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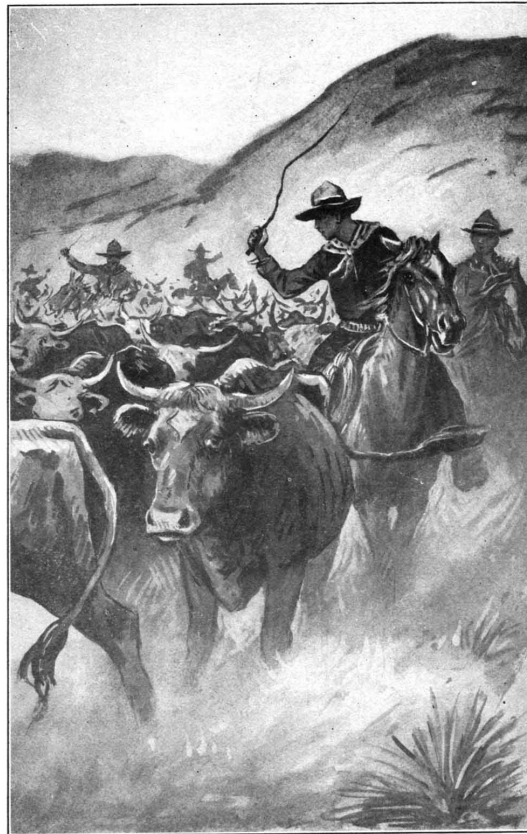
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SADDLE BOYS AT CIRCLE RANCH; OR, IN AT THE GRAND ROUND-UP ***



THERE WAS LITTLE TROUBLE WITH THE HERD NOW.

The Saddle Boys at Circle Ranch

Or

In at the Grand Round-Up

BY

CAPTAIN JAMES CARSON

AUTHOR OF "THE SADDLE BOYS OF THE ROCKIES," "THE SADDLE
BOYS IN GRAND CANYON," "THE SADDLE BOYS ON
THE PLAINS," ETC.

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BY CAPTAIN JAMES CARSON

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THE SADDLE BOYS OF THE ROCKIES
Or, Lost On Thunder Mountain
THE SADDLE BOYS IN THE GRAND CANYON
Or, The Hermit of the Cave
THE SADDLE BOYS ON THE PLAINS
Or, After a Treasure of Gold
THE SADDLE BOYS AT CIRCLE RANCH
Or, In at the Grand Round-Up

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THE SADDLE BOYS AT CIRCLE RANCH

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CONTENTS

- I. [The Strange Return of Old Baldy](#)
- II. [One Gray Thief Less](#)
- III. [The Alarm Bell](#)
- IV. [When the Rustlers Came](#)
- V. [At the Quicksands](#)
- VI. [The Hidden Trail of Mendoza](#)
- VII. [The Secret Valley](#)
- VIII. ["The Way is Clear!"](#)
- IX. [The Cattle Cache](#)
- X. [A Surprise](#)
- XI. [Just Before the Moon Set](#)
- XII. [Bottling up the Rustlers](#)
- XIII. [The Prisoners of the Bunk-House](#)
- XIV. [Shut In](#)
- XV. [Baldy's Hoof Points the Way](#)
- XVI. [The Advance Disputed](#)
- XVII. [Over Thunder Mountain Ridge](#)
- XVIII. [Driving the Herd](#)
- XIX. [Startling News](#)
- XX. [A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing](#)
- XXI. [Setting the Trap](#)
- XXII. [Caught in the Act—Conclusion](#)

THE SADDLE BOYS AT CIRCLE RANCH

CHAPTER I

THE STRANGE RETURN OF OLD BALDY

"Did you find your knife, Bob?"

"No such good luck, Frank."

"That's kind of queer, isn't it?"

"I'm beginning to think so myself," and Bob Archer looked meaningly at his chum, as though a suspicion might be forming in his mind to the effect that there was a practical joke back of it all; and that Frank Haywood really knew more about the missing article than he chose to admit.

And yet, Frank, as a rule, was not given to pranks.

"Did you go all over the ground where Ted Conway was teaching you yesterday how to pick up a handkerchief from the back of a galloping pony?" Frank continued.

"Covered every foot of it, and more," replied Bob.

"And still didn't find the knife you value so much?" persisted his chum.

"Never saw a sign of it," replied Bob; whose home had originally been in Old Kentucky, although a year or so back he had come to the Southwest to live, his father being interested in various ranches and mines with Colonel Leonidas Haywood.

"Oh! well, I wouldn't worry about it too much," observed Frank. "It's sure to turn up, sooner or later. Perhaps one of the boys happened to pick it up, and is waiting for an owner to claim it."

"I asked every one on the ranch," Bob went on, gloomily; "and they all had the same story to tell—never saw the thing. I hate to have anything like that happen. Seems as if I feel every little while that it's on the tip of my tongue to say what I did with that knife. Then I get all mixed up again, and for the life of me I can't remember where and when I had it last."

The two boys, while talking in this manner, were galloping over the level plain at a fair clip. Bob was riding Domino, a big black horse he had brought with him from the blue grass region of Kentucky. Frank rode a yellow pony of great endurance, and wise beyond the average of his class. Buckskin he was called, true to his color; and Frank had taught him many of the tricks known to the favorite mounts of cowboys.

Frank and Bob were seen riding over the country so much, that, far and wide, they had become known as the "Saddle Boys." Some months before the time when they are introduced to the reader in the present volume they had investigated a mysterious noise that seemed to come from a spur of the great Rocky Mountains within twenty miles of Circle Ranch.

This queer rumbling had awed the Indians for a century or more, and they really believed it to be the voice of Manitou. What the two lads saw, and the adventures that befell them on that occasion, have been related in the first story in this series, entitled: "The Saddle Boys in the Rockies; Or, Lost on Thunder Mountain."

Later on, a sudden call came for them to go to the wonderful region where the great Colorado River runs for some hundreds of miles through the most astonishing canyon in all the world; and here they not only saw strange sights, but had some lively times. These are narrated in the story called: "The Saddle Boys in the Grand Canyon; Or, The Hermit of Echo Cave."

Colonel Haywood was laid up with a broken leg when a summons came that required his presence at Cherry Blossom mine, so he was compelled to ask the two boys to go in his stead. This mine was a most valuable property; and the disaster that hung over it like a cloud gave the two lads considerable work before they could feel that they had won out. The remarkable things that happened when on this gallop over plain and desert, and through mountain trails are told of in the third book of this series, entitled: "The Saddle Boys on the Plains; Or, After a Treasure of Gold."

After passing through these troubles of magnitude, here was Bob bemoaning the loss of a knife, as though such a little thing distressed him beyond measure.

"It was a present, you see, Frank," he said, for perhaps the tenth time, as they rode along side by side.

"Oh! yes. I know," replied Frank, as though really getting quite tired of hearing about that wonderful knife; "some girl you knew in Old Kentucky, wanting to give you a present that you could use out in the wild and woolly West, drew all her pin money she had saved, and actually bought you that fine hunting knife. Too bad that if it was so valuable you didn't keep a closer watch on it, Bob."

"But you said *you* didn't have it, didn't you, Frank?" went on the other.

"Sure I haven't; take my word for that, Bob," said Frank. "Don't you think I'd give it to you, if I had it around? Though, for that matter, I think you deserve to be punished a little for being so careless about a present that a girl gave you."

"But perhaps you could give me a hint about what I did with it, if you cared to, Frank?"

"No, I don't believe I could," replied the other, slowly, and in what Bob chose to consider a suspicious way. "You'll remember after a little. Perhaps it'll pop into your mind as you wake up in the morning. I've had things do that more'n a few times. But look at that steer cavorting around over yonder. Whatever in the world do you suppose he's doing, Bob?"

The Kentucky boy shook his head as though still unsatisfied.

"I reckon now, Frank might know a little about that knife," he murmured to himself, as he

looked at his chum. "But for some reason he wants to play innocent and let me think things out. And it isn't like Frank, to act this way. Perhaps I'd best keep quiet, and watch him. He might give himself away somehow when he isn't on his guard."

Frank, meanwhile, seemed to be really interested in the actions of the animal to which he had called the attention of his chum.

"Say, suppose we turn aside here," he remarked, presently; "and go a little closer to that old chap. Looks to me he's acting mighty queer. See him throw up the dirt; and I can hear him bellow from here. Something's made him ugly."

"All right; anything you say goes, Frank," replied the other, suiting his actions to his words, and wheeling to the left.

For the time being he put all thought of the missing present from his mind. Just as Frank had said, the chances were he would find it again, sooner or later. Yet Bob admitted to himself that it had been a long time since anything had arisen to annoy him so much.

They were now bearing down upon the spot where the steer was acting so strangely. He circled around a small patch of timber and brush that was too dense for him to push through, every little while bellowing angrily, shaking his long horns, and giving every evidence of having been worked up to a pitch where he could not contain himself.

"Strikes me he's keeping close to that *motte* of timber, Frank?" suggested Bob, as they kept galloping closer to the spot.

"Just what I had in mind," replied his chum.

"Look at him behaving as if he'd give anything to be able to rush it; but no long-horn could push through that thick scrub. There's something in the bunch that makes him furious, that's what, Frank!" went on Bob.

"Reckon you're right, Bob; anyhow that's what I was thinking myself."

"Could it be a rattler?" asked the Kentucky lad.

"Well, now, I hardly think a steer would act that way if it was," replied the youth who had been brought up on a ranch, and knew a great many things that were as yet mysterious to a recent tenderfoot like Bob. "In the open, some steers might try and jump on a snake that was coiled, just as I've seen a deer do more'n once, grinding it to pieces under his hoofs. But if the snake got in among the brush, a steer would let him go."

"Then what can it be?" queried the boy from Kentucky; "a sneaking coyote?"

"Hardly that, either," declared his chum, decidedly. "You see these old steers size up a coyote as a harmless thing, not worth wasting time over. Now, if it were a wolf that would be another thing. A steer hates a mountain wolf like poison. Seems like they know how the gray rascal is always hanging around, waiting to pull down a calf when the chance comes."

"So I've been told," declared Bob; "Ted related an instance where a steer and a wolf had a battle over the body of a heifer the robber had stolen."

"Yes, I happened to see that fight; and the steer won out, too. The wolf was as mad as they make 'em, and wouldn't quit. He grabbed the steer several times by the nose, but couldn't hold on. And finally the steer managed to pin him to the ground by one horn. After that it was all over with Mr. Wolf."

"But see here, Frank, supposing there is a wolf in that bunch of timber and scrub? He's been sneaking around, thinking to get a dinner while the cowboys are away on the other side of the ranch, twenty miles from here. But a wolf can outrun even the fastest steer, can't he?"

"I reckon he can, every time," admitted Frank.

"Then why wouldn't this beast make for his home in the mountains; tell me that, please?" persisted Bob.

"Oh! there might be a reason," his chum rejoined, as he continued to watch the actions of the steer. "In the first place, this might happen to be a particularly bold wolf; and having started out to get a dinner, he hates to give up the idea just because a silly old steer prances around his hiding place, and dares him to come out into the open."

"But there might be another reason?" pursued Bob, always eager to learn.

"If it is a wolf," Frank continued; "he might happen to be lame, and not feel like taking chances on the open with a lively old steer. That would explain it, you see."

"Well, anyway, we'll soon know, Frank."

"Yes, because we're nearly there," the other remarked, as he reached around to unfasten his repeating rifle from the saddle, where he often carried it, rather than over his back by means of a strap.

"And before we leave here it's going to be a hard winter for Mr. Wolf, if that's what's making the trouble. If he runs, the steer will catch up with him; and if he stays, it's a bit of lead between his ribs. I'm sorry for him, Frank; but I reckon he's been responsible for more than a few heifers that have disappeared mysteriously from time to time."

"Yes, that's so," replied Frank. "Stockmen hate wolves more'n anything on four legs. There's only one thing that hits 'em worse."

"Rustlers, you mean, Frank?" remarked the Kentucky boy.

"Yes, the Mexicans or halfbreeds, who drop down on a herd of cattle, or the saddle band of the punchers' horses, and disappear with them. And of all the rustlers in Arizona, there's none equal to Pedro Mendoza. Look at the steer, Bob!"

"Seems to just know we're coming to lend a helping hand," laughed Bob. "There he gallops around to the other side of the timber, as if he wanted to cut off Mr. Wolf before he took a start from that side. He's a sharp one, that steer."

"None smarter, and I ought to know, because that's Old Baldy!" remarked Frank.

"What!" cried Bob, "didn't you tell me a long time ago that Old Baldy had been nipped, with a bunch of cattle; and your foreman believed the rustlers had him?"

"That's what we felt sure of, and I believe it yet," Frank said. "But all the same, I don't think I'm mistaken when I say that's our Old Baldy, come back as straight as he disappeared."

"Perhaps he broke out of some corral in the mountains, where the rustlers were keeping him penned up, and took the home trail on the gallop," suggested Bob.

"Maybe," Frank remarked. "Later on we'll see if his brand has been altered, because that would tell the story. But turn off here, Bob, and let's cover as much ground as we can. Have your gun handy; and if the wolf vamooses, give him a little start. Then we'll have a bully gallop, and see who will be the first to nail him. Whoop! there's something doing right now, Bob!"

CHAPTER II ONE GRAY THIEF LESS

"There he goes; and it is a wolf, sure pop, Frank!" shouted Bob.

"And if you look close," remarked his chum, "you'll see that he wobbles just a little with that left hind leg of his. Reckon he got a thorn in his paw, or cut it on a sharp rock. After him, Bob!"

They gave the horses free rein. Both animals were comparatively fresh, and eager for a mad gallop over the open country that cool day in the Fall.

The steer did not seem to have sighted the fleeing wolf, or else must have decided that, with the two mounted boys in swift pursuit, there was little need of his exerting himself to overtake the hated enemy. At any rate he remained in the vicinity of the timber, as though bent on keeping the animal from again seeking refuge there.

"He's heading for that swale near the rocky point; and if he reaches it we'll have a hard time getting him!" exclaimed Bob, after a few minutes of racing.

"Don't worry, he isn't going to get there," said Frank; "because we're overhauling him right now. Look at him run! Lame or not, he can lope along as well as any wolf I ever chased. He knows he's running for his life, the sly varmint. And he has hopes of giving us the slip."

"I can see him look back every little while, Frank," Bob remarked, as he bent low in the saddle, and felt his pulses thrill with the excitement of the chase. "What do you suppose he does that for?"

"Looking for the flash of the smoke of a gun, perhaps," came the reply. "Some of these old prowlers are as wise as they make 'em. The boys declare they can dodge a bullet, if they happen to be looking back when you fire. Remember that, Bob, and be ready to shoot at the drop of the hat after I've let loose. Perhaps we can catch him napping that way."

Bob was aware that he had much to learn about shooting while on the full gallop. Still, he would like to make a try. If he failed, then rather than see the wolf escape, he meant to be the one to take first shot, and let Frank try to nip the gray robber of the herds before he could recover.

Already had they decreased by one-half and more the lead with which the fleeing animal had started. Things were getting serious with the wolf now. His observations became more frequent. Evidently he expected that at any moment firing might begin; and he wanted to be ready to dodge.

"How about it now, Frank?" asked the Kentucky boy, as he held his rifle in readiness for instant use.

"We might give him a try," came the reply; and as he spoke Frank threw his gun up to his shoulder, allowing the bridle to fall upon the neck of Buckskin.

The sharp report of the weapon sounded; but apparently there was no result. Quickly, after the first shot, came a second. Bob had pulled trigger, too; but the fleeing wolf did not show the least sign of having been struck.

"I missed him clean, Frank!" cried Bob, in dismay. "Hardly thought I'd be smart enough to hit such a flying target while going at this pace. But Frank, you were right; I plainly saw him dodge when you shot!"

"Well, let's give him another round then, and see if you can do better, Bob."

"I'm ready; let him have it," yelled Bob, eagerly, his sporting instinct now fully aroused.

Again did Frank fire; and, seeing that the gray animal was still bounding along uninjured, Bob in turn discharged his gun.

"Poor shooting; that's what!" he exclaimed; "I mean mine, of course, Frank; and now, you've just got to take your turn."

"If you say so, all right!" answered the other.

"Something ought to be done, because we're getting closer to that swale all the time; and I say it'd be a shame if the old wolf got clean away through trickery. Ready, Frank?"

"Let her go!"

Bob took a quick aim at the animal, and fired. Of course he had not the remotest idea of hitting the wolf; but by causing him to dodge it would open the way for his more experienced chum to get in a shot when the beast was off his guard.

The report of Frank's gun came so close upon that of his own that Bob could hardly believe there had been two shots. Yet he had seen that the wolf kept on after his discharge. It was different when Frank shot his bolt.

"Wow! you got him that time, Frank!" shouted Bob, with great glee. "He's dropped in his tracks, as sure as anything. Tried that trick just once too often, didn't he? Look at him kicking his

last! He's paying now for the veal he carried off all these years, the villain!"

Frank laughed, for he felt particularly well pleased because the wolf had been kept from reaching the rocks where he might have eluded them.

They drew rein, and looked down at the now motionless form of the gaunt animal. Even in death the big wolf had a sinister appearance, for the lips were drawn back, exposing his cruel fangs.

"Ugh! I'd hate to meet a critter like that alone, and without more'n a knife to defend myself with, Frank!" Bob exclaimed, as he sat in the saddle, pushing several cartridges into the magazine of his rifle, and looking down at the hated quarry that had rewarded Frank's last shot.

"Oh! he's an old one, all right," remarked Frank. "I can see the scars of many a fight on his hide, and about his muzzle. But wait till I fling him across the horse. Watch Buckskin prance! No horse likes to come in touch with a wild animal like a panther, wolf or bear, dead or alive. The scent of blood makes 'em wild, too. Whoa! Buckskin! don't be so funny now. You've just got to carry this chap back to the ranch, because I want dad to see him."

"Then we head toward home, now?" remarked Bob.

"Yes, but by way of that timber. I want to take a look at Old Baldy. When the boys hear of his return, there'll be some tall talking. He used to give heaps of trouble in the past; yet they all liked the old chap. And when he disappeared, in company with a dozen head of stock, there was more range riding to find him than I ever heard of."

"Old Baldy is waiting for us," remarked Bob. "Seems like he just knew what we went for, and he wants to see what luck we had."

"He's a smart one, all right," laughed Frank. "And if those rustlers have had him penned up all this while, he's managed to break out at last, and come home."

"Say, wouldn't it be a great stunt now, if some of the boys could follow his trail back to Where he was kept in a corral. That would tell us, Frank, just how Pedro Mendoza manages to disappear, whenever he runs a bunch of cattle off."

"Well, perhaps it might be done yet, impossible as it seems," observed Frank.

"What makes you say so?" demanded the other.

"You see, Old Baldy has a marked hoof," Frank went on.

"Different from those of other steers, you mean?" asked his chum.

"Yes. It's got a queer twist that makes it look much longer than his other hoofs. The boys all know it, too. Spanish Joe used to say the animal must have got caught in a cleft of the rocks when small, and his hoof grew that way."

"But, Frank, could any cowboy track Old Baldy all the way across plain and desert to the mountains, if he came from there, perhaps all of forty miles?"

"Under ordinary conditions I'd say no," Frank answered promptly; "but you remember that we had a rain two days ago, which is quite remarkable for this country. That laid the alkali dust; and eyes trained to that sort of thing might do wonders. But that we'll have to put up to dad and Bart Heminway, the foreman of Circle Ranch."

"Here's Old Baldy, looking to see if you got the wolf," remarked Bob.

The gaunt-looking old steer did indeed seem to be beset with curiosity. Standing there, with head thrust out, he was sniffing the air, as though possibly the scent of blood came to his nostrils. Frank tossed the body of the wolf down on the ground, and then with his chum rode back a little distance to see what the steer would do.

"Watch!"

"He's going up to smell of the wolf, Frank!" exclaimed the Kentucky boy.

"That's what he is!" echoed Frank, as he watched the big beast approach, and finally bend his horned head to sniff at the gray-coated robber who had, in times past, stolen many a calf, and partly grown heifer, from the herd, as the animals grazed in some dangerous spot.

"How about the brand; has it been changed?" asked Bob, seeing the flank of the returned steer turned toward them.

"It's been burned out entirely; but no new one made yet," Frank replied.

"How was that, do you suppose, Frank?"

"Perhaps Old Baldy was too much for the Mexican ropers," the other answered; "and they just had to give up the idea of putting another brand on him. Then again, if Spanish Joe or his nephew Abajo happened to be in the bunch of rustlers, they would recognize Old Baldy, and warn the others that it would be dangerous to try and slip him through. No matter, here he is, right side up with care, and as ready as ever to do battle."

"Look at him going to horn the dead wolf," said Bob. "He'll spoil the skin for you, Frank, if you don't watch out."

"Oh! I don't care much about that," Frank remarked; "because it's an old and sunburned pelt at best; but I'd like dad to see the thief intact. So let's ride forward, and induce Old Baldy to stop his sport."

The steer retreated at their advance, still shaking his head threateningly, as though not quite convinced that he had better keep the peace. Possibly he recognized Frank as an old acquaintance, and was so rejoiced to be back again amid the associations of his earlier years that he decided not to attack them. Had he tried anything of the sort he would have rued the day, because Frank could throw the rope as well as any cowboy, and he would speedily have rolled Old Baldy over on his back.

Once again the dead wolf was tossed across the back of the plunging buckskin pony. No matter how well trained a horse may be, he will never become accustomed to the presence of a beast of prey. Even circus horses show their nervousness, after drawing a cage containing a tiger or a lion

for weeks and months at a time.

Old Baldy trotted along after them as they rode off.

"That proves he was on his way home when he scented that lame wolf; and perhaps chased him into that bunch of timber," remarked Frank, as he turned in the saddle and saw the following steer.

They soon sighted the white-washed buildings of Circle Ranch. Trees gave a grateful shade in places; but from far off on the plain a traveler could catch glimpses of the home of the Haywoods, and the headquarters of the largest stock-growers in all Arizona.

When the two boys drew up in front of the ranch house they found Frank's father sitting in a chair on the piazza. He had not as yet fully recovered from his broken leg.

"Hello! Frank, back again so soon?" he called out, as the boys drew rein and jumped to the ground. "What brought you back in such a hurry? And it seemed to me I heard some sort of firing away out to windward. Was that you?"

"Just what it was, dad," replied Frank. "We were chasing a wolf, and trying to beat him at dodging. He was an old chap; but after a few trials we knocked him over; and he'll never pull down another calf for us."

"I wish we could get rid of all our troubles as easily as that, Frank," remarked Colonel Haywood, as he glanced at the dead animal which his boy dragged up near the steps of the piazza.

