see me?"

"I saw you risk your neck, if that's what you mean," answered Mr. Merkel with a half smile.

"You should have seen him when he missed!" chuckled Old Billee.

"Anything the matter, Dad?" asked Bud as he swung himself down off the saddle blanket and approached his father who was now leaning over the top rail of the corral fence. Something in Mr. Merkel's face showed that he had news to impart.

"You see," went on Bud, "we're all going to do stunts over at the Palmo rodeo, and I made up this one, of fence jumping, so Dick and Nort and I could horn in on some of the prizes. But if you don't want me to—" He paused suggestively.

"You seemed to make out all right this last time, which is the only time I saw you," chuckled Mr. Merkel. "But——"

"You needn't worry about the ranch work, Dad!" interrupted Bud, eagerly. "It's all been 'tended to. Herd riding, looking after fences, cattle all shipped off just as you left word when you went away and all that. We got everything cleaned up and I thought we could take a little time off to practice for the rodeo."

"Oh, sure! That's all right!" Mr. Merkel hastened to say. "I wasn't finding any fault with your bare-back riding. But what I wanted to say was that I've got a new job for you boys and if you take it on, which I hope you'll do, you won't have any time for a rodeo."

"A new job!" cried Nort, eagerly.

"Anything to do with Chinese smuggling?" asked Dick.

"No, I'm glad to say it hasn't," went on the owner of Diamond X. "This is right in the line of your regular work."

"Then you bought the new ranch; did you, Dad?" asked Bud, for his father had been away about a week on a mission known only to the immediate family, but which was now stated by his son.

"Yes," Mr. Merkel slowly replied, "I took over Dot and Dash, and if everything here at Diamond X and in Happy Valley is in as good shape as you boys seem to think, why, I'm going to send you there."

"Send us where?" Bud wanted to know.

"To the new ranch—Dot and Dash is its cattle brand—to get it in shape before winter sets in. You don't mind; do you?"

"Mind!" joyously cried Bud. "Sure not!"

"That's good news!" commented Nort.

"Right-o!" sang out his brother. "Things were getting slow around here, and if we didn't have the coming rodeo to think about——"

"Well, then if you're willing to take charge of Dot and Dash for a while you can pass up the rodeo," chuckled Mr. Merkel. "Not but what you won't have more excitement, maybe, than if you did try bulldogging and bare-back riding," he added to his son. "Only it will be sort of different, and your stunts will be doing some good instead of just endangering your necks."

"Aw, there wasn't any danger," murmured Bud.

"No!" chuckled Snake Purdee. "The dust is pretty soft to fall on," and his point was illustrated as Bud began whipping some of the accumulated soil from his chaps.

"Well, that's what I came out to tell you, the news about buying Dot and Dash," concluded Mr. Merkel.

"That's good news for us!" declared Nort. "It will give Dick and me a chance to show how much we have learned about cow punching since we came here."

"Sure, it's good news all right," echoed Dick.

And then Old Billee Dobb struck in with a few remarks which, most distinctly, were in the category of bad news. For the veteran puncher said:

"Excuse me, Boss," and he looked at Mr. Merkel to ask: "Did I understand you to say you'd taken over the old Dot and Dash ranch?"

"That's right, Billee."

"Is that the outfit not far from Los Pompan, near the Mexican border?"

"That's the place, Billee."

"Hum!" The old man seemed lost in thought for a moment. Then he went on with: "It's in a valley; ain't it, Boss?"

"Yes, Billee, in the prettiest valley, outside of Happy, that I ever laid eyes on. It's an ideal place for a cattle ranch. I'm lucky to get hold of it at the price I did. But Jed Barter was anxious to sell out and——"

"Scuse me once more, Boss," and Old Billee seemed very anxious and much in earnest now, "but did you hear any rumors or talk about Dot and Dash before you bought it?"

"No, Billee, I didn't. What do you mean?"

"Didn't anybody tell you the local name of the place 'fore you took it over?"

"The local name! Why, no. What's the name got to do with it?"

"Nothin' much, maybe," slowly answered Billee while the boy ranchers regarded him curiously. "Only Dot and Dash ranch is located in what has always been called Death Valley, and nobody has ever been able to make a success of it as long as I can remember. I wish, Boss," he went on earnestly, "that you'd 'a' told me 'fore you bought this ranch. I'd 'a' put you wise to what it really is—Death Valley!"

"Death Valley?" echoed Bud Merkel. "What do you mean? Who died there, and how come?"

An ominous hush fell over the assemblage of cowboys on the corral fence and they looked from Billee Dobb to the owner of Diamond X. The bad news, clearly, had startled him from his usual calm.

## CHAPTER II

### UNDAUNTED BY FEAR

"Look here, Billee," began Mr. Merkel as he leaned against the fence for he had just returned from a long journey and was rather weary. "Is this a joke or are you just stringing me?"

"No stringing, Boss, and not a joke either. You've bought a ranch in Death Valley as sure as shootin', and while I wish you good luck I don't see how you're going to have it—not if Death Valley is like what it was years ago."

"You aren't getting my new Dot and Dash ranch mixed up with Death Valley in the Panamint Mountains of California; are you?" asked Mr. Merkel. "I know that place—four hundred feet below sea level—alkali—borax and all that sort of stuff. Do you mean——?"

"No, I don't mean that Death Valley," interrupted Billee. "This Death Valley I speak of is only a local name for the region around Los Pompan. But it's as bad as the other."

"Suppose you tell me more about it, Billee," suggested the ranch owner.

"Sounds like it would be a good yarn!" commented Bud.

"The kind I like to read about," added Nort.

"This is no *yarn*!" declared the veteran puncher in an ominous voice. "It's gospel truth. I'll tell you all I know."

He hitched his heavy chaps around to make his legs more comfortable and then, selecting a place on the ground, where a shadow was cast by the cowboys on the fence, Billee Dobb began his narrative.

But before I give you that, I want to make my new readers somewhat better acquainted with Bud Merkel and his two cousins. They are the youths who are to be the heroes of this story, and they first came into prominence in the initial volume of this series, entitled: "The Boy Ranchers; or Solving the Mystery at Diamond X."

In that story was related how Norton and Richard Shannon had gone out west, from New York, and how they took up life on the ranch of their uncle Henry Merkel. There they found Bud, who had been among horses and cattle all his life. Nort and Dick soon assimilated the traditions of the west, became

accomplished riders and able to punch cows with the best of the hands on Diamond X. The lads from the east also learned what it was to come to grips with rustlers, led by that notorious half breed Del Pinzo.

After having solved the mystery at Diamond X, Bud and his cousins were given virtual charge of another ranch in Happy Valley, not far from the main one managed by Mr. Merkel and his foreman Slim Degnan. But even on what was, practically, their own ranch, the troubles and adventures of the boys were not over.

Del Pinzo and others tried more of their tricks and in the succeeding volumes of the series is related about the water fight, the battle with more cattle rustlers, how the Yaqui Indians were trailed, and how the sheep herders were overcome. "The Boy Ranchers on Roaring River; or Diamond X and the Chinese Smugglers" is the title of the book immediately preceding the present volume, and in that Bud, Dick and Nort had some narrow escapes from unscrupulous men. Incidentally they helped the United States government bring to justice a large Chinese smuggling band.

Things on Diamond X had somewhat quieted down after the strenuous days with Delton and the others, and Mr. Merkel had gone off on a business trip, the import of which was little known to the boys. He had returned, as has been related, in time to see Bud leap from the fence to the back of a galloping horse in preparation for rodeo stunts.

Then Billee Dobb had made his startling announcement about the ominous character of the new ranch purchased by the cattleman.

"Before you spill your bad news, Billee," suggested Mr. Merkel, "maybe I ought to say a few words about what I've done. But also let me ask you if this Death Valley of yours is anything more than one of the picturesque names we have out here in the Golden West. You know we just naturally run to Dead Horse Gulch, Ghost Canyon and all that sort of stuff. So if your Death Valley doesn't mean more than those names, why——"

"It means a whole lot more than just a name, Boss," said the old puncher solemnly. "It means *real death*."

"Death to whom, Billee?" asked Bud.

"To anybody that's foolish enough to try to live there and ride herd," was the short answer.

"How about the cattle?" Dick wanted to know.

"The same thing happens to them as happens to the men," said Billee in a low voice. "They just naturally die off 'fore they can be shipped to market. Believe me, Death Valley is a good place to stay away from!"

"How is it, then, Billee," asked Mr. Merkel, "that nothing happened to me? I just came from there. I don't buy a pig in a poke. I went to Dot and Dash and sized the place up before I closed the deal with Jed Barter. How is it Death Valley didn't get me, Billee?"

Nothing daunted the old man replied:

"You didn't stay there long enough."

"Well, there may be something in that," admitted Bud's father. "But it won't take me long to tell you boys," and he indicated his son, Dick, Nort and all the other punchers.

"For some time past," he went on, "I've had the notion that I wanted to spread out a little. Neither Diamond X nor Happy Valley is quite large enough. To make any money in the cattle business nowadays you got to do business on a large scale. So I've been looking around, and making inquiries, and in that way heard that the Dot and Dash ranch was in the market. I'd looked at several others before I got word about this and didn't like 'em, for one reason or another.

"But when I got to Los Pompan, which is the nearest town to where Dot and Dash is located, it struck me that here I'd found just what I was looking for. The ranch wasn't too near the town, and yet it wasn't too far from the railroad, and I took the trouble to find out if the railroad branch line I'd have to use had good cattle pens and loading chutes. Lots of lines haven't."

"You spilled a mouthful of good beans right there," commented Snake Purdee.



"So," resumed Mr. Merkel after nodding at Snake, "liking the first once-over I gave the ranch, I investigated further. It had plenty of good grazing ground, lots of water, and there's a range of hills that will keep off the cold winds in winter. Barter's cattle—what I saw of 'em—looked to be in good shape. So, having satisfied myself, I made him an offer for the place, we dickered a bit and then closed. So he vamoosed off Dot and Dash and I went on and took possession."

"But did you come away, Dad, and leave no one in charge?" asked Bud, in surprise.

"Oh, no," was the answer. "I hired Tim Dolan, the foreman who worked for Barter, to remain in charge until I could send you boys down to get your hands in."

"Was this here Dolan anxious to stay?" asked Billee, slowly.

"Well, no, now you mention it, he did seem in a hurry to get away," admitted Mr. Merkel. "Though I didn't pay any attention to it at the time. He said he had another job, and——"

"Most everybody that goes to Death Valley does get another job," commented Billee, dryly. "But go on, Boss."

"Well, that's about all there is to tell," said Mr. Merkel. "I bought Dot and Dash and hurried home here to get Bud, and some of the boys to go down and take charge. And when I get here I find you practicing circus stunts."

"I'm through that stuff, Dad, if you got a real job for me!" exclaimed Bud.

"You'll get a real job all right, and then some," muttered Old Billee.

"Go on! Spill it!" begged Bud. "What you talking to yourself for? Broadcast it, Billee!"

"Oh, I'll tell you all I know, if your father is through," voiced the veteran puncher.

"Yes, I'm through, Billee," said Mr. Merkel. "Let's hear your good news."

"Tain't good news, and there's no use pretendin' it is!" snapped the aged cowboy. "If I'd known you was dickerin' for any ranch near Los Pompan, Boss, I'd 'a' told you to lay off. But it's too late for that now, it seems, so I can only warn you to keep away."

"But I've bought it and paid for it. Barter has my money and——"

"Let him keep it, Boss."

"And lose the ranch and the cattle on it?"

"Better to lose your money than to lose your life," muttered Billee. "As for the cattle, you'll find fewer of 'em there when you go back than you left there."

"Oh, stop croaking, Billee, and spill the beans!" begged Nort.

"Twon't take long," Billee answered. "I forget just how many years ago it is," he said, looking off toward the distant hills that bordered Diamond X, "when, in the course of my wanderings, I struck Los Pompan. There was a ranch there then, called Dot and Dash, just as there is now, but it was run by a fellow named Golas. Maybe he was a Mex. Anyhow I signed up with him and started to ridin' herd. But I didn't stay long."

"Couldn't you hold down the job?" chuckled Babe Milton, who was Slim Degnan's assistant, and as fat as Degnan was lean.

"None of your wise cracks!" snapped Billee. "I can cut out a bunch of cattle better'n what you can any day and I'm a heap sight older 'n' wiser. No, the reason I quit was on account of what kept happenin' at Dot and Dash."

"And what happened?" asked Dick.

"Death is what happened!" said Billee, solemnly. "Mysterious death!"

"Death can happen on any ranch," observed Mr. Merkel quietly. "We have, unfortunately, had deaths here."

"Yes, but they were natural deaths!" declared Billee. "And they didn't keep happenin' one after

another like at Dot and Dash."

"How many deaths were there?" Bud wanted to know.

"I don't rightly remember, but there was plenty."

"You said they were mysterious," commented Nort. "In what way?"

"That's what nobody could find out," resumed the veteran puncher. "First some poor devil of a puncher would be found dead off in some lonely swale. Then we'd find a bunch of cows stretched out, and then we'd find another dead man."

"Rustlers," suggested Slim.

"Rustlers nothin'!" scoffed Billee. "Rustlers drive off cattle—they don't kill 'em—what would be the good?"

"I meant the rustlers did up the cowboys," suggested the foreman.

"Well, if these fellows, who were found dead, got shot, why wasn't there bullet holes in 'em?" asked Billee, teasingly.

"Wasn't there?" asked Dick.

"Not a hole."

"How about a knife thrust?" Nort wanted to know.

"Not a scratch or any kind of mark on 'em!" declared the old man. "And yet their faces showed they'd died in agony. That's what I meant by mysterious deaths."

"It does sound rather queer," admitted Mr. Merkel. "But didn't you find out what caused all this, Billee?"

"No, Boss, I didn't stay long enough. And neither did nobody else I ever heard of, who worked at Dot and Dash. I vamoosed."

"Well, maybe there was something queer about the ranch years ago," admitted Mr. Merkel. "But that doesn't say, because fifteen or twenty seasons back something queer happened, that it's still going on."

"Oh, but it is!" declared Billee. "Not a month ago I met a puncher who was lookin' for a job. He come here but I knew we was full up so I told him to go over to Circle T, and he done so. But he'd been down Death Valley way recent like, and he said it was just the same."

"You mean about mysterious deaths?" asked Dick.

"That's it, boy! So what I says is, lay off that place, Boss!"

"Hum!" mused Mr. Merkel. "It doesn't sound very jolly. I don't want anybody to take any unnecessary risks and yet I hate to lose my money."

"You shan't lose it, Dad!" cried Bud.

"What do you mean, son?"

"Just this! Dick, Nort and I will go down there! We aren't going to be scared off by any of Billee's tales! We're not afraid; are we?"

He looked at his fellow boy ranchers.

"Nothing to it!" declared Dick, valiantly.

"Let's go!" cried Nort, eagerly.

Undaunted by fear, the three lads ranged themselves alongside of Mr. Merkel, waiting for his word.

## CHAPTER III

## ON THE TRAIL

Slowly the owner of Diamond X began to speak.

"That's just about what I'd expect of you boys," remarked Mr. Merkel with a smile as he surveyed the lads. "But I can't let you run your heads into a noose."

"That's just what they would be doing if they tried to ride herd in Death Valley," came ominously from the veteran puncher.

"Watch me get him!" whispered Bud to his cousins. Then, addressing Old Billee he went on: "I don't reckon, if we hit the trail for Dad's new Dot and Dash ranch—I don't reckon you'll come with us; will you—Billee?" and he drawled the last few words with a wink at Nort and Dick.

"Who, me? Go out there with you if your Pa thinks he'll let you? Is that what you asted me?" demanded Billee Dobb, sharply.

"You heard me the first time!" chuckled Bud. "What say?"

"Course I'll go with you an' you know it!" snapped the old man. "Hu! What you think I am, anyhow?"

"But you just said you vamoosed from Death Valley because you were afraid," said Bud.

"Well, what I mean I *was* afraid!" admitted Billee. "It was a mighty skeery feelin', I'm tellin' you, to start out in the mornin' an' not know whether you'd come acrost some dead puncher 'fore you'd ridden half way round the herd. I sure was scared!"

"Then why would you be willing to go back?" asked Nort.

"To look after you kids—that's why—if so be your Pa thinks it fitten to send you out to Dot and Dash. An' you heard me, too, the first time!" snapped Billee with a trace of temper which was unusual in his gentle nature.

"Well, I don't believe I'm going to send them—that's the answer to one question," said Mr. Merkel. "After what you told me, Billee, I can't see that it would be wise to take a chance. I'll put up with my loss, and——"

"Did you pay much for the new ranch, Dad?" asked Bud.

"Well, I thought I was getting a bargain," his father relied. "But maybe I'm going to be left holding the bag after all. It strikes me now that Barter was pretty anxious and quick to sell. I ought to have smelled a rat, but I didn't. And, by and large, it was a pretty good sum I paid. But, as I said, I'm willing to lose if ——"

"You aren't going to lose, Uncle Henry!" cried Nort.

"Not if we have anything to say about it!" chimed in his brother.

"And you got to count on me!" added Bud.

"The smallest roosters always have the loudest crow!" chuckled Snake Purdee.

"Hey, you! Cut that out!" growled Yellin' Kid. "There ain't a yaller streak in these boys an' you know it!"

"Course I know it!" chuckled Snake. "I was only kiddin'! Me, I aim to go 'long with 'em an' see what caused them mysterious killin's. Sure, I'm goin'!"

"Go easy, boys!" chuckled Billee. "If you all leave Diamond X, how's Slim an' Babe goin' to run things?"

"Don't fool yourselves!" snapped the lanky foreman. "I run Diamond X 'fore any of you fellers ever forked a bronc an' I can do it again."

"He's got me!" chimed in Babe.

"Ho! Ho!" chuckled Yellin' Kid. "You must 'a' been readin' the funny papers!"

There was an ominous note, now, in some of the voices and Mr. Merkel, knowing how easily tempers of even the best of punchers are ruffled, interposed a soothing word or two.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," he said. "If what Billee states is true, and I know he is telling the truth as he sees it, or as he heard it, why, I'm not going to send anybody to Dot and Dash."

"Oh, Dad!" cried Bud, beseechingly, while Nort and Dick chimed in with:

"Uncle Henry, we just *got* to go!"

"We'll have another talk about it," went on the ranch owner. "This is all news to me, Billee, and surprising news, too. I don't know what to do. I wish I had heard some of these stories before I went to Los Pompan."

"You'd 'a' heard 'em all right if you had asted me," said the old man, thoughtfully scratching his head near where a bald spot was plainly showing. "But I had no idea you'd ever locate there."

"Oh, I won't *locate* there!" Mr. Merkel made haste to say. "I'd never live anywhere else than at Diamond X—my wife wouldn't move. But I just have to branch out and this struck me as being a good place to start."

"Ain't no better place in all the west for raisin' cattle than the neighborhood of Los Pompan," interposed Billee. "And if it wasn't for what happened in Death Valley I'd be there yet."

"But what, actually, did happen?" asked Bud.

"That's what I don't know—what nobody knows," said Billee, "and that's what makes it all the more mysterious. Shucks! If we could 'a' found out what caused the deaths it would have been easy to stop it—whether it was Indians, rustlers or some disease. But we couldn't find out. That was the trouble, boys," and his voice sank to a whisper, "we couldn't find out."

"Then we will!" cried Bud.

"You'll do what?" asked his father.

"We'll solve the mystery of Death Valley. Come on, Dad," he pleaded, "you just got to let us go!"

"I'll think about it," was all Mr. Merkel would say, and there was a more serious air about him than he had worn in many a day.

Gone, now, on the part of the boy ranchers, was any interest they may have had in the coming rodeo at Palmo. All their talk and ideas centered about what the ranch owner had told them, and the bad news blurted out by Billee Dobb. While Mr. Merkel went in the house, where he talked to his wife and daughter, speaking only sketchily of the result of his trip and Billee's remarks, the boys began to question the veteran puncher. It developed that other hands on Diamond X had also heard rumors of sinister stories about Dot and Dash.

"But we never had no reason, before, for speakin' of 'em," remarked Squinty Lewis. And that, generally, was the sentiment. But though he could not have guessed his employer was on a mission to Los Pompan, Billee reproached himself for not having sounded a warning.

"Do you honestly mean to say, Billee," asked Bud while his cousins listened eagerly, "that there wasn't any way of tellin' how those punchers and the cattle died?"

"Absolutely not, boy!" was the reply. "They'd be all right one day, and the next they'd be dead."

"Maybe lightning struck 'em," suggested Nort.

"Lightning leaves a mark," Billee replied. "Besides, these things—I mean the deaths—would happen in clear weather. We didn't have many storms, though lightning did kill some cows and I remember one puncher who cashed in his chips that way. He was a nasty looking object, too, let me tell you. But Death Valley don't depend on lightning to get you. There's some other way."

"Well, we're going to find out what it is!" declared Bud and his cousins backed him up so forcefully that, in the end, Mr. Merkel at last consented to the boy ranchers going to Dot and Dash, at least to look the place over.

"I'm not going to ask you to try and sell it for me, so I won't be stuck," the ranchman said after his decision was made. "I'm not going to palm off a death-dealing place on somebody the way Barter, so it

appears, loaded me up with it. But I don't yet admit anything is wrong. However, if you boys find there is, just close up shop and we'll forget it."

"No, Dad, we won't!" said Bud in a low voice, but with great determination.

"What'll you do then?"

"We'll find that death-dealing ghost and lay him, or her or whatever it is!" cried the lad.

"And we'll be with you from the drop of the hat until the last gun is fired," cried Nort, while Dick nodded his agreement.

"Well, I like to hear you talk that way," Mr. Merkel said. "But I do hope nothing happens," he added anxiously, when the boys left to make preparations for taking the trail to Death Valley.

"Something is bound to happen!" said Billee, who had been present when the decision was made. "But maybe these boys'll be able to beat the game. They cleaned up the Chinese smugglers and beat the rustlers, so they may cheat this mysterious death—whatever it is."

"Hush!" warned Mr. Merkel, for the old man, in the rancher's private office, had spoken rather loudly. "I don't want my wife and Nell to hear. They'd never let the boys go, and I'm not sure I should, either."

"I'm going to be with them," Billee said, as if that meant a lot, and it really did.

"I'll send Yellin' Kid and Snake Purdee, too," decided Mr. Merkel.

"Yes," agreed Billee, "and it's going to be hard to beat that bunch. Well, maybe the curse has died out, but I'm afraid not—I'm afraid not," he added with an ominous shake of his head as he went to the corral to arrange about selecting the horses for the coming trip.

Los Pompan was about a week's ride, by easy stages, from Diamond X, and while the trip could have been made by train or auto, the boys decided to take their horses. Considerable in the way of supplies must be taken, and, after all, an auto is not of much use, even the ever-dependable flivver, in riding herd, a round-up or cutting out a bunch of cattle for shipment. Albeit most of the ranchers owned cars which came in handy for going to and fro from town, or getting in food and supplies to the ranch house.

"We may be able to pick up a cheap, second-hand car after we get out there," remarked Nort when his brother and Bud were talking plans over with him a few days before the start. This was after they had decided to ride their ponies to Death Valley rather than take the rusty and trusty old Tin Lizzie which they owned and which carried them back and forth between Happy Valley and Diamond X.

"Yes, we may need a car to run down this mysterious death-dealing force that Billee sets such a store by," agreed Bud.

Final preparations were made. The boy ranchers, with Billee, Snake and Yellin' Kid were to take over Dot and Dash. Mrs. Merkel and Nell said their good-byes, happily unaware of the dangerous phase of the undertaking. As for the boys, they would not admit it was dangerous. To them it was a great lark.

"I only hope they'll sing the same tune after they've seen some of the things I've seen," remarked Old Billee. "But I'll stick by 'em to the last!"

"On our way!" cried Bud, the morning of the start, when their ponies had been saddled and extra mounts, carrying packs, were loaded with food and supplies.

"Hit the trail!" echoed Nort.

"And we'll come back with its scalp!" added Dick, referring, though not specifically, to the mystery.

"Good-bye, boys," said Mr. Merkel in a low voice. "And—take care of yourselves," he added as he clasped firmly the hands of his son and nephews. "Don't take any risks."

"No, sir!" they promised. But Mr. Merkel took that for what it was worth.

So they were on the trail at last, setting out with high hopes and light hearts for Death Valley.

"Where's that outfit heading for?" asked a passing puncher from Circle T ranch, the nearest to Diamond X, and a place owned by Thomas Ogden, who was quite friendly with Mr. Merkel.