"We never would have seen him, I reckon, sir," Bob spoke, "only for a steer that had him cornered in a little bunch of timber and brush, and was daring him to come out. Frank guessed the wolf might be a little lame, which was why he didn't appear. That proved to be so when we scared him into running. But Frank nailed him, all right, you may be sure—caught him just back of the foreleg, when he turned aside at my shot. It's a trick I hope to learn some day."

"So a steer held him up, eh?" went on the stockman. "It isn't often any of them will do that, Frank."

"Well, you can expect anything of Old Baldy!" remarked Frank, quietly.

The stockman started, and showed great interest.

"What's that, Frank?" he exclaimed. "Old Baldy come back again, after we believed the rustlers got him? That's some interesting news, now. The boys will be tickled to know that. And perhaps Old Baldy may help us locate Mendoza the Rustler's secret corral!"

CHAPTER III THE ALARM BELL

"How long has Old Baldy been gone now, dad?" asked Frank.

"All of a month, I'm positive," replied the stockman. "Yes, I remember now that we missed a round dozen head at the time, followed their tracks for several miles, and then they seemed to disappear in the low swale back of Purple Sage Mesa. We never got a trace of them again. Some of the boys jumped to the conclusion that they were caught in that quicksand. But I never could quite believe Old Baldy would forget all his cunning like that."

"You've always stuck to it that the bunch was driven off by men cunning enough to hide their trail, haven't you, dad?" Frank continued.

"That's what I have," said Colonel Haywood, emphatically; "and now that you tell me the old fellow has shown up again, I'm more set on that explanation than ever."

"There's proof that Old Baldy has been in other hands all this time," remarked Frank, nodding his head convincingly.

"You mean his brand has been changed?" exclaimed the stockman, eagerly. "Perhaps that ought to tell us who took him. I hope, son, you haven't found the Arrow brand there, nor yet the mark of the X—bar—X Syndicate? I'd hate to think any decent rancher could be guilty of such a thing, for spite!"

"Fact is, dad," laughed Frank, "there isn't a sign of a new mark on the flank of Old Baldy. Somebody took the pains to wipe out our brand, all right; but they didn't have the nerve to continue the work. I reckon that Old Baldy just tore around, so they had to let him severely alone."

"Well, I wouldn't wonder," chuckled the stockman, who had known the tough old steer to do many queer things in his time. "Only wonder is they didn't put a bullet in him, and end his loping. But I must go out and see our old friend when he shows up. You think he was on the way here, don't you, Frank?"

"Sure he was," continued the boy, "when he caught a whiff of that lame wolf, and set up a siege by the little bunch of timber. Give him half an hour, and you'll see him show up at the cattle corral, acting just as if he'd never been away."

"There'll be some high old jinks played around there," remarked Bob. "Old Baldy used to be the Great Mogul, I remember; and since he disappeared several candidates have bobbed up to take his place."

"Yes, he'll have to beat the lot of 'em before he's proved his right to his old position of boss!" declared Frank.

"And he'll sure do it," echoed Bob. "The way he acted out there on the plain proved that even a month's vacation hasn't taken any of the ginger and spirit out of the old chap. Why, I guess he's that tough, his flesh would turn the edge of a hunting knife—that is, any ordinary blade," and Bob sighed as he spoke.

Frank knew that he was thinking once more of the mystery concerning the disappearance of his own knife, which he valued so highly, and thought without an equal.

Some of the cowboys connected with the Circle Ranch came galloping in just then. They were grinning, as though wonderfully pleased over something; a fact the boys with Colonel Haywood noticed immediately.

"Two to one they're on," remarked Bob, upon seeing the three punchers make a bee-line for the piazza, as though each wanted to be the first to communicate some pleasing information.

"He come back, Colonel!" yelled one, from afar.

"It's that sly Old Baldy, he means!" called a second.

"Thar he is, headin' for the corral right now!" whooped the third, not wanting to be left entirely out of the game.

"An' our brand's been burned off, sure," declared the leader, as he reached the steps; "but thar, ye don't seem to be s'prised a heap. Boys, it ain't no news after all, we're slinging. Look at Frank grin; it's a cinch he's been ahead of us!"

Of course, after that, Frank had to own up, and relate the story of how Old Baldy had made the lame wolf take to cover, and held him there until help came.

"Bully for Old Baldy! He's the same game chap as before he was took!" exclaimed Jeff Davis; and then led his comrades in a series of cheers for the returned wanderer who had finally made his way home, after adventures which might never be more than guessed at.

An exciting debate followed; but when all had given their opinion it was found that suspicion centred on Pedro Mendoza as the guilty one. This Mexican had long been a thorn in the flesh of the ranchers of Arizona. He led a band of bold, lawless spirits who seemed able to appear and vanish in a manner that baffled all search.

As a rule the rustlers had not annoyed the Circle Ranch people, confining their operations to ranges more distant. Nevertheless, the stockmen had grumbled considerably about the way these frequent outrages took away from the profits of raising cattle; and, only for the petty jealousies between them, they must have united long ago in a determined effort to rid the country, once and for all, of such a bad character as Mendoza.

Colonel Haywood and his foreman had often talked the matter over. They had even laid out a plan of campaign to be followed in case they awoke some morning to find that the rustlers had visited the herds of Circle Ranch.

At the time the dozen head had vanished, Old Baldy among them, opinions had differed so widely that nothing was done. Since no trail could be found beyond a certain point the boys had concluded that the quicksand was responsible for the wholesale disappearance. At other times a single cow had been engulfed; and, on the face of it, this theory appeared plausible; though Colonel Haywood had never been fully convinced himself concerning its truth.

But at the time he had been laid up with a broken leg; and as he would wish to be at the head of any expedition formed for the purpose of hunting the shrewd rustlers to their hiding place, it was finally allowed to drop.

But the anger of the Circle Ranch cow punchers only slept. The return of Old Baldy with the mark of a fresh burn on his flank, blotting out the circle that had stamped him as the property of Colonel Haywood, was the match that once more started the smouldering blaze.

There was more or less excited talk in the bunk-house that night concerning the necessity for some prompt action with regard to ridding the country of the rustlers who had so long had things their own way.

Even the stockman seemed to have the subject on his mind, for as he sat with the two boys and Bart Heminway on the piazza after supper, with the moon just rising in the eastern heavens, and the many noises of the night adding to the drowsy feeling, he referred to the loss of the entire saddle band of horses, sustained by a ranch located some twenty miles away, on Cibiou Creek.

"I've been thinking some over that matter, Frank," he continued; "while I was kept here idle with this game leg; and putting this and that together, I reached a certain conclusion. Fact is, I've about made up my mind I know where that Mendoza crowd of rustlers must hold out."

"If that's so, dad," remarked Frank, "you'd sure please a lot of people a heap if you could show 'em. They've been hunting high and low these three years and more for that secret cache where Pedro hides his stolen cattle and horses. Would you mind telling Bob and me about it?"

"Fact is, Frank," the rancher went on, "you were the one to give me my idea."

"Now I get on to what you mean, sir," remarked Frank. "You're referring to what Bob and myself saw, that time we were on our way to find out what made the queer growling and thunder-like sounds on that mountain?"

"Just what I mean," nodded Colonel Haywood. "You remember you told me that when you were camped in the dark, near the beginning of the canyon, you were startled to hear the thud of many horses' hoofs; and looking out, saw a troop pass by, many of the animals being led by unknown riders."

"Yes," Frank went on, quickly, "and at the time, Bob and myself just kept quiet, and they never suspected we were anywhere near. You see, we couldn't make sure at the time whether they were some cow punchers from a ranch, taking home some new stock, and making use of the canyon over Thunder Mountain as a short-cut to the country beyond; or the rustlers. And as we hadn't lost any saddle band just then, we didn't care to mix in."

"As near as I can figure out, Frank, it was that night, or the one before, when the raid was made on that Cibiou Creek ranch. And the more I think of it, the firmer grows my conviction that over beyond Thunder Mountain somewhere Mendoza has his hidden corral, in some lost valley none of us know anything about!"

"Just as you say, dad, the chances look that way," Frank admitted. "And if Circle Ranch meets

with a loss any of these fine mornings, that's where we'll have to look to recover our stock. It may come sooner than any of us think. And dad, even if it's the X—bar—X, or the Arrowhead, that stands the next loss, don't you think we'd all better sink our differences, and unite against the common enemy?"

"I had made up my mind to that, Frank," replied the stockman, firmly. "The time for our fall round-up is now close at hand, and the way things look we ought to make a good showing, unless something unforeseen drops down on us. They say we have the finest herds in the whole section; and the branding before winter sets in ought to be the biggest ever."

"Yes, and that's just the reason we may be the next one to suffer at the hands of Mendoza," observed Frank. "They say he keeps tabs on all the ranches, and even has many spies. In that way he knows about the condition of the herds, and makes his plans so carefully that he never was known to carry away anything but the very best."

"What you say about spies has occurred to me more than once," remarked the rancher. "I've even thought it possible that he might have one of his friends here. But it's hard to suspect any of our boys, they've all seemed so faithful. In the other days, now, there was Spanish Joe, and his nephew, Abajo, both of whom I felt sure had communication with Mendoza. I was glad to be rid of the greasers. Still, there may be some one at Circle Ranch who sends word on the sly to the rustlers."

"It would be a bad thing for him if the boys ever learned of his treachery," declared Bob.

"Yes, they'd either tar and feather him," said Frank grimly, "or else put it out of his power to send any more messages. But I hope it isn't so, dad. Just now, with such fine prospects before us, and, as you say, the fall round-up at hand, we've got to be more watchful than usual over our herds, that's all."

"And son," Colonel Haywood said, in a convincing way, "I've made up my mind that to-night's the last one we'll let our cattle stay away on the range. We've got three big bunches out now, with two boys to act as night wranglers for each herd, it's true, but they're miles away from here. If anything swooped down on those steers, we mightn't know it for hours."

Gradually the conversation took a different turn, and before the two boys went in to sleep they had for the time being quite forgotten the fears of the early evening.

By ten o'clock everything seemed quiet and peaceful around the ranch house. Over where the punchers bunked one cowboy was playing a banjo, and there was some little singing; but by degrees even this died away.

The moon sailed high overhead in a clear sky. Midnight came and went. A touch of coolness in the air told of coming fall, though as a rule winter was not a time to be much feared in this warm section of the southwest, even if "northers" did blow in upon them occasionally, that caught the herds on the range, and brought about some loss of stock.

Bob had been dreaming of his Kentucky home, as he often did. Perhaps with some of his boyhood comrades he may have been visiting the "ole swimmin' hole," and amid much whooping was engaged in one of the mud battles that marked those visits. Then again, he may have dreamed that he was once more climbing the tower of the church in the dead of night, dispatched by his prank-loving companions to ring the bell, and startle the village out of sleep.

He sat up in bed to find Frank shaking him. Yes, a bell was certainly ringing furiously enough; but it belonged to no church.

"Get up, and fling some clothes on, Bob," Frank was saying.

"What's the matter? House afire?" gasped Bob, a little dazed still, even as he started to follow the directions of his energetic chum.

"Don't know," replied the hurrying Frank; "but I hear dad shouting out there. He's rousing the boys—you can catch their whoops now!"

"Great guns! I wonder what it all means!" ejaculated Bob, shivering with excitement.

CHAPTER IV WHEN THE RUSTLERS CAME

Bob Archer always believed that he made record time in getting dressed that night. Just how long it took him he never knew; but Frank seemed to vie with him in speed, for they rushed out together.

One glance overhead told Frank that it was not far from morning. The position of the moon in the sky gave the prairie boy that information. Possibly Bob would never had thought of looking aloft, had he wished to know how the night was passing. All his life he had depended on watches and clocks, which might go wrong; whereas Frank's celestial timepiece was always trustworthy.

There certainly was much excitement about the ranch buildings just then.

Cow punchers, half dressed, were pouring out of the bunk-house, shouting, everyone according to his taste. Like Bob, most of them believed that the alarm must mean that a fire had broken out, and quick work would be needed to get the flames under control.

Their astonishment at not discovering a red glare would have been amusing, only that the two saddle boys realized the occasion must be serious.

Above all the other sounds the voice of Colonel Haywood could be heard. He was on the piazza of the ranch house, and calling to the men to come to him.

Immediately there seemed to be half a score of cowboys gathering around just below where the stockman stood. Evidently the Colonel, too, had been suddenly aroused from sleep, for he was only partly dressed.

Frank could not remember ever having seen his father so alarmed. Perhaps by this time Frank was able to give half a guess as to the cause for the commotion. In this he was aided by the fact that his father was not alone. Seated in one of the easy chairs was a figure. It was that of a man, and Frank felt sure he could recognize Andy Lane, one of the cow punchers who had been left out on the range as a night wrangler, to watch the herds that were quartered miles away from the big corral.

Something, then, must evidently have happened to bring Andy home. He undoubtedly brought serious news that had inflamed the mind of the usually cool rancher, and would account for his excited manner.

Frank looked further. He was accustomed to seeing things that might escape many another, less observing. To his mind Andy was breathing very hard, and he looked as though he might have passed through a recent disturbance of some sort.

Immediately the boy remembered the conversation he had had with his father concerning a possible descent of the rustlers on one of their choice herds. Had such a catastrophe really happened? Would that account for the disturbed appearance of the cowboy who had been left out on the range to watch the cattle?

"What is it, Colonel?" demanded one of the assembled punchers.

"We're all here, and we want to know!" called another eagerly.

"That's Andy, boys, a-settin' thar; an' he looks mighty bad used up!" shouted a third; at which deep murmurs arose, as a suspicion of the truth began to break in upon the minds of the wild riders of the range.

"They've come down on us at last, boys," said Colonel Haywood, trying to master his emotion, though Frank could detect an unaccustomed tremor in his voice, and saw that his face was white with suppressed passion.

"The rustlers!"

Those two words seemed to start at one end of the semi-circle, and pass along from mouth to mouth. There was a bitterness in the way they were spoken, which told better than anything else how deep was the detestation the Circle cowboys entertained for the stealers of horses and cattle.

"Mendoza and his crowd have been on the watch," continued the stockman; "and saw that we were in the prize class this fall, with the best herds. They waited for the right time to strike. Another night, and our herds would have been safe in the big corral up to the time of the round-up. Mendoza knew all about it. He must have had word from some spy who visits around the ranches. And he got what he came after, boys!"

A chorus of angry exclamations interrupted the stockman.

He held up his hand to signal for silence again, and then went on:

"You know that Andy was left in charge of the pick of our stock this night, out on the best grass, with Clem Stiles to help. He rapped on the window of my room, and woke me up. He was covered with dust and blood. Before he said a single word I just knew what had happened. Before Andy had half told me I was dressed, and ringing the alarm bell. Andy, speak up and let the boys know what dropped down on you!"

The dilapidated figure that had been lying back in the chair managed to struggle to his feet. Although he had been badly used, Andy was still full of grit. It takes a good deal to put a genuine cowboy down for good.

"They sneaked in on us all right, boys," he said; "never would 'a thought it could 'a been played on me thataways; but they sure caught us 'a nappin'. First thing we knowed we was pounced on by a bunch of fellers that had ther handkerchiefs tied 'round the lower part of their faces. We kicked good and hard, me an' Clem, but what was the use? They was four to one agin us, and it wa'n't long before we was both done up."

"Did ye know any of 'em, Andy?" called out Ted Conway.

"Nary a one," replied the other; "'cause you see it was only moonlight, and them rags over their faces did the business. Besides, we was hurted a heap by the time the racket was over. They tied us like a couple of roped steers, and left us lie there, not carin' whether we bled to death or not."

"Then they ran the stock away, did they, Andy?" asked one of the listeners.

"We heard 'em get busy, while we wrestled with the ropes," continued the other. "They'd taken our guns along, and our hosses, too. As we laid thar we could hear the herd get under way. And the style them rustlers did things, it was clean easy to see every one of 'em had been a honest cow puncher in his time. Reckon that in less'n half an hour arter we was keeled over, I heard the last of the hoofs of the herd pass away."

"How long ago was that, Andy?" asked the Colonel.

"Must a been 'bout midnight when they kim down on us, sir," replied the other.

"And then what did you and Clem do?" pursued the stockman, who was by degrees becoming more collected, as he realized that if ever he needed a cool head the time was now.

"I was workin' like a house afire to git my hands loose, Colonel," Andy continued. "Clem, I knowed, was hurted worse nor me, for he said he believed his ankle must a been broke. Once I couldn't get him to answer, an' then I reckoned as how poor Clem had fainted from the pain."

"You got loose in the end, Andy?"

"I sure did, after workin, it seemed, for hours. Clem was able to talk again; but after I managed to get his rope off, an' stood him up, we seen it was no go. He couldn't walk a step. So I says as how I'd have to make the run in alone. I reckon I must a lost some blood myself. Don't know what else made me feel so weak every little while. Must a took me a coon's age to git here. Sorry I

couldn't 'a done it better, but—"

Colonel Haywood was just in time to catch the falling figure of Andy. The poor fellow was indeed so weakened from all he had gone through, besides the loss of blood from his several wounds, that he had fainted.

No shouts arose from the gathered cowboys. Their feelings were too deep just then for utterance. As the late vidette was carried into the ranch house, the employees of Circle Ranch clustered there, talking in low but significant tones.

"Get in and finish dressing," said Bart Heminway, the energetic foreman. "Then come back here again to take orders. And be sure you carry plenty of ammunition. It may be needed before we're through with this business. For, take it from me, boys, the Circle Ranch is a-goin' to get back that herd, if Pedro Mendoza has to be chased away down across the border into Mexico."

Frank and Bob followed suit. When they came out again, bearing their repeating rifles, and dressed for a long ride, they found every fellow once more on the spot, only waiting for the Colonel to say the word.

"No need of any hurry, boys," said the stockman, who had evidently been making his plans while completing his own dressing. "They can't get that herd away as fast as we can follow. First it's our duty to bring in the other two herds, and make sure of 'em."

"That's right, Colonel," called one cowboy; "nice joke it'd be on us to have 'em drop down and get the rest of the stock while we was ridin' 'round lookin' for signs."

"Then get away, and see that every animal is safe in the big corral by morning. Afterward we'll settle on our plan. And rest easy, boys, this time nothing is going to keep us from running down Mendoza's rustlers! They believe they'll be able to hoodwink us again; but wait and see. Perhaps they can; but the pitcher may go to the well once too often. So can Mendoza. Success has made him bold. We must clip his wings, boys!"

At that sort of talk a cheer burst forth from the Circle riders. They already knew their part in the drive, and while about half of them galloped after the foreman, the others followed Ted Conway in an opposite direction.

CHAPTER V AT THE QUICKSANDS

"Sounds like it's coming from the east, which means that herd is safe!" remarked Bob, as he and his chum stood in the faint light of early morning, listening eagerly to the sounds of cattle moving—the clicking of long-horns striking, the peculiar snap of hoofs, and every now and then a low bellow from some steer that had been prodded to keep him in line with the course leading to the big corral.

"Listen again!" exclaimed Frank, with evident satisfaction in his voice.

"Did you think you caught sounds, too, from over in the other direction?" asked Bob, seeing his chum appeared to have his attention turned that way.

"Yes, I'm sure of it," came the reply.

"That would mean both herds are safe, then, Frank?"

"Glad to say it looks that way," replied the other, whose keen hearing could often catch sounds that were unheard by the less keen ears of Bob.

Presently there could be no doubt about it. From two directions came great herds of prime cattle, steers, cows and calves partly grown, and many ready to be branded at the fall round-up so near at hand.

For a time there was more or less excitement, as the herds were driven through the gateway into the great corral, where they could find abundant pasturage for a day or two, while the main body of cowboys were away. Several men must be left behind to attend to the cattle, and these could during the day drive the big herd forth to the nearest grass and water.

After breakfast ponies were looked after, and a thousand and one preparations made that had an ominous significance. Had the rustler, Pedro Mendoza, only been able to look in on Circle Ranch just then, it must have flattered his pride to know what an upheaval his raid had created. And possibly it may have also rendered him a bit uneasy, because of the warlike signs which those determined cowboys manifested as they prepared to take to the trail.

Colonel Haywood would not hurry, however.

"We've got the whole day before us, boys," he said, when some of the more impatient urged that they get away faster, "and others to follow, if need be. They can't drive a big herd away faster than we can follow, if only we keep to the trail. We must watch out all the while for trickery. Mendoza has won out that way every time he ran off a bunch of cattle, deceiving those who tried to follow. And this time we mean to follow him to his secret cache, remember that, boys!"

"Hurrah! that's the talk!" shouted several, their confidence in the wisdom of their employer returning.

In due time, then, a determined body of cowboys galloped away from the ranch buildings, heading for the range where Andy and Clem had been watching their herd at the time of the night raid.

Besides the Colonel, and the two saddle boys, there were ten well armed men in the group of riders that clattered away, with the customary vim of their class, waving their hats to those who could not take part in the ride, and apparently filled with the utmost enthusiasm.

Bart Heminway was there for his advice would prove valuable under certain conditions;

because the foreman was a veteran in the cattle line. Besides, he had long been known as something of a fighter, and in case they came to a pitched battle with the rustlers, his experience would be worth considerable.

Bob was naturally deeply interested in everything he saw and heard. While he had now been in the Southwest more than a year, this was his first experience in a dangerous foray against those pests of the stockmen, the cattle rustlers. And Bob had heard so much about Mendoza and his night riders that, boylike, he was anxious to actually see the clever Mexican at close quarters.

"What do you think your father will do, Frank, if we manage to find where Mendoza hangs out?" he asked his chum as they galloped along, Domino and Buckskin having little trouble in keeping up with the balance of the horses.

"That depends a good deal on what Mendoza does himself," replied Frank. "If he's wise enough to vamoose at sight of us, perhaps we won't get a crack at any of the bunch. But if he tries to stand by the herd, and fight for it, I reckon there'll be some warm doings, Bob."

"I hope we can follow the trail; and for the life of me I can't see how they could hide the marks of fifty head of cattle. It must take pretty fine work, Frank, to do that, don't you think?"

"Oh! they're up to all that sort of thing," Frank replied. "I've heard some of our boys say an Indian would be clumsy at hiding tracks alongside a few of Mendoza's best hands. But wait and see what happens, Bob; perhaps we've got a few fellows along just as smart at finding a trail as they are at hiding one."

"I hope so," Bob rejoined. "I'd just hate to have to go home like a whipped dog, that carries his tail between his legs. And Frank, don't you remember what your father said about Thunder Mountain, and how we saw a string of horses being led into the canyon that night?"

"Sure," replied Frank, quickly and significantly; "that's part of the game. We're bound to scratch Thunder Mountain all over with a fine-tooth comb before we give up beat. If Mendoza does have a hidden cache in some little valley, where he keeps his stolen herds, and changes the brands before driving them to market, we expect to find it, and get back our property."

"We must be getting near the place where Andy wrangled his herd last night," Bob went on.

"Right ahead there," replied Frank. "How are you feeling just now, Bob?"

"Fine and dandy; and just wild to know how we're going to come out," Bob answered. "Fact is, I wouldn't have a single care or worry on my mind right now, if it wasn't for that knife!"

"Oh! rats! will you never forget that, Bob? I was in hopes you'd dream where it was," laughed Frank.

"Well, I didn't, and that's a fact," the other went on, with a quick look at his chum's face; "and I don't suppose you did, either, Frank?"

"I should say not, Bob. I give you my word I've never set eyes on that blade since I saw you use it the day before yesterday."

"Oh! where was that, Frank; perhaps you might give me a little clue, and there's no telling what it might lead to," demanded the Kentucky boy, eagerly.

"Why, don't you remember about it?" asked Frank.

"No, I can't just seem to get a line on it," Bob answered, gloomily. "Seems to just come to me, and then it slips away. I used the knife, you say; was it when we were eating lunch on that little hunt we took, Frank?"

"No. Have you forgotten that you started in to show me how much you knew about cutting up a deer the right way?" Frank asked, still laughing at his chum.

"Well, I declare, that's a fact, Frank; of course I had to use my knife when I carved that antelope you 'tolled' up with your red handkerchief, and knocked over before he was able to satisfy his curiosity. But, Frank, I'm nearly *dead* sure I can remember having the knife *after* that—while we were eating, for instance."

"Perhaps you did, Bob, but honest, that's the last time I can remember seeing you use it. Here we are at the place now. And watch how our trailers get busy."

Two of the cow punchers, who were known to be superior hands at following an obscure trail, were thrown out ahead. The rest kept just a little to the rear, since they did not wish to interfere.

Even one who was known as a greenhorn could have followed the broad trail of fifty head of cattle, leaving that spot. These men were doing more. As they rode back and forth, their keen eyes on the constant watch for signs, they began to pick up facts that would presently tell them just how many of the rustlers there had been in the party.

"Eight all told," one of the men reported presently; "an' the pony with the cloven hoof is one Spanish Joe used to ride when he was on our range."

Bob listened to this with growing wonder. He could not for the life of him see how the actual number of the thieves could be discovered so early in the pursuit.

"I'm sure to learn a heap before we get back to the ranch again," he mentioned to his chum.

"I just reckon you will," Frank replied, with a grim smile; for he knew better than the boy from Kentucky what difficulties would have to be surmounted, and what dangers encountered, ere they could wrest that stolen herd from the lawless men in whose possession it now remained.

An hour's riding, and the party brought up beyond the Purple Sage mesa, where, on that former occasion, the dozen cattle that had vanished in company with Old Baldy had been traced, to have the trail end near the dreaded quicksands that had swallowed occasional stray mavericks for years.

Some of the cowboys looked serious, as though they feared that a wholesale sacrifice had been made to the deceptive sands, which never gave up anything upon which they had fastened their terrible grip.

"Don't you believe anything of the sort for a minute, boys," declared the stockman, positively,

as they sat in the saddles looking at the deceptive hole which seemed to invite them on, as offering a short-cut across the nearby mountain passes. "Fifty head of fine cattle didn't drop in there last night; and driven by expert cow punchers at that. Get busy now, and find out just where the trail turned to the right or left, no matter how it was covered up later. Here's where we turn over a page, and expose Senor Mendoza's fine hand. On the jump, everybody now!"

CHAPTER VI THE HIDDEN TRAIL OF MENDOZA

There was an immediate scattering of the ten cowboys. Every one was eager to be first to make a discovery. Jumping to the ground, they searched the earth for traces that would indicate how the herd had not passed into the quivering quicksands, but turned aside.

No matter how cleverly the rustlers had concealed the marks of the many hoofs, and left a few time-worn tracks to deceive, some of those keen eyes now on the search were bound to discover what they so eagerly sought.

A quick call from one quarter soon announced that the expected signs had been found. Riding that way Frank and Bob saw that the trailer Scotty was indicating his discovery to Bart Heminway and the stockman.

They agreed with him that it pointed to the fact of the herd having been driven that way. A little further on, and they saw fresh signs that had escaped the scrutiny of the rustlers when they were busy concealing all marks, as they believed, to indicate the passage of the lost herd.

So it continued until finally they reached rocky ground, where there would be less to conceal.

"I can't see how they do it," declared Bob, as he watched the two men in the lead running back and forth like a couple of dogs, their ponies having been taken in charge by some of their comrades.

"Well," chuckled Frank, "I happen to know that one of them, Scotty there, would be just as surprised to hear you read any book you happened to pick up; because, you see, Scotty doesn't know how to read. The ground is like a printed page to him. He sees scores of little signs you would never notice. And they tell him things, just as the letters, placed in combinations, tell you a certain word is meant."

"But Frank, look over yonder," said Bob, pointing ahead.

"Yes, I see it, all right," replied the other, with a nod and a laugh.

"Our old friend, Thunder Mountain, isn't it?" demanded Bob.

"That's right," replied the other. "The same place where we had our little bunch of adventures with a grizzly, a cloudburst, and a few other things; not to forget a certain fellow named Peg Grant, who tried to play the game ahead of us, but fell down."

"And, Frank, you notice, I reckon, that we seem to be heading right in the direction of that big *arroyo* that leads up the side of the mountain?" Bob went on.

"That doesn't surprise me one little bit, Bob," his chum remarked. "You remember we figured all that out. Fact is, things begin to look mighty good to me; and I reckon we're closer to finding that secret corral of Pedro Mendoza right at this very minute than anybody has ever been before."

"It's noon now; and there's your father holding up his hand," Bob remarked.

"Which means he wants a halt called, while we take a cold snack, and talk matters over," Frank observed. "You know, my dad is noted for being cool, and going slow about things. I've seen lots of others lose their heads; but he was nearer to being excited last night than I ever saw him. Chances are, we may lie low here half the afternoon, because he'd rather climb that canyon after nightfall."

Frank's prophecy proved a true one, for as they ate and talked, the stockman proceeded to explain his plan, which was really to remain quiet where they were, under the shade of a clump of willows, until the afternoon was well spent. Then the ride could be resumed, though no one doubted now where it would lead them, with that canyon mouth so near at hand.

Several hours passed. They were almost endless to impatient Bob, who suffered very much because of his nervousness, and a desire to be moving. But finally Colonel Haywood seemed to be satisfied that the object of the delay had been accomplished, whatever that might be; and he gave the word for which the cow punchers had been so eagerly waiting.

Again they were on the move. Just as Frank had said, the trail led them into the great *arroyo*, that looked like a cleft in the mountain from a little distance.

Sometimes this pass was used by stockmen on one side of the range as a means of getting a herd over to the other side. Hence it was not strange to find plain traces of cattle having been driven along here. And the rustlers depended on this very knowledge to allow of a slackening of their labors in trying to wipe out all tell-tale marks.

Once in the gap, and the sun was no longer to be seen. Indeed, it looked dim between those high walls, and one could almost believe evening must be near at hand.

"And to think, Frank," said Bob, "that when we were here before we thought these cliffs were the real thing. We know better now, don't we? We've been in the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. And, Frank, you could put that wall yonder against one of the colored ones up there, and it would look like an ant hill. Am I right?"

"I reckon you are, Bob," replied the other. "But that hasn't anything to do with our finding the lost cattle. Let's think of that now. Watch Scotty up ahead there. He's going some, I tell you. A hound couldn't follow tracks much better."

"He's a wonder, that's what," declared Bob.

"And I suppose you're picking up heaps of information right along, eh?" Frank asked, with an amused smile.

"To be sure I am; but there seems to be no end to the game," replied Bob. "I'm just loaded up to my neck with questions I want to ask Scotty when I get a chance. He must tell me why he did this thing and that."

"And this is only the beginning, you'll find," observed Frank. "There are a lot more coming along soon that you don't want to miss, Bob."

They kept along for another half hour, continually ascending the rocky pass. To Bob there was an added interest in their surroundings because of the adventures that had come to Frank and himself during their earlier visit to Thunder Mountain, as recorded in the first volume of this series.

"Look, Frank!" he exclaimed, calling the attention of his companion to a certain place, high up on one of the walls, "wasn't that where we had to climb to get away from the flood that rushed through this pass when the cloudburst came?"

"Yes," replied the other, "I can see the very ledge we stood on, wondering if we would be carried away, or not. That was a narrow squeak, Bob, for us."

"I believe you, Frank; but we pulled through, all right. More than once since then, when things have looked ticklish, I think of that time, and make up my mind the sky isn't so dark as it looks. But it sure is getting near night down in this hole!"

"Are you watching Scotty, Bob?" demanded Frank.

"I saw him turn aside just then," replied the other. "Looked like he was interested a little in that narrow crack in the wall; but I see he's passed on, and is waving to the bunch to come after him; so I reckon there wasn't anything doing there."

"Huh! don't be too sure of that," said Frank.

"Why, what do you mean?" demanded his chum, eagerly.

"Because I saw Scotty give my dad a quick sign that stood for something," Frank went on to say.

"About that little hole in the wall, you mean?" asked Bob.

"It was while he was down on his hands and knees there that he made it, so I've got a hunch it was about that same hole. But don't seem to pay any particular attention as we ride past."

"Then you think there might be somebody watching us; is that it?" asked Bob.

"Why not, if these rustlers are half as smart as they say, don't you think they would be apt to have a vidette posted on the side of the mountain?" and Frank declined to turn his head in the slightest as they rode past the cleft, that hardly seemed wide enough for a fat steer to pass into.

They rode slowly along up the canyon, picking their way carefully around such obstructions as came in the path.

"Have you been looking to see if there are as many signs up here as below?" Bob asked of his chum, as he noticed Frank watching the ground by bending over in his saddle.

"I don't seem to get on to them, if they are," replied the other. "But then, we'd better hold in our horses a little, and hear what Scotty has to say. Pretty soon he'll call a halt, and then we'll know."

But they continued on until it became so dark in the canyon that the ponies frequently stumbled. Scotty had fallen back, and was riding alongside the stockman now, with whom he seemed to be conversing eagerly, as though he had news worth while to communicate.

Then Colonel Haywood threw up his hand. It was a signal to halt, recognized by every one in the party. Pressing in a little circle around the leaders, they waited to hear how things were working.

"We leave the ponies up here, boys," said the stockman, "and go back on foot. Do you remember noticing that little split in the left side of the *arroyo*, where Scotty halted a few seconds? Well, the herd was driven through that, one at a time. It's the secret passage no one has ever been able to find, up to now."

All sorts of low exclamations told how eagerly the cow punchers received the welcome news that the long hidden trail had been found.

"How do you suppose Scotty ever made that out?" asked Bob, unable to hold his curiosity in check. "Frank, do you reckon he found the tracks of the cattle on the stones, where the rustlers failed to make 'em out?"

"Well, there might be lots of ways of knowing that," replied the other boy. "And to tell you the truth, Bob, I saw Scotty taking a quick look at the sharp edges of the rock just where the crack starts. Now, it wouldn't surprise me much if he discovered some bunches of hair fastened there, where it was rubbed off the flank of a steer that didn't quite take the middle of the road while passing in."

"I never thought of that," Bob said, in a low tone. "That's another page made clear. Oh! but all this is mighty interesting to me, I tell you, Frank. I only wish I could write shorthand, and I'd have it all down in black and white."

"Huh! better have it written in your memory, where it can never be rubbed out," remarked Frank, dismounting, as all the others were doing.

"What's the programme, Frank?" asked the Kentucky boy, a short time later, after they had taken the horses into a little bay, which the Colonel called a *cul-de-sac*, where they could be easily kept by piling up some of the big rocks at the mouth; though one cowboy must be left to guard them.

"As I understand it," replied Frank, "it's first a bite to eat, and then down the canyon for ours. When we come to that hole in the wall, we'll slip through, and find out where we bring up."

"But Frank, do you really believe all that herd passed through that little opening? Why, they'd fill any sort of cave; and besides, how under the sun would they get anything to eat?"

"Well, remember that I'm only guessing," returned his chum; "but here's the way I figure it out. That cleft in the wall runs back some little way, and perhaps keeps getting bigger all the while. Presently it turns into a regular trail over the rocks, that the cattle will follow single file. And mark me, Bob, sooner or later they'll turn up in a valley among the mountains here, that no cowboy has ever set eyes on—that is, unless he's in with Mendoza."

"Sounds like a fairy story, Frank," objected Bob, who was very practical.

"Lots of things do, until you really pass through the experience, and then you know they are the real article. I feel that my dad believes the same way I do; and Bart Heminway, too. But we'll know after a while, Bob, if we just hold our horses. There, get busy with some of that grub you're carrying. We don't have to depend on getting game this time, in order to make sure of a supper."

The moon was up when they prepared to quit the spot. One rider was left behind to guard the saddle band.

Down the canyon then, they went like a bunch of shadows, flitting silently along. All talking above whispers was positively forbidden. Reaching the spot where that mysterious opening occurred in the wall of the canyon, Scotty slipped inside without a moment's delay, the others following after, one at a time.

Bob kept close behind his chum. He had several good reasons for that. In the first place Frank was sure-footed, and would serve as a guide to his less experienced comrade. Then again, if there arose any occasion for communications, Bob wanted to be where he could whisper in his chum's ear.

Just as Frank had said he believed would prove to be the case, that cleft in the rocks did turn out to be a narrow passage. It wound in and out for some distance. Once Bob saw the man in the lead strike a match, and look at the rocks at his feet. Scotty appeared quite satisfied with the result of his examination; and Bob saw him showing something that he had picked up, to the stockman.

Then the match went out; and the march was resumed.

"Look up, Bob!" whispered Frank, presently.

"Why, I can see the stars!" answered the other, also keeping his voice down.

"Sure you can; which shows that we've come out from the passage and once more stand in the open. We've passed through one of the walls of the mountains. This is some narrow valley back of the outer part. And it's sure going to lead us to the hidden corral where Mendoza keeps all his stolen stock!"

As they kept on Bob was fortified to undergo any amount of fatigue. The thought of being connected with the expedition that might unearth the long cherished secret of the rustlers was enough to give anyone additional courage and endurance.

Still, when an hour had passed, and they were still on the move, he admitted that he was getting a little tired.

Now and then they could get glimpses of the moon, though as a rule their passage was continued through dense shadows, where the overhanging rocks shut out the light; or the same result was obtained through the trees under which the trail led.

Looking up from time to time Bob could see the outline of a ridge on either side. He could not remember ever having looked upon such a peculiar formation during his previous visit to Thunder Mountain. Then Frank's surmise must have hit near the truth, and they were now moving along a narrow little valley that was artfully concealed behind the crest of the mountain.

"How about it, getting tired?" questioned Frank, when an opportunity arose that brought their heads close together.

"Oh! nothing to speak of," replied the other; for Bob was proud, and would never willingly admit that he lacked in nerve or ability to equal others in anything undertaken.

"I've got a hunch that we must be near the turning-off place," Frank went on, with the idea of bolstering up the waning powers of his chum.

"That sounds as if you didn't believe this might be the valley where they keep their stock," remarked Bob, wondering a little.

"No more do I believe that it is," Frank replied. "It's lonely enough, all right, but there's little save bare rock here; and cattle have to graze, you understand, Bob. Hold out a little longer, and I reckon we're going to run up against another quick turn. Perhaps it'll be in the shape of a second passage under this ridge here on the left, that will show us into this Mendoza's retreat."

The words, somehow, thrilled Bob. He realized that this was indeed a serious business upon which, in company with the Circle Ranch cow punchers, he was now fully embarked. What the end would be it was impossible to more than conjecture.

Scotty was constantly on the watch, as though he, too, anticipated a change in the conditions, sooner or later, and did not mean to pass the turn by. Whenever the moon served, he would try to examine the ground most carefully, evidently looking for signs that would tell of cattle having passed this way many times.

Once, when they had not been able to take advantage of the moon's light for almost ten

minutes, Scotty grew restless.

"He's going to strike another match," remarked Frank in his chum's ear, as he saw the trailer getting down on hands and knees close to the rocks.

His prediction proved to be true, for immediately afterward Bob saw a small glow, with the face of Scotty pressed close to the ground, as he moved back and forth, eagerly looking for something that seemed to be missing.

"He don't seem able to find it, Frank," said Bob, guessing the truth from these signs.

"That's what," echoed his chum, who had arrived at that conclusion half a minute before it struck Bob.

"What would that mean, then?" continued the Kentucky boy.

"Only that we must have passed by the place where the trail turned aside," Frank answered, quickly.

"Then we'll have to go back again, and find it; is that so, Frank?"

"Just what we'll do," answered the other, adding: "There, Scotty is talking it over with dad and Bart. He's telling them no stock have ever come up as high in the valley as this, and that we must go back to find where they broke out. But we're bound to find it, you know, Bob."

They did, and without any great trouble. Scotty, knowing that the secret passage must be just a little below, was on the watch every foot of the way. And in the end he discovered another crevice in the side of the mountain, through which undoubtedly the stock had been driven.

"Say, but there must have been considerable excitement around here, when all those steers, cows and half-grown calves were hustled along this trail," Frank whispered, as in imagination he could see Mendoza's Mexican rustlers heading the drove off, and compelling the frightened animals to enter the second opening.

"I take off my hat to such drivers of cattle as those fellows," remarked Bob, who did not understand how the thing could have been done.

This time they were only a short while in the narrow cut. All they had to do was to follow straight ahead, and keep in single file. Every man was also warned not to try to make haste, for they did not wish to betray their presence by any unlucky stumble.

Scotty, in the van, was on the lookout for signs of a trap. He knew that Mendoza had long ago earned the name of the "Mexican rat" because of his cunning; not only in hoodwinking those who tried to camp on his trail, but on account of his skill in laying snares for the feet of pursuers. More than one party had come to grief in times past just when they expected they had the rustler chief in a hole.

Bob became suddenly aware of the fact that the creeping line had stopped. On his arm he felt the hand of Frank Haywood; and this pressure was the signal understood among them.

"Look up ahead!" was whispered in Bob's ear; and as he turned his eyes obediently upward, he discovered what he took to be a giant firefly glowing in the darkness of the mountainside—it would vanish, only to again appear, like a small star!

CHAPTER VIII

"THE WAY IS CLEAR!"

"What is it, Frank?" whispered Bob, as he stared in wonder at the strange firefly that seemed to appear, and then vanish so regularly.

"A sentry smoking a cigarette," came the reply.

"How silly of me not to have guessed that," thought the Kentucky boy.

And then he sniffed the air, for it chanced that the night wind was blowing gently from the point where that fire glowed.

"Smoke, sure enough, and from a cigarette, just as Frank said," he continued to himself.

Of course it was very plain now why the expedition had come to such a sudden halt. Here was a vidette posted in a position where he could discover any suspicious movement below. There was a wide strip of moonlight confronting them, and it would be difficult to pass along the trail without crossing this, when of course the keen eyes above would discover their presence.

"What are we going to do about it, Frank?" he managed to say in his chum's ear.

"Nothing—that is, the main lot of us," replied Frank.

"But how about Scotty?" Bob continued, determined to be posted.

"Leave that to him; he's figuring on doing something right now," Frank replied; and indeed, the Kentucky boy could see that the guide of the expedition was leaving the main body, as though he had arranged his programme.

Bob could give a pretty shrewd guess as to what was necessary. That sentry must not be allowed to block the way much longer. So long as he sat there in the shadows above, the cowboys could not advance a step without taking risks. And if discovered this early in the night, they knew that their plans would receive a serious setback.

Evidently Scotty was about to make some sort of move looking to the capture of the vidette. Bob had heard Colonel Haywood warn his men that there was to be no blood shed unless the rustlers put up a desperate resistance. The stockman was known as a humane man, and believed in peaceful tactics whenever possible, although, if forced to the wall, he could fight hard.

A second cow puncher started to creep immediately after Scotty. That looked as if they wanted to make sure of the game.

"Lay low!" was the whispered word passed along the line; and hence the two saddle boys

remained where they chanced to be crouching.

Beyond the narrow pass no doubt lay a fertile valley, which the cunning Mendoza had long utilized as a corral. Here he kept his stolen herds, while the brands were being changed. When the hue and cry had died down no doubt he would drive the cattle forth, taking care to avoid the neighborhood where his latest operations had been carried on.

"Listen hard, and perhaps you'll hear something familiar," Bob heard his comrade whisper.

From this he fancied that what Frank meant would not have any connection with the presence of that rustler, perched high on the hillside. So he concentrated his mind on discovering something else. A minute later and he drew Frank's head close to his own lips, to say:

"Sure thing; I can catch the sound of cattle moving about; and there was a lowing sound as plain as I ever heard a cow make. They're not half a mile away, Frank; is that so?"

"Just what they are; our lost herd; and perhaps other stray steers along with 'em," came the answer.

Bob was strangely thrilled by the situation. He seemed to feel that they were on the verge of great doings. Just beyond lay the enchanted valley, of which cowboys had often hinted, but of which no one seemed to know the exact location. And soon, when Scotty and his comrade had cleared the way, they were going to enter that secret cache of the Mexican rustler, to claim their own again.

For years had this bold Mendoza been having things pretty much his own way in the cow country. He had many secret allies on the ranches, who sent him word of rich prizes to be captured; as well as plans on foot looking to his taking. And by pulling these strings whenever he felt like it, he had been enabled to laugh at all efforts undertaken by the stockmen to down him.

Yes, even Bob, the late tenderfoot, could now understand that there must be a good sized herd of cattle somewhere nearby. Various sounds declared it. Besides, when the night breeze happened to increase in strength for a few seconds at a time, he believed he could hear the tinkling of a mandolin, and a man's voice singing some Spanish serenade.

Evidently, then, the rustlers were so accustomed to feeling perfectly secure in this lonely valley, far away from everything civilized, that they took life easily, and acted as though quite at home.

But Scotty and his mate had been gone some time now, Bob remembered.

"They ought to be getting pretty close up, hadn't they, Frank?" he questioned, in the low tone that had characterized their brief conversation hitherto.

"Watch the fire!" was all the answer he received; but it was enough.

Bob knew his chum was anticipating seeing a change take place at any minute now; that he fully believed the two agile cow punchers must have had ample time to crawl up the incline.

He found himself wondering whether the sentry would make any outcry. Of course any such sound would threaten the success of their plans, since it must excite the curiosity of the rustlers, and lead to an examination.

But then Scotty knew what he was about, and would hold his hand until he could be sure of silence and success. Somehow Bob found himself putting the utmost faith in the cowboy. The remarkable manner in which Scotty had led them thus far seemed to stamp him as capable.

The glow of the end of the cigarette could still be seen in the shadows under that clump of trees that clung to the face of the mountain. Of course the man who smoked had consumed more than one little paper-bound weed during this time, but Mexicans have a way of rolling them deftly between their fingers when smoking, and lighting one from the end of another, in succession.