"That outfit?" questioningly repeated Babe Milton, sizing up the man and noting that he was a stranger, "that bunch is going to Los Pompan to take over a new ranch the boss bought." It was no secret—half the people around Palmo knew what Mr. Merkel had done, though they had not heard the

sinister reports of Death Valley.

"To Los Pompan, eh?" murmured the puncher, looking at the cloud of dust which hovered over the cavalcade of the boy ranchers. "Los Pompan," and he seemed unusually interested.

"Know anything about it?" asked Babe.

"Who, me? Not a thing!" and, putting spurs to his mount he was off and away.

"I don't want to be impolite," murmured Babe as he watched the puncher disappear in a cloud of dust, "but I think you're a liar!"

Meanwhile the boy ranchers were on the trail. What they would find in Death Valley not even Billee Dobb could tell.

## CHAPTER IV

### A NIGHT ALARM

"Well, Dick, how they coming?"

Bud Merkel urged his pony up alongside the mount of his cousin and gave young Shannon a friendly poke in the ribs.

"Oh, everything's fine, Bud," responded Dick.

"How about you, Nort?"

"I'm sitting pretty," was the response from the other boy rancher.

"That's good," and Bud began to whistle a lively air. "Thought maybe you were getting tired of the trip."

"What, so soon? And we've only been on the trail three days!" exclaimed Nort. "What do you think we are—tenderfeet?"

"Sure not!" replied Bud. "But this is one of the longest trips we've ever taken without something happening, and I thought maybe you two were getting discouraged."

"Nothing to it!" chuckled Dick. "As you say, nothing much has really happened, but we've been having a fine time since we started out from Diamond X."

"And there's still plenty of time for things to happen before we get to Dot and Dash and see what Death Valley looks like," suggested Nort.

"You said it, kid!" exclaimed Snake Purdee who, with Old Billee Dobb on one flank, and Yellin' Kid on the other, was trailing the three boys along the rough and dusty trail. "There's plenty of time yet for things to happen."

It was their third day of travel since Mr. Merkel had sent the boys and the older ranch hands off to take possession of his new place concerning which Billee had told such sinister tales. The first day was uneventful if you eliminate the fact that the pack of one of the led horses came loose, spilling the outfit on the ground. But it was easily salvaged though it took some little time to pursue and rope the horse who seemed inclined to take a holiday.

The first night saw the travelers camping under the glorious stars and though, as a matter of precaution the boys insisted on standing guard, it was not necessary. Aside from the distant howling of coyotes, not a sound disturbed their slumbers.

They traveled on the next day, stopping to cook their dinner over an open fire and the boys declared they had even beaten Ma Merkel at the cooking game. Though Billee Dobb was heard to complain that the beans, which Dick passed to him, somehow lacked the home ranch flavor.

They were now on their third day of travel, after two uneventful nights spent in the open, and, so far, nothing had happened. Truth to tell, Dick and Nort were beginning to get a bit discouraged. They had

heard much about the great and glorious west before coming to live at Diamond X and the things that happened shortly after they arrived were quite "up to sample," as Dick used to remark. And in the succeeding seasons they passed with Bud, riding fence, helping at the round-ups and at the cutting out of cattle for shipment, enough had taken place to satisfy any reasonable lad.

So it was not without reason that Dick and Nort expected something startling to happen after they had started on this expedition. Especially after what Billee Dobb had told them concerning Death Valley.

"But we haven't had any trouble since that one load was spilled," complained Dick as he and his brother and cousin rode along together.

"Are you looking for trouble?" chuckled Bud.

"Well, I'd like enough to keep from getting lonesome," was the reply.  
"You take it now——"

Dick's remarks were suddenly interrupted for, at that moment, his pony felt its left forefoot slipping into the burrow of a prairie dog. And in shifting and struggling to keep from going down the pony neatly shook Dick from the saddle and deposited him in a heap alongside the trail.

"Ride 'im, cowboy!" shouted Yellin' Kid.

"Say, this is no rodeo!" chuckled Bud.

"Are you hurt?" Nort anxiously inquired, spurring to his brother, who was scrambling to his feet. The pony, after running on a little way, came to a stop for the reins slipped down over its head and this was sufficient signal to cause a halt.

"Hurt? Shucks, no!" cried Dick. "'Tisn't the first time I've had a fall." Nor was it. Suddenly leaving the saddle was something a cowboy must count on any time of the night or day. And there are ways of falling off gracefully, and without damage, just as there are in submitting to a football tackle. Dick and Nort had learned how to protect themselves.

"Well, something happened then all right!" chuckled Bud as he rode on to capture Dick's pony and lead him back to the unseated ranch lad.

"Thanks, but I don't care for just that kind of happening," and Dick laughed as he vaulted into the saddle and the travelers kept on their way. Because of the fact that they had with them several led horses, carrying packs containing food and other supplies, their progress was necessarily slow.

"Well, we're half way there, I guess, aren't we, Billee?" asked Bud when, late that afternoon, they reached a place in a grove of trees amid the foothills where it seemed a good place to make camp for the night.

"Leetle more'n half way," admitted the old puncher.

"That's good!" sighed Dick. "I'm anxious to see what we'll find in Death Valley."

"Do you know, Billee, I've got another idea," remarked Bud as the horses were picketed and preparations begun for cooking supper. "I mean about the mysterious deaths of men and cattle you say you saw while you were a hand on Dot and Dash."

"Yes, I seen 'em all right!" declared Billee with more force than grammar.

"I'm not doubting that," admitted Bud. "Though you don't know what killed 'em. But I got an idea."

"What?" chorused Nort and Dick.

"A poison spring!" exclaimed Bud. "I mean bad water. You know there's a lot of it out this way, and especially as we get into the mineral district, where dad's new ranch is located. Maybe there were poison springs on Dot and Dash, Billee, and the men you saw lying dead, and also the cattle, might have drunk from them. Couldn't it happen that way?"

"Yes, it *could*," admitted Billee with an emphasis which showed his doubt. "But I never heard tell of no bad water on Dot and Dash."

"But maybe we can find some," went on Bud.

"Find bad water—poison springs! Sufferin' horned toads, what you want to do that for?" roared Yellin' Kid.

"To prove my point," answered Bud, "and to locate such places and fence 'em off so there won't be any more deaths. If dad is going to develop this ranch he doesn't want bad water on it."

"You're right! I didn't think of that," admitted the cowboy. "The kid may be right, Billee," he went on.

"Yes, he *may* be," admitted the veteran with that same emphasis of doubt. "And it's true enough the Boss wants to develop this new ranch. He said, if we could get it going, he'd buy a big herd and raise cattle down there. But first Death Valley has got to be cleaned up, and that's certain!"

"And cleaning up Death Valley and solving the mystery is just what we are going to do!" declared Bud. "How about it, boys?" and he turned to his cousins.

"We're with you!" echoed Nort and Dick in chorus.

After the meal, and as darkness began to fall, the travelers sat about the campfire, the dancing flames of which cast flickering shadows over their faces. The men were smoking and the boys talked among themselves, speculating over the mystery and occasionally listening to the conversation of Billee, Snake and Yellin' Kid.

"Well, I'm goin' to turn in!" Billee announced at last as he rose and started for his blankets. As the air was warm and dry they had not erected the small tent which was carried.

"Shall we stand guard?" asked Nort.

"What in the name of Tunket for?" asked Snake. "What good did it do you to have sentry-go the other nights?"

"None," admitted Bud. "Guess there isn't much sense in it."

"What do you say, Billee?" asked Nort.

"Anybody what wants to stay awake all night listenin' to them pesky coyotes has my permission!" chuckled the old man. "As for me, I'm going to pound my ear," and he prepared to crawl into his bed.

"We'll let it go," Bud decided and his cousins were not at all averse to this, for it was no fun for one member of the trio to lose even a few hours' sleep while waiting to call his relief to take the nest trick.

Accordingly, a little later, all six of the travelers were peacefully slumbering, while the restless horses moved about the length of their picket ropes, picking what herbage they could reach.

It happened to be Dick who was suddenly awakened at what he judged to be the middle of the night. And the manner of his awakening was this. He seemed to be dreaming that he was buying a new pair of shoes and, after having tried on several tentative pairs in a shop, the salesman, who was attired in the full regalia of a cowboy, gave Dick's left foot a sharp kick as if to indicate that he should remove the shoe from it.

This kick was so realistic that it awakened the youth and he sat up, his eyes barely open, but feeling a distinct pain in his left foot.

"That was some vivid dream," Dick was murmuring to himself when he suddenly became aware that some one was moving away from him—a dark figure barely seen in the shadows of the night—shadows cast by the flickering embers of the fire. And then, in a rush, there came to the young rancher the meaning of this night alarm. It had been partly a dream and partly an actual happening.

Some one had stepped over him as he lay in his blankets and had kicked his foot, causing the dream to merge into reality.

"Who are you?" cried Dick sharply, reaching for his gun.

## CHAPTER V



Flaring up suddenly, a stick, in the embers of the fire which had long been smoldering, burst into blaze. By the light of this Dick saw the figure hurrying out of the maze of sleeping bodies in the camp. And there was light enough to see, though dimly, that the figure was that of an old man.

"Billee Dobb, is that you?" cried Dick, lowering the gun with which he had begun to draw a bead on the moving figure. "What's the matter?"

But, even as he asked the question his eyes roved to the place where the old puncher had spread his blankets. And a huddled form there told Dick that Billee was still sleeping.

Then, before the boy rancher could again get his gun up, the mysterious figure that had caused the night alarm slipped out of the circle of firelight and into the shadows of darkness.

Hardly sure, even yet, that it was not all a dream, part of the queer, fantastic vision of the cowboy shoe salesman kicking his foot, Dick sat there on his blankets, fingering his gun and wondering what would happen next.

"Did I see an old man or didn't I?" the boy was asking himself when two other things happened simultaneously, in the end convincing him that it was not all a dream.

One thing that happened was that Billee Dobb himself awakened and sat up as Dick was doing.

"What's the row?" the veteran cattle puncher demanded.

Before Dick could reply there was a disturbance among the tethered ponies as though something had alarmed them. In a flash it came to Dick that the intruder he had seen was trying to steal a horse. The ponies did not dream. When they saw anything they knew it was real. Accordingly the boy sharply called:

"A horse thief, Billee!"

This warning was enough to set any Westerner on the alert in an instant, for, in spite of the progress of automobiles, the horse is still, in the cattle reaches of the west, a thing most vitally needed.

"Horse thieves, eh?" cried Billee in ringing tones. "The varmints! Come on, boys! We'll get 'em!"

His cries and the voice of Dick served to rouse the others in camp and in a few moments Nort, Bud, Yellin' Kid and Snake Purdee had unrolled from their warm blankets and had grabbed their guns. Bud threw some light cottonwood on the embers and the blaze that at once resulted showed objects up fairly plainly, though there was sufficient shadow to make the picking out of any particular horse thief very difficult.

"Where is he—which way did he go?" shouted Yellin' Kid.

"Over there!" and Dick pointed the trail along which they had ridden that day. Quickly he told his story—how he had been awakened by the midnight visitor kicking the boy's foot as he strode over him.

"Come on!" called Snake and in a moment the entire camp was trailing after him in the direction where Dick had seen the old man vanish.

But it was like pursuing one of the shadows of the night, and it did not take long, after emerging from the circle of illumination of the fire into the blackness of the surrounding night, to impress all with the idea that a capture was out of the question.

"How many horses did he get?" asked Bud. "Gee! Why didn't you wake me, Dick?"

"I did as soon as I got my wits about me," was the answer. "It all happened so suddenly."

"Horse thieves don't generally send word they're comin'!" chuckled Billee. "But it strikes me you've made a mistake, Dick."

"A mistake, how?"

"Callin' this old man, as you say he was, a horse thief."

"What else was he?"

"I'm not sayin' he wasn't. But he didn't take any of our ponies. Count for yourself."

It took only a few moments to enumerate the riding and pack animals tethered near the camp and the count was found to total correctly. Not an animal was missing.

"Guess you were too quick for him," commented Nort to his brother.  
"It's lucky you woke up."

"It's lucky he kicked my foot!" chuckled Dick. "Lucky for us and unlucky for him."

"Somewhat," admitted Billee Dobb. "Well, he come here and he went away, and we aren't none the worse off as far as I can make out. Guess I was a little out when I said not to stand guard. But I didn't imagine we were in horse-thieves' country."

"Hadn't we better have sentry-go from now on?" suggested Bud.

"'Twouldn't be a bad idea," admitted Billee.

"I'll take first shot at it," said Dick. "I'm wide awake now and since I saw this old man I'll know him again if he comes sneaking back."

Nort and Bud were as eager to take the first watch as was Dick, but he insisted that it go to him. So, after another supply of light wood was placed near the fire in readiness to throw on and produce a quick blaze, in case of another alarm, the others retired to their blankets and Dick was left on guard.

Once more the silence of the night settled over the camp, a silence broken only by the occasional howl of a distant coyote. Dick made himself as comfortable as possible and at first he was able to keep widely awake. Then as the fatigues of the day manifested themselves in a desire to go to sleep once more he found himself wishing that the intruder would come back again to furnish excitement to keep him awake.

But nothing like that happened. The night continued quiet and in due time it came the turn of Bud to relieve Dick. Later Nort relieved Bud and finished the night watch which came to an end when a rosy tint in the east announced, the coming of a new day.

"Well, you didn't catch anybody I see!" chuckled Billee as he sauntered down to the water hole to wash for breakfast.

"No, nothing happened while I was on duty," announced Bud.

"He knew better than to come while I was sitting up waiting for him," added Nort.

"You didn't see anything; did you, Dick?" asked Yellin' Kid of the remaining sentry. "I mean after the first scare."

"No, nothing. He didn't come back—whoever he was."

"Wonder what he came for, anyhow?" mused Bud who had started to follow Billee to the water hole.

Suddenly Nort, who was walking near his cousin, stooped and picked something up off the ground. It was a soiled bit of paper, evidently part of what had once been a grocery bag.

"Maybe he came to leave this!" suggested Nort as he turned the paper over.

"Came to leave that—what is it?" asked Bud.

"It's some sort of a warning, I guess," was the answer. "Look!"

He held the soiled scrap out to the others. The writing was large and straggling, but it was plain. The warning said:

**KEEP AWAY FROM DEATH VALLEY IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU. S. T.**

## **CHAPTER VI**

Silently the little circle of ranchers, young and old, gazed at the ominous warning Nort had picked up. Yellin' Kid was the first to speak, following the reading of the message on the dirty piece of bag paper.

"Well, I'll be horn-swoggled!" voiced the Kid in his usual loud tones.

Billee Dobb looked sharply from Nort to Dick and then at Bud.

"This any of your doin's?" he asked.

"Our doings! What do you mean?" challenged Bud.

"I mean you aren't getting up some stunts for the rodeo—oh, I forgot—that's off," the veteran puncher hastened to add. "But none of you youngsters did this, I hope."

"Dropped that warning?" questioned Dick. "I should say not! I didn't do it!"

"Nor I!" voiced Nort. "I picked it up, and I can see, Billee, you might naturally be suspicious of me as one who knew just where to locate this piece of paper. But I had nothing to do with it."

"Nor I!" said Bud. "'Tisn't my idea of the right kind of a joke to play."

"You never can tell what young fellows will do," murmured Old Billee. "But I'm glad to hear you three say you had nothing to do with it. Sort of relieves me."

"'Tisn't my kind of writing," went on Dick as though he thought, because he had given the first alarm and had been, in fact, the only one to view the midnight intruder, that more suspicion might attach to him as the joker than to any one else.

"I'm not much on writin' myself," declared Yellin' Kid, "and while I might say I'd be proud if I could sling a pen the way this feller did, I want it distinctly understood I didn't have nothin' to do with it."

"You needn't tell the folks in the next county about it," gently chided Billee. Then he took the paper from Snake Purdee, who was curiously examining it, and subjected it to a close scrutiny.

"Make anything of it, Billee?" asked Yellin' Kid endeavoring to put the soft pedal on his voice.

"The writin' ain't that of anybody I know," said the veteran, "and I can't, offhand, recall anybody whose initials are S.T. But Tim Mellick, who keeps the store over at Palmo, has paper bags of the same kind of stuff as this."

"I don't believe that will be much of a clew," said Dick. "Most paper bags are alike, and store keepers get their supply of them from a wholesale house that supplies a hundred customers."

"No, I don't reckon we can do much toward pickin' up the trail of this fellow from that scrap," admitted Billee. "So the next best thing to do is to get breakfast."

"That's right—let's eat!" exclaimed Snake.

"But you aren't going to throw that away; are you?" asked Dick as he saw Billee folding the ragged piece of brown paper containing the sinister warning.

"Throw it away? Oh, no! Of course I'm not. I'm going to keep it until I can find out what it means."

"What it means is plain enough," said Bud. "Somebody doesn't want us to go on to Death Valley and Dot and Dash ranch."

"All the more reason why we should go on there and see what it means!" cried Nort.

"That's the talk!" echoed his brother and cousin.

"If they're trying to scare us away, they'll find we don't scare worth a cent," added Bud.

"It goes to prove, though," remarked Dick, "that Billee's story is likely to be borne out. I mean that there's something queer going on at Death Valley."

"Queer is right!" assented Bud. "Though whether this is a warning in our interests, sent by one who doesn't want to see any of us get put out of business with the poisoned water, or whether it's a warning to keep away so we won't discover some crooked business—that's something we can't answer."

"Not yet," said Billee Dobb significantly. "But we'll soon be able to. I've got my mind made up, now."

I'm going to see this thing through to the finish!" and he smote his right fist into his open left hand with a sound like the report of a small gun.

"That's the way to talk!" cried Yellin' Kid. "I wish I'd had a sight of the fellow who dropped that warning," he went on. "He would be sitting down here now talking Turkey and tellin' what it was all about. Why didn't you call me first, Dick?"

"I raised the alarm as soon as I could wake myself up," was the answer. "But I guess we were all sleeping pretty sound."

While Snake was frying the bacon and making the coffee, some of the others cast about the camp in a circle, seeking some clew to the midnight visitor. But nothing could be found that shed any light on the mystery. It was evident that the man, whoever he was, had ridden to the camp, had picketed his horse out some distance and then had sneaked in among the prostrate, sleeping figures. Evidently his object was merely to leave the warning, and not to rob or commit some more serious crime. And his touching the foot of Dick was an accident. Then, seeing he had caused an alarm, the man slipped away, dropping his note.

Puzzle their heads as they did, none of the six could recall any one, either among their friends or enemies, whose initials were S.T. and Dick's suggestion, that the symbols of a name were only assumed, seemed to be generally accepted.

Breakfast was eaten, camp was broken and once more, after another casual casting about for possible clews to the intruder, the cavalcade was under way. But one more night separated them from the vicinity of Death Valley and the new ranch.

"And the sooner we can get there and begin checking up on some of the things we've heard the better I'll like it," remarked Bud.

"I guess we all will," echoed Nort.

"I only hope we'll find something tangible, and not a lot more mysteries," spoke Dick.

"It'll probably turn out to be poisoned springs or bad water," suggested Yellin' Kid. "That's the most reasonable explanation."

"Um!" was all Billee Dobb would reply to that.

They made rather good time that day, as the trail was now downward for they had passed the range of low hills outside of the valley. And when night came, and they were once more camped out, they knew that the following day would see them at Dot and Dash ranch.

"What about standing guard to-night?" asked Bud of his cousins when camp was established and a good supper had been eaten.

"'Twon't do any harm to have sentry-go," agreed Dick.

"But the chances are a hundred to one against anything happening to disturb us," said Nort. "That fellow isn't likely to come back."

"I agree with you," said Bud. "But, all the same, I think we'll all sleep sounder if we stand watch and watch."

"It'll be our turn," declared Snake. "We three old gazaboos will take turns. You kids had last night. This is ours."

It was no more than fair and the boy ranchers were glad enough to let the men act as sentries. So Billee, Snake and Yellin' Kid arranged it among themselves, leaving the night to uninterrupted slumber for the three boys.

"That is, we'll sleep if nothing wakes us," said Bud.

And nothing did. Nor did any of the cowboys, who took turns staying awake during the night, report any untoward occurrences. But in spite of that fact when Bud went to the grub box to get out some bacon he found, stuck in a pack, a folded brown paper, like the one on which the other warning was written. And this message was of like import with the other. It said:

**DON'T GO TO DOT AND DASH.**

However there was no signature to this. But none was needed to make it certain that it was from the same hand.

"Well, what do you know about that!" cried Nort when he saw what Bud had found.

"How'd he get in camp to leave that warning without being seen or heard?" asked Dick.

"Guess it's up to us," admitted Billee with a sheepish smile. "We old geezers must 'a' been asleep at the switch. No tellin' which one it was," he went on, "'ceptin' I'll swear nobody slipped past when I was on guard."

"And nobody came into camp while I was sentry," added Snake.

"That goes for me, too!" came from Yellin' Kid.

"Then we'll all have to plead guilty," chuckled Billee. "Anyhow here's the warnin' and it looks as if this fellow, whoever he is, was follerin' us up to discourage us from going on."

"Well, he shan't discourage me!" exclaimed Bud.

"Nor me!" came in a duet from Nort and Dick.

"That's the ticket! Then we'll go on!" said Billee. "But I would like to know," he murmured, "how this chap can sneak in and out of a camp without rousing somebody. I sure would!"

However there was nothing more to be done. And after making sure no clues could be picked up, the second warning was placed with the first, in Billee's big leather wallet, and the travelers prepared to resume the trail.

They were now in a wilder and more lonesome country than any they had ever before visited. It was distinctly the "bad lands," but often in such a region can be found isolated places where abundant water and herbage offer ideal sites for cattle raising.

Such, Mr. Merkel had said, was his new Dot and Dash ranch. And it was apparent to the boys and their older companions, as they rode along, that the valley was a good locality for raising cattle.

"This must be the place," said Bud as they began riding down the opposite side of the slope they had climbed to cross the low range of mountains. "It's just as dad described it. I'll show these papers to whoever's in charge and they'll know we have come to take over the ranch." He tapped in his pocket a bundle of documents which his father had given him to show the transfer of authority.

"Yes, that's Dot and Dash," said Billee as he recalled some of the familiar landmarks. "This is the place where I used to punch cattle."

"Seems to be a right nice sort of a place," murmured Snake. "And I reckon them tales about all the cattle droppin' dead are fakes. Look at that herd," and he pointed to a collection of dots on a distant hill.

"Nobody said *all* the cows died!" retorted Billee. "And maybe the bad spell, whatever it was, has worked itself out. I hope so. But there's Dot and Dash all right," and he waved to a collection of ranch buildings that came into view with a turn of the trail.

In a short time they had traversed the slope and were on the level and green floor of a pleasant valley, long and narrow, yet wide enough to give space to several big ranches. The hills were barren and rugged in some places, and wooded in others.

On up to the ranch rode the cavalcade, the thoughts of the boys busy with many things. It was rather a tamer entry than they had counted on after Billee's stories and the receipt of the two dramatic warnings.

"Guess we aren't going to have any trouble after all," said Dick as they rode their horses to the hitching rail, made the reins fast and dismounted to enter the main house.

"It's quiet enough," said Nort

"Tis, for a fact," echoed Bud. "Doesn't seem to be anybody around here for me to serve my possession papers on!" he chuckled. "Hello! Anybody home?" he called loudly.

There was no answer save the echoes of his voice through the rambling building.

"Give 'em a call, Kid, you can make yourself heard," suggested Snake, and the yeller let out a ringing

shout.

Still there was no reply and the silence was beginning to get on the nerves of the boys when Billee, who had been roaming around, came in with a queer look on his face.

"What's the matter?" asked Bud.

"There's a dead man outside in the yard," was the quiet answer of the veteran puncher.

## CHAPTER VII

### SAM TARBELL'S STORY

This news, so startling, coming as it did after the strange silence that seemed to wrap Dot and Dash in a pall, and following the talk that had been going on the last few days concerning the sinister aspect of the situation, was enough to startle any one. And the boy ranchers were no exception.

"A dead man?" gasped Bud.

"Who is he?" Nort wanted to know.

"Who killed him?" was Dick's question.

To these inquiries Old Billee Dobb returned no answer. As for Yellin' Kid and Snake Purdee, they just stood in the middle of the deserted living room of the ranch house and stared at the old puncher. Death did not frighten, nor was it anything new to the cowboys. Yet Billee's news was startling.

"Let's go have a look at him," suggested Yellin' Kid, in no whit lowering his voice as he might reasonably be expected to do under the circumstances. "Where is he? Do you know him, Billee?"