Straining his eyes, Bob endeavored to make out some moving form near that point upon which the attention of the watchers below was concentrated. In this he did not succeed. Those who were creeping upon the man who lolled there, enjoying his smoke, and perhaps dreaming of some day when he could return to his native country with his pockets filled with gold, were moving with all the care that marks the advance of the gray panther, when approaching his intended prey.

Bob was becoming uneasy. The strain began to tell upon him, wholly unaccustomed as he was to such scenes of excitement and suspense. He even found himself imagining all sorts of unpleasant accidents as happening to Scotty, anyone of which would interfere with the successful carrying out of his plans.

But Frank seemed to have no such fears. When Bob started to mention what was worrying him, his chum immediately eased his mind.

"Don't you believe it for a minute, Bob," he whispered. "Scotty is right close to that rustler now, and perhaps before you could wink fifty times he'll make his move. Keep on watching the light. When it suddenly goes out, and doesn't die down, you'll know something has happened!"

So Bob took fresh heart, and continued to keep his eyes glued on the point of fire, which he knew marked the spot where the vidette sat.

Then, suddenly he missed the spark! It had vanished without the slightest warning. Bob felt his chum move, and thought Frank gave a little gasp as of satisfaction. Yes, and unless his own ears had deceived him, he caught some sort of rustling sound up yonder where the vidette had his post.

Evidently Scotty had acted. From the fact that there was no outcry, Bob judged that the movement had been a success.

Still no one among the crouching cowboys moved hand or foot. They were waiting for a signal of some sort inviting them onward and upward. When Scotty and his companion felt sure that they had the sentry so bound and gagged that he could not give any alarm, they would doubtless let their allies know.

The light did not reappear, though Bob strained his eyes in the effort to discover it. From this fact he knew that something had indeed happened.

"Has he got him, do you think, Frank?" he could not keep from asking, cautiously.

"Not any doubt about it," came the confident reply. "I heard him drop; and he would have whooped it up only Scotty's fingers closed on his throat, and cut the yell off. Just give 'em a minute more to fix him up right, then we'll get the sign."

"Well, I'm glad that part of the job is over, and no alarm given," thought Bob, his nerves relaxing somewhat after the recent strain.

And while he lay there waiting, ready to make a fresh start when the time came, he heard what he thought was a little bird uttering a lazy twitter somewhere up on the mountainside.

Frank began to get up.

"Are you going, Frank?" asked the Kentucky lad, also rising to his knees.

"Everybody's on the move," came the reply. "Didn't you hear the signal, Bob?"

"I heard what I thought was the sound of a sleepy bird disturbed on his perch; was that what you meant?" asked Bob.

"Yes," replied Frank. "That came from our friend Scotty. It told us the way is clear, and that we might as well get a move on. So here we start into the valley, where our prize herd is kept on the grass."

"They did that thing up handsome, Frank," admitted Bob.

"It's a way Scotty has," chuckled the other. "He never goes into anything but he carries it out like machine work. And Bob, this is only the beginning, remember. We've got a heap cut out for us yet. It's going to be a night you'll never forget as long as you live. And as for Senor Mendoza, the boys of Circle Ranch expect to give him his Waterloo right here in his own camp. Come along, Bob; show how you can move along this path into the narrow pass."

CHAPTER IX THE CATTLE CACHE

Just as Bob had anticipated, it was found that the narrow pass served somewhat as the neck of the bottle. Perhaps it was the only way whereby cattle could enter or leave the secret valley lying between the several spurs of the high ridge. By blocking this pass with rocks, as had apparently been done, there was little chance of any wandering on the part of the trapped herd.

The two boys had to clamber over these rocks. Bob could see that they had recently been moved to the position they now occupied.

"I wonder how the old chap ever made it?" he murmured, as he went down the other side of the barrier.

Frank chuckled, for it happened that just then his thoughts were roving in exactly the same quarter that the words spoken by his chum would indicate held Bob's attention.

"Now, you're thinking of Old Baldy, eh Bob?" he asked, softly.

"Just what I was," replied the other.

"And wondering how he ever got over all those rocks when he escaped?" Frank went on.

"He must have had wings to do it, that's what, Frank."

"Oh! shucks!" Frank remarked. "I don't believe for a second the old rascal ever went up over this barricade. Perhaps it didn't happen to be here at the time he flew the coop. Then, again, it might be the sharp old chap found some other way of leaving the hidden valley, that even the rustlers know nothing about."

"I wouldn't wonder, Frank," said the other; "for he's as wise as they make 'em, I reckon."

"No more at present, Bob," cautioned Frank.

Having climbed over the barrier designed to block the neck of the valley which had so long served Mendoza as a hiding place for his stolen stock, the two lads followed Colonel Haywood and the cow punchers.

The broad stretch of moonlight had been left behind, and now they were passing along through shadows again. Bob hardly knew when Scotty and his mate joined the column, so silently did they appear. The first thing he realized, some one was at the side of the stockman, and appeared to be conferring with him in low tones as they moved along; and when they chanced to pass through a patch of moonlight, he saw that it was Scotty.

Of course from this he understood that the sentry had been placed in a condition where he could do no harm. Somewhere aloft there he was undoubtedly lying, tied up like a mummy of the ancient pyramids, and doubtless filled with wonder as to what had happened.

They seemed to be following what was evidently a path, partly made by the hoofs of many cattle coming and going. Now it seemed to run along over the plain side of the mountain; but occasionally it hugged the edge of what appeared to be a sheer descent.

No doubt in the light of day this would have not been a dangerous route. It was quite a different thing now, for the moon failed to be of any assistance, owing to the lay of the land.

Bob was making his way along with more or less confidence, never dreaming of sudden peril, for he had faith in his abilities as a mountain climber. But it proved that, after all, he was not quite so sure-footed as those who had been brought up to such work.

Bob always claimed that it was a pebble under his foot that caused him to slip. He felt a thrill of alarm as he felt himself going, for a black gulf lay on that side of him, and he could only guess how far he would tumble if he went over.

He naturally made a convulsive effort to clutch some object that would prevent his slipping beyond the edge upon which he was now perilously balanced. And, queer as it might seem, when he looked back after it was all over, Bob realized that he was really more concerned about the noise his fall would make, thus betraying the presence of his comrades, than what would happen to him personally.

Fortunately, Frank had been on the watch. He knew the Kentucky boy was not quite so sure on his feet as the rest of them; and besides, Bob must be more or less tired just then.

So when he heard that suspicious grating sound, which told of a stumble, Frank turned instantly. His hand shot out and by the best of luck came in contact with the extended rifle of Bob. There was a quick clutch, and as Frank had braced himself for the little shock, he managed to hold the other. And in another second Bob was once more back on the path, trembling not a little, but safe.

"Whew! that was a bad job for me, Frank!" he gasped.

"It might have been worse," came from his chum, rather dryly.

"I didn't mean that, and you know it," added Bob; "but the noise of that piece of rock I kicked over the edge, what if it was heard by some of the rustlers?"

"Not much danger, because you see they're too far away from here. Besides," Frank continued, "such a thing wouldn't alarm them. A rock may roll down the side of a mountain like this at any time. It was only the growling that came from the heart of Thunder Mountain that used to rattle the Indians and cowboys."

"But Frank, these rustlers didn't used to mind it, did they?" asked Bob.

"I've been thinking that over," his chum replied, "and I've come to the conclusion that Mendoza must have found out the truth for himself long ago, and knew about the big geyser that boiled up inside the mountain."

"Then he and his men kept it a secret, all right," Bob remarked, as he followed close on the heels of Frank, the dangerous point having now been passed by.

"It paid him to do that, don't you see?" Frank went on. "So long as Indians and ignorant prospectors, as well as cowboys, believed the place to be haunted, he knew they would fight shy of Thunder Mountain, and his valley ranch here wouldn't be known. But the worm has turned at last; and this is going to mark the end of the rustler's secret cache."

Once more Bob held his peace. He was interested in watching ahead, and noting what seemed to be lights in the valley.

"Unless I miss my guess, they're fires, too," he said to himself. "And when that one flamed up just then I sure saw what looked like a cabin just back of it. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if that Mendoza has got a regular little colony planted right here! This must be where he lives when he isn't out rustling cattle, and running off with the saddle bands belonging to ranches. Talk about nerve, would you!"

Of course, as they advanced along the side of the valley, the sounds that had come so faintly to their ears when beyond the barrier now grew more positive. Cattle could be heard, trust the experienced ears of cowboys for detecting their presence. Then, besides, voices sounded, as men called out to one another; while the fellow who twanged the mandolin persisted in his efforts to practice on the airs he possibly meant to sing the next time he went courting down below the Mexican border.

That the rustlers had been in this place a long time, unsuspected by any of the stockmen, or even the State authorities, Frank soon had positive evidence.

"Say, what's this mean?" asked Bob, as they came to what seemed to be a barbed wire fence, six strands high.

"It's a corral to keep the cattle in, at times, perhaps while the branding is going on," answered his chum, familiar with all such devices.

"I wager then that Old Baldy broke through it," Bob declared.

"I wouldn't think that impossible, because he's done it many a time in the past," Frank whispered in his turn. "But how did you guess it?"

"Because I noticed, Frank, that he was considerably torn along one of his shoulders, and the marks looked fresh, just as barbed fencing always jabs a steer," went on the other.

"Good for you, Bob; glad you had your eyes about you that time," Frank said; for it always pleased him to find that his chum was observing little things, such as serve as straws to show which way the wind blows.

"I wonder how many men there are in this place?" Bob continued, for he was so filled with a desire to obtain information that he could not keep from asking questions.

"No telling," Frank replied; "but enough to give us a tussle in case we have to get down to hard blows, which I hope we won't. All we want is to get back our stock."

"But if the rustlers try to keep us from recovering the herd, what then, Frank?"

"Trouble, and of the worst kind," was the reply. "But between dad and Scotty and Bart I reckon they'll be able to manage things. We've got one chap with his wings clipped right now; perhaps there may be others, sooner or later."

"You mean, take them prisoner?" asked Bob.

"That would be what my dad would want if he had his way. But all we have to do is to lie low and obey orders. I'm ready to help as far as I can; and I know you are too, Bob."

"We seem to be creeping closer all the time," remarked Bob.

"Yes, and for that reason, suppose we stop talking now. If it's really necessary you can whisper close to my ear; but better keep quiet all you can," said Frank; and his chum took the hint.

They could now easily make out the men as they walked back and forth, or lounged in the

camp. The several cabins and tents could also be plainly seen, as the fires burned cheerfully, or the moon looked down on the scene, mounting higher above the rim of the ridge to the east, fringed with a straggling row of stunted trees.

Bob had never expected to be given a chance to look in on the camp of a rustler band, and especially one so notorious as Pedro Mendoza's. More than once he rubbed his eyes as though suspecting that he might be dreaming; but the voices of the men around the fires, the clashing of long-horned cattle near by, and the picture of the cabins still remained to prove the truth, and show him that it was real.

CHAPTER X A SURPRISE

When half an hour had passed, both boys began to grow a little anxious. They knew that, undoubtedly, those in charge of the expedition must have been holding a council of war, and deciding on the course to be carried out.

"Wait here for me, Bob," Frank whispered.

"Where are you going?" asked the other, suspiciously; for he wanted to be in any move, as well as did his chum.

"Just to see dad, and find out what's doing. I'll sure be back again right away," Frank told him.

"All right. You'll find me here, lying like a log," grunted Bob. "Fact is, if this keeps on, I'll just turn into one, I'm getting that stiff in the legs."

Frank crept away softly, and the Kentucky boy continued to stretch out in the dense shadows, listening to the sounds that came from the camp not very far away. A soft murmuring sound told Bob that he was near some spring, possibly that which supplied the drinking water for the camp; and in running down the side of the valley it evidently also satisfied the thirst of the cattle in the corral near by.

In not more than ten minutes, though perhaps it seemed much longer than that to Bob, his chum crawled alongside again.

"How?" queried Bob, Indian fashion.

"Oh! they've got it all arranged," Frank answered, between gasps; for he was breathing hard, after his recent exertions.

"You mean about capturing the herd, Frank?"

"I mean about making prisoners of the rustlers," replied the other; "because, you understand, we couldn't run the cattle out of this place without first clipping the claws of Mendoza and his crowd."

"I suppose that's so," replied Bob; "because such a big bunch of long-horns must make considerable racket when on the jump."

"Sure; but then that isn't the only thing," Frank remarked.

"What else would hinder us running 'em off?" his chum demanded.

"Sh! not so loud, Bob. Drop down to the whisper again. Why, stop and think, how do you suppose cattle could run along that path where you nearly took a header, and in the dark too?"

"Shucks! I should say so, Frank. Funny now I didn't think of that. Why, to be sure, the chances are, half of 'em would drop over. It's bad enough in daylight, let alone with that tricky moon, or the darkness. Well, go on; what's to be done?"

"I'll tell you," Frank continued. "The scheme is this—to wait 'till later in the night; then perhaps we'll find a chance to shut the crowd up in one of the cabins, that biggest one, it might be. While some kept the rustlers there, the rest of us, at dawn, could start the herd going. Once out of this valley they couldn't hold us from driving the cattle home."

"Sounds fine, Frank, and I reckon I can see your dad's hand back of the scheme."

"They hatched it up between 'em, anyhow; and it struck me as the greatest thing going. Scotty says he thinks there aren't more than nine of the rustlers, without counting the fellow we've got already. But they're gun fighters, every one, and would give us a hard battle if it came to that sort of thing."

"That means we've got to hang around here all night, doesn't it, Frank?"

"About that," replied the other.

"Gee! how can we stand it for hours and hours?" Bob grunted.

"You don't have to. Go to sleep whenever you feel like it. I'll promise to wake you up before the circus starts," Frank assured him.

"As if I could!" said Bob, reproachfully.

"The others are coming in this direction," Frank remarked, still keeping his voice down to the lowest possible pitch.

"What for?" asked his chum.

"Scotty says," Frank went on, "the spring is here that supplies the camp with water; and by hanging out close by something may be heard. I can just catch the little sound now that tells me they're coming; so don't be worried, and think it's one of the rustlers creeping up on us."

"I'm glad you told me then, Frank, because it might have bothered me some. Come to think of it, I reckon the spring must be in that little bunch of trees over yonder. It seems to be open from there right into camp."

"Right again, Bob. You see it pays a fellow to keep his wits about him, and use his eyes in the bargain. But here's Scotty right at my elbow; and that must be dad coming up on the other side

of you. Enough said, Bob."

They lapsed into silence. Bob knew that several unseen forms had ranged close by, and he could easily understand that these were the balance of the Circle Ranch cow puncher outfit, carrying out the directions given by their employer.

Bob had been idly watching the camp, which was not far away, when he suddenly became aware of the fact that a single figure had issued from among the tents and cabins, and was approaching.

He nudged his chum, as though to call his attention to the fact.

"I see him," whispered Frank; "and unless I miss my guess, that is Mendoza himself. I've heard him described often enough to know."

"But what's he coming this way for?" asked Bob, a little nervous at hearing such information, and with his eyes still glued to the approaching figure of the Mexican.

"Give it up," Frank replied; "still, the spring is over yonder, and perhaps he wants a nice cool drink, after smoking so much. We'll watch and see."

"Oh! wouldn't it be great if some of the boys and Scotty could capture him while he's bending down to drink?" said Bob.

"Great stunt," assented Frank; "but hardly possible. Too close to the camp; and the first cry would upset everything. Let's wait and see what happens."

"Look again, Frank!"

"Yes, I see another man has started out after him; and as sure as you live, Bob, we ought to know that figure."

"It looks like an Indian to me," whispered the Kentucky lad.

"It is an Indian, and one belonging to the Moqui tribe up near the Grand Canyon, too. Look again, Bob. What do you say now?"

"I declare, that's queer!" said the other.

"Then you think you know him, do you, Bob?"

"But what could old Havasupai be doing down here among the rustlers, when we left him headed back for his village?" Bob ventured.

"Stop and think again, Bob. You remember when we first made his acquaintance the old fellow was about to steal one of our horses. When we caught him he claimed that he was fleeing from his people because he had done something that made him an outcast. Perhaps when he went back they kicked him out again; and in the end he's just fallen in with these wild rustlers."

"But it's old Havasupai as sure as anything, Frank!"

"That goes; but drop out now, Bob, you're getting too close for us to whisper any more. Just keep your ears open, and perhaps we'll hear something worth while that may explain things. Silence now, Bob."

The leading figure had reached a point close to the clump of small trees from which the sound of running water proceeded. Bob had seen the Mexican look back, several times, as though he knew the other was following him; but he manifested no sign of fear.

Entering among the trees he was gone for a couple of minutes, during which time he undoubtedly quenched his thirst. Meanwhile the Indian drew near. He did not attempt to enter the copse, but waited for the Mexican to come into view again. It might have been dangerous for anyone to follow Pedro Mendoza into the shadows, for he was suspicious of all men and their intentions.

When Mendoza, if the Mexican were really that person, came forth once more, he found the old Indian waiting for him.

"Well, what do you want with me, Havasupai?" he asked, in an irritated tone, as though the interview did not promise to give him any too much pleasure.

Bob was surprised to hear him speak such good English, for most of the Mexicans whom he had met thus far had a sort of *patois* of their own, in which Spanish words and phrases were mixed with American.

But then he had felt the same way when he heard the Moqui Indian talk, until he remembered that for years Havasupai had come in contact with tourists, and in one way or another picked up considerable information, as well as the speech of the whites.

"Many moons ago the White Wolf came and took the daughter of Havasupai away from the lodges of her people," the Moqui began; "but Antelope went willingly, because she would be the squaw of the white man. Now Havasupai is sent away to live or die like a dog, because he has broken the laws of the Moquis, and he would see again the face of his child before he passes to the land of the Manitou."

"So, that's the reason you hunted me up, was it, old man?" said the Mexican, with a short, ugly laugh. "When you told me what had happened to make you an exile I thought at first you only wanted shelter and food. Your daughter is far from here, down in my country. And as I don't care to have you meddling around, I refuse to tell you where she can be found. Go back to your people; or jump into the sacred river, for all of me; but see Antelope again you never will! Get out of my way!"

Bob thought at first the old chief was about to throw himself on the insulting Mexican. Whatever was in the mind of the Moqui exile, he seemed to hold himself in check. The Mexican walked on back to the camp, never dreaming what lay in those shadows close by; while the Indian, wandering still closer to where the Circle Ranch cowboys lay, sat down on a rock as though to meditate upon his gloomy outlook.

CHAPTER XI

JUST BEFORE THE MOON SET

Bob knew that his chum had been wriggling past him for some little time, and he guessed that Frank wanted to communicate with his father. Now the Kentucky lad could hear them whispering in the lowest possible tones.

He wondered that the old Moqui, squatted so close by, did not catch sounds that might arouse his suspicions; but on looking again Bob saw that he still sat there on the rock, his Navajo blanket drawn about his head, the picture of woe, as though the whole world had turned against him.

It might be the ears of Havasupai were getting old, and he did not hear as keenly as could a young warrior. Or possibly he was so wrapped up in his bitter reflections that he gave small heed to anything that was passing. Then again it would be easy to mistake the whispering of Frank and his father for the twittering of the birds disturbed on their roosts.

Just why Frank wanted to confer with his father Bob of course was unable to understand.

He found himself wondering whether the unexpected presence of this old friend might not have something to do with his move. Frank was quick to see an advantage, and use it, when he believed it would serve his purpose.

And as Bob still lay there in his rather uncomfortable attitude, waiting for something to happen whereby the conditions might be changed, he heard a low, cautious voice, which he recognized as that of his chum, softly calling:

"Havasupai!"

The gay blanket moved, and the head of the old Moqui came into view.

"Who calls the Lonely One?" he asked, in steady tones, as though not quite sure whether he were dreaming, or hearing the voice of Manitou.

"Come this way, where you see the branch shaking. It is a friend. Frank, the boy you met in the Grand Canyon. I want to talk with you."

Soft as the words were spoken, they reached the ear of the Indian. He immediately gained his feet. There was no such thing as fear about Havasupai, for without the slightest hesitation he started directly toward the spot where the quivering branch guided his steps.

Then a figure rose up to meet him as he entered the dense shadows. He recognized Frank, and put out his dusky and withered palm with the Indian salutation.

"Speak in a whisper, chief," Frank said, as he took the hand of the Moqui; "for we don't want the rustlers to know we are here. They have stolen my father's cattle, and we have come to get them back, even if we have to fight for them."

The old Indian grunted. Evidently he could easily comprehend the situation; for he must know what occupation the man followed who had carried his daughter away from the lodges of her people, and now refused to let him see her face for the very last time.

He had already seen that there were many others in hiding close by, men who were dressed as cattle drivers, and who carried arms which they evidently knew how to use.

"Perhaps you can help us, Chief," Frank went on; and from this Bob knew that it was about this matter his chum and the colonel had been whispering.

"Ugh! Frank much friend Havasupai, long go. Not forget. How can help?" was what the old Moqui said.

"We heard what the rustler said to you," Frank went on eagerly, though carefully. "He scorns you because your people have sent you out to die like a dog or a coyote. Help us to trap Mendoza and his men. We would shut them up in the cabins while we run off our stock. And as you are allowed in the camp, you might be of great help to us. Will you do it, Havasupai? If we win out, my father says he will look after you, and see to it that you find Antelope again."

The old Moqui did not hesitate. Anyone who would promise that was his friend. Besides, he doubtless secretly hated and despised Mendoza, and would be glad to see him tricked.

"Tell me what to do, Frank; Havasupai knows your tongue is straight. He will trust you," he answered.

"Here is my father," the boy went on; "who owns the Circle Ranch stock farm. Come a little further into the bushes, where you can speak with him. We must be careful not to be heard by any of those in the camp."

Upon that invitation the Indian folded his blanket calmly about him, and stalked in among the bushes. He did not know what sort of reception might await him; but he was a seasoned warrior, and could not flinch from danger. From the time he could pull a bow-string he had been accustomed to looking peril in the face, and smiling at its terrors. In his old age, then, it could not be expected that his nature would change.

For a long time he remained there, holding a conversation with Colonel Haywood and Scotty. Perhaps the leaders of the cowboys picked up more or less valuable information through this channel, for the Indian was willing to turn upon the man who had treated him so scurvily.

Bob had settled down to watching again when he saw a figure leave the shelter of the thicket, and head straight for the camp. Of course he knew that this was the old Moqui. No danger of Havasupai betraying their presence. That promise of the stockman in connection with finding his daughter for him would serve to hold him loyal, even if gratitude toward the two boys for what they had done before was lacking in his breast.

"What time do you think it can be, Frank?" asked Bob, when his chum once again cuddled down alongside him.

The prairie boy, through instinct, cast his eyes upwards. He was able to tell what Bob wanted

to know by the position of the moon. Had that been lacking, then the low-lying star that trembled above the hill-top to the west would have given him the information he wanted. Nature holds a thousand secrets that become as an open book to those who have learned how to read her signs.