"Never saw him this side of sole leather as far as I know," answered the veteran. "But he's out there by the corral, and here's another thing. If we're going to turn our ponies loose into that same corral the fence has got to be mended. 'Twon't hold a yearling as it is now."

"That can be 'tended to later," remarked Snake. "Let's go have a look at this poor gazaboo you say has cashed in."

"It looks as if Death Valley was living up to its name," said Nort to Bud as he and the other lads followed the men out of the silent and deserted house.

"Can't tell yet," was Bud's rejoinder. "This may be just a natural death, and somebody that has no connection with this ranch. Lots of passing strangers stop at our place and he may have stopped here."

"Well, even then, that doesn't say what killed him," protested Nort.

"We'll soon find out," went on Bud. "Come on."

Billee Dobb was leading the way toward his startling discovery, and a moment later the whole outfit from Diamond X came upon the body. It lay, as Billee had said, near a corral the fence of which was much in need of repairs. The man was a typical cowboy, with a bright red neckerchief and sheepskin chaps. His gun had fallen from the holster and lay beside him. His horse was nowhere to be seen, and a cowboy without a pony between his legs, or at least in his immediate vicinity, is like Hamlet with the melancholy Dane left out.

"There he is," said Billee in a low voice.

Snake and Yellin' Kid stopped in their tracks. But Bud, who, perhaps, was too young to feel any squeamishness at the proximity to death, hurried forward and knelt beside the motionless figure. Seeing what their chum had done, Nort and Dick started to follow. But they were halted, when they had almost reached the man, by Bud's voice exclaiming:

"He isn't dead at all! He's breathing!"

"He is?" cried Nort.

"Sure! He isn't dead at all! Get me some water. We ought to have a doctor, but maybe we can pull him around until we can find one. But get some water—*pronto!*"

Dick slung his canteen around, pulled out the stopper and, an instant later, was kneeling beside Bud and the stranger. Nort helped Bud, on the opposite side, support the man's head, which appeared to be but loosely attached to his body and the boys finally succeeded in forcing a little water between the almost lifeless lips.

"We ought to have some sort of a stimulant," said Bud as he noticed a faint flickering of the man's eyelids, as though life was struggling hard to return to the frame it had almost decided to vacate.

"I got some aromatic ammonia in my saddle bags," said Dick. "Your mother put it in with a lot of other medicine, thinking we might need it."

"We do, now, and mighty bad!" exclaimed Bud. "Rustle it here, Dick."

A little later the powerful heart stimulant, mixed with a little water, was being administered to the stranger, and when the fumes of it had done their work the fluttering of his eyelids became stronger.

"He's comin' 'round," observed Billee who, with his two older companions, had drawn nearer to observe what the boys were doing.

"Looks like you didn't call the turn on him after all," said Yellin' Kid, for once in his life at least lowering his voice.

"I hope I didn't," said Billee. "I'd like him to pull through. Maybe he can tell us what's wrong with Dot and Dash."

"Don't look like there was anything wrong," commented Snake, letting his eyes rove away from the prostrate stranger to the wide reaches of the ranch and the valley in which it was so snugly located. "This seems to be a right proper place to raise cattle. I only wish it was mine. I'm tired of being just a puncher. I'd like to own this place. I think it's all bunk what you been tellin' us, Billee."

"You wait," was all Billee would reply. "You can't tell by squintin' at a toad how much wool there is on him, and you can't give a ranch a good name just by lookin' it over. You wait!"

By this time the ammonia had completed its work and restored to consciousness the prostrate stranger. He was able to sit up now, without being supported by Bud and his cousins. And as he supported himself on one hand, while with the other he reached for his fallen gun, he murmured:

"Who are you and what happened?"

"Stranger," pronounced Billee, who, by common consent seemed to be the spokesman, "we can answer the first part of your question but not the last. All we know is we arrived here to find you—er—stretched out like you was takin' a sleep." Billee had a certain delicacy about mentioning death, now that the man was so evidently alive.

"As for us, we're from Mr. Merkel's ranch—Diamond X—and we're sent here to take charge of Dot and Dash. You may have heard of us and you may not."

"Oh, yes, I've heard of you," was the somewhat unexpected answer. "In fact I was waiting for you to come to take charge."

"Then you aren't a stranger here?" asked Bud.

"Well, I been here a few days, that's all. I was Mr. Barter's foreman up to the time he quit, and sold out, so he told me. He asked me to stay here and turn the place over to the new owner. Merkel—yes, that's the name. I was away when the deal went through."

"I have the papers here," said Bud, reaching for the documents in his pocket.

"Tain't necessary. I'll take your word for it, my boy. And now that you're in charge I'm going to vamoose. I've had full and plenty."

He struggled to his feet, plainly showing how weak he was, swayed unsteadily for a moment and then staggered to a bench on the shady side of the bunk house not far from the corral.

"If I could have another nip of whatever that was you gave me—" he murmured.

Bud gave him the remainder of the ammonia and it brought a tinge of color to the tanned and

leathery cheeks of the puncher.

"I guess I can light out now," he went on. "Have you seen my pony—oh, I forgot—he's dead. Well——"

He looked at the untenanted corral and then to the bunch of tethered animals the outfit from Diamond X had brought with them.

"Look here!" exclaimed Bud. "Do you mind telling us what happened? We have heard strange stories about this ranch and don't know whether or not to believe them. We found you stretched out and——"

"Sort of took me for dead; didn't you?" asked the man.

Now that he had given the opening Billee had no hesitation in replying:

"We sure thought you had cashed in."

"Well, I nearly did," said the man. "I believe I would have been dead in a short time if you hadn't come along. My horse is dead, I'm sure of that. And how I managed to drag myself here after he collapsed under me is more than I know. But I did, hoping I might get some help. Then I passed out. That's all I know until I found myself sitting up and drinking camphor water."

"Tisn't camphor," said Bud. "It's aromatic ammonia."

"Oh," murmured the man. "Well, sort of tasted like the old camphor bottle my mother used when she got faint. However, I'm much obliged. And, now that you're in possession I'll be traveling on. Only—my horse——"

He was as lost without a steed as a sailor would be without a ship, and he was plainly at a loss how to proceed.

"Look here!" broke in Bud, who, as the representative of his father could speak with some authority, "we can't let you go this way. In the first place you're not fit to travel on, and, in the second place we want to hear your story. After that maybe we can fix you up with a pony if you want to leave."

"I'll tell you my story all right," said the man, readily enough. "And thanks for the loan of a horse. As for staying here—after what happened—I guess I don't feel much like it."

"What happened?" asked Dick, eagerly.

"Lots of things, but the main one was that I nearly passed out on account of some deviltry. But I'd better begin at the beginning."

"'Twould seem the most sensible way," said Old Billee. "In the first place what's your name?"

"Sam Tarbell," was the answer.

In an instant Bud, Dick and Nort exchanged glances. Like a flash came to them the memory of the warning paper, signed with the initials S.T. They would fit this man's name—Sam Tarbell.

But if Billee, Snake and Yellin' Kid thought of this coincidence they did not remark upon it.

"Sam Tarbell; eh?" murmured Billee. "I used to know a feller of that name once. Only he was Bill Tarbell. I don't reckon he could 'a' been your brother; could he?"

Sam Tarbell shook his head.

"I never had a brother," he answered. "Well, as I was saying, I been acting as foreman for Mr. Barter a few days back, and when he sold out I agreed to stay and deliver the ranch to the new owners."

"What became of Tim Dolan, who was foreman, and all the other punchers?" asked Snake. "Takes more'n a foreman, which you say you are now, to run a shebang like this. What happened to them?"

"Well," said Sam slowly, "some died and the rest, including Dolan, lit out and that left me. Dolan was foreman, like you said, but he vamoosed in a hurry and I almost cashed in when——"

He suddenly interrupted his story to gaze off across the level plain. The others, following his glance, saw riding along an old man on a somewhat ancient steed. He was an old man with a white beard and flowing, white locks, and as he glimpsed him Sam exclaimed:

"There's the old man now!"



# CHAPTER VIII

## THE ROUND-UP

Sam Tarbell suddenly arose from the bench where he had been sitting. But if he had any intention of starting after the old man on the distant horse his resolution was better than his performance. For he had to sink weakly back to his seat, and his face, that had assumed its natural color after the ammonia, now went white again.

"Take it easy!" advised Old Billee in soothing tones.

"Guess I'll have to," and Sam gratefully accepted a dipper of water that Nort handed him, getting the fluid from a pail that sat on a shelf outside the bunkhouse.

"Do you want one of us to chase after that old man?" asked Bud, while Dick inquired:

"Did he have anything to do with knocking you out?"

"No, to both questions, boys," responded Sam. "You can chase that old man for all of me, but I don't think you'll catch him. He's as slippery as an eel. As for his having anything to do with me being knocked out in such a queer way, I can't honestly say he had anything to do with it. I just happened to see him 'fore my horse crumpled under me, and he was riding away when I started to stagger back here as best I could. I hollered at him to give me a lift, but either he didn't hear me or didn't want to. It was just a coincidence that he happened along while I was telling you my story."

Wonderingly the outfit from Diamond X watched the old man slowly riding into the foothills, amid the woods of which he was soon lost to view. And the same thought came to all of them—the memory of the old man who had aroused Dick that night, when, next morning, the mysterious warning was found.

"Do you know that old man's name?" asked Bud.

Sam Tarbell shook his head.

"He's a stranger to me," he answered. "But I've seen him around off and on what little time I been here. I'm beginning to wish I'd never taken the job of puncher or foreman here at Dot and Dash. I've had nothing but bad luck from the start."

"You mean being knocked out like you was dead?" asked Yellin' Kid who, now that there was no mourning to be done, had switched back to his loud tones.

"Lots of things besides that," answered Sam. "I lost one good gun, lamed a good pony and got shook up bad when my other horse, the one that died under me, stepped into a prairie dog's hole and throwed me. Nothing but bad luck. I'm through!"

"Don't blame you for wanting to quit," remarked Bud. "But I hope you'll stay a little longer. As I said you're not fit to travel and——"

"You're right there!" interrupted Sam. "I'm as weak as a new-born calf. But after I get my strength I'm going to vamoose. This ranch is no place for a healthy man—or a sick one either, if you come to that. But I'll tell you what I started to, and give you all the help I can in rounding things up here. Then you can decide for yourselves whether it's worth your while."

"This is Death Valley all right; ain't it?" asked Billee Dobb.

"You said it, stranger! There's been a lot of deaths here, so I been told. I never would have come if I had known what I know now."

"Just what do you know?" asked Dick.

"Do you know what caused the deaths?" Bud inquired.

"No, I can't say I do," was the somewhat hesitant answer. "And that's the mysterious part of it. Only I know I came mighty near passing out and I don't want to do it again."

"Suppose you finish telling us all about it," suggested Bud, the while he looked in the direction taken by the old man who had disappeared. But the picturesque figure was out of sight.

"Well, as I was mentioning, I've been knocking around the country quite a bit," resumed Sam. "I'd have a job first on one ranch and then on another. You fellows know how it is," he said, looking at Snake and Yellin' Kid.

"Sure!" they murmured.

"Well, finally I ended up here and I must say Mr. Barter treated me all right, as he did his other hands. But when cattle began to be found dead all over the place, and when some men and their horses began to pass out, I began to get worried. So did a lot of others and they left so fast it was hard work to run the place with the few hands left.

"I was just getting ready to light out and look for another job when a man came to look the Dot and Dash over with a view, so Mr. Barter said, to buying it. Right after that Dolan, who had agreed to stay, quit sudden like, so I promised to stick and help the boss out and I did. The place was sold, and you say your dad bought it?" he asked, looking at Bud.

"Yes, this is now part of the Merkel holdings," was the answer. "Though my father didn't know anything about the queer deaths on the place when he agreed to buy it. He didn't even know that this was called Death Valley."

"Not until he got back to Diamond X and I told him," put in Billee. "Then he said he wasn't going to back out, 'specially after these boys begged for a chance to chase the jinx."

"Well, they'll get all the chance they want," remarked Sam. "No, I don't reckon Mr. Barter would tell the bad name his place had when he was trying to sell it. I don't say it was right of him to hold back the news, but lots of men would have done what he did. For myself, I never had a chance to talk to your father, so I couldn't have put him wise if I wanted to. Dolan might have, but he didn't. And I guess even Mr. Barter thought the thing would pass over."

"What thing?" asked Dick. "You mean the series of deaths?"

"That's it. They were mighty queer."

"I told 'em that," said Billee. "I used to work here myself years ago," he added. "I thought maybe, after all these years, the bad luck might have passed. But after what happened to you——"

"Just what did happen?" asked Bud. "We want to get down to brass tacks on this thing if we can."

"Twon't take long to tell you," said Sam. "As I mentioned, I agreed with Mr. Barter to stay on here and look after what few cattle remained until the new owner—that's your dad," and he looked at Bud—"could come along and take possession.

"Well, I was left pretty much alone here, but I didn't mind that, for I'm used to rustling for myself. Mr. Barter left when he got his money, I s'pose, and the cattle wasn't much trouble. There's only a small herd left, and I didn't bother much with 'em—just rode out now and then to see they wasn't being run off. Which they wasn't. But this morning I thought I'd ride to the far end of the range to see if there was any fences needed fixing, so's I could tell the new owner.

"I was riding along when, all of a sudden, my horse began acting queer. Then, 'fore I knew it, he just sort of crumpled up and I just had time to jump or he'd have fallen with me under him. And as I went down I began to feel sort of queer myself. One of the last things I remember seeing in the distance was that old man riding along. Then I went down and out.

"That's all I remember, but I must have had sense enough to start either to walk or crawl back here, and evidently I arrived, for you found me. That's all I know."

"But what knocked you out?" excitedly cried Bud. "And what killed your horse?"

"You can search me!" was the frank answer. "I didn't look the horse over after he died, to see what bit him. As for me, I don't know what ailed me."

"Maybe the old man shot you and the horse," suggested Nort.

"I wouldn't swear the horse hasn't a bullet in him, for I didn't examine him," stated Sam. "But I didn't hear any gun, and I know I got no holes in me."

"Then it was bad water!" said Snake.

"What's that?" Sam inquired, not comprehending.

"You and your horse must 'a' drunk from some poisoned spring," went on Snake, explaining how this theory had been advanced among his companions to account for the mysterious deaths at Dot and Dash.

"Bad water; eh?" murmured Sam. "Well, I certainly did take a drink at a spring, and so did the horse. But it's a spring I always have patronized, so to speak, and it's mighty queer if it would be all right yesterday and poison to-day. Mighty queer!"

"The old man——" began Nort.

"He wasn't nowhere near the spring," interrupted Sam. "I don't believe you got the right dope."

"Well, there's something queer around here, that's sure," declared Bud Merkel, "and we're here to find out what it is! We'll be glad to have you stay and help us solve the mystery. We need some ranch hands and I'd be glad to take you on."

"Thanks. I've got to stay, anyhow, a few days until I get to feeling more like myself. After that we'll talk business. But I warn you it's dangerous here."

"We knew that before we came," said Bud, quietly.

Much puzzled, and not a little alarmed over the strange story, the members of the outfit from Diamond X now began putting things to rights about the ranch house in preparation to taking over Dot and Dash. While Snake and Yellin' Kid began to repair the corral fence, Bud, his cousins and Old Billee brought their food and supplies into the ranch house and began to arrange for supper, since it was now late afternoon. A look in the bunkhouse showed it to be clean and in good shape.

"I'll take charge out there, with Kid, Snake and this new hand," said Old Billee, referring to Sam Tarbell who had been put in a bunk the better to regain his strength. "You boys'll stay here," and he indicated the ranch house.

"It might be a good idea to divide our force up that way," agreed Bud. "Then, in case the jinx comes it won't get all of us at once."

"According to the stories," said Billee, "nothing ever occurs inside. It's all out of doors. Well, we'll see what happens."

In spite of the sinister cloud of fear that hung over the place, the adventurers managed to make a good meal, and when the horses had been turned into the repaired corral preparations were made for the night. Both parties—the one in the bunkhouse and the boys in the main building—decided to keep watch all night.

But their precautions were not needed. Nothing happened. The sun rose bright and warm over Dot and Dash next morning and Sam Tarbell said he felt like a new man after his sleep.

"The first thing to do," decided Bud after matters had been talked over at the breakfast table, "is to have a sort of round-up. I want to see just how many head of cattle are left, and what the chances are for getting more. Also we want to give the whole ranch the once-over."

"That's right," agreed the veteran Billee.

"Shall we all go on the round-up?" asked Dick.

"No," said Bud after a moment of thought, "we'll have to leave some one here in charge. But in time each one of us must know all there is to know about Dot and Dash—I mean just how it's laid out, where the water-holes are, what shape the fences are in and all that. It will take a little time, but this first round-up will tell us some things we ought to know."

"The boy's right!" fairly shouted Yellin' Kid.

Accordingly, when it was decided to leave Snake, Nort and the still somewhat invalid Sam at the ranch house, the others started out.

Nort made the best of being obliged to stay. The choice had fallen to him by lot, as it was decided this was the fairest way of making a division of forces, since other things were equal.

"But you got to tell me everything that happens when you get back!" Nort stipulated to his brother and Bud as they rode away.

"Sure!" they promised.

The three who were left in charge of the ranch buildings watched the others ride off over the hills and then, as there was plenty to do in cleaning up the place, and getting it ready for a number of new hands that must be hired, the two from Diamond X got busy. Sam was able to help with light work.

It was while Nort was busy making a checkup of the household articles on hand that he heard the sound of a horse out near the corral, and, going to the door, saw dismounting, the same old man to whom Sam had called attention the night before.

"Howdy, stranger!" the ancient one greeted Nort, cheerfully.

"How are you?" responded the boy, courteously. "Are you looking for some one?"

"Yes," was the answer. "I'm looking for the boss. I want to warn him and all with him to get away from here as quick as they can! You don't know the danger you are in. You had better leave quick!" And then, though it seemed to take from the force of his words, the old man strode over to the water pail and took a long drink.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE QUEER OLD MAN

Nort was doing some quick thinking. And the burden of his thoughts was to this effect:

"Bud and Dick have ridden off to see if they can solve the mystery, but along comes this queer old man to me, and maybe he holds the key to open the lock. It would be just my good luck!"

So it was with a feeling of elation, rather than otherwise, that Nort watched the aged stranger finish his drink and then come back to where the boy stood near the ranch house. Snake and Sam were in the bunk house.

"Why should we go away from here?" asked Nort, trying to speak easily and naturally. "And what is the danger?"

"Are you the boss?" was the quick retort.

"No, but the boss is my cousin, and he and I, with my brother, are going to run this ranch."

"You'd better run away before you try to run it!" chuckled the old man with what seemed to be sinister humor. "But you can't say I didn't warn you."

"Warn us of what?" asked Nort, a bit sharply. "What do you mean by coming here trying to scare me?"

"I'm not trying to scare you, my boy, I'm just trying to warn you. Those here before you wouldn't listen to me, and what happened to them? They died, that's what happened. Now I'm offering you a chance for your life and it seems to rile you."

"Oh, no, I'm not mad," and Nort smiled a little. "But I would like to know what you are driving at. Before we came here we heard stories about the danger of Dot and Dash, but no one knew just what the danger was. Now you seem to——"

"Oh, no, I don't, young man!" interrupted the stranger, running his skinny hands through his straggly, white hair. "I don't know what caused all those deaths any more than you do. But I do know if those who are gone—I mean the humans now and not the cattle—I mean if they had taken my Elixer they'd be alive to-day. There she is—Elixer of Life!" and from what seemed to be one of many pockets in his loose coat he pulled out a bottle of dark liquid. Before Nort had a chance to make reply the stranger, holding up the bottle and affectionately patting it from time to time, went on with:

"There she is! Elixer of Life! Made from roots, berries and herbs I gathered myself. Compounded in a secret manner after a recipe given me by an old Indian. It soothes the nerves, strengthens the muscles, clears the brain and prolongs life. Only a dollar a bottle and I can let you have as many as you like.

Guaranteed to act as specified and harmless enough so you can give it to babies! There you are—the Elixir of Life!" It was so labeled—spelled with an e instead of i, and as the old man insisted this was right the boys let it go at that. So the stuff remained "elixir" to the end of the chapter.

He produced another bottle from somewhere in the recesses of his long coat and, holding the two phials aloft, advanced upon Nort with a strange light shining in his eyes.

From a distance it must have looked to an observer as if the old man was approaching the boy to hurl the bottles at him with evil intent, for they were high in the air, and over Nort's head. And Snake Purdee must have taken this view of it, for, a moment later, standing in the door of the bunkhouse, the cowboy drew his gun, aimed it at the aged stranger and cried:

"Stand still or I'll bore you!"

The command was so threatening and Snake was in such a good position to shoot that, for a moment, Nort feared a bullet would end the matter. But the old man wheeled about, took in the situation at a glance and mildly said, as he lowered the bottles:

"No harm intended at all. I'm only trying to save this young man's life. You've got no call to shoot me."

"Oh," exclaimed Snake rather lamely, seeing how the matter stood.  
"Well, I don't just like your attitude, and——"

"He's only selling a patent medicine," broke in Nort with a smile.  
"It's the Elixir of Life."

"I make it myself, from roots, berries and herbs," eagerly went on the old man. "Only a dollar a bottle or six for five dollars. If them as were here before you had taken it they'd be alive to-day. But they were scoffers. They spurned me and look what happened to them."

"I've seen you before, old man!" said Sam and there was something menacing in his tone. "I've seen you around this ranch a lot, and I've heard some say you was always around when something happened—I mean when men and cattle were found dead. I saw you just before my own horse died and I passed out and now I want you to explain. I've got you now!"

He made a grab for the old man, who did not seek to elude Sam, but stood quietly while the cowboy held one arm and took out a gun with which he covered the inventor of the Elixir.

"Now, son," said the old man, soothingly, "don't get excited. I haven't done any harm and I don't intend to. It's true you've seen me around this ranch a lot—I live a few miles from here back in the woods. And I've been around when there's been deaths. But I was trying to stop death—not bring it about. Only I was always too late. They never would listen to me—them cowboys. And I was around when I saw your horse go down. I rode back, later, thinking I could sell you a bottle of my Life Elixir before you passed away, but I got there too late. I saw that you had expired so I went on."

"I'm a pretty live man for a dead one!" chuckled Sam. "But what's your game, anyhow?"

He had released his hold of the aged one and had put his gun back in the holster as Snake had done. And then Nort made, unseen by the stranger, a motion to his two companions which served to explain matters. Nort made a circular motion with one finger up near his head as though to indicate wheels going around.

"Oh!" softly murmured Snake, understandingly, and he was echoed by Sam with:

"I'm wise!"

While, as the aged one again raised his Elixir bottles on high Nort with his lips only said the words:

"The poor old man's a bit cracked!"

And so it seemed. He was one of the many harmless but well-meaning "herb doctors" to be found in every community. He had a firm faith in his own concoction.

"Be warned in time, gentlemen," he went on, still offering the Elixir to Nort. "You are alive now, but you may be dead to-morrow. This will save you. One dollar a bottle or six for five."

He now held the two bottles in one hand while, with the other, he went searching through his coat for more. But Nort stopped him with a gesture.

"Two are enough for now," he said, soothingly, handing over a two dollar bill. "But can you tell us anything about the causes for the deaths that have taken place on Dot and Dash ranch?"

"Yes, young man, I can," was the firm answer as the bill was tucked away inside the hat band, "I know all about those deaths. They were caused by a failure to heed my warnings and take this Elixer of Life!

"Be warned in time, gentlemen," went on the old man as he moved over to his horse. "There are three of you, and you have only bought two bottles. At least each one should have his own. I may not be back here and—"

"Oh, shucks! Gimme a bottle!" ejaculated Snake. "And see if you can't tell us what killed these folks and the cattle."

"I can tell you—yes—certainly!" was the quick retort as another bottle of the dark liquid was produced and another dollar added to the hat band bank.

"What was it then?" asked Snake, eagerly, while Nort and Sam waited for the answer.

"The hand of fate!" was the solemn answer. "But now you are safe. You have the Elixer of Life and so death cannot harm you. I bid you good day!"

Before they could stop him, even had they been so inclined, which they were not, the old man left Nort and his chums holding their bottles of Elixer and rode away on his sorry looking nag, crooning something into his ample beard.

"Well, what do you make of that?" asked Snake when the stranger—they had not thought to ask his name—was beyond hearing.

"He's just a harmless crank," said Nort. "An old herb doctor."

"That's what I think," chimed in Sam. "Though at first I was a bit suspicious of him. But I guess he doesn't mean anything. And he don't know anything about the deaths here."

"If he does he isn't telling," decided Nort.