"About eleven by the watch," Frank replied, readily, after that one glance up at the starry heavens.

"And do we have to keep this thing up till nearly dawn?" asked the other.

"Oh! I reckon it isn't quite so bad as that," replied Frank. "Dad says we will draw back some and get a little sleep. Around about an hour before daybreak we get back here, and then we can all listen for the signal of the Moqui."

"What will that tell us, Frank?"

"That the trap is ready to be sprung. In other words, Bob, that the rustlers are snug in the bunk-house there. When we learn that, Scotty and his boys will creep up, close the door, and fasten it, ditto the windows; and then we'll be ready to get the stock moving with the peep of day."

"Say, won't they be a hot bunch, though, when they find out what's happened to 'em?" Bob remarked.

"That goes without saying," his chum answered. "Perhaps they may try to break out. In that case there's going to be a rough-house time. But Mendoza is more cunning than bold, dad says; and he believes that when the rustler knows how he's in a fix, he'll keep quiet, and let us run off the stock, rather than risk his neck trying to defend it."

"You said we might get a little sleep, didn't you, Frank?"

"Yes, and by the way you keep on yawning, I can see you need it, all right. And as I hear some of the boys making a move, it looks like they meant to follow out the idea, and get further away from the camp."

"But tell me why they want to go back, when this is as good cover as we can find anywhere?" Bob asked.

"One man will stay here to keep tabs on what is happening in camp," Frank answered, as if he had it all figured out in his own mind, and did not hesitate about posting his companion. "But it's safer for the others to sleep far enough away, so if there happens to be a big snorer among 'em, he won't tell the rustlers that we've come to town to pay them a visit."

"Oh! I see now; and I'm glad I'm not one of that kind, Frank."

The two chums moved back with the rest. A short time later they were gathered in a retired spot, where the stockman took the pains to explain the conditions, so that everyone might be fully posted.

"Now get what sleep you can, boys," he finished. "A few hours won't be long; and when the right time comes, we'll move out on the firing line once more. Try and keep from making any more noise that you can help. No telling what might happen, you know. And I have heard men snore loud enough to almost make the house shake."

They dropped just where they happened to be at the time; and each one after his own way sought the sleep needed to put them in shape for work.

The last Bob knew he was looking up through the branches of a tree at the bright moon, glimpses of which crept in through the interlaced leaves. Then he lost himself entirely, confident that those who kept watch would see to it that no evil befell the sleepers.

Of course it was Frank who gently shook Bob, and thus awoke him. Left to himself it was doubtful when the Kentucky boy would have opened his eyes again, until the sun, rising over the ridge in the east, told of another day.

Bob sat up, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles.

"Keep still, Bob! Remember where you are!" said Frank, quickly; for he judged that as yet the other did not realize the nature of the situation; and there was always a possibility that he might call out before he understood.

"Whew! I had forgotten, for a fact," breathed Bob. "Is it time, do you think?"

"Some of them are moving, and it woke me up," came the reply. "Yes, there's Scotty going around now, and shaking every sleeper. We're going to move up, Bob. See, the moon is low down over the western ridge, and it must be about four o'clock."

"And I've been asleep over four hours, then; why, it didn't feel more'n a few winks," remarked Bob, astonished at the truth; "but I feel better, Frank, and ready to do my part in the game. So let's get a move on, as the others are doing."

CHAPTER XII BOTTLING UP THE RUSTLERS

"How do you like it, Bob, as far as you've gone?" asked Frank, as they prepared to follow after the others, who were slowly moving off in Indian file, pressing close to the earth, and looking not unlike a string of great cats, creeping upon their quarry.

"Is that a fair question, Frank?" said the Kentucky boy, with a sign of hesitation in his low voice. "Because if it is, I'm bound to answer you straight."

"You don't care much for this sort of thing, then; is that it?" asked the other.

"Well, between us honestly, then, I don't seem to," came the reply. "You see, when I looked forward to it, the idea seemed rather fine; but somehow the experience feels different. And, Frank, I hope when I say that, you won't believe for a minute it's because I'm timid."

"I know better than that, Bob. You mean, I take it, that this thing of hunting *men* somehow

doesn't seem to appeal to you?"

"That's just what I mean, Frank," replied the other, hastily. "It's hard to explain how I feel, but I'd rather ten times over be galloping across the plains on my good old Domino, than crawling all over these mountains, looking for rustlers, and feeling ugly in my heart because they've robbed Circle Ranch of its prize herd."

"But you don't blame the rest of us for wanting to get those cattle back again, do you, Bob?"

"Well, I should say *not!*" Bob exclaimed, with so much feeling that his chum had to press a warning finger to his lips; "and remember, that I'm just as eager about turning the trick as you can be. Only," and there was a wistful tone to his voice now, "I'll be awful glad when it's over."

Frank chuckled softly.

"Looks like you'd never make a very good sheriff, or marshal, Bob," he remarked.

"I don't reckon I would," replied the other. "Perhaps it's because I've got too soft a heart. But Frank, if I saw the biggest scoundrel that ever went unpunished nagging a little chap, or a girl, I think I'd jump in, and try to hold him up."

"Don't I know it, old fellow?" the other hastened to declare. "Haven't I seen you do just that same thing more'n once? But we'd better cut this talk out now, Bob, and get along because they've all gone but us; and we want to see what goes on, whether we have a hand in it or not."

"Right we do, Frank; lead the way!"

The two saddle boys started to follow the rest, creeping along as stealthily as the best of them, and heading for the camp of the cattle thieves.

The night was near its close, just as Frank had declared when mentioning the fact that it must be after four o'clock. And the moon would presently vanish behind the summit of the ridge that marked the cap of the western range, of which Thunder Mountain was a part.

When Frank and his chum arrived within seeing distance of the several cabins comprising the camp of the rustlers, all seemed quiet. The fires had been allowed to die down, so that there was only a little glow where they had been.

From the direction of the big corral where the cattle were kept, such sounds as would indicate the presence of a herd could be heard by ears accustomed to the various noises of a ranch.

Of course the boys were more concerned in the bunk-house than anything else, for it was in this quarter the excitement would presently center.

"The door seems to be wide open," whispered Bob, in his chum's ear.

"That's all right," came the faint reply. "We expected that, because the night has been warmer than usual. But make up your mind that's all been thought of, and if you keep your eyes fastened on that doorway, perhaps you'll see something moving before long."

Frank would not have spoken at this length only that he had his lips close to the ear of his companion; and had anyone been five feet away it is doubtful whether they could have distinguished his voice from the sighing of the soft night wind through the branches of the cedars, or the aspens, near by.

As Bob lay there with his eyes glued upon the dark doorway of the big bunk-house, boylike, he allowed his thoughts to stray far away. And as might be expected, he thought, among other things, of the missing knife, which had never seemed half so valuable to him as when he found it gone.

What Frank had said about his using it to cut up the deer several days ago appeared to have made considerable impression on Bob's mind. He was trying now with all his might, to mentally look upon that scene again, in the hope that in this way he could follow his actions, and find out just what he had done with the knife, after finishing his work.

In vain did he try, however. There seemed to be just one place up to which he was able to carry himself, and there he stuck, every time.

But the minutes were passing. Surely it ought to be nearly time for things to begin happening. He had kept his eyes on that open door; but so far nothing had rewarded his scrutiny.

What were they waiting for? Had the old Moqui promised to make his appearance, to tell them that all was well, and every one of the rustlers sound asleep?

What was that—Frank nudging him in the side? Then his chum evidently wished to call his attention to something that was taking place.

For the first time Bob had removed his eyes from the doorway, to glance around the camp; and warned by this signal, he hastened to turn his attention once more in the quarter where he anticipated discovering something.

He was not disappointed this time, for he could certainly see a movement there. The moon's rays did not happen to be shining on that side of the cabin, so that he could not see as distinctly as he would like; but Bob knew that the object must be the figure of a man.

What if one of the rustlers had arisen, and thought to start the fire for an early breakfast? That would "play hob", as Bob expressed it in his own mind, with the carefully laid plans of the stockman.

But he felt pretty certain that the one who had appeared in the doorway must be the Moqui warrior. His actions indicated stealth, and a desire to keep from doing anything calculated to arouse the sleepers.

Looking closer, Bob believed he could see the unknown one closing the heavy door of the bunk-house. This caused him to remember what had passed through his mind at the time he scrutinized this same building, when the glow of the fires lighted it up. It had reminded him of a fort, with its heavy log walls, stout shutters that could be fastened over the windows, and cumbersome door.

Perhaps in building it the rustlers may have had some such idea in view. They were at war with

the cowmen of the country, and at any time might find themselves attacked by a force of indignant cowboys ready to avenge the daring raids of the past. At such a time a fortress in the valley was apt to prove of considerable value, and might save their lives.

Yes, the man in the shadows had now closed the door, beyond all doubt. He seemed to be doing something more, which Bob could easily imagine must mean that he was fastening a stout rope in such a way that those within would be powerless to open the door.

Bob remembered the small openings that served as windows. How could they be secured against the exit of the rustlers, aroused by the lowing of the herd after it was put in motion; or even before?

Strange how a sly fox should venture so near the camp, even at this still hour of the night; or could that little bark have come from the lips of the Indian, to serve as a signal?

"Come on!" whispered Frank in his ear; and immediately Bob jumped to the conclusion that his guess was the truth, after all, and that it had been the Moqui who so closely imitated the call of the red fox.

Figures arose here and there. The eager cowboys had been waiting for this sound with a fever in their blood. But there was no confusion, no stumbling, as they swiftly advanced, ready to take a hand in the game.

Colonel Haywood and Scotty had made all arrangements beforehand. Each man knew exactly what was expected of him, and they moved like the parts of a well oiled machine.

There were two of those small openings, one on either side of the cabin. The heavy wooden shutters could be closed easily enough; but, being intended for fastening inside, it was not so easy to make them secure from without.

Two heavy posts that had been chopped for some purpose by the rustlers having caught the eye of the stockman, he judged they would be just the thing to hold the shutters closed, if placed in a slanting position from without.

Bob saw men run lightly forward, pick up these posts, and after the shutters had been quietly swung over, plant the braces in such a way that no effort from within could displace them.

And it seemed to him this had hardly been accomplished before there came a shout from inside the cabin, that told of alarm.

CHAPTER XIII THE PRISONERS OF THE BUNK-HOUSE

That one yell was immediately followed by others from inside the cabin. Then came a tremendous thumping on the door, accompanied by more outcries.

The cowboys without, not being able to hold themselves in check any longer, started to shoot; and the rattle of firearms was the first sign that told the prisoners of the bunk-house something of the truth.

Colonel Haywood knew that he was dealing with desperate men. He realized that nothing must be neglected in the effort to hold them prisoners, until the cattle had been driven out of the mountains, and within the zone of safety.

Upon the door of the cabin he pounded with the butt end of a revolver.

"Mendoza!" he called, in a tone of authority.

The clamor both within and without ceased as if by magic. The rustlers were consumed with a burning desire to know what it all meant. On the other hand, Scotty and the rest of the punchers knew that their employer wished to give the leader of the rustlers warning.

"Who calls me?" came from within; and Bob knew that it was the chief rustler who spoke, although bitter anger filled his voice.

"This is Colonel Haywood, Mendoza; you know me!" continued the stockman.

A laugh greeted the announcement.

"So you have come to reclaim your strays, is that it, Colonel Haywood?" mocked the Mexican; "well, they are all safe, but a few heifers that grew dizzy climbing along the trail, and dropped over. But you will never take them out of this valley."

"We're going to make a big try for it, just as soon as daylight comes; and mark my words, Mendoza, the men who try to oppose us are going to get hurt," the stockman continued, sternly.

"Wait and see who laughs last," mocked the other. "You think you've got us shut up here like rats in a trap. Perhaps you mean to keep guard over us until the last of the steers has been safely run out of the hills; those belonging to us as well as your own?"

"You are good at guessing, Mendoza," replied the stockman; "for that is exactly what we plan to do."

"And you think we will tamely stay in here while you are robbing us of our property, we who are armed, and do not know the meaning of the word fear? Senor, you have another guess coming!" continued the man behind the door.

"All the same," Colonel Haywood went on, sternly; "not one of your men will dare show his face outside that cabin, until those I leave here on guard hear the signal that we have reached the plain with the herd. They have orders to shoot, Mendoza, and to make every bullet count. It is a long score they have to settle with you; and if you are wise you will hesitate to give them the chance they have been waiting for these many moons."

The rustler chief laughed again.

"I don't like the sound of that laugh," Bob said to Frank, as the two stood where no stray shot from the besieged cabin might reach them; "somehow it makes me think of a hyena I once saw at

a circus. When he howled it sent the cold creeps up and down my back."

"Same here," admitted Frank. "They say Mendoza is as sly as any fox that ever crept into a hen house, and carried off a fat prize, with all sorts of traps set to catch him. Somehow I just can't get rid of the notion that while we seem to have him in a pickle right now, he's got a string he means to pull, that's going to surprise us disagreeably."

"Say, you make me feel bad, Frank," declared the other; "I hope you're mistaken about that. But listen to the racket they're kicking up inside there! Do you think they'll break out, and tackle our fellows?"

"Not much they won't," laughed Frank. "They know what cowboys are, once they get their guns going. And remember, they have no idea how many of us there are. How can they tell that there are not forty fellows here, just waiting for them to break out?"

"Then that's all put on for show, the pounding and shouting?" asked Bob.

"Huh!" snorted Frank; "they have to make a bluff of being hungry to get at our crowd; but all the same, you mark my word, it'll be some time before the first rustler shows even the tip of his nose where Scotty or any of our boys can get a crack at him."

"Frank, am I right, and is that the first peep of dawn over yonder in the east?"

"No mistake about that, my boy; morning is close at hand; and before another hour I reckon we'll be pushing the herd over the back trail," Frank replied.

"There will be several men left here to hold the rustlers in the cabin; is that the programme, Frank?"

"Just what; and you can easily understand that they will be men chosen for their staying qualities," Frank answered. "For you know it's going to be something of a ticklish job; because when once they get the signal, and quit here, the rustlers will burrow out in no time. And, being wild for revenge, they'll chase after the boys, and give them a running fight all through the mountain trails."

"How about them shooting now, through cracks or holes in the cabin walls?" asked the Kentucky boy.

"They might," replied his chum. "I reckon they've got some gun-holes here and there for just that purpose. But if they know what's good for them, they'll go slow about wounding any of our boys. Dad can hardly hold the fellows in now, and it would only take one match to set off the magazine; and there's no telling what terrible things would happen then."

"There goes your father and Bart now, toward the corral," Bob remarked.

"Yes, and some of the boys trailing after," Frank added. "It looks like they expected to get the herd in motion as soon as the trail can be easily seen. Dad is just wild to drive his stock clear of this valley; though some day I expect he'll be wanting to use it on his own hook, after the rustlers have been driven out of this part of the country; because it's a boss place to winter a herd."

"We go with the punchers who will drive, I suppose, Frank?"

"Sure we do," replied the other, a little regretfully. "I tried to coax dad to let us stay back; but he just wouldn't hear of it."

"And for one I'm glad he didn't say yes," Bob spoke promptly. "I don't feel that I'd like to stay here, and have a hand in that game of hide and seek you say will take place when the siege of the bunk-house is raised, and the rustlers rush out like a swarm of angry bees. No, I think I'd be happier driving the herd; though if they came up with us, and tried to take the cattle back, I hope I'd fight like a true Kentuckian ought."

"Oh! once we strike the level with the herd we'll see no more of the rustlers," Frank assured him confidently. "And, what's more, you can take it from me that as soon as dad gets home he'll stir up all the stockmen in this part of the State. It's going to get too warm for Mendoza and his crowd on this side of the border; and they'll have to vamoose, if they want to keep alive."

Once at the corral the boys found that, as daylight came on, the cowboys were getting busy indeed. They recognized the best part of the herd as their property; but besides these there seemed to be fully as many other cattle. Mendoza had claimed these as his lawful possession; but no one believed him; for it was found that in every case the brands on full-grown cattle had been altered. Only a few partly grown animals bore the single star that seemed to be the trade mark of the hidden valley ranch.

The last the boys saw of the bunk-house, all appeared serene there. No doubt the inmates were watching through cracks and holes, to see what the cowboys were doing; but thus far they had made no serious attempt to force a way out, knowing, as they did, that a number of good shots were posted behind the other cabin, ready to give them a very hot reception upon their appearance.

It was now light enough to make a start, and the cries of the cowboys began to cause a movement in the herd. The barbed wire corral had been cut, so that the animals were easily driven forth, and headed on the trail that would, in a short time, bring the vanguard to the neck of the bottle—that narrow pass through which they must apparently proceed in order to leave the valley.

All seemed to be going smoothly, and the boys, who were keeping pretty much together, could see nothing menacing in the conditions around them. The country was exceedingly wild, and a few daring men would be able to break up the drive, could they be posted on the slope of the mountain. But the boys felt sure that all the rustlers, except the vidette who had been first captured, were shut up in the bunk-house, and hence beyond power of doing any harm.

Still, somehow, Bob could not quite get that scornful laugh, as well as the mocking words of Mendoza, out of his mind.

"He meant something by it, I'm sure of that," he was saying to himself for the fifth time at least, as he stalked along, doing his share of driving the herd toward the outlet of the secret valley back

of Thunder Mountain.

This being on foot galled the cowboys very much. If there is anything a puncher dislikes it is being compelled to play his part without a horse. Habit so accustoms him to being mounted that he really seems to be a part of his steed, once he flings himself across the animal's back.

"Ten minutes more, and we ought to have the leaders starting through that little gap, hadn't we, Frank?" Bob asked, after a time.

"Just what we ought," the other replied; and hardly had he spoken before he staggered back, while Bob almost fell over with the shock.

It seemed to the two boys as though the cap of Thunder Mountain, long suspected of having been a volcano centuries in the past, had been blown sky-high by some tremendous internal force. There was a heavy blast that seemed to make the very earth quiver under their feet. The cattle bellowed, and shrank fearfully into a compact mass, refusing to go further along the trail. And the loud cries of the cowboys told that they, too, had been astounded by the explosion that seemed so mysterious.

CHAPTER XIV SHUT IN

"An earthquake!"

Perhaps, after all, it was not so very strange that Bob should give utterance to this exclamation. He had been thrown to the ground, and with considerable violence too. The consequence of this rough treatment was a shortage of breath as he began to scramble to his feet again, though even this did not prevent his excited outcry.

The cattle had been frightened by the sudden, fearful noise, and the trembling of the earth. They were bellowing madly, and showing all the signs that generally go before a stampede.

The instinct of a stockman must have overcome the alarm Colonel Haywood naturally experienced himself at this unexpected happening.

"Get busy, boys!" he shouted. "Take care of the stock first. Get them milling, or we'll have a stampede, and lose the whole bunch!"

The nearest cowboy passed the word on to the next. Above the racket then arose the cheery cries of the drivers, as they started upon the customary tactics to get the animals wheeling in a circle, so as to prevent a mad rush.

There was no succeeding shock. After that one crash there came a silence. Birds that had been singing in the trees flew wildly away, but their songs were hushed. Here and there an animal could be seen dashing away, or slinking through the underbrush, as though half dazed by the concussion.

Presently it was seen, much to the relief of Frank and Bob, who were doing their best to assist, that the cattle had been held. They were moving in a big circle, "milling" after the most approved methods of the range, and doing it in spite of the limited open space at the command of the cowboy band.

"That danger is past, anyhow," Frank remarked, as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"But we may have another shock, Frank," said Bob, nervously, as he looked upward toward the peak of Thunder Mountain. "They say these things never go singly; and the first shake isn't always the hardest of the lot, either. But I don't see any smoke hanging over the cap up there, Frank!"

"Smoke?" echoed the other boy, looking puzzled.

"Why, yes; there's always a lot of it, you know, when a volcano starts to knocking things around," Bob went on.

It was a strange time to laugh, but all the same Frank seemed unable to keep from doing it.

"So that's the idea you've got, is it, Bob?" he demanded.

"Sure it is, and from what I heard some of the boys call out, I reckon I'm not the only one to believe it," Bob made answer, without hesitation.

"And you don't see any smoke up yonder around the top of our old friend, Thunder Mountain, eh?" asked Frank.

"If there was any, it's cleared away," the other continued, "which I take it would be queer; because once they start to pour out ashes, lava and fire, these volcanoes keep it up for days and weeks."

"And seems to me the cap still fits snug up there, Bob; it doesn't look like anything had happened to blow it into a thousand pieces, as far as I can see."

"Yes, that's what sets me to wondering, Frank. But you don't act as if you took any stock in the idea?"

"Well, to tell the honest truth, Bob, I don't!" declared Frank.

"But it couldn't have been that geyser in the mountain, could it?" Bob went on.

"I should say not. No geyser in the world, or a dozen of the biggest together, could have made all that fierce row, and shaken the earth as we felt it tremble. But Bob, though I didn't happen to see smoke, for I was tumbled down just as you were, I have *smelled* it since!"

"You have?" burst out the Kentucky lad, eagerly. "Then that proves my idea, doesn't it, Frank?"

"Hardly," returned the other, dryly. "In the first place, notice that the wind doesn't happen to be coming from the direction of Thunder Mountain at all, and smoke couldn't reach us from there. It's straight ahead, in the direction of the little gap, or pass, we took to get into this valley,

and through which all cattle have to be driven, to enter or leave!"

"Oh!" burst from Bob's lips, as he seemed to grasp something of what his chum was hinting.

"Another thing," Frank went on, "there was something about the smell of that same smoke to remind me of powder, dynamite or such things, and not the gas they say always comes with an outbreak from a volcano."

Bob stared at him. So great was his astonishment that his mouth even opened, and Frank was forced to smile at the picture his chum presented.

"Powder!" ejaculated Bob. "Then Frank, you believe that awful explosion was caused by human hands, and not Nature: is that it?"

Frank nodded.

"It wasn't the smash of a volcano breaking loose," Bob went on, voicing his surprise; "we won't be drowned, or burned to cinders in a flood of lava flowing down the side of the mountain—it isn't even a fierce landslide that's carried away half the old ridge; but just an every-day explosion—some miners, perhaps, blown up with all their stuff?"

"Hold on, there; you're going a step too far, Bob. I never had miners in my head when I said that," Frank remarked.

"But who else would carry explosives around with them, and carelessly let the whole outfit go up in one big smash?" demanded Bob.

"Well, there's Mendoza, for one," the other said, quietly.

"Mendoza? the rustler?" echoed Bob.

"Sure."

"But Frank, you must be joking, because he's shut up in that bunk-house good and tight. How could Mendoza get ahead of us to the pass, and touch off that big mine?"

Even as Bob was saying this the expression on his face changed. Some sudden idea had found a speedy lodgement in his mind; and without waiting for his chum to make any reply to his question he went on:

"Oh! now I see what you mean, Frank; he must have had a mine planted, connected with his old cabin by a wire, and a battery! He fired the charge from there; is that what you want to tell me, Frank?"