"Well," said Snake slowly, "I'm not superstitious, but as long as I bought this stuff I might as well sample it."

He pulled the cork from the bottle, and was about to take a drink when Nort, with a quick motion, knocked the flask down, almost sending it to the ground.

## **CHAPTER X**

### **DEAD CATTLE**

"What's the idea?" spluttered Snake, for he had his mouth set for a drink, and did not appear to like being balked.

"Better wait until you find out what's in the bottle before you sample it," advised Nort.

"Why, didn't the old gazaboo tell us what it was—Elixer of Life? Some sort of tonic, I reckon, and, believe me, boy, I need something right now!"

"What you need is grub!" broke in Sam. "I'm in the same boat. I'm getting my appetite back," he added with a look at Nort, whose turn it was to get the dinner.

"Well, maybe this will give me an appetite for baked beans," suggested Snake.

"More likely to take your appetite away," went on Nort. "This may be a good, safe stomach medicine, and, again, it may be deadly poison. I want it analyzed by a chemist before I take any of it. And, even then, I don't believe I'll try any though it may be safe. I don't need it."

"Poison; eh?" mused Snake. "Do you think—"

"No, I don't think this harmless, crack-brained old man had anything to do with the deaths that are said to have taken place at Dot and Dash," interrupted Nort, guessing at Snake's implied question. "But a crank is a dangerous man to have mix your drinks. He may have brewed this from honest herbs, or it may be an extract of toadstools. I'm going slow at it."

"Well, I guess I'd better, too," agreed Snake, ruefully, "I'm glad you didn't let me sample it, Nort."

"It's better to be sure than sorry," said the boy. "Is there a chemist in Los Pompan," and he nodded in the direction of the town that lay nearest to the ranch.

"I don't believe there is," Sam answered. "But there's a doctor and maybe he can tell whether this stuff is safe or not," and he gazed at one of the Elixer bottles he had picked up off the bench where Nort had set them.

"Safe or dangerous, we don't need it," went on the boy. "I only bought it to lead the old man on. But we didn't get much out of him."

"No," assented Snake. "His answers were crazy enough. Guess we'll have to wait until Billee and the others come back to find out what's the real secret of Death Valley."

"Maybe we won't then," suggested Sam, in a low voice.

"Do you mean they won't come back?" asked Nort with a sudden increase in his heart beats.

"Oh, *some* of 'em are bound to come back," was the not very cheering reply. "The deaths ain't wholesale like that. And maybe nothing won't happen to any of 'em," which was sufficiently clear and hopeful if not very grammatical. "But, even if they all come back, which is more than likely," went on the most recent foreman of Dot and Dash, "that ain't saying they'll find out the secret."

"No, I suppose not," agreed Nort. "Well, we'll hope for the best."

They resumed their labors of getting the group of ranch buildings in shipshape against the return of Bud and the others. Sam had agreed to stay for a while to aid in the check-over and as soon as possible, as Nort knew, Mr. Merkel intended to add to his cattle already on the ranch, and hire more men to look after them.

"I wish we'd found out that old geezer's name and more about him before we let him vamoose," said Snake as he worked away with Nort.

"Yes," agreed the boy, "but so much was happening, and he was so queer, that I forgot about it."

"Guess we all did. Well, we can pick him up again when we need him—if we ever do," chuckled Snake. "I mean if the doctor says this here Elixer is any good."

"If there isn't any harm in it that's the most I expect," came from Nort. "As for finding the old man——"

"He's an eel, I tell you!" broke in Sam. "I've seen him more then once, riding along, that is some time ago, 'fore I was knocked out. But when I tried to come up to him he'd vanish. And to look at it you wouldn't think that cayuse of his was any quicker'n a snail!"

"He must have some hiding place," suggested Snake.

"Maybe," admitted Sam. "But I don't like that *hombre* and you hear what I'm tellin' you!"

Dinner was served, and eaten with hearty appetites in spite of what had happened and what might take place later. Then more work was done about the place, and as the afternoon waned Nort began to get rather anxious for the return of those who had gone on the round-up.

It was not a round-up in the real sense of the word—but merely a riding around of the place to size it up—to ascertain the number of head of cattle on the ranch, to find out the location of water holes, the best pasture, look to the condition of the fences and such matters as that.

"And I wish, while they were at it, they'd get a Chink cook," said Nort to whom had fallen the task of washing the dishes. "Any chance of getting a yellow man in Los Pompon?" he asked Sam.

"Oh, sure, I should think so. If you can get him to stay."

"Why wouldn't he stay?" Nort wanted to know. And then he remembered and added: "You mean on account of possible deaths?"

"Sure! That's it. Them Chinks is powerful leery about anything like that. But maybe we can get one fresh smuggled over from Mexico and he won't be so particular."

"That's right," agreed Nort as he recalled how desperately eager the Celestials were to be smuggled into the United States.

It was getting dusk, and the three were a bit anxious as they prepared the evening meal, for, as yet, the prospectors, as they might be called, had not returned. Nort was going to suggest that perhaps it might be well to ride out and see if his brother and the others were in sight when the clatter of horses' feet was heard and into the ranch yard came riding the cavalcade.

A quick count showed not one missing, and it was with a relieved heart that Nort greeted Bud and Dick.

"Anything happen?" asked Snake.

"Nary a thing!" boomed out Yellin' Kid. "It was as peaceful as a Sunday school picnic. But this is sure some dandy ranch."

"That's right!" chimed in Bud. "We didn't have time to go all over it," he went on to those who had been left behind. "But we saw enough to convince us that dad made no mistake in buying it—that is if we can clear out the jinx."

"But you didn't see any signs of him—or it?" asked Nort.

"Who?" inquired Dick.

"I mean the jinx."

"No, not a thing. Didn't even see a dead calf, and, as we know, they're common enough on a ranch. Everything was lovely."

"It sure is a good buy," went on Bud. "Of course it's a bit run down, and the fences here and there need mending. But there's plenty of water and what cattle there are seem to be in good shape. When we buy a few more herds, and hire some more men to help us, we'll be sitting pretty."

"Then we didn't need to do so much worrying?" questioned Nort.

"Seems not."

"And that warning was all tommyrot!" added Dick with a laugh. "Hello, what's this?" and he picked up one of the bottles of Elixer, for by this time the whole party was in the ranch house, and saw the three flasks on the table.

"Stuff your brother bought to save lives!" chuckled Snake, and the story was told.

"An old man, half crazy; eh?" mused Billee as he listened. "Who is he and what about him?"

"Doesn't seem to amount to much, really," stated Nort. "But I thought we'd better have this stuff analyzed."

"Sure!" assented Billee, and, taking the three bottles he locked them in a wall cupboard and put the key in his pocket.

There was much to talk about at Dot and Dash that night. Nort related the coming and going of the vender of Life's Elixer, and on their part Bud and Dick told of the scenes about the ranch, and added to their first statements that it was an ideal place to raise cattle.

"And there weren't any signs of sudden deaths?" asked Nort.

"Nary a one. It's a shame to call this Death Valley," declared Bud.

The week that followed was a busy one and there was plenty of work for all hands, including Sam Tarbell who, when he found that there was no sudden passing away of any of his new friends or the remaining cattle, decided to stay and work for Dot and Dash.

A careful examination was made in the vicinity where Sam had "keeled over," as he expressed it, and where his horse had died. Nothing suspicious was discovered, however, and there was no way to account for the strange happening. The animal appeared to have died a natural death.

"Of course," Sam said, "my pony might of dropped dead from heart disease, and when he fell I was



threw off and hit my head on a rock. That's what might have knocked me out."

"It's very possible," agreed Bud.

Arrangements were under way for the purchase of two herds from ranchmen in the adjoining county, and several more cowboys had been engaged when, like a clap of thunder out of a clear sky, it happened.

Bud, Nort and Dick were riding over to the south end of the ranch one day, to inspect the present herd, with a view to shifting it, when Nort pointed to what looked like several dark boulders on a distant, grassy slope.

"What are those?" he asked. "Big stones?"

"Stones?" queried Bud and, a moment later, he exclaimed, "Those are dead cattle! Boys, I guess the jinx has come back!"

## CHAPTER XI

### INTO SMUGGLERS' GLEN

"Hop to it, boys!" cried Nort, as he dug his spurs lightly against the sides of his pony. The spurs were blunt ones, for Mr. Merkel insisted that his men treat their horses kindly, and the spurs were such in name only. However, even these gentle ticklers indicated to Nort's animal the need of haste and it leaped ahead.

"Come on!" echoed Dick, following his brother's example and guiding his animal toward those silent forms on the grassy hillside.

Bud, however, held his animal back and shouted to his cousins:

"Hold on a minute! Don't be rash! Hold on!"

Nort pulled his pony back so suddenly that the creature reared high in the air. Some time ago Nort would have been unseated by such a trick, but now he stuck to the saddle like a burr to a cow's tail.

"What's the matter?" Nort shot back over his shoulder.

"Don't you want to find out what killed those cattle?" asked Dick, riding back to join his cousin.

"Sure!" Bud replied. "But I don't want to keel over myself. There must be something there that killed those cows, that is if they're dead. And what killed them may kill us, if we go too close, just as it has killed others and nearly did for Sam."

"Those cows are dead all right," declared Nort who, now that his pony was quiet, had taken a pair of field glasses from the case slung at his shoulder and was examining the silent forms. "They're as dead as a last year's sunflower."

"But maybe Bud's right about wanting to be careful before we go any closer," suggested Dick. "You know Uncle Henry warned us not to run our necks in any noose."

"But we got to find out what killed these cows, so we'll know how to guard the others against the same danger," declared Nort. "And if it was poison water they drank, or maybe poison grass they ate, why, we don't want our other animals to do the same thing, or get any poison water ourselves."

"No," agreed Bud, who, having taken the glasses from his cousin, was now making a careful observation, "we don't want to drink any poison water or have cattle eat any poison grass, if there are such things on the ranch. But we can stop a bullet just as easy as a cow can and with just the same bad results for us."

"Bullet?" questioned Nort, wonderingly.

"Do you think those cows were shot?" asked Dick.

"They might have been."

"Who'd do such a thing?" demanded Nort.

"If it was done at all—which I'm not saying for a fact—it probably was done by the same man, or men, who have been doing the other killings in Death Valley."

"But what in the world for?" exclaimed Dick.

"Search me!" answered Bud.

"The other cows weren't shot!" asserted Nort. "Sam's horse that died wasn't shot, and no bullet nipped him or even creased him."

"No," agreed Bud. "I guess I'm out when it comes to guessing those cows were shot. But let's wait a bit before we go any closer. We can't do those dead cows any good and it may save our lives."

Though their curiosity made them eager and anxious, the boy ranchers held themselves in check and while riding slowly around on their ponies kept a keen watch of the territory surrounding the grazing herd and the motionless forms of the dead cows.

But when nearly half an hour had passed, and there was no sign of any human enemy, and when nothing suspicious had been observed, Bud gave the signal to ride on to come closer to the scene of the mystery. During the wait the living members of the herd had exhibited no signs of uneasiness. They wandered around, grazed, ambled here and there, some coming close to look at the boy riders. They behaved like any normal herd of cows. Some of the calves showed their playfulness in kicking up their heels and darting hither and yon, while some of the young bulls engaged in head-butting contests.

"Whatever happened," said Bud as he and his cousins rode nearer, "didn't scare the whole herd. Death must have come silently, and in the night."

"Silently, I grant you, but not necessarily in the night," spoke Dick. "It could happen any time, as it did to Sam. That was in the daytime."

"You're right," Bud admitted. "It sure is mighty queer. But maybe we can find out, now that it has happened almost under our noses as you might say."

This section of Dot and Dash ranch consisted of diversified country. There was a wooded portion, with a small stream running through it, and in the distance were rolling hills and dales. It was ideal cow country and the herbage was succulent and rich.

Near the place where the five dead cows were stretched out was the beginning of a long, narrow defile, or gorge which ran back into the hills. Some of these hills were quite high and were covered with a growth of timber. Others consisted of big rocks piled in fantastic fashion as though there had been a volcanic eruption some time when the world was young. Between the hills were small valleys here and there, which made fine, sheltered places for the grazing of cows.

Having satisfied themselves that there was no lurking enemy waiting to attack them, the three young men rode up to the cows. The ponies showed no signs of fear on approaching the dead bodies, as some Eastern horses might have done. A cow pony has no nerves. He gets used to so many queer sights and happenings that even an auto rearing up on its front wheels and running backward while a cow turned somersaults on the fender would not cause a pony to turn his head.

The boys dismounted, pulled the reins of their animals over their heads as an intimation to the creatures not to stray and then made their way toward the cows.

"They're sure dead all right," remarked Bud, prodding the one nearest him with his foot.

"Have you just found it out?" asked Nort.

"No, but I remember what happened to Sam, and I was thinking maybe they might be only stunned, or something like that. But they're dead."

"And not long, either," added Dick, noting the fresh and limp condition of the bodies. "This didn't happen later than last night or early this morning."

"Guess you're right," admitted Bud. "Yes, they're dead sure enough."

"And a total loss," came from Dick. "Can't even sell the fresh beef in Los Pompan. We wouldn't dare, not knowing whether the cows died from poison or not."

"No," agreed Bud. "And it can't be anything but poison of some sort, for I'm sure they weren't struck

by lightning."

"There was no storm last night," declared Nort.

As Dick had said, the cows were a total loss, or nearly so, for it would hardly pay to have a skinner come out to flay off the hides of such a small number. Often when a cow or steer is killed by accident the carcass is fit to eat and there is fresh beef on the ranch or the carcass may be sold to the nearest butcher. But in this case it would have been dangerous and foolish to use this cow meat for food.

"Nothing to do but bury 'em and forget it, I guess," sighed Dick. "But it's quite a loss."

"It sure is," remarked Bud. "But we're not going to bury 'em right away—at least not all of 'em, and we're not going to forget it."

"No, I didn't mean just that," went on Dick. "We've got to get to the bottom of this. But why not bury the bodies, Bud?"

"Oh, that will have to be done, of course. But I mean to have some sort of a doctor come out here and look at these cows, or at one of them. Maybe he can tell what killed 'em."

"Good idea," said Nort. "There may be a horse doctor in town."

"I think there is," spoke Bud. "And we'll see if he can tell us anything about what that Life Elixir is composed of. I'd like to have that analyzed."

"Do you think that, or the queer old man, had anything to do with the death of these cows?" Dick wanted to know.

"There's no telling. I'm not going to pass up anything until I find out there's nothing in it!" retorted Bud. "Dot and Dash isn't going to ruin if I can help it!"

"That's the idea!" echoed his cousins.

They rode about the place but could discover nothing wrong. The cows seemed to have dropped in their tracks, dying without a struggle, though the ground around them was considerably cut up by their hooves, as though the animals had "milled" restlessly before death overtook them.

The remaining and live members of the herd showed no uneasiness and no signs of having been injured or disturbed as far as the boys could see by riding among them.

They rode over to the stream, which the ponies showed an anxious desire to drink from, but as Dick was riding his horse toward the clear water, evidently to let the animal plunge its nose in, Bud cried:

"Do you think it's safe?"

"Why not?" Dick asked, momentarily pulling his pony back, and it was not easy, for the creature was thirsty.

"Maybe this is the poison water the cows drank."

"Running water like this couldn't very well be poisoned," declared Dick. "A stagnant pool or a water hole might be, but not this. And horses won't touch bad water. Watch mine."

The pony fairly got beyond control, now, in its mad desire to quench its thirst and was soon drinking greedily, an example followed by the other two.

"Yes, I guess this water's all right," Bud finally admitted. "As you say, a horse won't touch bad water. I'm going to sample some myself."

This he did, and he and his cousins found the stream sweet and refreshing. There was no taint to it and they drank their fill as did their ponies.

"Well, what next?" asked Nort, as he sat easily in the saddle, while he watched the water dribbling from the champing jaws of his steed. "Shall we go back and get that horse doctor, and then bury the dead cows?"

"Not yet," answered Bud. "I want to ride up that defile and see what's at the other end." He indicated a long, narrow valley leading up into the wooded and rocky hills.

"What's the idea?" asked Dick.

"Oh, just a notion," Bud replied. "That would make a good hiding place for rustlers," he added.

"It's dark, and silent and secret enough," agreed Dick as they turned their horses into the defile. "Regular smugglers' glen!" and he chuckled at his suggestion.

"We can call it that," assented Bud. "Come on, then, let's see what we'll find in Smugglers' Glen."

They rode on into the narrow, sinister valley, all unaware what they would discover there.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE ELIXER CAVE

"Nifty hiding place—this," remarked Dick as the three rode side by side up "Smugglers' Glen," as they had jokingly named the defile.

"Sure is," agreed Bud.

"A man, or a band of men, if they wanted to, could hole up in here for the winter, slip out when they liked and raid a ranch, and get back again without any one being much the wiser," suggested Nort.

"Let's hope that doesn't happen," remarked Bud. "But it's just as well to know about this place. Some of our cows might wander up in here and, not finding them on the range, we'd think the rustlers had paid us a visit."

"That's right," came from Nort.

"Maybe rustlers have used this for a hiding place," was Dick's next remark.

"Smugglers' Glen or Rustlers' Glen—it's about the same," commented Bud. "If those fellows we fought last year, who were running the Chinks over the Mexican border, had known of this glen they'd have used it."

"That's the truth for you," agreed Dick. "And, speaking of Chinks, when are we going to get that Celestial cook we talked of?"

"I expect he'll be back at the ranch when we get there," was Bud's reply. "Fellow in Los Pompan promised to ship me out a good one."

"I won't be sorry!" chuckled Nort. "I'm tired of cooking and washing dishes."

The boys and their older companions had taken turns with the not very agreeable duties of housekeeping on the ranch. Old Billee Dobb was an experienced cook and Snake often said the old puncher could make beans taste like roast turkey. But Billee drew the line at washing dishes. Said he couldn't see any sense in cleaning plates only to muss 'em all up again. So when it came his turn to cook somebody else had to do the cleaning.

Talking of various matters, speculating on the mystery at Dot and Dash, and wondering what had caused the latest deaths, the boys rode on and on up into the depths of the glen. As they went on, the little valley seemed to shrink in width until it was barely wide enough for the three of them to ride abreast. On either side the grim, rocky hills, studded here and there with trees and bushes, rose high above their heads. Now and then they came upon a little stream meandering its way down the defile. Here and there it dropped over a ledge of rocks, making a pleasant, if miniature, waterfall.

Aside from the clatter of their horses' feet, the occasional fall of a dead branch or the rattle of loose stones and the tinkle of the stream, the only sounds were those of the boys' voices.

"This place sort of gives me the creeps!" remarked Nort with a little shiver and a backward glance. "We might as well have called it a Pirate Den as what we did."

"It is sort of dismal," assented Bud. "But I guess we aren't going to find out anything here, so we might as well turn back in a little while."

"Say after the next turn," suggested Dick, indicating a place where the defile swung around a

shoulder of bare rock.

"Suits me," came from Bud.

They reached the big rock, swung around the narrowest section of the defile they had yet encountered and, a moment later, made a discovery which filled them with surprise.

Burrowing into the side of the gorge, just beyond the sharp turn, was a cave with an arched opening. At first glance it looked as if it had been cut by the hand of man, but it evidently had been made by the erosion of water through many centuries.

"Jumping flapjacks!" cried Nort, pointing to the cave. "Do you see that?"

"Why not?" chuckled his brother. "It's big enough to be seen."

"But did you know it was there?"

"I didn't," put in Bud. "Though that's nothing, for this is the first time we've ever been here. But dad said this was a wilder and different country than back home, and caves aren't anything unusual."

"No," assented Nort, "and I s'pose I might have expected to find one or more in these hills. But it sort of startled me. Wonder if there's anything in it?"

"Meaning bears, wildcats or other such varmints?" inquired Dick with a laugh.

"Yes," said Nort. "Or maybe rustlers might have hung out in there."

"The only way to find out is to go in and have a look," suggested Bud. And, urging on their steeds, which they had, involuntarily, pulled to a halt, they were soon at the cave entrance. It was big enough to give passage to a man on horseback—at least for a little distance within, but the boys did not think it would be safe to guide their ponies into the cavern. They were not certain of the footing.

Dismounting, then, at the opening, and tethering their horses, the three boys entered the dark hole, not without some trepidation. For it was very dark; the outside light, which was not strong on account of the darkness of the defile, only penetrating a short distance inside the cavern.

Their footsteps echoed eerily as they advanced, and the state of their nerves can be judged when Dick and Nort jumped and exclaimed aloud as Bud took out a flashlight and suddenly switched on the current, sending a brilliant, though small, shaft of illumination down the stretches of blackness.

"Did I scare you?" chuckled young Merkel.

"A little," Dick admitted. "I didn't know you had a lantern with you."

"Oh, I generally carry a small pocket torch," Bud replied. "Never can tell when you'll be caught out after dark."

The flashlight showed the cavern to be hewn out of solid rock, though how high the roof was, or how wide the walls from side to side, they could not judge, for their light was not powerful enough to penetrate. But the cave was, evidently, a big one.

Suddenly, as they walked along, Bud became aware of a growing sheen of light ahead of them. At first he thought it was but the reflection of his own torch on what might be crystals in the cave's sides or roof. But as they walked on the glow increased.

Nort and Dick also noticed it, and Nort exclaimed:

"Guess this is more of a tunnel than a cave. I see daylight ahead."

"Tisn't daylight—too red for that," objected Bud. "Looks more like a fire."

And, a moment later, as they rounded a turn, they saw that the light was caused by a fire. It was a fire blazing on the floor of the cavern. Over the fire, suspended on a tripod, was a black kettle, a veritable witch-caldron and, bending over it, if not a witch, was a good imitation of one. For it was the figure of an old man—a man with long, straggling white hair and a flowing white beard, as the flames revealed. It was the same old man who had called at the ranch with his sinister warning when he sold the Elixir of Life.

"Look!" murmured Bud, but he need not have said this. His two cousins were looking with all the power of their staring eyes.

"It—it's him!" murmured Nort, and the others knew what he meant.

"But what's he doing?" whispered Dick.

There was hardly need to ask that question. Undoubtedly the old man was brewing something in the kettle over the fire. There was a peculiar odor in the air, not unpleasant, but rather overpowering.

"He's making that stuff he bottles and sells," went on Dick. "The Elixer. And maybe——"

He did not finish the sentence. Either the cautious talk of the boy ranchers, or some noise they made carried to the sharp ears of the old man.

He started back, out of the circle of light cast by the fire under the kettle. He seemed to be alarmed.

"Who's there?" he cried.

The boys did not answer. They did not know what to do. It was all so strange and startling.

A moment later the queer hermit, for such he seemed to be, had snatched the kettle off the chain by which it was suspended. With a quick motion of his foot he scattered the embers of the fire so that immediate section of the cave was obscured by smoke and fantastic shadows. Then the old man ran back into the darkness of the far reaches of the cavern and disappeared from view.

"There he goes!" cried Nort. There was no longer need of whispering.

"After him!" cried Dick.

"No! Don't go!" exclaimed Bud. "You don't know what he was doing, what he may be up to nor where he's gone. It isn't safe!"

This last was so evident that Nort and Dick at once agreed to the proposition and halted. But Dick added:

"We don't know, for sure what he was doing, but I can pretty near guess!"

"What?" asked Bud.

"He was brewing stuff to poison our cattle. He's the fellow that's been doing it. He's the cause of all the trouble at Dot and Dash. We ought to have him arrested, and we've got good proof against him!"

"What proof?" Bud asked.

"The bottles of stuff he sold us. Lucky we didn't take any of it! It's poison, sure! Come on, let's get back and then send word to the sheriff to come and arrest this old man."

It seemed to be good advice and the best thing to do under the circumstances, whether or not Dick's theory would be borne out by facts.

"We'll go back and have that Elixer analyzed," said Bud as he swung around with his cousins and began the retreat. "I meant to have it done before but there's so doggoned much to do here it slipped my mind. But I'll have it looked after now."

It did not take the three long to emerge from "Elixer Cave," as they named the place where they had seen the hermit over his brew. Their horses were patiently waiting and in a little while the boys were within sight of the ranch house.

But something seemed to be going on there. Snake, Billee and Yellin' Kid were standing near the cook house, whence came a series of wild, yipping yells.

"What's the matter?" cried Bud as he rode up to the group of cowboys.  
"Who's doing all that yelling?"

"Fah Moo!" answered Old Billee Dobb.

"Who in the world is Fah Moo?"

"The new Chinese cook that come out from town soon after you boys left."

"But what's the matter with him?" asked Dick. "Doesn't he like it here that he's taking on like this?"

"Maybe he's singing for joy," suggested Nort as a louder series of yelping cries came from the

cookhouse.

"More like he's in pain," remarked Snake Purdee. "I'm mighty glad I didn't drink any of it."

"Any of what?" asked Bud, wonderingly.

"That Elixer of Life the old gazaboo sold for a dollar a chunk. There was three bottles of it, you know."

"Yes, I know," assented Bud with growing uneasiness.

"Well," went on Snake, "you know I started to take a swig from the bottle I bought, but Nort wouldn't let me. Then Old Billee locked the three bottles in a cupboard."

"That's right," assented Bud.

"Well," resumed the cowboy, "we discovered, a little while ago, and soon after Fah Moo arrived to take charge of the kitchen, we discovered that those three bottles were gone. We found 'em in the new cook's department and the last one was empty."

"You mean he drunk all that Elixer?" cried Dick.

"Unless he used it for bathin', which I doubt!" chuckled Snake. "He must have been nosing around, discovered where the stuff was hid and he drunk every last drop. That's what makes him sing so, or cry—whichever way you take it."

"He's poisoned!" cried Bud, no less excited, now, than were his two cousins. "Poor Fah Moo is poisoned. We just discovered some of our cattle dead over on the south range. And we found a cave where the old man brews that Elixer. It's poison, sure. I guess it's all up with the Chink, but we'll try to get a doctor to save him. I'll 'phone in to town!"

Bud disappeared into the ranch house while the cowboys looked at each other's startled faces, and, meanwhile, Fah Moo continued to yelp, yap and yip in his high, falsetto voice.

## CHAPTER XIII

### FRIGHTENED HORSES

Bud Merkel lost no time in getting connected, through the telephone, with the only physician in Los Pompan. Old Doc Taylor, the medical man was called, though he was not very old. It was more a term of affection.

"Our Chink cook is poisoned!" Bud explained. "Can you come out quick?"

"*Pronto!*" was the illuminating reply and then there was nothing to do save wait for Dr. Taylor's arrival.

"He's got a flivver," announced Snake who, with Yellin' Kid, had paid more than one visit to town since arriving at Dot and Dash, thereby learning considerable about the place and its inhabitants. "It won't take long for the doc to get here."

"But can't we do anything, meanwhile, for that poor Chink?" asked Nort.

"Guess there isn't much hope for him if he drank all that stuff," remarked Bud in gloomy tones. "Though we might try to help him get it out of his stomach."

"How you goin' to do that?" Snake demanded.

"By giving him an emetic," Bud answered. "Mustard and water's good, I've heard. Come on—we got to try something," and he turned to his cousins as the most likely ones to be of service.

They found poor Fah Moo rushing around the somewhat narrow confines of his kitchen. The Chinese was still yelling and holding both yellow hands across the pit of his stomach. On a table, amid pots, pans and dishes, were the three bottles of the Elixer of Life. Two were completely emptied and the third had but a little fluid remaining in it.

"You drink all that?" asked Bud, pointing to the three bottles when he could get Fah Moo's attention for a moment.

"Can do! Dlink lot—chop-chop!" was the groaning answer the import of it being that he had taken the stuff quickly.

"Whew!" murmured Nort. "Guess there's no hope for him."

"There may be," said Dick. "Sometimes an overdose of poison is its own antidote. He may have taken so much that he'll be sick and that would be the best thing for him."

"He sure took an overdose," declared Bud. "See if you can find some mustard, you fellows. I'll put on a kettle of water to boil. The mustard ought to be mixed with warm water to make it work."

The boys bustled about, Fah Moo, meanwhile, rushing around, clutching his stomach and howling at the top of his voice. Billee and his companions looked in now and then to ask if they could help, or to offer suggestions, more or less useless, but their services were not required. Indeed there was room for no more first-aiders in the small kitchen.

In due time the water was warm, the mustard had been found and a big dose mixed. Then came the difficulty of administering it to the Chinese cook, and a great difficulty it was. As soon as he got the idea that he was to be made to drink something more, and when he had sight of the unappetizing yellow mixture of warm water and mustard in a big bowl, the cook revolted. He retreated into a corner, pulled a chair in front of him and yelled:

"No can do! No can do!"

"But you've got to do!" insisted Bud. "It's the only way to save your life! Drink it!"

"No can dlink! Fah Moo dlink chop-chop—plenty—no can do!"

And that was all there was to it. He yipped and yapped, clutched his stomach but would not come out of his corner nor touch the emetic. The boys were in despair, and their comrades were of no help, Snake even suggesting that it served the Chink right for taking the stuff. But just when it seemed that Fah Moo would raise the roof with his yells, Dr. Taylor arrived in his rattling flivver and took charge of the case.

"What did he take?" was his first question.

"Poison!" chorused the whole Diamond X outfit.

"All right, but what kind? I can't tell what to give him to counteract it until I know what poison it was," said the medical man.

"Here's the dope!" announced Yellin' Kid, handing over the bottle containing what was left of the Elixer.

Dr. Taylor smelled it, tipped the flask to get a little of the mixture on his finger and then, gingerly, applied the digit to his tongue. He waited for any possible reaction, and then took a larger taste of the stuff. Then a slow smile spread over his face as he indulged in even a bigger "swig," as Snake called it.

"This stuff isn't poison," he said, setting the bottle back on the table. "If this is all the Chink drank he won't die."

"Not if he took three bottles of it?" asked Bud.

"Not if he took a dozen. It may make him mighty sick, but he won't die this trip."

"What is that stuff?" asked Nort.

"Sarsaparilla!" was the chuckling answer. "Nothing but good, old-fashioned sarsaparilla soda pop with the pop left out. It's as flat as ditch water. Where'd you get it?"

"Bought it from an old geezer who said it was Elixer of Life," Snake informed the doctor.

"You mean old Tosh?"

"Don't know what his name is," Bud said, "but he's an old man and he has a place back here in a cave. We caught him, a little while ago, brewing the stuff. Just before that we found some of our cattle dead and we sort of jumped to the conclusion that he'd poisoned the animals. Then, when we got here and found the Chink taking on so, and discovered the three bottles in his kitchen, empty, we thought he was



poisoned."

"Not a bit of it!" chuckled Dr. Taylor. "A barrel of that wouldn't poison anybody, though, as I said, it would make them ill and give considerable pain. Elixir of Life! Ha! Ha!"

"Do you know this old man—what did you say his name was?" asked Dick.

"Old Tosh he calls himself. Might better be *Bosh!* No, I don't know him—never saw him as far as I know. But a lot of fools in Los Pompan have bought his dope, and it made some of them sick. That's how I happened to know what it was soon as I tasted it. I've seen samples in the homes of folks who called me in to treat them for stomach pains. Almost always it was because they had taken too much of this Tosh elixer. I've sampled dozens of bottles of it. He puts it out under all sorts of names—makes the labels himself, I guess. So I didn't recognize his concoction here until I sampled it," and the medical man waved his hands at the three bottles. "So that's that. Fah Moo won't die."

"He'll wreck our nerves, though, if he keeps this yelling up!" complained Bud. "Can't you give him something?"

"Yes, I can relieve him," chuckled the doctor. "Mustard and water; eh?" he went on as he saw the mixture. "Good enough but you have to swallow too much of it to be effective. I've got something that will do the work."

He produced a couple of capsules, which after much urging, the Chinese was induced to swallow when told they would save his life. Then he was led outside and far away by Snake and Yellin' Kid. In a short time Fah Moo was a very sick Celestial, but after that he grew rapidly better and came creeping back to the kitchen, somewhat pale, wan and drawn, but no longer yipping, yelling and yapping.

"Can do now," he said, meaning that he could proceed with his work, which he did, when he had formally been engaged by Bud who was virtually head of the new ranch.

"Well, I guess that's all there is to this case," remarked the doctor as he repacked his black bag. "There was no danger. He would have gotten over it in time, anyhow."

"So the Elixir is only sarsaparilla; is it?" asked Bud.

"That's about all. Just a sort of root beer mixture of herbs and barks the old man concocts. Harmless enough. It hasn't even the virtues of soda water, for that has carbonic acid gas in it and that's beneficial at times. So he calls it Life's Elixir; does he?"

"He does," assented Bud.

"And he stung me for a dollar!" sighed Snake. "Wait till I get hold of him! Did I hear you boys say you caught him in a cave?"

"We didn't catch him—he vamoosed as soon as he heard us," reported Bud. "But we saw him boiling the stuff. Only we thought it was poison, on account of the dead cows."

"That's so—you did mention dead cows!" exclaimed Billee. "So Death Valley is livin' up to its name. Let's have the yarn, boys."

Bud and his cousins explained what they had discovered and the older cowboys looked anxious. Dr. Taylor listened attentively.

"I don't believe old Tosh had any hand in it," he said. "He bears the name of being a harmless crank, always imagining every one is going to die who doesn't take his herb medicine."

"I wonder if you could tell what those cows died of?" asked Bud.

"I could take a look at 'em," said the medical man, "but unless signs of the poison—granting that it was poison—were very plain, I could not say what kind was used. It would require an autopsy and a chemical analysis. I'm not equipped for such work."

"Well, would you mind having a look at the bodies?" asked Bud. "I know it isn't in your line—"

"Oh, I don't mind," said Dr. Taylor, good-naturedly. "Anything to oblige. I'll run out and go over the matter with you to-morrow. I've got to get back to town now. Not that my practice is so large," and he laughed, "but I've got to look after it. Your Chink cook will be all right in a little while," and he hurried off in his flivver, promising to return next day.

"How'd Fah Moo get the Elixir?" asked Bud when matters had somewhat quieted down and the

Celestial was busy in the kitchen.

"Oh, I reckon he was snoopin' around and found where I hid the stuff in the cupboard," Billee answered. "If he's going to be our regular kitchen canary, Bud, I'll have to keep things better hid."

"I guess he's had his lesson," said young Merkel. "And I guess he'll be our permanent pot wrestler from now on. I left word for a man in Los Pompan to send me the first one he could get hold of, and Fah Moo is the result."

"And I'm glad he's here!" voiced Dick. "I'm sick and tired of giving the dishes their bath." The others felt the same about it, so Fah Moo became a fixture at Dot and Dash.

Billee and the others were surprised at the news the boys brought back from their little expedition. The finding of the cave was not considered remarkable, as Billee said there were many such about the neighborhood.

"And it wasn't strange that old Tosh, if that's his name, skipped out when he saw you," went on the veteran puncher. "Likely he thought you were coming to steal his Elixer secrets. So I guess we don't need to worry about him."

"Probably not," assented Bud and his cousins. "But," added Mr. Merkel's son, "it will be necessary to give some attention to the deaths of the cows."

"You're right there!" declared Billee. "Looks like the same old trouble was starting up again."

However the mystery was not solved by Dr. Taylor who came to the ranch next day. He looked at the dead cows, but beyond saying that they had undoubtedly died from some sort of poison he could give no opinion. And, because of the hot weather, it was not considered wise to cut up any of the bodies to send the inner organs away for a laboratory test.

"We'll have to solve the problem some other way," Bud said.

So the unfortunate cows were buried and then, resolving not to be frightened in their operations by this streak of bad luck, the boys carried out Mr. Merkel's ideas by completing the purchase of several score more head of choice animals and hiring additional cowboys to help with the work at Dot and Dash.

The new ranch was, by this time, quite an establishment, and though many croakers in Los Pompan predicted failure for it, as those who had gone before failed, Bud and his chums went on with their heads high and their hearts strong.

Fences were repaired, the herds were put out to graze, arrangements were made to ship away cattle at the most advantageous times and the work of Dot and Dash was now in full swing. Meanwhile nothing more had been seen or heard of the old hermit, as the boys called Tosh.

Bud and his cousins paid another visit to the Elixer Cave, as they christened it, but aside from the ashes of the fire they found nothing. The cavern was too big for them to explore completely in the limited time at their disposal, though they resolved, after the fall round-up, to investigate it fully.

Fah Moo fitted well into the routine at Dot and Dash. He was a good cook and was popular with the punchers for that reason. But he was cured of any "snooping" habits he may have had. He would not touch a bottle of any liquid, no matter how openly it was left around. Two or three times some of the cowboys, having heard the story, laid traps for the Chinese. But he blandly passed them by, murmuring:

"No can do!"

Mr. Merkel had been informed of the progress of affairs and though he expressed a little anxiety because of the fact that those five cattle had been found dead, he added that the animals might have eaten some poison weed which the others in the herd did not get at. And as since then nothing had happened, he expressed the hope that nothing would, and that his wisdom in buying Dot and Dash at a bargain would be demonstrated.

So matters went along for a few weeks. Every one was busy, things looked favorable for a good season and Bud and his cousins were getting ready to laugh at themselves for thinking there was a jinx.

But one afternoon, when the three had ridden over to mend a broken fence, and when they were returning home, as they passed the entrance to what they still called Smugglers' Glen, Dick's horse suddenly started, reared and then, after a fit of trembling, as though in fear, made a mad dash across

the range. An instant later the steeds of the other boys did the same and three frightened horses were soon carrying their puzzled riders over the hills.

## CHAPTER XIV

### BUD DISAPPEARS

Excellent riders as were the boy ranchers, it took them some little time and effort to calm their ponies and bring the frightened animals to an easy canter which gave Bud and his cousins a chance to consider the matter.

"Whew!" exclaimed the ranchman's son as he eased up on the reins and patted the neck of his mount. "That was some dash!"

"Not much *dot* about it!" chuckled Nort.

"For a pun like that you ought to be forced to drink a bottle or two of Tosh Elixer!" retorted Bud. "How about it, Dick?"

"I'm with you! That was rotten—not much *dot*—I suppose that's a play on the word *doubt*—not much *dot* about it—that *dash*! Oh, somebody hold me!" and he shook his fist at his brother.

"I was thinking we'd soon need somebody to hold our horses," said Nort, not a little pleased at his own joking words, however nonsensical his two companions thought them. "What happened?"

"That's what I want to know," chimed in Bud. "All of a sudden my pinto here started off as if there was a race."

"Same with me," went on Dick.

"Something must have frightened the ponies," said Nort.

"Yes, and we've got to find out what it was," declared Bud. "Come on back." He wheeled his mount as he spoke.

"Maybe we can't get 'em back," suggested Dick.

"Well, at the place where they begin to balk we'll know the trouble started," suggested the ranchman's son. "And we'll know we have to look for the trouble right there."

"What do you reckon it could have been to make them bolt so suddenly?" Dick wanted to know.

"Skunks, maybe," was the thought Nort offered.

"Not many skunks in this neighborhood, thank goodness," said Bud. "I wouldn't say there aren't any, but I've never heard of them."

"Or smelled them," added Nort.

"That's right—smelled 'em, either, and, what's more, I don't want to! No, I don't believe it was skunks."

"Rattlesnakes, maybe," was Dick's next contribution. "Horses are afraid of rattlers all right."

"Yes, and with good reason," Bud said, "though I don't know as I ever heard of a horse dying from a side-winder's bite. It may happen, but, personally, I can't prove it. All the same I don't believe it was rattlers, though there are plenty in this region."

"Why couldn't it have been snakes?" asked Dick.

"Well, if any rattlers had sounded their warning, and they always do rattle before they strike, we would have heard them as well as the horses would, and I didn't hear anything."

"No, I didn't, either," Dick and Nort admitted in turn. "But what was it, then?" Nort asked.

"It was something the horses smelled!" declared Bud with conviction. "They got a whiff of something they didn't like and they lit out like all possessed."

"Do you mean a bear?" asked Dick.

"Bear what?" came from Bud who had urged his pony somewhat ahead of the mounts of his cousins.

"Did the horses smell a bear, do you think?" went on Dick. "You know a bear, even a tame circus one, will set a cow pony off quicker than anything else."

"Yes," agreed Bud. "But I hardly think this was a bear. There are probably some back in the woods and hills, but they don't very often venture into the open, especially at this time of year. And if it had been a bear I think I would have winded him."

"I don't know about that," came from Nort. "You know a horse, and almost any other animal, has a keener sense of smell than most humans. The horses might have smelled something we didn't."

"That's true enough," assented Bud. "But the fact of the matter is I noticed a queer sort of smell just before the horses bolted. It wasn't very strong, and was more like perfume than anything else. In fact I thought it might be some sort of flower or perhaps an herb the ponies stepped on and crushed. I was just going to mention it to you fellows when the rush began and I had my hands full, same as you did. Either of you notice any smell?"

Nort and Dick had to confess that they had not, but Dick added:

"You've lived out of doors more than we have, Bud, and you got a better nose—I mean for smelling, not for shape!" he added as Bud's hand went to his olfactory organ. "So you might have caught a whiff of something we didn't."

"There's something in that, though I don't like to boast," said Bud. "I'm pretty sure that's what it was—a queer smell the ponies didn't like, and feared, and so they ran away from it."

"But what kind of a smell could it be?" asked Dick.

"Maybe we'll find out when we get back to where the thing happened—that is if the ponies will go back," spoke Bud.

However there seemed to be no trouble on this score, for, as the boys came nearer and nearer to the place whence the animals had started on their dash, there was no sign of fear or nervousness. The steeds trotted on as they had done over any other stretch of the range, and the deepest breathing of which the boys were capable betrayed to their alert noses not the slightest taint in the air.

"This is mighty queer!" murmured Bud as he guided his mount to and fro around the locality. "Mighty queer!"

"It's almost as if we had dreamed it," remarked Nort.

"It was no dream the way I had to pull my horse back!" declared Dick, and the others agreed with him.

"Well, I guess we'll have to give it up and put it down as part of the unsolved mystery of Dot and Dash," said Bud as he wheeled his horse around and headed for the ranch house.

"Unless you want to take a ride up there again," suggested Nort.

"Where do you mean?"

Nort pointed to the defile—that gulch which the boys had named Smugglers' Glen—and added:

"We might catch the old man in Elixer Cave."

"What good would that do?" asked Dick. "You don't imagine he had anything to do with scaring our horses; do you?"

"Not exactly," replied his brother. "But, seeing we're so near the place, I thought we might give it the once over."

"Not much point to it," said Bud. "There's nothing to be learned up there. No, I guess it was some sort of queer weed or flower I smelled and which also frightened the ponies. I wish I knew more about botany. I might find out what it was," and he looked at the trampled grass over which they were now

riding. But it gave no clew.

"If there's a weed, the mere smell of which causes a horse to bolt," said Nort, "it may be the thing that's causing the cattle to die. Maybe it's the poison weed that caused so many deaths here."

"I can't believe anything as strange as that," declared Bud. "But after we get things running well I'm going to have a doctor, or a chemist or somebody who knows about such things come out here and look the place over. We've got to get to the bottom of this puzzle."

His cousins agreed with him. However there was nothing they could do at present. So they rode back to the ranch where they told their strange experience, and suggested to Billee, Snake and the other cowboys that it would be well for them to be on the watch, to find out if any strange weed or flower growing in Death Valley was responsible for the sinister manifestations.

"It may be a new brand of loco weed," suggested Yellin' Kid in his big voice. "Some of that's deadly."

"To eat, yes, but not to smell," Bud reminded him. "But you may be right at that. Keep your eyes open, boys."

"Loco weed!" exclaimed Billee. "I've had experience with that—I mean some ponies I once owned went crazy from it. It sure is queer stuff." He referred to a species of bean plant, growing in some sections of the west. Horses and cattle who inadvertently eat this weed with their other fodder run madly about as if insane and often have to be shot. Sometimes loco weed is powerful enough to kill, it is said by some, though there is a doubt on this point. But none of the cowboys had ever heard of the odor from loco weed doing any damage.

The incident of the ponies running away was soon forgotten in the rush and detail of work that soon piled up at Dot and Dash ranch. More cattle were put out to graze, to thus fatten up for market. More hands were hired and the place soon was almost as busy, big and important as the boys' ranch in Happy Valley, or the original one at Diamond X.

There was one thing Bud and his cousins noticed and spoke of, however, and this was that all their cowboys came from distant places, with the exception of Billee, Kid and Snake. All the hands hired gave their addresses as of ranches far removed from Death Valley. And though when they first started business the boy ranchers had endeavored to hire hands in Los Pompan, they were not successful.

"Why don't you want to sign on with us?" Bud asked more than one.

"Oh, well, I don't have nothin' against you, personal, boss," would be the answer, "but I don't jest like that locality."

Then Bud and his cousins knew that the sinister reputation of Dot and Dash was at the bottom of the refusal.

But enough men from other places were hired to run the ranch, and matters were shaping themselves nicely. Bud sent word home that in spite of the sensational stories, and the one or two strange happenings the boys had themselves experienced, it looked as if the proposition would be a successful and paying one. Fah Moo was a jewel of a cook and there was soon established quite a happy little family at Dot and Dash.

Then, without warning, another blow fell.

It was decided that some of the original herd, purchased with the ranch, could now be sold, as cattle on the hoof were bringing good prices. And, talking it over one night, Bud and his chums planned to cut out a number of fat steers and ship them away.

"I'll ride over to that range in the morning," Bud told his cousins at the conclusion of the conference, "and give the bunch the once-over. Then you two can do the cutting out for I've got to go to town the next few days to sign up some papers for dad. So I'll leave the shipment to you."

"It will be our first from here," said Dick.

"Yes," agreed his brother. "And I hope they don't die before we get 'em to the loading chutes."

"Not much danger, I guess," Bud remarked. "This jinx seems to be passing us up. Guess it got tired of the way we came back at it. Well, I'll go over the first thing in the morning and next day you can begin to round up and cut out."

"When'll you be back?" Nort asked his cousin when Bud slung his leg over the saddle next morning. The two Shannon boys were to be busy at some duties about the ranch during their cousin's absence.

"Oh, I'll be back by noon," was the answer.

So Bud rode away, singing the Cowboy's Lament, and idly flipping the end of his lariat.

Noon came almost before Nort and Dick realized it, so busy were they, and when Fah Moo cried: "Klum an' glit it!" which was the signal for dinner, Nort exclaimed:

"Bud isn't back yet!"

"No," said Dick. "Maybe he found the herd farther off than he counted on. But he'll be along before we finish."

However, Bud did not show up, and when all the cowboys had eaten, and the afternoon began to wane without the return of the ranch owner's son, his cousins looked at each other with anxious faces.

"Where do you reckon he is?" asked Dick.

"That's hard to say, but——"

"Say, let's ride out that way!" interrupted Dick. "We've finished here and——"

He did not complete the sentence, but his brother knew what was implied. Accordingly a little later, saying nothing to the other hands, the two saddled their ponies and started out on the trail to that part of the ranch situated near Smugglers' Glen, where the original bunch of cattle were grazing.

"I don't like this disappearance on Bud's part," said Nort, as they rode along.

"Is it a disappearance?" asked Dick, pointedly.

"What else is it? He hasn't come back."

To this Dick returned no answer, but there were anxious looks on the faces of the boy ranchers as they urged their ponies forward.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE SEARCH

Pleasant enough it was, riding over the sunlit, undulating broad stretches of the range, and Dick and Nort would have thoroughly enjoyed it had it not been for the nature of their errand. Had Bud been with them they would probably have "whooped it up" with joyous, care-free exuberance. But now they were rather solemn, not to say glum.

Dick, noticing that his brother rode along with his eyes bent on the ground just ahead of the pony, inquired:

"What are you looking for—lost something?"

"No. But I was thinking about the possibility of poison weed and I thought maybe I could spot it before anything happened."

"I don't take much stock in that poison weed theory," said Dick.

"No? What do you think caused the deaths?"

"Hanged if I know! I'm more concerned, right now, with finding out what's keeping Bud away."

"Well, that's why I was sort of looking for this weed—if there is such a thing."

"You thought maybe he'd been overcome by it?"

"Somewhat—like Sam Tarbell was overcome, you know."

"There's a possibility of that," admitted Dick, with an anxious air.  
"But we ought to meet him soon."

However they rode on for several miles, and though they strained their eyes for a sight of their returning cousin, they did not glimpse him. It was getting dusk when they came within view of the original herd which had been purchased with the ranch. The cattle were quietly feeding, chewing cuds or roaming about as suited each individual taste. But there was no sight of Bud.

"Something must have happened to him!" said Nort, voicing not only his own fear but that of his brother. "He doesn't seem to be around here. Something sure has happened!"

"I'm beginning to fear so," admitted Dick. "He might have had a tumble, or his pony might, and gotten a broken leg from it—I mean Bud might."

"He could manage to sit on his horse with a broken leg—that is some kinds of broken legs," Nort pointed out.

"He couldn't get back up in the saddle if he fell off and broke his leg," objected Dick. "Gosh! I wish we'd find him."