"That's what I believe," replied the other, firmly.

"But why would he do that, Frank? Do you think the miserable coward expected to blow us all up?" demanded Bob, with considerable heat.

"Oh! I don't know about that," Frank went on, slowly, as though loath to believe the Mexican could be so vindictive; "but I do think Mendoza wants to close the neck of the bottle here, so that dad can't take his cattle out of this valley."

"That sounds just like all I've heard of Mendoza!" cried Bob. "I wouldn't put it past him one minute. But Frank, he took big chances of blowing us up at the same time. If we'd been closer, we might have been hit by some of the rocks I heard falling like hail all around!"

"That was our lookout, and Mendoza wasn't going to trouble himself about making sure none of us were hurt. Stop and think, Bob; you'll remember how he told dad, with one of his laughs, how we would never take the stock out of this valley? Well, he believes he's fixed it that way right now!"

"Then we're in a nice pickle, aren't we?" lamented the other saddle boy. "If he's blown that little pass into a ruin, and cut off our only way for going out, we'll never get the cattle through."

"Never is a long time, Bob; just wait till my dad gets to work. He always rises to his best when in a hole like this. There he is, coming this way with Bart and Scotty. Perhaps he hasn't caught on as well as I did; so let's join them to find out."

It proved, however, that Colonel Haywood had guessed the true solution of that fearful explosion just as his son had, through smelling the smoke, and putting several things together.

He had been telling the others his opinion, and Scotty was getting ready to push his way forward, in order to investigate. The others would all be needed to keep the cattle quiet; though by degrees the fright of the animals was wearing off, as they heard the reassuring calls of the cow punchers around them.

For a short time the party exchanged ideas, and the stockman was pleased to find that Frank had appreciated the situation so fully.

"As soon as I can spare a man I mean to send him back to the camp," the stockman remarked. "Our two fellows will be wondering what terrible thing has happened; and, not hearing anything from us, might be tempted to give over guarding the rustlers. It would only add to our troubles if the thieves broke loose, and started to play a sharp-shooting game, hiding along the side of the mountain, and pestering us with their fire. But first, Scotty, go ahead and find out if what we suspect is true."

Accordingly the cowboy started off. Duty with him took the lead above everything else. No matter what might lie beyond, once Scotty had his orders he stood ready to obey.

Bart hurried back to assist his men in keeping the herd intact, until they could decide on their next move, which would not be until the skirmisher had reported.

"If the pass has been blown up, what will we do then?" asked Bob.

"That depends on how bad the wreck is," replied the stockman, calmly. "If it is possible to dig a passage in a reasonable time, we may start to work."

"But if it's out of the question, sir, will we have to abandon the herd after all our fine work tracking them here?" Bob went on, plainly disturbed.

"We won't cross that bridge till we come to it," the Colonel said, with a tightening of his lips that Frank knew of old; "but you can depend on it, my boy, I'll never abandon my cattle so long as

there's any chance to save them. Our Fall round-up is due shortly now, and I'd feel pretty blue if one-third of my whole stock had been abandoned up here, to be slaughtered by these rustlers in revenge, after we left for home."

"Because, if we couldn't get them out, they would be in the same fix, I reckon you mean, sir?" Bob suggested.

"Exactly; and Mendoza would rather kill every steer and cow and yearling than know they had fallen into my hands again. But Scotty ought to be back here very soon now, when we will at least know the worst," and the stockman looked anxiously up the valley in the direction where he knew the pass lay.

"And there's something moving right now, dad!" cried Frank, whose keen vision had enabled him to catch sight of the object before any one else.

"That's Scotty, all right," pursued Colonel Haywood. "Now he's making motions, cowboy fashion, and I don't like the news he's sending me. It looks like we're up against it, good and hard."

"You mean he is telling you the pass has been blown up, sir?" asked Bob.

"Seems as if that must be what he means; but wait till he gets here, and we'll know the worst," concluded the rancher; his set jaws and flashing eyes telling how the desperate situation was arousing that old spirit of "never say die" which in times past had always marked his work, and been the means of his present success.

The cowboy came hurrying along as fast as the uneven ground would permit. Straight toward the little group he advanced—for Bart, the foreman, had again joined the others, eager, to hear the news the scout was bringing back.

Frank knew before a word was spoken that Scotty had made a disagreeable discovery, which would put them to great trouble so far as getting the stock out of the valley was concerned. Hence, he was nerved to hear bad news.

"How about it, Scotty?" asked Colonel Haywood, as the other arrived close to where the others stood.

"Couldn't 'a been worse, sir," replied the disgusted cowboy, shrugging his broad shoulders.

"Then the pass has been blown up, and filled with rubbish?" continued the other.

"Filled so high that a month wouldn't open it again to let even an Old Baldy climb over. We're sure up agin it, Colonel, this time!" declared Scotty, scowling.

CHAPTER XV

BALDY'S HOOFF POINTS THE WAY

"It's a bad outlook, but we're not the kind to give up easily," said the stockman, grimly.

Bob, who had been much dejected by the news which the cowboy trailer brought, plucked up fresh hope at these words from the rancher.

Frank, too, was able to grasp at little rays of encouragement.

"At the worst," he said resolutely, "we might hold the fort here, and send for help. Some of the other stockmen, learning that we had Mendoza cooped up, would rush assistance; and in time we might clean out the pass."

"Bully!" cried Bob, impulsively.

"That's true," the Colonel remarked, "but lots of things could happen before that same help arrived, which would mean several days at least. And when dealing with Mendoza, you never can be sure that you can put your finger on him when you think you've got him. Perhaps he might manage to slip out of that cabin to-night; and then there would be warm times around here."

"One thing's sure," Scotty declared, with a shake of his head, "they must 'a had a fierce lot of dynamite under that pass. You never did see such a piled-up lot o' rocks in your born days. I had to rub my eyes, and pinch myself, to believe there ever had been an opening there, through which we came into this here valley, an' all that stock, too."

"Mendoza always had a reputation for doing things to the limit," remarked the stockman. "He knew that it would be useless damaging the pass only a little; so he made the mine a big one. I never heard anything like that detonation before. But we'll all try and think up some way of beating the rustler at his own game."

"If we only had the stuff," remarked Bob, "perhaps we might clean out the pass the same way he filled it!"

"By an explosion, you mean?" said Frank. "Well, I reckon that would only make bad worse, and do no good; for there isn't any pass there now under the rocks, if what Scotty tells us is true."

"What the Colonel said goes with me," remarked the foreman.

"You mean about holding the fort here, and sending for help?" asked the stockman.

"Yep, that's the idea, sir," replied Bart. "We might set to work and make prisoners of the rustlers, you see, first of all. And once we got that crowd where they wouldn't bother us any, we could stay here, and wait till help came."

"If only there was some other way to get out of this queer little valley!" said Bob, dismally.

"Well, there isn't, 'cause you see Mendoza would know about it; and he always used the pass that's been blowed up," Scotty argued.

"I'm not so sure about that, Scotty!"

All turned and looked at Frank when he said this. Even his father seemed surprised to hear his words. And there was a faint smile on the boy's face to indicate that some bright thought might

be occupying his mind; something with which he may have been wrestling lately, while listening to the conversation around him.

"How's that, Frank?" Scotty demanded.

"Why, you seemed so positive about there not being any other way for cattle getting out of here, I just had to remark that perhaps you were wrong."

"As how?" persisted Scotty, who always had to be shown.

"How about Old Baldy?" Frank remarked, quietly.

The Colonel uttered an exclamation.

"The boy may be right," he remarked, with some little excitement. "It never occurred to me to remember that that smart old chap got out of here some way; and just as like as not he couldn't get past that little opening, which was kept closed most of the time, I reckon."

"But he was brought in that way, an' don't it stand to reason the critter'd try to get out by the same route?" asked the foreman.

"I suppose he would try," admitted the stockman; "but finding the cork in the bottle, Old Baldy might take a turn in another direction. And that makes me think of something that happened years ago, when the old fellow disappeared one bad winter, and was gone with a few cows for some months. We gave them up for dead; when early in Spring they turned up on the range, looking sleek and fat, as if they'd wintered where there was plenty of grass. See the point, boys?"

"Well, well, I wouldn't put it past that Old Baldy to have found his way into this same fine valley, and stayed here till the winter was gone, with its Northerners," Frank declared, with exultation in his voice; for such a happening would add strength to his suggestion, strange as it had at first appeared to the others.

"And if he happened to come in here and go out through some other pass, that even the rustlers never knew a thing about, doesn't it stand to reason that such a sharp steer would be able to find the way again, even if years had passed?" Colonel Haywood demanded.

Bart looked at Scotty, nodded his head, and observed:

"There never was such a critter as Old Baldy before, and I reckon he'd easy remember that trail. Course, though, it might be he went out through the regular way, for it might 'a been open at the time."

"Well, let's look at that closer," said Frank. "When Bob and I first ran across Old Baldy he was away off a direct line between the mouth of the canyon and Circle Ranch. And, Bart, you must admit, that once he came out of that pass, he would hit a bee-line for home!"

The foreman threw up his hands.

"I pass," he declared. "When it comes to arguing I'm not in it with you, Frank."

"But answer my question—wouldn't Old Baldy be apt to head straight for home?" insisted the boy.

"Sure he would, every time," admitted Bart.

"And that's a strong point you've made, son," declared the stockman, with a proud glance at Frank. "The chances are three to one Old Baldy got out of this valley by some other trail than the one we took in entering, and which has just been blocked by the rustlers. Now, the question comes, can we find that other exit, and make use of it to take the herd out this same way?"

He had already sent a messenger back to the camp to tell the two guards of the bunk-house what had happened, so that they might not relax their vigilance, and allow the prisoners a chance to escape during broad daylight.

"And that same is going to tax us some, I opine," grumbled Bart.

"Not if we can only find the trail of Old Baldy," said Frank, cheerfully.

"His trail!" echoed Bob, in dismay, as he looked down at the ground, which just at that point had been torn up by scores of hoofs. "Well, I should say that would be a tough old job, just as Bart declared. How can you do it, Frank?"

"Well, stop and think a minute," replied the other. "Don't you remember my telling you that Old Baldy has a marked hoof, one so much longer than any other steers, that a tracker could tell it anywhere at a glance?"

"Why, to be sure you did," cried Bob; "and I remember that we thought perhaps Scotty might be able to follow his tracks back to where he came from; because we believed even then he must have been in the hands of Mendoza's crowd, since his brand had been burned over."

"Just what we did," Frank remarked; "but before anything could be done Mendoza made his raid on our prize herd, and that brought us here on the jump. But if we could follow that marked trail over the plain and up into the mountains, why not do as well here in the valley?"

"Scotty, you hear that?" asked the stockman.

"You bet I do, an' I'm going to get some busy right off'n the handle. No use lookin' away up here, is there?" the cowboy observed.

"Well," the rancher went on to say, "let's take it for granted that Old Baldy first tried to get out the regular way, and finding the passage blocked by rocks which a man might easily climb over, but a steer never, he turned around sharp, and put for that other exit, which he had never forgotten in all these years. So, Scotty, take a turn around, and see if you can run across that marked hoof print."

Frank was not the one to linger when anything of this sort was going on. After all, he might chance to find the track himself in the midst of the multitude that scoured the side of the valley.

"Head back toward the camp!" called out the stockman; "and if either one finds the track, give a call to the rest. We'll keep close by."

Bob himself could not help getting down every little while to look at the torn turf, where scores of hoofs had cut in, on the passage of cattle back and forth. Each time he had to shake his head,

and smile.

"If it depended on me to run Old Baldy down, I just reckon the herd would stay in here till doomsday," he admitted to the stockman.

"Well, of course, in most spots, the cattle coming after must have crushed out all traces of Old Baldy's hoof-mark," declared Colonel Haywood; "but some place or other we hope that a single print may have escaped. That's all they need to tell the story, you know."

"And of course," pursued Bob, wisely, "they can easily settle which way the steer was going at the time, because the mark will be pointing in that direction."

"Exactly, my boy. These things are all very simple, once you get the cue. To a trailer everything has its meaning. He reads signs as we do print. And I've known Scotty there to spin a yarn that made the rest of us think he was joshing, without ever seeing the people ahead; and yet when we came to prove it, everything was just as he had described."

"It's a wonderful science, sir, and I hope to master it some day; but seems to me I get on terribly slow," Bob said, dismally.

"Everything that is worth while takes time," remarked the stockman, encouragingly; "and tracking can't be learned in a week, a month, nor yet in a year. Truth to tell, most cowboys never do learn it worth while. It doesn't run in the blood, you see. They can rope steers, break bucking broncos, and do all such things; but only to a favored few does the trail give up all its wonderful secrets."

"I hope Frank gets sight of the tracks first," said Bob, as his eyes followed the stooping figure of his chum longingly.

"That must be a matter of chance," remarked the other, smiling. "Frank is a pretty fair hand at this business, but of course not in the same class with Scotty. Still, he may be lucky enough to be the one to run across the first track."

"There he is, stooping down lower now, sir," exclaimed Bob, with some excitement in his voice; "and he seems to be a heap interested in something. Do you think he will make a strike, sir?"

"He acts like it," responded the stockman, himself deeply concerned in the actions of his boy. "See, there he turns back this way, and waves his hand. And now he calls, to let Scotty know. You can see him hurrying to Frank's side; so it looks as if he'd made some sort of find."

Together the ranch owner and Bob hurried forward, with Bart close at their heels. They found the two trail hunters with their heads close together, evidently examining some track, which Frank had been fortunate enough to run across at a point where the herd had failed to wipe it out.

"What luck, boys?" asked the stockman, as he came up.

"Frank has found Old Baldy's hoof-mark, all right," declared Scotty, without the faintest trace of jealousy in his manner; for he was very fond of his employer's son, as indeed was every one connected with Circle Ranch.

Bob himself pushed in, because he wanted to satisfy his mind with regard to the direction in which the hoofprint pointed.

He had noted the peculiar mark at that other time, when Frank told him about it, and readily recognized it now, plainly indented in the yielding soil, at a spot where, luckily, none of the other cattle had happened to tread, either in coming or going.

And Bob laughed to see how easily that one point was settled. The footprint undoubtedly pointed toward the camp; and it was evident that Old Baldy had been heading in that quarter when the mark was impressed there!

CHAPTER XVI THE ADVANCE DISPUTED

"What next, Colonel?" asked Scotty, as he arose from examining the print of Old Baldy's hoof.

"There's only one thing to do," replied the stockman; "which is to head back in the direction of the camp, watching out to see just where the old rascal left the regular trail, and branched out for himself. Once we get started on that, it ought to be easy for you, Scotty."

"I guess yes," answered the squatty cowboy; whose legs seemed to look very much like a loop, partly on account of the sheepskin chaps he wore.

He took one side, while Frank looked after the other. In this fashion, then, they all started toward the camp down in the valley.

It was not a great while before Scotty emitted a roar.

"Here she goes, sure as you're born, and a-headin' out in great shape," he declared, as the others came up. "Oh! that Old Baldy never did forget nothin' he ever knowed; and here he goes, a-headin' up for that other outlet, just like he remembered every foot of the way. Come along, Colonel; it looks like we was a-goin' to larn mor'n Mendoza himself ever did; an' all through a pesky steer!"

The others were well content to drop in line after the stunted trailer, who continued to move along, with his eyes constantly watching the ground. Frank and Bob came close in his rear; while back of them were the stockman and his overseer, both anxious to learn how the game turned out.

"We're heading up all the time, that's one thing sure," remarked Bob, after they had been pushing along in this fashion for some ten minutes, at least.

"And you can see how wild it looks up here," Frank added. "Like as not Mendoza and his men never thought it worth while to explore this part of the ridge; for it wouldn't strike them that

cattle could ever find a way of climbing over such big piles of rocks. But Old Baldy has found a means of going in and out, all right."

"Yes, and he knew where he was heading for when he struck out up here, that's a cinch," declared Bob.

"That's right, he did," Scotty announced, with conviction. "That rascal wa'nt just runnin' wild when he headed this way. He had an object in comin', you mark me when I says it. And we're a-goin' to know what that object was before a great while now."

"We've just got to," laughed Frank, "because we'll soon be at the top of the old ridge, the way we're climbing. And dad, if it turns out that Old Baldy shows us a new way out of the valley, what are you going to do to him when we get back home?"

"He can own the ranch," replied the stockman, readily. "He'll be in clover for the rest of his days, I promise you, son."

The way grew more difficult; yet no matter what obstacles seemed to loom up ahead, there was always a way around them, and Old Baldy knew the trail. Many times Bob lost all signs, and would have been compelled to give up in despair; but Frank pointed out where a stone had been displaced, or it might be a twig ground under the weight of the heavy steer.

"He climbs like a mountain goat, that Baldy!" declared Bob, after an unusually hard effort, that winded him more or less.

"Oh! all cattle can do that," Frank assured him. "Wait till you see the whole herd putting up this steep slope; even the youngest will surprise you by the way they hang on to the side of the hill, and climb over all sorts of things that give us more or less trouble."

"One thing I notice," remarked Bob.

"And what's that?" asked his chum.

"We don't get even an occasional peep in at the camp. The big spur or shoulder of the mountain that juts out hides it. And Frank, by the same token, it would keep any one down there from noticing Old Baldy, if he climbed this place in the daytime."

"That's right, Bob," replied the other. "I didn't think of that myself. And perhaps the rustlers never took the trouble to look around to see if that pass was the only way in and out. You know they're a lazy lot, taken as a whole, and hate to do the least thing except when in the saddle."

"Huh!" grunted Scotty, who heard the remark, "they's a lot o' cow punchers in that same class, don't you forget it, Frank. In the saddle they kin ride, and cavort around hours an' hours. Drop 'em on their feet, an' they act like ducks on dry land. A cowboy has no business afoot when he kin git a pony under him."

Scotty came to a halt a little further on. He seemed to be interested in something ahead.

"Wow!" he exclaimed, "it sure is a Mountain Charley squattin' there. Reckon we might be a-goin' to have a little trouble along of him sooner or later, when the cattle get to comin' up this way."

Bob instantly understood, for he recognized the name as one given to a grizzly bear in California, and among some of the cowboys of the Southwest.

"Where is he?" he asked. "Frank, we've got our guns; and perhaps we'll just have to touch up the old fellow; because it would never do to let him get among the stock."

"No," said the ranchman, immediately; "for while he might content himself with just a single cow, the sight and smell of him would surely stampede the rest of the herd; and let that once happen up here, and we'd never get them together again."

"Then we'll have to try and bowl him over, Bob," said Frank, as he looked to his repeating rifle, which was one of the very best on the market.

Bob felt the sportsman blood leap in his veins. This was different from shooting an innocent little antelope, which he never did without feeling more or less sorry; and only repeated the exploit because fresh food was needed. But a grizzly bear was a foe worthy of the efforts of the most experienced hunter.

Bob had had one experience in this line, and not a great distance away from the spot where he now stood; for it had been on the occasion of their first visit to Thunder Mountain that it happened, and in the entrance to the big canyon leading upward.

He could see the bear, now that Scotty had pointed him out. The animal was apparently aware of the presence of human beings; but he showed not the slightest trace of fear, or a desire to retreat.

"He seems to be right on the trail," declared Frank, as he looked.

"That's just what he is," Scotty added; "and I reckon now that p'raps he was startin' to foller the tracks of Old Baldy, if there was the least whiff of scent left for him to get. Then he heard us a-comin', and squats down to see who we is, an' what we wants in his diggings."

They continued to advance. Colonel Haywood, Bart and Scotty had all drawn their revolvers, and were ready to give a good account of themselves should the conflict be brought to close quarters. All of them knew how very tough a grizzly bear is, and that often many bullets will fail to bring such a terrible brute down.

"No use shootin' till we get some closer, boys," said Scotty.

"There, see, he's getting up now!" exclaimed Bob. "Perhaps he means to challenge us to a fight; or, not liking the looks of our crowd, expects to walk off to his den, which must be up here somewheres."

"Never knowed one to back out of a scrap," avowed Scotty.

"He's coming at us now, on all fours, and looking as if he meant to take us on in a bunch. Don't you think we ought to let him have a shot, Frank?" Bob asked, a trifle nervously; for he had been appalled upon examining that other grizzly to note the terrible claws, and the enormous muscular

power of the animal's legs.

"Not yet, Bob," Frank answered, coolly; "hold your horses, and pretty soon we'll have our chance. Don't forget to try and get him back of the shoulder, if you can, or in the eye. Either the brain or the heart is the place to hit a grizzly; you can pump him full of lead in other places, and he'll walk off with it, so they say."

No doubt the calm manner in which Frank handled his rifle did much to reassure the less experienced Bob. He immediately "took a brace," and quieted his nerves, well knowing that unless he secured the mastery over himself he could hardly do good work when the moment came to fire.

As both parties were now approaching each other, the crisis could not long be delayed. Bob thought his chum might be going a little too far. Still, he remembered that at the famous battle of Bunker Hill, General Putnam had ordered the waiting line of Continentals to hold their fire until they could see the whites of the enemy's eyes. So it was apparently good policy not to show too much haste when expecting an attack.

"Get ready, Bob," said Frank, presently, in a low tone.

The grizzly was a little above them, and heading straight toward the place where the five intruders into his domain were huddled together. He meant to attack them all without the least hesitation. This, Scotty afterwards declared, was something unusual for a grizzly to do, except when half starved. He might not make a move to run away; but he does not often attack unless wounded and enraged.

"But, Frank, he's heading so straight this way, that I just can't find a chance to aim behind his shoulder as you said," Bob complained. "Shall I try to get him in one of his little eyes?"

"Wait just three seconds; he's got to turn around that rock, you notice. As he comes out again he'll be broadside on, above us. Be ready to give him your first shot as I say the word. Quick! now, look sharp!"

Even while Frank was saying this the bear did indeed pass back of the spur of rock, just as the boy had foreseen. Bob let his cheek rest against the stock of his rifle. He was covering the exact spot where he expected the grizzly to show up in another second.

As his nose came into view, he waddled forward, as bold as any lion ever could be, and, some hunters claim, a great deal more so.

"Now!"

Frank uttered this one word. It was immediately drowned in a double crash, as both guns were discharged. With the sound arose a series of cowboy yells from Bart and Scotty, who had been awaiting the result of the volley with more or less suppressed excitement.

Bob mechanically went through the pump action which sent the discharged shell flying out to one side, and pushed a fresh cartridge into the firing chamber; at the same time leaving the gun ready for business, with the hammer raised.

He looked upward, and was thrilled to see the great hairy figure of the grizzly apparently rushing straight down toward them. Naturally the first and dominating thought that possessed the mind of the Kentucky lad was that, after all, their lead had failed to reach a fatal spot; and that the bear was now bent on seeking revenge for the pain inflicted on him. Those yells which Bob had at first believed to stand for exultation, might after all mean the demoralization of the cowboys because of this rush of the great beast!