They topped a little rise, which gave them a good view of the surrounding territory, and eagerly scanned the vista. There seemed to be nothing but cattle in sight, but a few moments after reaching the little hill summit Dick exclaimed:

"There's a pony!"

Excitedly he pointed to it, and a moment later Nort had taken his field glasses from their case and was focusing on the animal. After what seemed like a long time, but which, really, was only a few seconds, Nort cried:

"That's Bud's horse all right!"

"Do you see Bud?" anxiously inquired Dick.

"No, he doesn't seem to be in sight. But let's ride over there."

They urged their ponies forward at top speed but as they drew near Bud's favorite mount, which he had brought with him from Diamond X, the steed perversely kicked up his heels, wheeled about and was away on a fast trot.

"He must have lost his bridle, or else the reins are caught up on the saddle horn!" cried Dick as he and his brother took after the runaway. For a Western horse, in almost all cases, will stand still if the reins are dropped over his head to the ground. Of course there are exceptions, but Bud's mount was well trained in this habit. Consequently when Nort and Dick saw the animal running from them they realized that one of two things must have happened. A horse cannot run far with the bridle reins dangling in front of him. He is very likely to step on them and trip himself up. But nothing like this happened with Star, which was the name of Bud's pony. He ran on easily.

"Have to rope him, I guess!" cried Nort, who was a little in advance of his brother.

"Go to it! We got to find out what's wrong!"

There was an exciting race for a few minutes but in the end Nort and his trusty lariat won. The coils settled over the head of the runaway and he was gently brought to a halt. Once caught he was tractable enough. It was as though he had wanted to show off.

"Bridle's gone; eh?" remarked Dick as he cantered up alongside his brother and the captured horse. "That looks bad."

"Unless Bud took it off himself, to let his pony graze in more comfort."

"He wouldn't do that without hobbling him, and look—there's his rope." Dick pointed to the coils on the saddle horn.

"Then what happened? Is there any—"

Nort did not like to use the word "blood," but that is what he implied. And his brother knew the thought—that Bud might have been shot by some rustlers or roving desperados and so had been dropped from the saddle. But there were no evidences of foul play, and no signs of a struggle. No marks showed on the pony, either.

"Well, this sure is a mystery!" exclaimed Nort when the casual examination, was over. "What has

become of Bud?"

"That's what I'd like to know," echoed Dick. "What's the next move?"

"Better go back and tell some of the boys. We'll have to organize a search."

"Guess that's the only thing to do," admitted Dick. "Gosh! The jinx was only on a vacation. Now it's back in full force."

"Oh, I wouldn't go thinking the worst—not yet a while," urged Nort as they started back for the ranch, leading Bud's mount by a rope around his neck. "Something might have given Bud a fall and his pony might have run away. Then Bud may have met some cowboys who loaned him a mount to get back on. He may be back at the ranch when we get there."

But Dick shook his head over this theory.

"If Bud had ridden back on a borrowed horse we'd have seen him, sure!" he declared. "We came the same trail he'd have used."

Truth to tell Nort did not think much of his own reasoning, but he put it forward as the best under the circumstances. There was clearly only one thing to do, and that was to acquaint the cowboys with the mystery of Bud's disappearance as soon as possible, and get a search under way.

There was plenty of excitement at Dot and Dash when, in the shadows of the coming night, Nort and Dick galloped into the yard and shouted the news. They knew, without asking, that Bud had not returned in their absence, so Yellin' Kid did not have to shout:

"He isn't here!"

"Then we've got to find him!" was Billee's conclusion after hearing the brothers' story. "Come on, boys! We've got to search for Bud!"

## **CHAPTER XVI**

### **BUD'S STRANGE TALE**

Darkness, which shrouded Death Valley shortly after the search started, was a severe handicap. Even the most skillful followers of a trail, and there were several such among the cow punchers, could do little in the night. Still they rode out in various directions from the Dot and Dash ranch house—big, stern-faced men, with lariat and gun ready and determined looks in their eyes.

Though some of the cowboys had only been associated with Bud Merkel during the short time of their hire, they had come to admire the boy rancher who treated them as his father would have done, with fairness and kindness.

"If any doggoned rustlers have been playing tricks with Bud," voiced Yellin' Kid as he rode off with Nort, Dick and Billee, "they had better make their wills. I'm after 'em, boy, I'm tellin' you!" and he shouted this information to the silent night.

So they rode forth into the blackness. The Shannon brothers, with Yellin' Kid and Old Billee Dobb, made up one party. Snake Purdee with Sam Tarbell headed another, and the various new cow punchers, including one or two who had recently been sent by Mr. Merkel from Diamond X, took up such trail as there was.

At best it was only a series of faint clues that led toward Bud. It was known in what direction he had started that morning, and the finding of his horse near the original herd, and not far from the Smugglers' Glen, gave color to the theory that he had carried out his intention of getting information about the cattle he wanted to ship away. That was as far as clues went.

What had happened to the young man, how he came off his horse, how the pony's bridle was missing—all these were points to be cleared up by the searchers. And it was not easy in the night.

"We can't do much till morning," said Billee Dobb when he and his companions had circled around the wondering cattle of the original herd, without getting any nearer to the solution of the mystery.



"Something's happened to Bud to put him out of business."

"Out of business!" exclaimed Nort. "Do you mean——"

"I mean only temporary!" Billee made haste to add. "Bud's in some sort of condition where he can't come back to us or send word. I don't really think anything could have happened to him—I mean anything serious."

"I hope not," murmured Dick, while Nort echoed the wish.

However, as the hours of the night passed, and searching as best they could by the glimmer of flashlights, stopping to shout Bud's name now and then, they did not find the missing young rancher.

"It's getting daylight," remarked Yellin' Kid in lower tones than he was wont to use. Perhaps the strange hush which always precedes the dawn, or perhaps the sorrow that pervaded all hearts on account of Bud's absence had an influence on Kid and he was more solemn.

"Yes, soon be time to eat," agreed Old Billee. "We'll have to go back, though. Didn't bring no grub with us."

This was true enough. When the search started no one thought it would last very long. There was no idea that the searchers would be out all night. Yet such was the case.

"Yes, we'll have to go back and then start out again after we eat," assented Nort.

They rode along for a time in silence. Slowly the light in the east grew. More and more rosy it appeared, now with golden streaks. Morning was about to break forth in all its glory.

"I wonder if he could have had anything to do with it?" spoke Nort suddenly, and apparently asking himself the question.

"Who?" inquired Dick a bit sharply. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the old Elixer peddler."

"Tosh?"

"Yes."

"How could he have anything to do with Bud staying away all night?"

"That's it. I don't know. I'm just wondering. Tosh is a queer old crank, you know, and he may have met Bud and tried to sell him some more of the stuff that Fah Moo got sick on."

"Well, there'd be no harm in that," remarked Billee. "Old Tosh probably tries to sell everybody he meets some of his dope, on the plea that it'll save them from the fate that overtakes so many in Death Valley. No harm in that. Poor, old crank!"

"No harm in trying to sell—no," assented Nort. "But if Bud didn't buy any bottles of the stuff—and he wouldn't be likely to—Tosh might have got mad and kicked up a row. There might have been a fight and ——"

"Oh, I don't think so!" interrupted Dick. "That's a little too far fetched."

"Well, almost anything might have happened," argued Nort. "But I wish we'd find him!"

The others heartily echoed the thought. They were nearing, now, the entrance to the defile, or Smugglers' Glen. The sun was just peeping up above the line of round hills which represented the horizon. A new day was being born, but to those from Dot and Dash ranch it was not a joyful day—or it would not be if the mystery over Bud remained unsolved.

"I wonder if, by any chance, he could be up in there," mused Nort.

"Where?" asked Dick, who was gazing off across the range, his eyes intently focused on a small, moving object that did not seem to be either a cow or a horse.

"Up there where we found old Tosh making the witches' broth," and Nort looked closely at his brother to see what was attracting his attention.

"I mean in Smugglers' Glen," went on Nort, for Dick had not turned.

"What you looking at?" suddenly demanded Nort.

"Why, I thought—I saw—" Dick was speaking in a preoccupied manner, his gaze still fixed on that small, dark object.

Then, so suddenly that it startled all of them, as they sat on their mounts, with back turned toward the defile, there came from the glen a noise. It was a noise of stones rattling one against the other.

Like a flash all turned from observing the object that had caught Dick's eyes, and the reason for the stone-rattling noise was explained. It was caused by some one walking unsteadily out of the defile, and the person who was walking was—Bud Merkel!

For a moment the searchers could scarcely believe that they really saw the missing youth. But as he came nearer it was only too evident.

"Bud!" cried Nort and Dick in a duet as they spurred their horses forward. "Bud!"

"By gosh! 'Tis him!" roared Yellin' Kid.

"But he's 'bout done up!" commented Billee Dobb as he, with Kid, urged his pony forward. "What happened?"

It was obvious that something serious had taken place. Bud was hardly able to walk, and was supporting himself by leaning on a tree branch as a sort of cane or crutch. But his face brightened in the rising sun as he beheld his friends coming toward him.

"What happened?" called Dick, as he dismounted beside his cousin.

"It's a strange story," said Bud in a weak voice. "I've been practically kidnaped and put under the spell of some sort of poison gas."

"Kidnaped!" cried Snake.

"Poison gas!" echoed Billee.

"Who did it?" demanded Nort.

"Rustlers, I reckon," said Bud as he sank down on a bowlder and drank greedily from the canteen Dick offered. "I was surprised by a crowd of men back there," and he nodded back up the gulch. "They shot some sort of vapor at me that knocked me out, and I've been a prisoner ever since. I just managed to get away."

"Tell us about it!" cried Nort.

"And we'll go back there and clean those fellows out!" shouted Yellin' Kid, reaching for his gun.

He would have put his threat into execution, too, but Bud restrained him with a gesture as he said:

"It's no use!"

"Why not? Did you shoot 'em up?" asked Snake, with the beginning of a delighted grin.

"No," Bud replied. "But they aren't there now. They lit out. That's how I could get away."

"Say, there's more to this than you're telling us!" said Nort.

"Go ahead. Spill the whole yarn—that is if you're able," begged Dick.

"Oh, yes, I feel better now. Give me a little more water and I'll tell you what happened to me."

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE AVENGERS

Bud Merkel took a long drink, shook his head several times as though to clear his brain of some benumbing influence and began his story.

"I guess you all know," he said, "how I started over here yesterday to size up our stock to get ready for the first shipment to go from Dot and Dash under the new ownership." His hearers nodded. By this time several other cowboys from the other searching parties had arrived to hear the good news of the finding of Bud.

"Well," went on the young rancher, "I got to the range all right, looked the herd over and found there were more steers ready to ship than we had counted on," and he looked toward his cousins. "Then I thought I'd spend the rest of the morning in exploring Smugglers' Glen. I wanted to see if I could find out where the old Elixer man disappeared to that time he ran away from us," and again he looked at Nort and Dick. The story of the herb doctor was known to most of the cowboys.

"I rode on up into the gulch," continued Bud, "and when I got close to the cave I slid off my horse, for his feet made so much noise on the rocks that I thought if the old man was in the cavern he'd take warning and skip out before I could catch him at work. That's what I wanted to do—see old Tosh at work brewing his stuff. And I wanted to find if there was another entrance or exit from the cavern. I didn't know but what, in case of a big blizzard, we might not shelter some of our stock in the cave if we could open it up more."

"That wouldn't be a bad idea," commented Nort.

"Well, anyhow," resumed Bud, "I got off my pony, tied him to a tree and went on up the glen afoot. I was almost at the cave when, all of a sudden, two or three men came out. They seemed quite surprised to see me, and I certainly was to see them. They weren't any of our men, and they hadn't any right on our range, any more than Old Tosh has, but I guess no one minds him.

"I thought, of course, that these fellows were rustlers—they were rough and tough enough looking to be almost anything. But before I could say or do anything, one of them set down what looked like a tank containing carbonic acid gas, like they use at drug store soda water fountains. I wondered whether these fellows were going into the game of putting pop in the Tosh Elixer, when, all at once I felt sort of queer. I tried to fight off the sensation, but I kept getting weaker until I just crumpled up in a heap.

"I thought of all sorts of things—the stories Billee had told about the sudden deaths here, how Sam Tarbell was overcome and his horse killed and then, just as if I was in a dream, I felt some of those men pick me up and carry me into the cave."

"The darned hijackers!" cried Yellin' Kid.

"Can't we do something to 'em?" demanded Snake angrily.

"Wait," cautioned Bud. "I haven't finished. The men picked me up. I was so weak and knocked out by that peculiar smell, whatever it was, that I couldn't do anything. It was, as I said, just like being in a dream. They laid me down on a pile of bags, or something. It was dark, but they had some lanterns. My eyes were half open so I could see a little. Then they tied me up and after that I don't remember much. I have a hazy recollection, just as you'd have from trying to remember a half-forgotten dream, a recollection of seeing the men moving about the cave, digging out rocks, hammering and crushing them. For a time I thought they might be going to wall up the entrance and bury me there alive.

"Then I must have gone to sleep, or lost consciousness, for everything faded away and the next thing I knew I woke up. It was dark and quiet around me and I began to move my arms and legs. I had been tied up pretty tight, but the knots seemed to be looser now and I managed to work some of them off so I could free myself.

"Then I got up, found a flashlight in my pocket—luckily the men hadn't searched me—and I managed to make my way out of the cave. So here I am—that's all there is to it."

"Well, that's good and plenty!" cried Nort.

"Didn't you stop to see if those men were still there, and what they were doing?" asked Dick.

"No, I didn't feel able," Bud answered wearily. "All I wanted to do was get out, find my horse and ride back to the ranch. But where is Star?" the young rancher suddenly asked, looking around.

"He's safe in the corral," Dick answered. "We found him wandering around without his bridle on when we went to look for you late yesterday afternoon."

"He must have pulled away from the tree where I had him tied and yanked the bridle off that way," Bud said.

"Horses an' bridles ain't much account now!" declared Billee. "The main thing is about these darn

varmints that treated Bud so. Who do you think they were—I mean what sort of scamps?" asked the old ranch hand, and he fingered his gun, which several other cowboys were doing.

"I think they were cattle rustlers," answered Bud, who seemed to be feeling better each moment. "They must have been hiding in the cave waiting for a chance to drive off some of our stock, when their plans were spoiled by my happening along."

"That's probably it," agreed Nort. "But what about that soda water cylinder you say they shot at you?"

"I wouldn't call it soda water," stated Bud with a grim smile. "But it contained some sort of gas and they must have shot it at me for it knocked me out."

"How was it they could turn a stream of poison gas, or at least knock-out gas, on you, Bud, and not suffer from it themselves?" asked Dick.

"The wind was blowing straight from them to me, down the glen," was the reply. "The breeze carried the stuff to me and it didn't bother them at all for it floated right from them."

"Just like gas in the war," stated Snake, who had fought in France, as had several of the other husky cowboys. "That's probably what it was, too, some kind of gas they used in the war. It comes in tanks, and the Germans used to lay a shallow trench full of these cylinders, with the openings in 'em pointed our way. Then they'd open a faucet, let the gas out and the wind would blow it right in our faces. If we didn't put on gas masks it was bye-bye for us."

"But," exclaimed Nort, "Bud wasn't killed."

"No," agreed Snake with a grim smile, "and we're darn glad he wasn't. Like as not they didn't use strong gas on him. There's lots of kinds of gas, you know. I took some once to have a tooth yanked out and I laughed to beat the band. Even in war all the gas wasn't sure death. There was a kind that made you cry like you'd lost your best girl."

"That's the explanation then," decided Nort. "These fellows—call 'em rustlers for the time being—have got hold of some kind of knock-out gas and they used it on Bud."

"I sure was knocked out," murmured the young rancher.

"But what's their game?" asked Yellin' Kid in no gentle tones. "If they're rustlers why did they just hold Bud a prisoner a while and then light out and not take any stock?"

"They probably figgered the game was up," suggested Snake, "and wanted to make their get-away. Anyhow they didn't get no stock."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Bud.

By this time nearly all the other members of the searching parties had been gathered near Smugglers' Glen, the more distant ones having been signaled to by shots previously agreed upon. And from the leaders of these squads it was learned that no raid had been made during the night. The whole range had been pretty well covered.

"Well, that's good," said Bud when the welcome news had been conveyed to him.

"Do you think these rustlers were responsible for the deaths here in this valley?" asked Nort. "Have they been setting off this gas—or some even worse—and killing cattle, men and horses?"

Billee Dobb shook his head.

"Death Valley got its name a long while back," he said. "Long before these fellers could have been operating. This is some new dodge, take my word for it."

"It's a queer way to rustle cattle—kill 'em with gas," said Yellin' Kid.

"Oh, they keep the gas for humans that might try to catch 'em, I guess," Billee went on. "That's just something to cover their operations. And it doesn't solve the other deaths that took place here."

"You say you saw those men digging away in the cave, cracking rocks and the like of that?" asked Snake.

"That's what I think I saw," spoke Bud. "Of course I don't know *what* I really saw and what I may have *dreamed*, half unconscious as I was.

But it's easy to find out if any digging has been done in the cave. We can take another trip back there and——"

"That's just what we'll do!" cried Nort

"And we'll catch these fellows an' string 'em up!" cried Sam Tarbell. "They killed my best horse and I'm going to have revenge on 'em. Are you with me, boys?"

"Sure!" cried half a score of cowboys, their hands going to their guns.

"We'll revenge Bud, too!" exclaimed Dick.

"That's the talk!" shouted Yellin' Kid. "Let's get at these *hombres* an' chase 'em out of the country!"

Eager and excited, angry, and justly so, the crowd was ready for anything. They would have rushed at once into the defile but that Billee Dobb held up a restraining hand.

"We want to go at this thing calm and cautious like," he said. "We want either to catch these scamps or drive 'em out. At the same time we want to find out what their game is."

"That's right," agreed Bud. "The more I think of it the more I'm sure I didn't *dream* I saw 'em digging something out of the sides of the cave. They *really did it*."

"Diamonds, maybe!" exclaimed Snake, eagerly.

"Be yourself, boy!" chuckled Yellin' Kid. "Diamonds don't grow out here."

"All right—have it your way," mildly assented Snake.

"So it would be a good thing to see what these birds were up to," went on Bud. "I'm still so sort of knocked out that I can't do much. I've got to get back and rest up. But if you boys want to go back up there and see what you can find, and do, I'm willing."

"We sure will!" cried the crowd as one man.

"Let Billee be the leader," suggested Bud.

And in a few minutes the avengers had formed a sort of plan of battle or attack which, they hoped, would solve some of the mystery of Death Valley.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### DRIVEN BACK

Bud was to go back to the ranch with some of the cowboys and remain there while the main body of punchers moved up into the glen to capture, if possible, the mysterious men with their more mysterious tank of strange gas. And, after a second consideration of the affair in hand, it was decided that it would be best if the main body of avengers could have one of Fah Moo's hot breakfasts before starting in on what might be a strenuous day's work.

"But if we all go in," objected Nort when this plan was outlined, "those fellows up in the glen may escape, if they haven't already skipped away to stay."

"I've thought of that," stated Old Billee who was sort of commander-in-chief. "We'll send some scouts up to watch and see what happens. Who'll volunteer?"

There was no lack on this score, for though the men were all tired from the night's vigil, on edge from lack of sleep and hungry into the bargain, Billee had three times as many as he needed for scouts.

Cow-punchers are "he-men," and little things like loss of sleep and delay in getting breakfast do not bother them. It was arranged that when the main body returned, after a session with the Chinese cook, they would bring a "snack" for the scout volunteers.

"And some hot coffee in thermos bottles," added Bud, who knew how that would be appreciated. "We have some thermos bottles at the ranch. I only hope I'll feel able to come back and help fight."

"Do you think there'll be a fight?" asked Yellin' Kid, eagerly.

"It's likely," said Billee.

"Whoop-ee!" roared the loud-voiced one and his joyous sentiment was echoed on all sides. Bud looked a little glum that he could not be "in on the fun," as he called it later. But he was more done up than he imagined, for he had gone through a strenuous time, though he had not actually been mistreated.

So while some of the cowboys more recently engaged were sent into the glen as scouts, the main body, with Bud riding on a spare horse which had been brought along for just such an eventuality, went back to the ranch.

There things soon began to "hum," as Nort and Dick expressed it. They had had experience before with desperate and unscrupulous men who, as rustlers, or otherwise, had endeavored to make trouble for the boy ranchers. And the young managers of Dot and Dash did not shrink from the coming conflict.

"Can do—sure!" was the bland reply of Fah Moo when asked if he could get breakfast for the bunch in a hurry. "Sure can do!"

And he did.

Guns were looked to, extra ammunition was packed, hurried snatches of food were the order of the day, and when baskets of grub had been packed for the scouts left on guard, once more the cavalcade started off.

On the way to Smugglers' Glen a sort of campaign was outlined and agreed upon. It was decided to advance on foot against the men in the cave, for the defile was so narrow, and the footing so uncertain because of loose rocks, large and small, that horses would be a disadvantage rather than a help in case of a fight.

"We'll leave the ponies at the entrance, same as Bud did his," suggested Old Billee.

"All alone?" asked Nort. "Some of those fellows may sneak up in our rear and make off with our mounts."

"They won't be unguarded," declared Billee, who was too old a fighter to make the mistake of leaving his rear open to attack. "I'll have a couple of the hands stay with the horses."

"Not me you won't!" shouted Yellin' Kid. "Me, I'm goin' to *fight!* I'm not goin' to be nurse-maid for a lot of cow ponies!"

"Me either!" declared Snake.

"Order in the ranks!" snapped Billee with blazing eyes. "I'm in charge here, by the instructions of the boss, and I won't have anybody saying what they will and won't do! You heard me!"

He was as different from the usual mild Old Billee Dobb as chalk is from cheese. He was in his element and he knew it.

"No offense, chief," said Yellin' Kid, humbly and in subdued tones. "But I do want to get a shot at these fellers!"

"I wonder if Del Pinzo can be back of this gang?" mused Nort as he rode beside his brother toward the glen.

"I wouldn't put it past him," answered Dick. "But I thought he was in jail."

"They don't seem to make, out here, the kind of jails that will keep Del Pinzo behind the bars," commented Nort. "If he's around these diggings he'd be the very one to engineer some dirty trick."

"Speaking of diggings," went on Dick, "what do you reckon it was Bud saw those fellows digging out of the sides of the cave?"

"Give it up, for the time being. We'll find out when we get inside. But in spite of the fact that Bud thinks he saw some queer operations he may have dreamed it all—after that gas attack, you know."

"Yea, I guess so. It's queer all around. Fancy rustlers being so up to date as to use the tactics of chemical warfare."

"There's been a lot of strange things since the Big War," stated Nort. "Maybe some of these rustlers were in the chemical division of the

A.E.F. and learned tricks there of how to make and send out of cylinders gas that would knock a man out but not kill him."

"That's possible. But what about the horses, cattle and men who were killed here in Death Valley? I mean years ago, the way Billee tells it. Did these fellows have anything to do with that?"

"Hard to say, but I don't believe so."

"Then what did?"

"That's what we've got to find out after we get through with this gang."

The avengers urged their ponies ahead at a fast clip and the sun was still far from the meridian when they came in sight of the entrance to the defile. Dark and sinister it loomed in contrast to the brightness of the day. What secrets did it hold?

"I wonder if Old Tosh is up there, helping the rustlers?" mused Dick as Billee got ready to call a halt and deploy his forces.

"Don't believe that old yarb doctor does any more harm than giving Chinks the stomach-ache," chuckled Nort. "But he may have rented that cave to those fellows."

"Nervy of him, considering that the cave is on Dot and Dash land," said Dick.

It did not take long to get ready for the attack. Billee named the men he wanted to remain as a rear guard in charge of the horses, and they accepted the detail in as cheerful spirits as possible. To the relief of Yellin' Kid and Snake Purdee, they were not compelled to remain thus inactive.

"Though you fellows may have a fight on your hands," Billee said to the horse guard as he posted them, "these fellows may dash out after we rouse 'em, and it'll be up to you to deal with 'em."

"We'll do that all right, boss," chuckled a big, lanky puncher, one of the new hands hired.

With Nort and Dick at his side, Billee Dobb led the way up into the dark defile. Every man had his gun out and was eager-eyed for what might happen next.

"Don't make any more noise than you can help," cautioned Billee to the men back of him. "We want to surprise these *hombres* if we can."

On and on they went, over big and little bowlders, up into the glen where the frowning, towering walls looked down on them. The passage became narrower. They were now approaching the cave.

"Steady, boys!" called Billee as they rounded a turn and came within view of the dark entrance to the cavern.

It was a tense moment. Some of the men carried a gun in either hand. Nort and Dick had one each, and Billee was armed likewise. A little wind began blowing down the gulch in the faces of the attackers. It seemed to bring with it a slight mist.

"Gettin' foggy," commented Snake. "I wonder——"

Then he began to cough and choke. So did Nort, Dick and Old Billee. The white mist came floating nearer.

"Look out, boys!" suddenly shouted Yellin' Kid. "It's a gas attack, same as in the war. Look out!"

A moment later the party was sneezing, coughing and gasping for breath as the faint white mist, blown by the wind, enveloped them. It caused a terrible, gripping sensation, a constriction of the throat muscles so that breathing was difficult.

"They've got us!" yelled Billee. "We can't fight poison gas! Back up, boys! We've got to run!"

It was impossible to advance in the face of this mysterious surprise attack and the avengers were driven back. Gasping, and trying to keep from collapsing under the afflicting sensation, the Dot and Dash men were forced to retreat from their unseen foes.

# CHAPTER XIX

## GAS MASKS

"Hold on!" yelled Snake Purdee as he swung around a ledge at the edge of the narrow entrance to Smugglers' Glen and made a grab at Nort who was running as fast as he could under the weakening influence of the gas. "It's all right here—the wind will blow the stuff to the east. Swing around here, everybody!" and he indicated a niche to the west of the entrance.

Nort stopped, his brain dully comprehending what Snake meant. Then the others in the wild, frightened retreat sensed what the words were intended to convey and, one after another, they gathered there in comparative safety with Snake, Nort and Dick.

"Whew!" gasped Billee Dobb whose age was telling on him, not only in the rapid, forced retreat, but in the effect of the gas. "That was tough! But what makes you think we'll be safe here, Snake?"

"On account of the wind blowing the gas away from us. Look, there it floats to the east. We're safe here. I didn't get nearly gassed in the war for nothing. We're safe here till the wind shifts and it won't do that right away."

"What about the horses?" gasped Dick, taking deep breaths to rid himself of the gas already breathed.

"They're all right—they're up wind, too!" shouted Yellin' Kid, whose lungs did not seem to have suffered much.

This was true enough. The ponies, with the guard of cowboys, were to the west of the gorge entrance and, as Snake had been quick to observe, the strange, white mist which had so mysteriously floated out of the cave toward the avengers, was drifting, now, out of the mouth of the defile and off to the east.

"If any of the cattle get in the path of that they'll be killed!" exclaimed Dick, noting how the mist clung to the ground and rolled along as fog sometimes does when the clouds are low.

"The bunch isn't down there," said Billee.

"And I don't know as that gas is so very deadly after all," stated Snake, breathing deep after a few cautious inhalations to make sure the air was clear.

"Then what'd you run for?" Yellin' Kid wanted to know.

"Because I wasn't sure of what sort of stuff it was. There's lots of kinds of gas, you know. We had one kind in the war that would just knock a man out for a few hours. I reckon that's the kind they shot at Bud and the kind they just now loosed at us. But I wasn't takin' any chances!"

"I should say not!" cried Billee Dobb. "But now we're out of danger for a while, what's to be done next?"

Nort had the answer ready in a moment.

"Gas masks!" he exclaimed.

"Gas masks?" echoed Billee.

"Sure! I get you!" cried Snake. "That's the ticket! Gas masks! Same as we used in war when the Germans let their gas loose. Why didn't I think of it before?"

"There's been so much happening!" remarked Dick, "that it's a wonder we thought of half we did. But gas masks would be just what is needed here. Only where are we going to get them?"

Up spoke one of the new cowboys to observe:

"There's a branch of the American Legion in Los Pompan. I belong to it and so do some of the other boys. 'Tain't much of a branch, but they got some war relics hangin' around the meetin' room, and I seen some gas masks there the last time I was in. I reckon we can borrow them without any trouble."

"Golly! That's the cheese!" cried Nort.

"But are the masks any good?" Dick asked. "If they're relics of the war they're likely to be old and no good. And a gas mask that won't keep gas out is worse than none at all."



"You're right there!" exclaimed Sim Roller, who had proposed the matter. "Some of the masks are the same as the boys used in France. But others are new ones they got from the gov'ment lately to decorate the meetin' room. I reckon they'd be fresh, with charcoal in and everything needed."

"Will you see if you can get some for us?" asked Billee, who was in charge during the forced absence of Bud.

"Sure!"

"Good!" cried Nort. "Then we'll come back and have another go at these fellows!"

"Yes, it will need another go," remarked Billee, looking at the entrance to the defile out of which a faint mist was still floating. "We don't dare go back at 'em now, unprotected. They're regular devils, that's what they are! Devils!"

"Wonder what their game is?" mused Dick as he and his brother, with the other cowboys, moved to where their horses were picketed in charge of the guard.

"They want to keep us out of that glen," suggested Nort.

"But why?" went on Dick.

"So they can poison more cattle and bust up this ranch and rustle what stock they don't kill," was what Nort answered.

"It doesn't seem reasonable that they'd poison cattle," and Dick shook his head. "What good would dead ones be to them? They can't be sold, and it wouldn't pay to kill 'em just for the hides."

"No, that's so," admitted Nort. "But they evidently want to keep us out of that glen, and drive us away from the ranch if possible, so they can have it for themselves."

"Part of that seems like to be true," spoke Billee, taking a part in the discussion. "But this isn't the first time there have been queer doings at Dot and Dash. Years ago I'm pretty sure there was no band of devils up here with cylinders of gas. This is something new."

"Tell me, Billee," resumed Nort, "on what sections of the ranch did most of the deaths occur—I mean when you worked here?"

"Well," and the veteran scratched his head reflectively, "as near as I can remember they was all somewhere near this glen, come to think of it."

"And this is where Sam Tarbell's horse was killed and where Sam was knocked out—near this glen; wasn't it?" went on Nort.

"That's true enough."

"And it's from this glen that Bud got his dose of poison gas and where, just now, we got ours; isn't it?"

"Sure," Billee was forced to say.

"Well, then," went on Nort, "isn't it reasonable to suppose that this band—or some bunch like it—has been doing this right along?"

Here Billee shook his head.

"You can't make me believe," he said, "that this gang, or one like it, has been doin' this gas business all along. In the first place the earliest, mysterious death on Dot and Dash took place many years ago, before poison gas in war was thought of. I won't deny that this bunch back there," and he nodded in the direction of Smugglers' Glen, "I won't deny but what they may be usin' war gas. But it wasn't so years ago."

"Then it looks," spoke Dick, "as if these men had some object in keeping us out of the glen."

"That's it!" cried Billee. "There's something up there they don't want us to find out."

"Maybe it's the secret Old Tosh has of makin' sarsaparilla," said Snake.

"No," objected Dick, "I don't believe the old man is mixed up in this at all. He was in the cave, that's sure, but I think this bunch of rascals with their poison gas have deposed him and taken possession for their own ends."

"And what those ends are it's for us to find out," suggested Nort.

"Sure!" cried his companions.

"We'll get gas masks and make another attack!" added Snake.

"I wonder what we'll find?" mused Dick.

"Bud could have told if they hadn't knocked him out," suggested Nort. "He says he saw them pounding rocks and digging in the sides of the cave. They were after something besides cattle, that's sure."

"Diamonds!" some one said.

"That's been mentioned before," remarked Dick. "It is out of the question, I think, but it may be something always associated with diamonds."

"What's that?" exclaimed several.

"Gold, maybe," was the quick answer, and into the eyes of every man there came a sudden, new gleam.

"By golly!" cried Yellin' Kid in his loudest tones, "I'll bet you're right! There's a gold mine in that cave and those fellers want to keep it for themselves! Whoopee! Let's get them there gas masks and rustle the whole bunch over the border. Then we'll have the gold for ourselves! Come on!"

## CHAPTER XX

### GLITTERING YELLOW

Such excitement followed the Kid's outburst that the very horses seemed imbued with it. The cowboys, keeping well out of the way of that floating, white cloud of gas—more or less poisonous, it was not to be doubted—had mounted their animals and were on their way, by a roundabout trail, to the ranch house.

"Gold!" muttered Snake. "Do you really think there's gold in that cave?"

"It would not be beyond the bounds of possibility," Dick replied. "I'm not a geologist, and I don't know anything about mining. But the west is the home of gold, and so is Mexico. We're not far from Mexico. What's to prevent a ledge or seam of gold from running up into these hills, or small mountains, and cropping out in that cave? What's to prevent?"

"Nothing!" came from Billee, a new light in his eyes.

"It would be very natural, I think," added Nort.

"That would account for what Bud saw—the men picking away at the stone sides of the cave," went on Dick. "And the roof and sides are of rock—that my brother and I saw."

"Then we're on the right track!" cried Snake joyfully. "I been tryin' to figger out what all this meant, but I see it now. The other poison attacks, where cattle and men died, didn't have nothin' to do with the gas we just now ran away from. Somebody else must have been the blame of that, or maybe it wasn't poison gas at all—might 'a' been just bad water or loco-weed. But this is different."

"Yes," agreed Nort, "this is different. We know, positively, that this gas attack was launched by men."

"Men who want to keep us out of that cave 'cause it's full of gold!" murmured Old Billee. "Boys, for once I see daylight ahead of me! I'm goin' to turn miner! I'm through nursin' cattle! I'm goin' to dig gold and retire rich! By golly, I am!"

"You better wait until we see the color of pay dirt!" chuckled Snake.

"And until we get those fellows out!" added another cowboy.

"Oh, we'll git them out soon as we have them gas masks!" declared Billee, who seldom had shown

such enthusiasm. "By golly, at last I see daylight! I'll soon lay this on the shelf," and he patted his old lariat.

"I hope he isn't disappointed," murmured Dick to his brother.

"Do you really believe there's a chance of finding gold in that cave?" Nort asked in a low voice.

"I really do. Why else would those fellows want to keep us out? It can't be that it's a mere cattle-rustling game."

"No," admitted Nort, "I don't believe it's that. But—gold! Seems sort of far-fetched."

"Well, maybe I'm wrong," went on Dick. "But we'll soon find out, if those gas masks are any good."

On the way back to the circle of ranch buildings a close lookout was kept for any sign of intruders on the range of Dot and Dash. But no strangers were seen, nor did a casual survey of the various herds scattered over the plains disclose any casualties.

"I guess everything that happens takes place around Smugglers' Gulch," observed Dick.

"Seems so," admitted his brother.

No one had suffered any serious results from the gas attack. It had been discovered so quickly, and the retreat had been made so promptly, thanks to Snake's vigilance, that aside from a little irritation of their mouths and throats the attackers were not injured. The irritation soon passed away and was about gone when they neared the ranch.

"They were just teasing us that time," decided Snake. "The next time they'll shoot some real nasty gas at us."

"And that's the time we'll be ready with the masks," declared Nort.

Bud Merkel was as excited as either of his cousins when he heard the news. He declared no better plan could be devised than going against the unknown cave dwellers with gas masks and a telephone message was soon on the way, asking the commander of the Los Pompan branch of the American Legion for the loan of as many of the protectors as were needed.

In due time word came back that the Dot and Dash ranchers were quite welcome to the masks. Snake and Kid, as experts in their use, and as judges of the best ones to bring back, were sent as a committee into town to get the life-saving apparatus.

It was next day, when the gas masks had been tried on by the cowboys who were to use them, and plans were being talked over for a second attack, that Nort suggested:

"Maybe we ought to try these masks before we use them. They may be defective in spite of the fact that they look all right."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Bud. "But we haven't any poison gas to try 'em with."

"If we could go in a room filled with ammonia, or some such vapor as that, we could soon tell if the masks were any good," Dick suggested.

Dr. Taylor was communicated with and agreed to supply from his somewhat limited laboratory sufficient fumes to make a sure test of the masks. He came out to the ranch, a small room was set aside for the experiment and into this vile chamber the men went one at a time, each one wearing the mask that was designed to protect him in the coming fight.

With the exception of one or two of the affairs, each one was gas proof and the defective ones were quickly replaced with good ones. So that in a comparatively short time the avengers were once more ready to make the attack.

Much the same tactics were observed as on the former occasion. The horses were left well out of reach of any clouds of vapor that might float from the ravine, and the guards were instructed to deploy their reserve cavalry to east or west, according to the direction of the wind, in case gas was noted coming out of the defile.

"Well, I reckon we're all ready," observed Old Billee on a certain morning a few days after the first failure. "How about it, Bud?"

"All set," answered the ranch owner's son, for he had recovered from the gas he had inhaled and was quite fit again. "Let's go!" he cried.

The cavalcade moved forward, and when within about the same distance as before from the defile, the horses were led aside, the guard posted and the men again advanced up the gorge.

"Don't make any more noise than you can help," warned Bud, as one of the men rattled some of the loose stones.

"Oh, I think they know we're coming," said Dick.

"You do? How?"

"Well, naturally they have scouts posted. We'd do the same if we were in their position. They know we're coming, all right."

"Perhaps so," Bud admitted. "Well, everybody have his mask ready to slip on as soon as gas is smelled."

"What if they use a kind we can't smell until it's too late?" asked Dick.

"Well, that's a chance we have to take," said Bud with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I think I shall smell it all right," Snake interjected. "I was pretty good at that sort of thing in the war. The officers said I had a mighty good nose—for smelling I mean," he made haste to add for fear his pals would accuse him of personal vanity. "In some of the trenches they used rats and canary birds to give warning of gas. But I was the official smeller for my bunch, and I got so I was pretty good at it if I do say it myself."

"Then we'll make you the advance guard," decided Bud, and so it was arranged.

Up the gulch they marched, with guns and gas masks ready, and once more, as on the former occasion, they were just within sight of the cave when Snake cried:

"Gas! Gas!"

At once each man donned his protector, and then, looking like prehistoric monsters the crowd, led by Bud, Nort, Dick and Old Billee rushed to the attack. The same white wisps of vapor floated down into the faces of the avengers, but there was no turning back now. There was no choking or gasping. The gas masks were a perfect protection.

Dick's surmise that the advancing party was being spied on seemed to be correct, since before they reached the cave shots came from the cavern, and there was the vicious whine and ping of bullets. One or two of the cowboys were hit, one seriously, and then the avengers began shooting on their own account.

Bud gave the signal for a rush attack and eagerly he and his comrades sprang forward. They passed a little trench near the mouth of the cave. In this shallow ditch were several iron cylinders from holes of which was pouring a white vapor. This was the gas, how deadly could only be surmised for the masks kept all fumes and effects of it from the attackers.

There was a current of air from the cave blowing down the defile and this carried the fumes away from the hidden men and into the ranks of the attackers. This direction of the wind explained why no gas masks were needed by the foe. The wind was their protection. And the fact that they wore no masks was soon demonstrated.

For as the attackers swept on and up to the cave they dislodged several of the first line fighters of their foes—rough, ugly-looking men who sprang up from amid the rocks and, after firing their last shots, turned and ran into the cavern. Not one wore a mask.

In a few minutes the attackers were safely back of the gas-emitting cylinders and could take off their masks for the wind carried the fumes away from them. Yanking his protector off, Bud shouted:

"Into the cave after them!"

The rush was made. A sight was had of a crowd of men retreating into the black depths of the cavern. The cowboys fired at them and were shot at in turn, Nort receiving a nasty scratch from a bullet along his shoulder, and his brother stopping a lead slug in the fleshy part of his thigh. Bud was nipped on the hand and several of the other cowboys were more or less painfully injured.

Some damage was inflicted on the foe, for there were yells of pain from several and one man was seen to fall. He was quickly picked up by his pals, however, and carried into the far end of the cave.

Then, when it grew dark as the daylight faded, a short distance beyond the entrance, Bud called a halt on further pursuit.

"No use going back there when we don't know what's beyond," he said. "We've driven 'em out, and we can have a look, now, and see what secret they have been guarding."

When Snake and Kid, again donning their masks, had shut off the flow of gas from the cylinders, a precaution taken against a possible change of wind, flashlights were produced and a close inspection of the cave was begun. It was evident that the men who had been in it, and who had relied on gas to keep intruders out, had made their escape through some rear exit, or they might still be hiding in the depths of the cavern.

Extra powerful portable electric torches had been brought by the exploring party and these were turned, now, on different parts of the rocky walls and roof of the cave. Bud showed where he had been held a prisoner, and it did not take long to find places where digging had been going on.

As the lights flashed over the rough, rocky walls, there were reflected back glistening yellow slivers of illumination.

"Look!" cried Dick, pointing. "There it is! Gold!"

"Gold! Gold!" came in joyful shouts from the exulting cowboys. "We've found a gold mine!"

And truly it seemed so.

## CHAPTER XXI

### FALSE SECURITY

Only those, probably very few of you, who have ever taken part in a gold rush can understand and appreciate the wild excitement that prevailed when the flashing lights revealed the rock of the cave to be seamed and studded with yellow veins and patches. It aroused even the most lethargic of the cowboys. And, truth to tell, none of them were very strongly of that type. They were accustomed to live amid excitement of one kind or another, and this was but a new sort.

"Gold! Gold!" was the exulting murmur on all sides.

"There's enough here to make us all rich!" cried Yellin' Kid, his loud voice echoing through the cavern.

"No more ridin' fence for me!" cried Snake.

"Me, I'm going to have one of them pianos that plays itself!" declared Billee, whose soul, hitherto, had been obliged to get its feast of music from a mouth organ.

"And look where them hombres have been takin' out our gold!" exclaimed Yellin' Kid as he flashed his light on a wall where, unmistakably, excavating had been going on. There were signs of new digging in the rock and dirt of the cave's sides and the ground beneath showed a litter of debris.

"You ought to make 'em pay for all they took out!" declared Snake to Bud.

"Maybe it would be a good idea to catch 'em first," suggested Dick, quietly.

"Well, that's so. We'll do that after we have begun to dig out the gold," decided the cowboy. "Oh, boy! Look at the yaller stuff!" and he picked up what seemed to be a nugget of great value. It was of gleaming yellow and heavy in his hand.

The boy ranchers were no whit less excited than their older companions. But perhaps the finding of the gold mine, in which, knowing Mr. Merkel's generosity, the cowboys believed they all would share, meant more to the older men than it did to the boys. The latter were, in a sense, owners of the ranch

and were not doomed to days and nights of hard work on the range. There was a brighter future before them, because of their advantageous position, than there was ahead of Billee and the others. Up to now the old cowboys had seen nothing but a hard life (though there were enjoyable spots here and there) and they counted on dying with their boots on, not from violence, perhaps, so much as from wearing out at their labors. Now they saw a chance of getting rich quickly, or, if not exactly rich, at least of gaining a competence.

No wonder they were excited.

"Boy howdy! I can't hardly believe it!" shouted Yellin' Kid. "First time I was ever on a ranch that developed gold!"

"It's the first for me, too," said Bud.

"What's the best thing to do?" asked Nort, of no one in particular.

"Hadn't the boss better file a claim of discovery?" suggested a cowboy who said he had once lived in California.

"He don't need to file nothin'!" declared Billee. "This gold is found on Mr. Merkel's land. Everything on the land is hissen. He can work the gold mine same as he can his cattle ranges."

That seemed to be the consensus of opinion and it was decided that all remaining to be done was to inform Bud's father of the discovery, start to work the claim and take the profit.

"And clean out them rascals!" added Billee.

"Oh, sure!" agreed Bud. "It's queer, though," he went on as he flashed his light about the cave, "that if gold has been here since the beginning, as it must have, that the secret of it only just now got out. And if the gang that's been working this mine has been shooting out poison gas to keep people away from here, why didn't some rumor of this gold strike filter out before?"

"There's something wrong," declared Billee. "I don't believe the deaths that took place in this here valley, from the time I knowed about 'em, had anything to do with this gold cave. I'm sure they didn't. And, what's more, this claim has only been worked recent like. You can tell that by the fresh marks of the digging."

This was plain to all, and the more they thought of it the more of a puzzle it was. Clearly poison gas, if such it was, had only recently been used to guard the approach to the cave. What, then, was the explanation of the former mysterious deaths?

But the boys and their friends were so excited over the discovery of the yellow metal that they gave little heed to this phase of the matter. All the talk had to do with getting out the ore and finding how much it assayed to the ton.

"But we can't let the cattle business slide; can we?" asked Dick, as he and most of the others prepared to depart. A guard was to be left in the cave, and sufficient food and supplies would be sent them to enable them to remain on constant duty.

"Oh, no, we won't give up the cattle business," decided Bud. "We'll work that and the mine, too."

Mr. Merkel was duly astonished when, that night, his son succeeded in getting in touch with him over the long-distance telephone from Los Pompan. Bud found a booth to talk from which insured his conversation not being broadcast in the town. If news of the gold strike got out it might mean a rush. Not that any land around the gulch or cave could be preempted by others, for it was all on Mr. Merkel's ranch. But not everybody would respect his property rights and there might be trouble.

"Are you sure it's gold, son?" asked the ranchman over the wire.

"Why of course it is, Dad. What else could it be?"

"I don't know. But I'm going to make sure before I start a torch-light procession. I'll send you out a good mining man. Don't do anything until he arrives, and keep your shirts on—all of you."

"All right, Dad. I know what you mean. We won't broadcast it."

"Better not. There might be a slip-up, you know."

"I don't see how there can be, but we'll keep it mum."

Busy days followed at Dot and Dash. While the cattle business was not passed up, Bud and his cousins devoted all their time to the discovery in the cave, and let the new cowboys attend to the shipping and care of the cattle. Some of the yellow ore was dug out and taken to the ranch house to await the arrival of the mining expert. Meanwhile it was carefully guarded.

Covering several days a careful exploration of the cave had been made without discovering any of the enemy. There were several exits from the cavern, and it was surmised that the "gas gang," as they were dubbed, had escaped by one of these.

"But as long as they're gone, we haven't anything to worry about," said Bud. "We're sitting pretty now."

"Nothing to worry about," added Nort.

"And I guess we won't find any more dead cattle," said Dick. "It must have been some of the gas they were experimenting with that killed the cows and Sam's horse."

"Sure!" assented Bud.

Thus were the boys lulled into a false security, and their fond dreams were not shattered for several days. It was on the afternoon of the day before the mine expert was to arrive that Bud, Nort and Dick, riding toward the cave to find out how matters were progressing there, saw, on a hillside some distance away from the glen, a number of motionless lumps.

"Looks like some of the steers from the main herd had strayed and were taking a siesta," suggested Nort.

"Yes," admitted Bud, slowly. "But I wonder——"

Suddenly he put spurs to his pony and dashed toward the dark objects. His cousins followed and as they got near enough they saw that the cows, far from taking a siesta, were in their last sleep.

"They're dead!" exclaimed Bud. "Dead same as the others were—from gas, or something. Boys, that gang is back again!"

"Then it's all up with the men on guard at the mine!" cried Nort.

## **CHAPTER XXII**

### **TO THE RESCUE**

There was no use wasting any time or sympathy over the dead cattle. They were dead beyond a doubt, a fact which was easily proved. And yet, as before, there was not a sign of anything that showed how they had met their death. The bodies lay in a natural position, as though the animals had been overcome when grazing and had sunk gently down. Or as if they had succumbed to some gentle poison that brought a painless death.

"Well, if this isn't the limit!" cried Bud while his cousins looked at him and at each other with wonder on their faces.

"Of all the rotten things to do!" snapped out Nort. "To kill these poor cattle! Why doesn't that gang fight like men if they want to give battle—not spray their dirty poison gas around dumb beasts?"

"It is pretty rotten," agreed Dick.

Bud was carefully scanning the ground in the vicinity of the dead cattle, at the same time cautiously sniffing the air to detect any possible taint. But he seemed to discover nothing. Dick and Nort followed his example, but were unable to come upon any clew.

However, not far from where the half dozen valuable animals had dropped dead there was a little crack or rift in the earth. It was a sort of opening between two long ridges of rocks, there being an outcropping of stone at this point. It was part of the two ridges which, suddenly rising higher, formed the walls of Smugglers' Glen farther to the south. Dick was the first to notice it.

"See anything there?" asked Bud, noting that his cousin was bending over the cleft in the surface.

"No, I can't see anything and I can't smell anything," he added, as he bent closer.

"But I can hear something!" added Nort.

"Hear something?" questioned Bud.

"Yes, the sound of running water down there. Listen!"

He bent with his ear over the crack in the rocks. And in the silence, broken only by the slight movements of their ponies, from which they had dismounted, the boys heard the murmur as of water flowing along far under ground.

"I'm afraid that doesn't mean anything," said Bud when he had signified that he, too, heard the ripple. "Dad said there were a lot of underground streams around here. This one must come from the little brook that flows through Smugglers' Glen. It takes a dip down under the rocks and comes to the surface again farther on."