CHAPTER XVII OVER THUNDER MOUNTAIN RIDGE

"Look out, Frank, he's coming after us!"

Bob was trying vainly to get a decent aim as he shouted these words of warning. He had spoken them in a mechanical way, and not because he feared that his chum would not be on his guard.

Already were Bart and Scotty popping away with their guns, after the fashion of cowboys, quick on the trigger. Then Bob suddenly noticed a queer thing. This was nothing more or less than that the grizzly, while still coming down the side of the mountain, and headed directly for the spot where they stood, seemed to have swerved more or less. In fact he was coming down tail foremost!

It was this singular fact that gave Bob his first suspicion of the truth. Then, quick on the heels of this he discovered that Frank was acting in a most peculiar fashion for a boy who ought to be greatly concerned because a ferocious beast was about to attack them.

Frank seemed to double up like a hinge, and to the amazement of Bob he saw that the other was laughing!

"Hold on, boys!" Frank managed to call out; "don't waste your ammunition, because you may need it. That bear is dead!"

Of course, upon hearing this surprising and agreeable news, both Bart and Scotty stopped shooting.

"Did they kill him, or was it our first bullets that did the trick, Frank?" Bob asked, as the body of the monster became wedged against an uplifted spur of rock not ten feet away.

"We don't take the credit, you understand," announced Bart, positively, and with a rather foolish grin at the recent panic he and Scotty had indulged in.

"I reckon we don't need to," remarked the other cowboy, energetically. "These here pop-guns don't count much agin a grizzly. An' when ye come to look the critter over, I allow ye'll find whar ye punctured his hide right back o' the foreleg, both bullets enterin' thar."

It proved to be a fact, upon examination; and Bob felt particularly well satisfied to know that in such an emergency he had managed to acquit himself so well. Such results seemed to show that his nerve was all right.

"But we can't let the old fellow lie here," said Frank.

Bob looked surprised at this.

"Why, what harm can a dead bear do?" he asked. "I should think that all the fight had gone out of him by now."

"Sure it has," answered his chum; "but you'd never get that skittish herd past this spot, let me tell you. They would scent that bear fifty feet away. Dead or alive, it wouldn't make much difference to them, and we'd be apt to have a stampede on our hands. How about that, Bart?"

"A dead certainty, Frank," replied the foreman.

"Then how would it do to roll him over that precipice there?" suggested Bob. "I'm sorry we can't get his hide; but it will have to go this time."

"Just the idea," declared Frank; "and it was smart of you to think of it, Bob."

"Then all come, and take hold, while we yank him around. It'll take the united strength of the bunch to slew him out of that crotch," said Bart, leading the way to the slain animal.

At any rate, the two boys were allowed to see just where their lead had gone.

"Couldn't 'a been better shots; no sir, not if it was the oldest b'ar hunter of the Rockies!" declared Scotty, as he thrust a finger in the holes and turned a look of genuine admiration on both Frank and his chum.

Bob thought that praise was the limit. The memory of that exciting little event would follow him always. In imagination he would many times see that grizzly heading down the slope, bent on questioning their right to progress along the mountain trail; and the quick action which he and Frank had been compelled to take in order to meet the crisis.

"All together now, yo-heave-o! Here she goes, boys! Once more, and yet another for good luck. Now, over with the old critter, ker-slam!" and as Scotty spoke he led the last effort, by means of which the bulk was pushed over the edge of the little precipice.

There was a heavy thud as the bear brought up far below.

Once more they could start out. The affair with the bear had occupied only a few minutes, all told.

Scotty again took up the tracking of the marked hoof belonging to Old Baldy. The trail still ran upwards toward the crest of the ridge, and there no longer remained a single doubt in the minds of the two boys but that the clever old steer had made his final escape from the secret valley in this way.

They even began to cast their eyes aloft in the hope and expectation that soon they might figure on just where the break in the rocky wall was to be found, with a passage leading over to the other side of the ridge.

"I think I see where we're bound to bring up," Frank presently remarked.

"Then show me, please," said Bob, eagerly, for his eyes, being unaccustomed to the looks of wild places, had not up to then been able to accomplish much.

"Seems to me there is some sort of break just between those two spurs that stand up yonder like sentries," Frank declared.

"You're correct, Frank!" cried Scotty; "I been watchin' that same spot myself for a while, now, and was just a-goin' to mention it. That's whar she lies, Colonel, believe me! Frank's got the eyes of a hawk, I do declare. 'Tain't much escapes him, now."

"Well, we'll get up there in a few minutes, won't we?" demanded Bob.

"Easy," affirmed Bart. "And I say just the same as the others. That's the place our old steer quit the valley, when he yearned to git back home, and broke out of the wire corral. Now you can see it plain, Bob."

Indeed, as they progressed further it became a positive thing; even Bob was able to note the fact that there was some sort of little pass between those two rocky horns.

And so they found it shortly afterwards, when they entered the small canyon, to pass quickly through, and see how the trail started down the other side of the mountain.

"That settles it!" cried Colonel Haywood, showing that the strain had eased up considerably in his mind. "We'll be able to push the herd over here. Trust some of the old steers for knowing that Baldy went ahead of them. And there's hope, boys, of our being down there on the plain long before dark sets in."

They turned back at once, and made all possible haste to arrive at the spot where their comrades were watching the cattle.

"Everything seems to be all right down there," remarked the stockman, when at one point they managed to obtain a glimpse of the huddled herd, with the cowboys on foot circling constantly around, in order to make sure that no start was made toward a stampede.

"Hark! what does that mean?" cried Bob, as shots sounded in the valley.

"Somethin' doin' down by the camp, I reckon," asserted Scotty. "P'raps Mendoza is a-tryin' to break out, and the boys are givin' the rustlers 'Hail Columbia.'"

After the few shots all was quiet again, a fact that seemed to satisfy the rancher that nothing serious had come of the effort.

"I reckon they saw some sign of a break, and just sent in a few shots to sort of remind the rustlers that they were still thar on the job," Bart suggested; but not being able to learn the facts they had to let that theory stand.

Arriving at the place where the big herd awaited their coming, they were soon busily employed getting the stock started. This was no easy task, there on the mountainside, with only a dim trail

ahead.

But these men were old hands at the business. They knew all the tricks of the trade, and how to utilize the instincts of the cattle in carrying out their designs.

Once the herd started upward, they seemed to begin to understand. One of the big steers led the way, doubtless occupying much the same position that Old Baldy had been accustomed to filling. Possibly the animal could catch the scent of the preceding beast; though even Bob considered this somewhat unlikely, since so much time had elapsed since Baldy passed over the ground.

But in climbing upward the latter had always unerringly chosen what seemed to be the only possible route; so once the herd started, it could not easily go wrong.

Colonel Haywood had sent a messenger down to the camp with new word for those two daring cowboys who were shouldering the difficult task of keeping the rustlers penned up during the whole day.

They were to wait for night, and then slip secretly away. Their horses would be left in a certain place for them, and they were ordered to follow the broad trail of the herd until they overtook the main body of drivers.

Up the mountain the drive continued. Constant vigilance was required in order to keep the herd intact. Any little break might prove a serious matter, with that precipitous slope below them, down which a frightened animal would plunge to what must surely prove to be a fatal conclusion.

"I've been through some drives in my time," Bart remarked, after they had pushed along in this way for nearly two hours, and the crest of the ridge was close at hand, "but this sure takes the cake. If we get this herd safe down to level land again I'll be mighty glad, I'm tellin' ye, now."

Bob was himself well pleased when the last of the steers had passed through the little canyon, and started down the outer slope.

The going here was better, somehow, as they all realized before they had been ten minutes following the stock downward. Undoubtedly this was the trail Old Baldy must have struck at the time he and several cows were missing all winter. Following some instinct, he had thus discovered a way into a Paradise of a valley, where the forage was fine through all the winter months.

"The only thing that surprises me," remarked Frank, later, when speaking of the matter, "is that Baldy never tried the same game again when winter came along. But perhaps there were reasons. He may have been shut in a corral at the time. Once I remember he was suffering from a sore leg, on account of tearing through a barbed wire fence. But things are looking all right, dad, I should say."

"Couldn't be better, son," replied the stockman, smilingly; "and all we need now to make us happy is to feel our ponies under us."

At those words every cowboy within hearing set up a shout. The very mention of a bronco acted on them as might a tonic. This business of climbing mountains on foot, and driving a herd the same way, was the most trying experience possible. It would haunt them for many a long day; and a mere mention of the trip over Thunder Mountain ridge from the Lost Valley would be enough to make them content with their lot, no matter what troubles they happened to be facing at the time.

Foreseeing that they would be slow about getting to the foot of the descent, the stockman had sent a couple of men ahead to scurry around to where they had left all their mounts.

If these could be waiting for them when they struck the level, it would save considerable time, and add much to their comfort.

There were little accidents, to be sure, on the way down; but all things considered they did remarkably well. But it was certainly a used-up bunch of cowboys that, an hour or so before dusk, gave a screech as they found themselves on the level once more, with no more climbing or descending mountains ahead.

"Never want to see a mountain again!" declared Scotty, as he limped along, his feet sore, and his lower limbs feeling as though they had been scorched.

"But look there, isn't that Jeff coming with the ponies?" asked Frank, pointing.

It turned out to be so; and from that moment every driver quite forgot all his aches in the wild desire to once more mount, and experience the delight of being carried swiftly from place to place. Walking to a cowboy is a waste of time and energy. And the saddle boys were also glad to get their favorites again.

CHAPTER XVIII DRIVING THE HERD

At noon the drivers had eaten whatever they chanced to have along with them. If one happened to be better provided than his mates, he was only too willing to share his lunch. It was anticipated that when night came one of the yearlings in the herd would be sacrificed to make a supper for the outfit; and on the strength of this the boys had been enabled to put in the entire afternoon.

Once they "threw a leg over a saddle" they seemed to revive wonderfully. After that the tired herd would have to hasten to keep up, for the horses were fresh.

But Colonel Haywood knew they could not expect to make any great distance before camping. He saw that some of the cattle were footsore, and liable to drop if pushed too far.

"There's only one thing we've got to look out for," remarked Bart, as they considered the advisability of stopping for the night.

"What's that?" asked Bob, who chanced to be alongside the foreman at the time.

"We don't have any way of knowing what them rustlers might feel like doing, once they git out of that bunk-house," Bart continued.

"Do you mean they may take a notion to follow us, and fight for the possession of the herd?" asked the boy, thrilled by the possibility of further adventure on this trip.

"Well, as a rule, the fellers that foller that line of business are a lot of cowardly coyotes; and on bein' found out will run to beat the band," Bart went on. "But this here Mendoza, he's hard to place. Course he's just boilin' over mad because his fine hiding place is discovered, and he'll never be able to use the same again. Question is, will he make a break for the border, thinking the ranchers are hot on his trail; or foller after us, just for spite, to stampede the herd, and make trouble?"

"Then we'll have to keep a pretty good watch, I should think," Bob observed.

"That goes without sayin', younker," replied the boss puncher. "And as some of the stock just look all in, we'll have to call a halt here and now. It's as good a place as we can find, I opine."

"Just what I was going to say, Bart," laughed Frank, coming up at that moment; "for the grass is good, considering the season; and here's all the water wanted, fresh from the mountains."

When the shouts of the cowboys told the weary cattle that they were to stop and rest, they gave evidence of their satisfaction. Crowding along the little stream, they drank their fill after the heat of the day. Some began to crop the forage, with others immediately dropped down, utterly exhausted by their labors.

With the report of a gun one of the yearlings dropped, and a cowboy was soon busily engaged in cutting the animal up to serve as their supper.

A fire was started, though fuel seemed scarce. But then, only a cooking blaze was required, and after supper was served they would have no further need for any fire.

Bob admitted frankly that he felt tired out, though he did not fully realize just how weary he was until he had sat down a little while, and then attempted to rise suddenly.

"Why, I just can't do it, Frank!" he exclaimed with a long face. "Seems as if my legs needed oiling about the hinges, they're that rusty. Gee! I hope I'll be feeling better than this in the morning."

"Oh! don't worry about that," laughed his chum, who, of course, being somewhat tougher, had not suffered quite as much as Bob; "after a sleep you'll be as fresh as a daisy again."

"But I want to stand my watch to-night, all the same," ventured Bob, positively.

Frank looked at him.

"What's come over you, to say that?" he demanded.

"Because, when there's danger around I think every fellow ought to share the duties of standing guard," Bob replied, sturdily.

At that Frank whistled, and then chuckled.

"I see you've been talking with Bart, and he's given you the idea the rustlers may be silly enough to follow after us, just to get revenge," he remarked.

"Well, Bart did say something like that," Bob admitted; "and he also told me he meant to keep a close watch all night, to prevent a surprise and a stampede."

"Oh! rats! don't you believe there's anything like that going to happen," Frank hastened to remark, seeing that his chum was really concerned and worried over the grim predictions of the boss cowboy.

"Then you don't take any stock in it, yourself, Frank?"

"No I don't," replied the other, quickly adding: "though of course Bart is quite right in saying he doesn't mean to take any chances of a stampede in the night. We've done so well that it would be a shame to have any accident happen now."

"But how about the rustlers?" asked the other.

"Well, by this time they're out of that bunk-house, perhaps; or will be as soon as it's really dark. My opinion is, if you want to hear it, Bob, that they'll get out of that valley on foot as fast as they can, leaving their ponies behind them, because they won't know about this other gateway, you understand."

"And then?" continued Bob.

"They'll be in a panic, believing that, since they're known now, the country'll soon be too hot to hold 'em. And so there'll be a chase for the Mexican border; and a 'good riddance to bad rubbish' for Arizona," Frank concluded.

After that little talk Bob's fears subsided somewhat, though he did occasionally cast a furtive glance backward to where the high rocky ridge cut across the sky-line, as though wondering what was taking place beyond the barrier.

Supper was soon ready, and it was an almost famished bunch of cow punchers who gathered around, taking turns at eating; for Bart would not let the herd go unguarded even for a minute.

Arrangements were soon made looking to a detail of wranglers to stand watch over the saddle horses and the cattle. Bob was not allowed any share in this duty, much to his regret, for he was in earnest in his wish to have a part in the labor. His inexperience would have rendered his work of little value, and the head herder decided that he might just as well get his full rest.

Bob lay down the best he could. He needed no lullaby to put him to sleep that night. The last things he remembered hearing were the whispers of the boys who sat near by, the drone of insects in the grass, the uneasy movements of the herd not far away, and some night bird calling in the trees close by the foot of the mountains.

When he awoke he could hardly believe his senses, as he sat up and dug his knuckles in his eyes. It was getting broad daylight. The cattle seemed to be for the most part feeding on the sweet grass that grew close to the creek; and were apparently in good trim for the long drive to the ranch.

"Well, that was a time when I slept like a top, sure pop," said Bob, as he started to get to his feet. "Seems as if I'd just lain down; and yet here it is dawn. And nothing happened after all!"

There was a shade of disappointment in Bob's tone. Whether this came from the fact that he had not been allowed to share in guarding the camp, because of his being reckoned a greenhorn; or on account of the failure of Bart's prediction of further trouble, it would be hard to say.

Enough of the beef remained to serve for breakfast; and they hoped to be at the ranch before they were hungry again.

"You see, we didn't have any trouble after all, Bob," said Frank, as he joined his chum, who was looking after his horse at the time.

"If we did, I must have slept right through it all," chuckled Bob. "Never knew a thing from the time I shut my eyes till daylight wakened me. But I reckon nothing bothered the herd, and we're starting the day fine."

"I don't believe even a stray wolf or coyote came near, the whole night," Frank went on. "I was up myself for two hours, keeping watch over the cattle; and once I thought I heard the report of firearms, but it wasn't repeated; and right now I couldn't say what it was I caught. Might have been just one of those little rock slides up on the mountain."

"I'm glad it's all over," said Bob.

"Same here," Frank added. "It's sure been some strenuous. And that climb over the ridge was the toughest ever. I suppose you'll believe now what I told you about how cattle can get up, and go some?"

"They're just great at climbing, that's what," the other admitted.

After breakfast the start was made. There was little trouble with the herd now. Reaching level land had apparently brought about a return of their confidence; and it might even be that some of the older steers could scent their customary feeding grounds in the distance.

At any rate they started off, and being once more in their glory while mounted on their ponies, the cowboys proved as active as cats, darting here and there to keep their charges in a compact mass as they headed toward distant Circle Ranch.

It was about two hours later that Bob rode alongside his chum.

"Say, do you suppose that means any trouble for us, Frank?" he demanded; and as the other turned his head to see what the Kentucky boy might be pointing at, he discovered two horsemen heading after them.

Visions of a desperate and vengeful Mendoza had naturally leaped into Bob's mind, at first seeing these parties. Frank quickly put him at his ease.

"Not by a jugfull, Bob," he said, cheerfully. "Those fellows are the two men we left behind us in the valley, to guard the rustlers, and keep them quiet. They got out all right, it seems, and found their ponies where they were left."

"Perhaps they'll be able to tell us something about the rustlers, and what they were doing the last they saw of the crowd?" Bob suggested.

"Well, as like as not they may," his chum admitted; and then they waited for the two riders to overtake the herd drivers.

Of course there was considerable yelling and waving of hats to mark the arrival of the balance of the Circle Ranch outfit. But, knowing that they should make their report to their employer first, the two riders sought the spot where he and the foreman were to be found.

Of course the two saddle boys hovered around, wishing to learn any news in connection with what had occurred in the valley during the preceding day, while the great herd was being driven over the ridge.

Under the skillful questioning of the stockman the cowboys told their story. All through the long day they had kept watch and ward over the bunk-house. Several times the rustlers who were being held prisoners there made a show of rushing out; but they really lacked the nerve to take their lives in their hands. And so evening still found the situation unchanged.

When it was dark the two cowboys had fired a few shots to let the rustlers understand they were still on deck. Then they had decamped, and, finding the exit, managed, after great difficulties, to climb out over the masses of piled-up rock, which had been torn loose by the explosion of dynamite.

They had spent the balance of the night in hiding, and when morning came made a "bee-line" for the place where they had been informed their horses would be waiting. After that it was no great effort to discover the presence of the herd off on the plain, and make direct for the cattle.

"Then you saw nothing of the rustlers after you left?" asked the stockman.

"We think we saw a bunch of riders far away to the south, an hour back," one of the cowboys answered; "and hitting it up for all they were worth. If so be the rustlers had a saddle band outside the valley somewhere, then that must 'a been the crowd we saw. No danger of them comin' back again."

"Well, on the whole, it's just as well," remarked Colonel Haywood; "though there are those who have suffered at the hands of Mendoza in the past who would much rather see him a prisoner, and sent to the penitentiary for a long term."

"I reckon he'd never get thar," remarked Bart, with a smile and a nod, that Bob, though a greenhorn, could easily interpret to mean that the cow men knew of a better way to settle the rustler so he could never again raid their herds.

CHAPTER XIX

STARTLING NEWS

"It promises to be a bully day for the round-up, Frank!" remarked Bob, just forty-eight hours after the morning that saw them near the foot of the Thunder Mountain Ridge, and driving the recovered herd homeward, after rescuing it from the cattle rustlers of the dreaded Mendoza.

"Just what it does," replied his chum, who was sitting on his buckskin pony, and looking out to where a band of punchers were circling around the first bunch of cattle that would require attention.

Colonel Haywood had been hearing from the neighboring ranches ever since they reached home. In a side corral he had all the cattle taken from the rustlers, outside of those which he recognized as his own property. Here the other stockmen tried to pick out certain steers and cows which had been stolen from them recently.

The original brands had been destroyed, and a new one burned on the flanks of the animals. Evidently these steers had been intended for shipping at the first favorable opportunity for reaching the railroad, on the part of the rustlers.

By degrees two-thirds of the recovered stock had been claimed. The balance was likely to remain in the hands of the Circle Ranch people, since there was no means of identifying it.

Having made all his arrangements for the Fall round-up, Colonel Haywood did not allow such a little matter as his encounter with the rustler band to disturb his well laid plans.

So this fine morning every cowboy employed on the ranch, as well as some borrowed from friendly neighbors, such as the Arrowhead over on the creek, were hard at work, bringing in cattle to be looked over, the brands renewed in cases where they had become unsightly; and the youngsters that had grown to a considerable size taken in hand for the first time, and marked with the big circle.

Since a full day had elapsed after their arrival in safety at the ranch, the two saddle boys had fully recovered from their fatigue. A couple of good nights' sleep had also done much toward making them feel as "chipper as ever," as Bob expressed it.

"Will they get it all through with in one day?" asked the Kentucky boy, laughing at the antics of some of the wild riders who were rushing back and forth on all sides of the herd, and showing their wonderful skill in the saddle.

There were riders in the Circle outfit who had few equals, when it came to carrying out the many difficult feats whereby cowboys delight to prove their claim to being better riders than even the famous Russian Cossacks. They could do the most astonishing tricks while galloping at full speed over the plain. And Bob, though brought up in an atmosphere where fine horses were bred, the Blue Grass region of Kentucky, despaired of ever equalling the records of some of these expert and reckless punchers.

"Dad says it will take all of two, and maybe more," replied Frank. "You see, some of the herds are a long ways off. And then you'd never imagine the trouble an old steer gives, once in a while, when it's necessary to renew his brand. I've seen half a dozen boys at their wits' ends to down a tough old chap; though they always get him, sooner or later. But it takes time."

"Old Baldy is with that lot, Frank; I'm sure I can tell him from here, leading them all, like a proud general."

"Yes, that's Baldy, sure. And no need of him worrying about his feed after this. Every cowboy on the range is proud of the way that old rascal found his way out of the Lost Valley. Why, just think how much we owe him. Only for his leaving a marked trail up to the second gateway we'd still have part of our herd cooped up there, and a big job to dig a passage through those tumble-down rocks to get 'em out."

"Say, Frank, what do you think? I dreamed last night that I found it!"

"I suppose now you're talking of that wonderful hunting knife you lost nearly a week back?" remarked the other, smiling.

"Just that," Bob went on.

"And where was it, in your dream?" continued Frank.

"Where do you suppose, Frank?"

"Well, if you're going to get me guessing, the first place I'd think about would be the spot where you cut up that deer, under the twin cotton-woods. How is that for a starter, Bob?"

"You made a bulls-eye of it that time, because that's just where I thought I found the old blade!" Bob exclaimed.

"H'm, lying on the ground, and perhaps half hidden under the grass or trash, eh?" his chum continued.

"That's where you missed fire. Where else but sticking in the trunk of that tree, just where the first crotch lies. But Frank, try as I will, I just can't remember ever putting it there."

"Which doesn't prove anything," his chum went on to say with decision. "Sometimes, you know, we do things mechanically, and without thinking."