"I guess you're right," admitted Dick. "It doesn't mean anything. But I didn't know there was underground water in this section."

"Oh, yes, plenty of it," Bud added. "I've seen other places with rock fissures like this where you could hear water bubbling along beneath the surface."

"Then this goes into the discard," spoke Nort, meaning that it was useless to form any theory about the mysterious deaths if it was to be based on the underground streams.

"But we'd better get on to the cave mine!" cried Bud. "If those fellows are at their poison gas game again, it's likely that Sam Tarbell and the fellows we left on guard are in as bad shape as these cows. Darn the luck, anyhow!"

"That's what I say!" chimed in Nort as the three hastened to where they had left their ponies. "Just as we thought we were sitting pretty, with nothing to worry about, along comes this! Wonder how they worked the game, anyhow?"

"They must have got back in the cave—probably from the end where they ran out the time we chased 'em with our gas masks on," said Dick. "They sneaked up on our fellows, let loose a cloud of gas, put them out of business and then came down here to kill the cows."

"But that's what I can't understand," said Bud. "Why should they go to the trouble of killing cows? Cows can't spy on those gold mine jumpers. Cows can't get out any gold. It's all so useless, this killing of our beasts."

"I guess they're just natural devils as Billee claims," suggested Nort. "But we'll pay 'em back!"

"You bet we will!" exclaimed Bud. "And now to the rescue! We've got to save Sam and his crowd if we can!"

They galloped their ponies in the direction of the Glen, and reached the opening to the sinister defile in record time. Nor did they stop to dismount. Rough as was the way, they rode their mounts up the valley until they came within sight of the cave. Nor were they stopped, and they detected no gas, though they were on the alert for it.

"Maybe it's a false alarm," suggested Nort. "Maybe our fellows didn't suffer from a gas attack after all."

"Well, the cows certainly did!" exclaimed his brother.

However their worst fears were realized when, as they flung themselves off their horses at the mouth of the cave they saw, just within, the prostrate forms of Sam Tarbell and his companion guards. Stark and silent the men lay there.

"We're too late!" muttered Bud sorrowfully.

"They're all dead!" echoed Nort.

"This is Death Valley sure enough!" came gloomily from Dick.

There was a movement within the cave. There sounded the rattling echoes of dislodged stones.



"Some one's coming!" murmured Bud, drawing his gun.

A moment later there emerged from the cavern the form of Old Tosh. He did not appear surprised to see the boys, nor to note the prostrate forms of the men. In one hand he held a bottle of his Elixer and waving it over his head he cried:

"I'm just in time! Come on, boys, help me! We'll save 'em yet!"

## CHAPTER XXIII

### TESTING THE GOLD MINE

Any suspicions which the boy ranchers held against the old man vanished quickly as they saw the eagerness with which he went to work to save, if possible, the men on guard at the cave gold mine. Bud and his cousins had, naturally, held back a little against approaching the stark, prostrate forms too closely. They were still young enough to be, at a time like this, unduly impressed by death.

But Old Tosh, as he was generally called, went at the business as if he were a doctor intent on saving lives in desperate danger. He opened a bottle of his Elixer, and, though the boys thought it pitifully weak stuff for the occasion, he appeared to have unbounded faith in it. Raising the head of Sam Tarbell, the old man placed the bottle to the silent lips, tipped it up and managed to force a little into the cow puncher's mouth.

"Come on, you boys!" Tosh called to Nort, Dick and Bud. "You got to help. I can't do this all alone. I'm just in time. I knew this would happen. They're on the verge of death but I'll save them."

"I'm afraid you're too late," said Bud.

"No, I'm not. These men are alive yet. All they need is a little stimulant to bring 'em around. They didn't get much of a dose of the poison gas. If they had, not even my Elixer could save 'em. But it can now. Come on, there's another bottle in my coat pocket. Reach it out and get busy, boys!"

Bud made a jump to do as directed. And as he was taking the second bottle from the old man's coat, while Tosh was still administering the medicine to Sam, Bud could not help wondering whether the queer hermit had anything to do with loosing the flood of gas against the mine guards. It was no time, now, however, to make such an inquiry.

Bud and his cousins gave Ned Frosh and Bill Dungan each some of the Elixer, raising the men's heads and forcing the liquid between their lips as they had seen Tosh do. As for the hermit, he went from Sam to a puncher who rejoiced in the name of Slippery Mike, giving him a good dose.

And then, strange as it may see, each of the four guards revived, opened his eyes and sat up. They had dazed looks on their faces, but were unharmed.

"What happened?" asked Bud of Sam, who was the leader in charge of the force guarding the gold mine. "Did those fellows come back and shoot gas at you?"

"I don't rightly know what did happen," Sam answered. "If those fellows came back we didn't see 'em. But there was sure some gas, for it hit us all of a sudden and keeled us over before we knew it. How did you get here, and what's he doing here?" Sam pointed at the old man.

"He got here soon after we did," Nort explained. "And I guess it's lucky he did. That stuff he gave you brought you fellows back to life."

"It's strong enough to make a mud turtle race with a jack rabbit!" chuckled Slippery Mike. "But it isn't bad, at that. If I could have another swig of it——"

Old Tosh hospitably held out the bottle.

"'Twon't hurt you," he said. "It's Life's Elixer."

"But how'd you know we was knocked out?" asked Sam when each of the guards had taken some more of the medicine. "It only happened a little while ago."

"And we only came a little while ago," said Dick. "We were out on the range and we saw some dead cattle. Right away we jumped to the conclusion that you had been poisoned with gas same as the steers. So we came here and found you stretched out. Then along came Mr. Tosh and he did the right thing, it seems."

"Did you know this had happened?" asked Bud of the old man.

"What, that these men had been gassed? No, I wasn't aware of it," answered the hermit. "I came back here to see if those men had gone away from my cave—the cave where they drove me out. I wanted to use it again, for there's no better place for brewing my Elixer. I went in the cave from the other end, and when I got here I saw you men stretched out. I knew what had happened, right away."

"But did you see any of those rustlers, holdup men, or whatever they are, with their gas cylinders?" asked Bud.

"No, I didn't," was the reply. "I don't know anything about gas cylinders. The poison gas doesn't come in cylinders. It comes out——"

"Oh, yes, it does come in cylinders, and it comes out of them," interrupted Bud. "We have some of the cylinders that we captured when we drove the men out of the gold mine."

"Gold mine?" excitedly cried the old man. "Where's a gold mine?"

"In that cave," and Bud pointed to it. "The cave where we saw you brewing your pot of herbs. Didn't you know there was gold there?"

Old Tosh shook his head.

"I don't take much stock in gold," he said. "But I liked that cave because it was so sheltered. Only, sometimes, I couldn't stay in it on account of the gas."

"That's the gas we mean," explained Nort. "The poison gas these men sprayed out of cylinders to keep us away so we wouldn't find there was gold in the cave. But we got gas masks and drove 'em out."

Again Old Tosh shook his head.

"I don't know anything about gas in cylinders," he said. "But then I been away a long time, in another county, getting different kinds of herbs. My Elixer is better than ever now and stronger."

"I'll say it's strong!" declared Slippery Mike.

"So I came back to see if I could use my cave," went on Old Tosh. "Now about this gas——"

But he was not allowed to go on, for Bud, seeing the effect of the Elixer on Sam and his companions had a new thought.

"Will that save the dead steers—I mean the steers that seem to be dead?" he asked the hermit. "There's half a dozen of 'em out on the hill, and——"

"No," replied Tosh, "this stuff won't bring the dead back to life. It will only revive where a spark of life remains. And, in any case, it isn't effective on animals. It is only for humans."

"Then our steers are dead," sighed Dick.

"Guess that's a foregone conclusion," agreed Nort. "But what do you think of him, anyhow?" he asked Bud in a whisper, indicating Tosh.

"You mean do I have any suspicions against him?"

"Yes. Do you think he may have gotten hold of a cylinder of the poison gas and sprayed it on these men so as to get a chance to use his Elixer to revive them?"

Before Bud could answer there was a noise as of men and horses coming up the defile, and, thinking it was some of the former gang returning, guns were whipped out. But they were not needed. Two mild-mannered and inoffensive appearing men rode into sight. They had the look of college professors. Behind them rode Billee Dobb.

"Hello, boys!" greeted Billee, all unaware of the recent sensational happenings. "Here's the mine experts your dad sent out to look over our gold prospects, Bud. They're going to test the quality of the ore, and see how much it assays to the ton. That's the right way to express it; ain't it?" He turned to the older of the two men.

"That is perfectly correct, Mr. Dobb. And if you will show us the mine we can soon tell you, approximately, how valuable it is."

"It's in that cave. You'll find lots of gold there. And the first lot that comes to me is goin' to be spent for a self-playin' piano. But what happened here?" Billee asked, for he was now aware that something unusual had taken place.

"The darn scoundrels!" he exclaimed when he had been told of the death of the cattle and the plight of the men. "So they come back; did they? Well, we'll soon have a big force here takin' out gold and we'll keep better guard."

Meanwhile the mining experts went into the cavern to test the gold mine.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### A STRANGE DISCOVERY

Billee Dobb, having listened to the stories of Bud and his cousins, and the tale told by Sam and his pals, shook his head dubiously.

"I can't figger it all out," he said. "But you sure done a noble job, Tosh, and we thank you for it. Can you tell us anything about those rascals with their tanks of gas?"

"I don't know nothin' about gas tanks," said the old man. "But more than once I've warned you men about——"

What the warning was he did not get a chance to explain, for at that moment Professor Dodson, the mine expert, with his assistant, Professor Snath, emerged from the interior of the cave, into whose black depths they had disappeared some time ago, while Bud and the others were talking.

"By golly!" exclaimed Billee, suddenly changing the subject. "They got their report ready pretty quick. I reckon the gold's so thick in there they don't need to make much of a test. Whoopee! I'll soon have my self-playin' piano!" He was as eager and excited as a boy. Indeed Bud and his cousins were not a little excited as they looked at the two scientists who came out carrying specimens of ore which they had knocked off the walls of the cave with their peculiar hammers.

"Didn't take you long," commented Bud.

"No, this was an easy problem," answered Professor Dodson. "We don't even need an assay to determine our findings."

"By golly! What do you know about that?" cried Billee. "About how many dollars will she run to the ton?" he asked. "I only want to know *about*," he stipulated. "I won't pin you down by five or ten dollars, 'cause I think that wouldn't be fair. But roughly about how much do you think our mine will assay to the ton?"

"How much what?" asked Professor Dodson with a peculiar smile. "How much what to the ton?"

"How much gold, of course!" exclaimed Billee. "What else? Gold's what we want; ain't it?" and he chuckled as he turned to his friends.

"Sure—gold!" was the murmur.

"Then I'm sorry to have to tell you that there is not one ounce of gold in any number of tons of ore and rock in that cave!" was the unexpected and startling answer. "There isn't any gold at all."

"No gold!" cried Bud.

"No gold!" echoed his cousins.

"No—no—gold!" faltered Billee Dobb, his jaw falling. He saw his self-playing piano fading back into the dim vista of his dreams.

"No gold," repeated Professor Dodson. "What we have here," and he indicated the ore specimens held by himself and Professor Snath, "is a selected lot of samples of iron sulphid. It is a yellow ore that looks

very much like gold, but which has none of the properties of real gold. In fact it is so often mistaken for the valuable metal that it has come to be called 'Fools' Gold.' I am sorry, but such is the case. I shall so report to Mr. Merkel, who engaged me to come out here after hearing his son's account."

"Fools' gold!" murmured Bud. "Well, it fooled us all right."

"Yes, and it fooled those other fellows," said Nort. "The men with the gas cylinders," he added.

As the two professors looked a little puzzled, Dick explained:

"There were some men hiding in this cave who must have thought, the same as we did, that it contained gold. They drove out Mr. Tosh, who used the cavern to brew his medicine. Then they drove us out. They used tanks of some poison gas, or at least gas that made a man unconscious. We had to put on gas masks, the kind used in the war, to fight 'em. But we drove 'em out."

"And a lot of good it did us," said Bud gloomingly, "if there isn't any gold in there."

"No, the evidence is too plain to be mistaken," said Professor Snath. "It does not even require a laboratory test to prove that the cave is rich in iron sulphid, but not gold."

"Maybe it will turn out to be an iron mine instead of a gold mine!" put in Billee, with new hope showing on his face. "Iron's valuable. Not worth as much as gold, of course, but a good iron mine—say, boys, maybe I'll get that self-playin' piano yet."

But again his hopes were dashed.

"It wouldn't pay to work this section even for iron," said Professor Dodson, and his assistant nodded his agreement.

"Well, then," remarked Nort, "we'll have to keep on raising cattle."

"But we can't do that if these fellows are going to let loose a flood of poison gas and kill them off every now and then!" bitterly cried Bud. "We're beat either way you look at it. Just as you said, Billee, this is Death Valley."

"Tell me more about this!" suddenly suggested the older scientist. "What is all this about poison gas in tanks killing cattle?"

"I can tell you!" came from Old Tosh. "I know all about it but nobody would ever listen to me. They said I was crazy. But I know! Look here!"

He pointed to a crack, or fissure in the rocky floor of the glen, not far from the cave entrance. It was just such a crack as Bud and his cousins had noticed one day near the place where they had found some dead cattle.

"Listen to that! It's rising!" cried Old Tosh, bending over the crack.

The two professors, the boy ranchers and some of the punchers leaned over and listened. From somewhere down in the depths of the earth came the rustle and swish of running water.

"An underground stream," said Professor Dodson. "They are not uncommon in this region. But——"

Suddenly he started back and withdrew his face quickly from above the crack in the earth.

"Hurry away from here!" he cried. "The gas is rising. I begin to understand now. It is the secret you have been trying to solve. Hurry away! It may not be deadly, but it will overcome all of us in a short time."

He ran down the defile, away from the long fissure, followed by the others, Billee and his men driving the ponies before them. Professor Dodson had made a strange discovery, after Old Tosh had put him on the track of it.

## CHAPTER XXV

Hurrying along, some of the men in their saddles, others stumbling on foot, not having taken the time to mount, the whole party rushed out of the defile. It was not until they had reached open country, some distance removed from the entrance to Smugglers' Glen, that the older scientist thought it safe to call a halt. And he did not do this until he had looked around, with his assistant, to make sure there were no earth fissures near, and had also ascertained the direction of the wind. He tested the air by breathing deeply of it and said:

"We're safe for a time. But there's no telling how long. This is a most remarkable natural phenomenon—one of the most remarkable I have ever happened upon."

"Very remarkable," agreed Professor Snath.

"But what's it all about?" asked Bud. "We've seen those earth cracks before."

"And near the place where there were dead cattle," added Nort.

"We heard running water down below, too," was Dick's contribution to the general information.

"Those cracks go down to the bed of an underground stream," explained Professor Dodson. "The subterranean river, brook or whatever it is, must flow a long distance under this ranch," and he looked over the expanse of valley, hill and plain. "Now an ordinary underground stream is not dangerous. In fact where it comes to the surface, as many do, it provides valuable water. But the stream below here is impregnated with a deadly gas." He gave it a long Latin name. "At least if it is not always deadly," he went on, "and it may not be so at all times, owing to dilution, it is risky to breathe it. I think that is the explanation of the deaths of your cattle," he said to Bud. "And you men who were rendered unconscious," he indicated Sam and his guards, "you must have breathed a modified form of the gas."

"But those fellows had gas in tanks!" cried Nort.

"No question about that!" added Billee. "Did they bottle up this stuff you gave such a long name to, Professor, and shoot it out at us?"

"No," was the answer. "I am inclined to think these unknown men used a very different kind of gas against you—probably a comparatively harmless vapor discovered during the war activities. I think there are two puzzles here and that they are both in the way, now, of being solved."

"It looks so," murmured Bud. "But how is the poison gas generated and how does it come up out of cracks in the earth to kill cattle and knock out our men?"

"The explanation is probably very simple," said the scientist. "There must be, somewhere near the head of the defile we just left, a deposit of the mineral or ore from which this gas I speak of is generated. It is somewhat like carbon monoxide, but more powerful even in the open air."

"Water, flowing over a bed of this mineral, liberates the gas in the form of an almost invisible vapor. It is swept forward in a cloud by the wind, some of it is carried along above the course of the underground stream, and as soon as it reaches an opening in the earth, like a fissure crack in the rock or ground, the gas rises and whoever breathes it dies or is rendered unconscious for a time, according to the strength of the vapor. At one time the underground stream may be strongly impregnated with the dissolved chemicals that generate the gas. At another time the emanations may be comparatively weak. That, I think, is the explanation of happenings here in Death Valley, as you call it."

"Then the men who thought they had a gold mine in the cave had nothing to do with killing the cattle?" asked Nort.

"I can't say for sure, but I think not," the professor replied. "I am inclined to believe that they got these tanks of gas to use in driving away any who might try to get at their secret—a useless secret as it proves now. But the accidental deaths, both of cattle and men, from the underground gas must have been going on here a long time," the scientist suggested.

"They have!" declared Old Billee. "Several years back. That's why I quit here. But we didn't know what the cause was. Some said poisoned water, others poison loco-weed. Some said it was the souls of Indians who were driven out of this valley years ago."

"And all the while it was just a natural gas liberated by an underground stream running over a bed of chemicals," stated Bud.

"That's what I think," said Professor Dodson. "It remains to be proved conclusively, but that is what I think will be found."

"Then this means the end of Death Valley," went on Bud, gloomily. "We can't afford to stay here and raise cattle to be killed off by gas."

"No," agreed Professor Dodson. "But do not form a hasty decision. Science can do much these days. It may be possible to neutralize this gas and so make your ranch safe. In that case it will be the end of Death Valley but in a better way. It will be Life Valley then."

"Do you think it can be done?" eagerly Bud asked.

"I don't know. But it's worth trying. You say you have gas masks? They will be needed I think."

"Plenty of 'em!" cried Bud. "Come on back to the ranch where we still have them. We may win yet!" he said to his cousins. "If the gold mine peters out, as it has done, we'll get rich raising cattle in one of the best valleys of the west—providing the poison gas can be done away with."

"There's always an *if* in the road," murmured Nort.

But when, a little later, the scientists, the boy ranchers and some of the men, wearing gas masks, penetrated to the far end of the defile, they found conditions which were distinctly encouraging. Professor Dodson located the mass of mineral which, when wet, gave off the vapor that caused death or disablement according to its strength.

"All that needs to be done," he said, indicating the stream which ran for some distance in the open before plunging underground, "is to build a small dam, change the course of this little river and send it down *outside* the defile, instead of *through* it. Keep this stream entirely in the open and you will do away with the poison gas. It is really a not very difficult problem in engineering and irrigation. It will not cost much to do this."

"Then it's going to be done, and it means the end of Death Valley forever!" cried Bud. "I mean a happy ending," he added. "For we'll do away with all danger."

"Thanks to you gentlemen and to Old Tosh," said Nort. "For he helped, didn't he?"

"Indeed he did," agreed Professor Snath.

"And when the course of the stream is changed," went on his chief, "there is no reason why the old herb doctor cannot resume work in his cave if he wants to. It will be safe then."

"Guess he'll be glad to hear that!" chuckled Nort. "He's been like a lost dog these last few weeks. Then those fellows, with their gas tanks, didn't have anything to do with killing our cattle?" he suggested.

"Not a thing," declared Professor Dodson. "It was a war against nature you were fighting."

"We've only just begun to fight her!" cried Bud.

Mr. Merkel was not much disappointed when he learned that the cave mine had petered out.

"I never took much stock in it," he told his son over the telephone. "But I'm glad you've solved the mystery of Death Valley. I'll send some engineers over, we'll change the course of that stream and go in for cattle raising. That's our business, anyhow, not mining."

In a few weeks the dam was constructed, the stream, where it ran in the open, was shifted several hundred feet and there was no longer any danger of it dissolving the chemicals and carrying the deadly gas underground, to send it up out of fissures to the detriment of man and beast. While the work was going on, all cattle were removed from the vicinity of the defile, which was found to be the only danger spot on Dot and Dash.

The boys recalled the time when, in riding over the range, their horses had taken such a sudden fright. They could not determine whether at that time some poison gas might have seeped out, alarming the sensitive beasts, or whether it was something like a snake which might have startled the ponies. It was one of the things that remained unsolved, but it was a minor phase of the main problem which had been brought to a successful conclusion.

And so, in this comparatively simple manner, was the mystery solved and an end put to Death Valley, though it retained that name for many years.

Some time after all danger was removed, when cattle roamed freely over the range, as near the defile

as they cared to go, and when Old Tosh was again allowed to brew his Elixer in the cave, a man was arrested in Los Pompan for horse stealing. He was convicted and it developed he was one of the men who had used the poison gas tanks against the boy ranchers. He was one of a gang.

They had nothing to do with and knew nothing of the emanations of natural gas in Death Valley. They had heard the sinister reputation of the place, but that did not keep them out, and they discovered the cave and at once jumped to the conclusion that it contained gold. They frightened away Old Tosh and when Bud stumbled on their operations they adopted the sinister form of defense they used later. One of the men in the gang had served in the chemical warfare division of the A.E.F. overseas. He was an expert chemist and developed a gas that would knock a man out but not kill him. Thus Bud was made a prisoner, escaping when the men left him for a time.

The gang had taken considerable of the yellow ore out of the cave, and, doubtless after the battle in which they were worsted, they discovered it to be valueless. So they had no reason to return to the territory. The gang dispersed. None of them, it appeared, had ever suffered from the effects of the natural gas.

Soon after the course of the stream was changed, Dot and Dash ranch was a busy place. Several new herds were bought and pastured and more men were hired. There was no trouble, now, in getting men from near by, for the story of the passing of the menacing gas was told all over.

Old Tosh was kept busy making his Elixer, for though the men knew it was comparatively useless as a medicine, some of them thought it did them good, and they rather liked the root beer taste it had.

"Why don't you put your full name on your labels?" asked Nort of the queer old codger one day, when the boys were visiting him in his, or, rather, their cave, which he had fitted up to live in while he did his brewing. "You just call it 'Tosh Elixer.'"

"That's enough for a name," he chuckled. "But my first name, if you want to know it is Simon. I don't fancy it so I seldom use it."

"Simon Tosh!" murmured Bud. "S.T. Why," he cried, "those were the initials signed to that warning we received while we were on our way here. Did you come to our camp and leave that note?"

"Yes, I did," was the answer. "I heard a new crowd was coming to Death Valley and I thought I'd save their lives if I could warn them not to come. I knew there was something with a queer smell, coming out of the earth, that killed men, horses and cattle. But I couldn't find out what it was. But I knew enough to get out of my cave and the glen when I caught the first whiff of the queer perfume. It didn't get me."

"No, but it did for enough poor fellows, and for too many of our stock before we found out what it was," said Nort.

"I never could understand, though," said Mr. Tosh, after he had identified the two warning notes which Bud produced from his wallet, "I never could understand why the gas came at some times and not at others. You never knew when to look for it."

"Professor Dodson explained that," stated Bud. "It was due to the height of the underground stream, and also the stream in the open. At low water there wasn't enough fluid to cover the bed of chemicals, and so no gas was generated. When the water rose, the gas was given off."

"Science is wonderful," murmured the old man.

The boys left him brewing his kettle of herbs. He insisted on giving them a bottle of the Elixer though he knew they would not swallow any of it.

"Give it to Fah Moo," suggested Mr. Tosh. "But tell him not to drink it all at once."

"We will," promised Dick with a chuckle.

The boys rode home over the rolling plains, dotted with cattle. No longer need they look for lifeless forms. Death Valley, as such, was no longer in existence.

"And we'll make almost as much money out of stock raising as if we had a gold mine," said Nort.

"Surest thing you know!" agreed Bad.

They put their horses in the corral and went in to supper.

"Smells good—whatever Fah Moo is cooking!" commented Dick. "What is it, Fah?" he asked as the Chinese cook came shuffling in.

"Melican man tulky," was the smiling answer.

"American turkey, what does he mean?" asked Nort.

"Roast pork and apple sauce," chuckled Bud, and he was right.

"Here, Fah," said Dick, handing the cook the bottle of Elixer. "Tosh sent this to you."

The celestial gave one look at the flask, raised his hands to cover his mouth and ran from the room, squeaking in his falsetto voice:

"No can do! No can do!"

"He'll never open another bottle here as long as he lives!" chuckled Bud.

And then, as the sun began to sink behind the western hills and from the various stations on the ranch the cowboys filed in to supper, the boys gathered at the table for the bountiful meal and were very happy. They had solved the poison mystery and made Death Valley a place of life.

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