"Yes, just as a fellow will work his pump-gun, after firing a round. It may be so, Frank. And if it wasn't that I want to see everything that goes on at the grand round-up here, I'd ask you to ride with me over the plain to where we got that deer."

"Well, I would have to decline, all the same, Bob; because I'm wanted here, and so are you. Another time will have to do. If it's true that the knife is there, I reckon it won't run away inside of another couple of days or so."

"Perhaps not," replied Bob, a little dejectedly it is true; for the longer the missing article eluded

his search the greater grew his desire to find it again.

They were soon in the thick of the work. Frank was given opportunities to show how he could throw the rope, and bring a steer down. Bob, too, took a chance; and as he had been practicing diligently since his last public attempt, he "did himself proud," as he expressed it; actually roping a big steer, and throwing the beast in a way that brought out a round of cheers from Frank and the boys.

Then Bob also assisted with the branding. The afternoon found them still at it. With hundreds of cattle to be looked over, considerable time was required to accomplish a clean sweep.

Colonel Haywood found much cause for satisfaction. His herds had increased even more than his best record; and doubtless the next few shipments would be banner ones for Circle Ranch.

Then again, the fact that he had not only recovered his missing herd, but driven the rustlers out of their long secret lair, was another cause for congratulation.

On the preceding day a couple of cowboys had been sent back over the trail, with instructions to leave their horses at the foot of the mountain ridge, and on foot follow the tracks left by the escaping herd, passing into the valley by way of the new gateway.

They were to look there for the horses of the rustlers, which it was believed must have been abandoned at the time of their flight; and should these be found they would become the property of Circle Ranch as spoils of war.

The afternoon was fairly well along when the two saddle boys, being tired of the sights and sounds marking the grand round-up, decided to gallop a few miles away over the plain.

"There's a lone pilgrim heading this way, Frank; and he's on foot too, which I take it is some queer out in this country," Bob remarked, pointing as he spoke.

"Oh! I don't know," his comrade said, "because sometimes Indians don't all happen to be riders like the Apaches and Comanches, you know."

"Is that an Indian, then?" asked Bob.

"It sure is, or my eyes deceive me," Frank went on; "and what's more, perhaps we happen to know him, too."

"Do you mean Havasupai, the old Moqui, Frank?"

"That man walks like him," the prairie boy continued; "and see, he's making gestures to us right now. I guess he's recognized us all right. Trust an Indian's eyes for knowing a friend as far as he can see him."

"But the last we saw of Havasupai was up there in the valley, when he shut the door of the rustlers' bunk-house, just when he knew every man-jack of 'em was asleep! To tell the honest truth, I had clean forgot all about the old fellow after that."

"Well, I didn't forget him," Frank remarked; "but he never showed up again, and I had to come away without seeing him. I reckoned he didn't want Mendoza to know he had played him false. You see, the old Moqui was awfully anxious to learn where his daughter, the Antelope, was. It seems that the rustler married the Moqui girl, and has her hidden away somewhere."

"Yes, I heard him say she was down in Mexico," Bob declared. "It struck me that Havasupai must imagine the girl is being badly treated, and he wants to recover her again. Do you think I'm near the truth there, Frank?"

"I certainly do," answered the other, as he swung around, and started his horse on an easy lope toward the on coming figure.

Already Bob saw that it was certainly the old Moqui. They had met Havasupai first of all up in the region of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, as has been mentioned in an earlier volume of this series. And his actions in the Lost Valley had proven beyond all question that the Moqui wished to retain their friendship.

"Dad will be glad to see him," Frank remarked, as they drew rapidly nearer the figure of the weary walker. "He said he meant to help the old man recover his child, if it was possible. And I heard him even asking several of those other stockmen if they knew anything about Antelope."

"Oh! I hope he came across a clue, then," Bob remarked; "because it must be hard on the old chap, being exiled from his village, and losing his only child."

"Dad says that the old warrior can stay around Circle Ranch as long as he wants," Frank went on to say; "he will always have his three meals a day, and little to do. Perhaps he's on his way there right now. He might happen to know something of what his son-in-law is meaning to do."

Presently they drew up with a flourish alongside the old Moqui, who allowed a faint smile of welcome to creep over his wrinkled and bronzed face at sight of the two lads he had come to care for more than a little.

"How! Havasupai! what cheer?" cried Bob, reaching down to shake hands.

"We hope you're on your way to the ranch, Chief," Frank said, a little more seriously; "because my father, the Colonel, wants to see you, and tell you something about the one you are hunting. Will you take a seat here behind me, and ride?"

"It will be as well if Havasupai can meet the big chief soon," replied the old Moqui, gravely, as he accepted Frank's hand, and for a man of his years deftly climbed to the withers of the buckskin pony, that pranced about, as though not satisfied at the prospect of carrying double.

"Have you any news to take him—word of the White Wolf?" asked Frank, referring to the rustler leader after the fashion in which the Moqui himself had addressed him.

"He has left the band, and turned back, filled with hatred for those who took his cattle out of the valley. Even now he may be there at the ranch, with a double face, meaning to have revenge by burning the teepee of the white man or poisoning the spring where the long-horns drink."

Frank and Bob stared at each other when the old Moqui said this.

"We must make for home on the jump, Bob!" exclaimed the stockman's son, as he dug his heels

into the sides of his pony, and headed along the back trail, followed by his alarmed chum.

CHAPTER XX

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

"S'pose Frank hold up—talk little 'bout White Wolf—no need hurry!"

When Frank heard these words spoken in his ear by the old Moqui he threw up his right hand, to let Bob know he intended coming to a halt, so that the galloping horses might not collide.

They had gone several miles in the direction of the ranch house, which could even then be seen in the far distance; with moving horsemen darting this way and that, as the process of the rounding up and branding the cattle went on apace.

"Havasupai wants to say something, Bob, and asked me to stop," was the way the prairie boy accounted for his sudden change of mind.

The Moqui slipped from the back of Buckskin to the ground. He was evidently considerably tired from his long journey; but an Indian would scorn to admit such a thing, even though near the point of utter exhaustion. So the Moqui looked as full of grit and determination as though he had only started out when they came upon him on the plain.

"It may be," he commenced to say, in his solemn way, "that White Wolf already there, to play part of Mexican cowboy."

"Whew! we didn't think of that, did we, Frank?" ejaculated Bob.

"To tell the truth, we started off at such a wild pace that there wasn't time to think much of anything," admitted his chum.

"But do you believe it could be done?" persisted Bob. "There must be cowboys working on the Circle Ranch range who knew this Mendoza in the past; and wouldn't they be apt to recognize the rustler if so be he dared come and engage to work alongside them?"

"I don't know," Frank replied, thoughtfully. "A Mexican can change his looks easy enough, you understand. We saw Mendoza in the Lost Valley, and as I remember him, he had a mustache, and little sideburns in front of his ears, the way so many Mexican senors do. Suppose he took a notion to have a clean face, why, his best friend might pass him by, Bob."

"I reckon you're right, Frank," replied the other, shaking his head, as though he did not exactly like the situation. "And now that we're speaking of it, I just remember that among the extra punchers your father took on to hurry this round-up through, there are a number of Mexicans, who are among the best riders on the ranges."

"All right, Bob, then there's a chance that one of them may be Mendoza himself, if what our friend here tells us turns out to be true, and not a false alarm."

"But would Mendoza dare risk his life in that way, by coming back to the country where every man's hand is raised against him?" Bob asked, wonderingly.

"They say he is a man of fierce temper, and strong hates," Frank continued. "I've heard lots of stories about his daring. Some people choose to call him a coward; but, bad man as he is, I don't believe that name fits him. And in all his career as a cattle rustler I don't think he ever had such a hard knock as when we snatched all his cattle away from him, and our boys held him up a whole day in that bunk-house."

"Yes," Bob admitted, "that sounds all right. I can understand how angry it must make a man like that to remember his profitable business of helping himself to other people's horses and cattle has been frosted, and ruined forever in Arizona."

"And don't you see, he must know that Circle Ranch was responsible for it all," Frank continued. "And that means he hates everything connected with our place, you and me included in the lot. On the way to the border, where his men intended crossing, so as to be safe from the pursuit they expected, Mendoza has been brooding over the fall of his plans, and it just set him wild."

"Yes, that sounds as if you could look in on his camp, and see the rustler walking up and down, saying all sorts of things to himself, and vowing to be revenged on Circle Ranch for his downfall. Frank, I hate to admit it, but I'm afraid Havasupai may be right, and that the White Wolf is already galloping over our range, roping cattle, and mixing with our boys like one of them."

"They used to say he was a cowboy once himself years ago, and knows all the wrinkles of the business," Frank went on. "It gives me a shiver just to think of that bad man being among our fellows. Why, even before now, perhaps, he's found some excuse to get inside the ranch buildings, to look around, and plan his game of setting fire to them to-night."

"But could he do that?" asked Bob, excitedly; "when all the boys are expected to be busy with the roping and branding; wouldn't it look mighty suspicious for a Mexican to be prowling around the ranch house, where only the women folks, and Ah Sin are left?"

"No matter what it would look like, a cunning schemer like Mendoza could find a way to get there," Frank insisted. "Suppose now, in his work he complained of having wrenched his arm or shoulder, and asked to have some liniment applied; don't I just know that my dad would tell him to gallop back to the house, and get Miss Prue, who always looks after the little hurts of the men, to rub on some of the famous stuff she keeps for just that purpose?"

Bob gave a low whistle, to indicate how he was affected by what his chum said.

"It sure takes you to see through all these things, Frank," he declared. "And yet I'm supposed to be going to make a lawyer some fine day; but they don't seem to dawn on my mind till after you've given me a hint."

"Oh! that's because I've been brought up here," said Frank. "I know cowboys, and their ways,

just through and through. And if Mendoza wanted to see what the inside of the ranch house looked like, and meet the women folks face to face, he'd be just as apt as anything to try some way like that. It would be easy for such a bold man, Bob."

"But what do you suppose the old warrior wants you to hold up here for?" asked the Kentucky boy, who could ask questions as became a lawyer, even if he failed to grasp situations as readily as his chum.

"How about that, Havasupai?" asked Frank, as he turned to the Moqui, who had been listening to what they said with deep earnestness.

"When rustlers get out of valley, and pick up other ponies, Havasupai ride with same," he said, slowly. "Still want see Antelope, and think White Wolf lead way to where the daughter of the Moqui be hidden away. Then watch while White Wolf walk up, walk down, say heap to self, shake fist back at Thunder Mountain; then when all rest sleep, jump on pony, and ride away to north. Know then what in mind of bad man. So Havasupai too leave camp, and start walk many miles to tell Frank, Bob, look out before blow it fall."

Evidently the old Moqui believed in condensing things, and not wasting a single word more than was absolutely necessary. Still, while his story left much to the imagination, even Bob could read between the lines.

"Looks to me that he may be right, Frank," he declared, as the Indian relapsed into silence once more, having finished his say, "if Mendoza is really and truly playing the part of a cowboy in the Circle Ranch grand round-up, and saw us fetching Havasupai in on our ponies, of course he'd know that his little game was in the soup. That would make him furious, wouldn't it now?"

"Yes, and he might be tempted to do something desperate, knowing that he'd be chased by the whole pack of cowboys then and there. So you see, Bob, it's our policy, just as the Moqui hints, to keep from telling Mendoza that we suspect his presence. That gives us a chance to tell dad, and make up some sort of plan to capture the rustler before he can get in his bad work."

"You're right, Frank," observed Bob, "and I see it all now, thanks to the Moqui, first of all. If it hadn't been for him, I reckon you'd have brushed right along into camp, and the fat would have been in the fire right away. Now we'll ride back just as if we'd only had our gallop; and Havasupai can come in after dark. Is that the idea?"

"You've got it down pat there, Bob," returned the other; "and as the afternoon is going fast now, perhaps we'd better be on our way back. I feel a creepy sensation all over me every time I think of what that rascal might do to get even with Circle Ranch for his upset."

"Didn't you hear what Havasupai said about his poisoning the spring where our cattle drink?" demanded Bob.

"Well, perhaps he might be ready to do such a thing, and again not," Frank answered, slowly. "I'd hate to think any man would be so mean as that. But no matter, his being at Circle Ranch looks like he had some scheme in his mind for getting even, and we've just got to nip it in the bud. Good-bye, then, Chief; see you later. You come to ranch house, my father he wants to hold out a helping hand to you. He believes he knows where Antelope is; cowboy tell him. How?"

Almost unconsciously when Frank talked with an Indian he adopted some of the methods of expression in vogue among the red men. Perhaps, like others born and brought up in close association with these people, he believed that he could make himself better understood this way.

Havasupai nodded his head, and straightened up, as if ready to continue his wearisome tramp. Fatigue and he were no strangers, and nothing of this sort could in any way daunt the spirit of the outcast.

"It is well, Frank;" he said, in his deep way of speaking; "when dark come, Havasupai will be close to ranch house, and on watch. No burn same if can be stopped. Much good about Antelope; know now the White Wolf bad man; never believe Havasupai. Be glad leave him all time. So-long."

The old Moqui had at least caught the parting sign of the range, for as he finished speaking he waved his hand to the two boys as they let their horses have their heads, and galloped away toward home.

Looking back once, after they had gone some little distance, Bob saw the exiled Moqui walking leisurely along. He knew from this that Havasupai did not wish to get within a certain distance of the ranch buildings before night fell, for fear that the cunning eyes of the Mexican rustler might discover him.

"What are we going to do about it, Frank?" demanded the Kentucky boy, as usual depending on his chum to take the lead.

"First of all, let dad know," replied Frank, promptly.

"And perhaps he'll start out to take a closer look at every Mexican puncher on the place?" suggested Bob. "Say, won't there just be some 'high jinks' when he finds Mendoza, and accuses him of wanting to burn the buildings, or something about as bad? Whew, the Mexican will be some surprised when he learns his mask is snatched off; eh, Frank?"

"All the same I don't believe dad will do anything like that," was the reply the other made. "In the first place, it would be dangerous. Father would be likely to hold back, just to see what the game of Mendoza might be."

"Oh! now I get on to what you mean!" exclaimed Bob; "in legal language, or as the police would say, he'd be better satisfied to catch him with the goods, trying to set a fire, for instance. And let me say, Frank, your father would show what you'd call good, sound, horse sense if he did let the fellow have rope that way. But say, I hope he tells a few of the boys. I'd feel safer if we had enough fellows handy to stop Mendoza, when he starts to get ugly."

"Depend on it he will, Bob. Dad never takes chances on such things. He's handled too many deals with tough customers to think of going to sleep. But we're getting close in now, and we'd

better act natural. If you look around at every Mexican we happen to meet, don't be too suspicious. Try and forget that we suspect a snake is warming himself at the Circle Ranch fires this evening."

"All right, Frank," replied the other, cheerfully. "I'm on to what you say, and don't worry about my giving it away. But the work is through for to-day; because I can see the boys gathering in bunches while they wait for Ah Sin to beat the gong for supper. But I want to be with you when you tell your father the story, Frank."

CHAPTER XXI SETTING THE TRAP

Just as Bob had remarked, the hard work of the first day of the grand round-up seemed to be done. The cowboys had taken their wearied mounts to the corral, and were themselves gathering in little knots, to talk over the exciting events marking the start of the regular Fall clean-up.

It promised to be a banner year for Circle Ranch. There were half again as many young cattle to brand with the well known ring, designed to stamp them as the property of Colonel Haywood. Besides, the main herd had wintered better the preceding year than for a long time; there had been less loss through wolves, and the depredations of rustlers; and, to cap the climax, many unclaimed cows and steers had fallen to the colonel, after his raid on Lost Valley.

All these things made everybody feel "bully," as the cow punchers themselves expressed it. And as Frank and Bob passed group after group they could see that, tired as the workers must be, this feeling was constantly cropping out.

"Nobody seems to think of anything like danger right now," said Bob, in a low tone, as they passed a bunch of the wild riders, among whom were several dark-faced Mexicans.

"I should say not," echoed his chum. "You see they believe our friend Mendoza is across the border before now, and likely to stay on Mexican soil for some time, if he knows what's good for his health."

"Did you notice that fellow on the outskirts of the bunch; and how he turned deliberately around to look at us when we rode past?" asked Bob.

"Sure," came the quick reply, "but if we didn't know what we did, I reckon neither of us would have thought it queer for him to do that. If he's a stranger here, as seems likely, it would be only natural for him to look, when one of the others remarked that the colonel's son was coming."

"I agree with you there, Frank; but seeing that we *do* know something, don't you admit that there was something suspicious in the quick way he turned? For my part, I only gave him one peep as I waved my hand to the lot; but that seemed to tell me he was frowning to beat the band. How?"

"Just what he was, Bob."

"Then you noticed that too, did you?" demanded the Kentucky boy, eagerly.

"No question about it; and three to one that fellow is no other than the rustler who's been such a nuisance around here for several years," Frank replied.

Bob whistled, as was his usual fashion when surprised.

"But think of his nerve, would you, Frank?"

"Oh! they say he's got more than his share of that, all right," chuckled his chum, as they headed toward the horse corral, to leave their mounts in the care of the man who had charge there.

"Some of these punchers must have known him; he used to be on a ranch once, I'm told," Bob went on.

"That's so," said Frank, slowly, "but it was years ago that he broke loose, and took to an easier way of getting a herd than raising cattle. Besides, you must remember we agreed he would shave his face clean, to start with. That must make a big change in any Mexican. And he can keep his hat well down over his eyes. Last of all, he relies on the fact that nobody dreams he would take such risks as to come here right now."

After leaving their horses, the boys headed straight for the ranch house, where they asked for Colonel Haywood.

It chanced that he was in his business office, in consultation with the overseer, which fact pleased Frank; since Bart Heminway would have to be put in touch with the truth concerning the presence of the notorious rustler at the Circle Ranch round-up.

The stockman looked up as the lads entered, and smiled.

"Back from your little gallop, eh?" he remarked; for he had seen them starting forth, and wondered at the powers of endurance shown by both boys and horses; for they had been pretty busy all that stirring day.

"Yes, Dad, and with some news that will make you sit up and take notice, I reckon," replied Frank, after glancing around, to make sure there was no chance of his being overheard by way of the open window.

Bob had, by arrangement, stepped over, and taken up his position where he could occasionally thrust his head outside a window and in this way make sure no listener was crouching near the wall of the building.

"Now you have me guessing, son," remarked the stockman.

"Three to one it's something about that Mendoza!" exclaimed the overseer, who had never ceased to lament the fact that they had allowed the rustler to escape so easily.

From the fact of Bob laughing at this chance remark, the stockman realized that Bart had hit

pretty close to the line.

"What about him now, Frank?" he asked.

"He didn't cross the boundary after all, Dad," said the boy. "Fact is, he's come back to this region, bent on getting his revenge for what the Circle Ranch outfit did to knock his game to flinders."

"Where did you get this interesting news, son?" asked the other, frowning; for well he knew that it meant trouble of some sort.

"We happened to run across that old Moqui, Havasupai, when we were riding just now. He was about tired out, but bent on getting to the ranch house some time to-night. He told us that after riding off many miles to the south with his men, Mendoza had slipped away, and headed back this way."

"But Frank, how did the Indian know what the rustler had in mind?"

"I think he overheard a talk between Mendoza and one of his men," the boy replied. "The rustler was angry at the slick way we shut him up that day, and walked all his cattle off, as well as our own. He said he was going to pay you up, if it was the last thing he ever did. And, dad, I reckon he's right here now, in the thick of the round-up, ready to strike before another morning!"

Colonel Haywood and his overseer exchanged glances.

"Oh! he's equal to it, Colonel," declared Bart. "When I think of the bold games that fellow has engineered through all these years, and the way he gave us the merry laugh every time we hunted him, I'm ready to admit he'd be ready to drop in whar fifty enemies was gathered, and make b'lieve he was one of 'em. And thar's sure several Mexican ropers along I never set eyes on before. Just as like as not one of 'em might be Mendoza."

"Did the Moqui know what sort of revenge this fellow expected to take, Frank?" the stockman continued, uneasily.

"I don't know whether he was only guessing, or knew about it," replied the boy; "but he said something about his poisoning the spring-hole where most of our cattle drink; or else burning the building, while all of us were sleeping!"

"Either one would be bad enough," declared the stockman; "but now that we have been forewarned it'll have to be a clever man who can accomplish such a game."

"What will you do, dad?" asked Frank, eagerly.

"First of all, put a guard over the spring, who will remain in hiding, with orders to shoot down any man seen to be tampering with the water, especially if he looks like a Mexican," replied the rancher, firmly.

"And about burning the buildings?" continued Frank.

"I'll make sure to be ready for him here," the stockman continued. "It would please me first class to catch the house-burner in the act. Of course, now that we believe Mendoza is here for some evil purpose, we could jump on him without warning. That might suit most people; but it's always been my plan to let a rascal go the length of his rope before nabbing him."

"I told Bob that, Dad," remarked Frank. "But will you let all the boys in on the game?"

"Not at all, Frank. I might tell several who can be trusted to keep a still tongue in their heads; for we shall need a certain amount of help here to watch the house on all sides, and get the fellow just as he strikes his match. Old Hank Coombs came in just before you did, and is around. Of course I shall count on him, as well as on Ted Conway, Scotty and Jeff Davis."

"But you will let us sit up with the bunch, Dad; after bringing in the news you wouldn't shut us off, would you?" Frank asked.

"It wouldn't seem right, I admit, after all the good work you two boys have done," remarked the stockman; "though you'll have to promise to hold back, and let some of the husky men do the actual hard work. I can't afford to take the chances of my boys getting hurt by such a desperate rascal."

Of course both of them readily promised, and after some further conversation Frank and his chum hurried out. The coming of Old Hank Coombs to the ranch was an event that greatly pleased Frank. Much that he knew about life in the open had come through the kindly instruction of the veteran cow puncher and hunter; and the boy could look back to many a happy night spent with old Hank beside a fire somewhere out on the plains, or in the mountains.

Circle Ranch was a bustling hive just then. Scores of strangers were apt to visit the place during the several days that the drive and the round-up were on, interested in the great event. Men representing big papers and magazines in the East had come to see how these things were conducted; for the stock raising business in the Southwest was soon going into a decline, because farms were being taken up everywhere, under the wonderful new system of irrigation that was being put into practice in many localities.

After supper there was heard the sound of merry music. Some of the boys played the mandolin or banjo; others sang; and a few even tried to dance with their customary vigor, though weariness compelled them to speedily abandon this form of hilarity.

Colonel Haywood had carried out all his quickly-laid plans for the campaign, looking to the arrest of the rustler. He had sent a reliable man to the spring-hole where the cattle drank, with strict orders as to what he should do if anyone came and acted suspiciously during the night. No mercy was to be shown a man who would descend to such a pass as to try and poison an entire herd of cattle, just to have revenge on the man who had broken up his unlawful trade.

Bart Heminway talked to the four cowboys wanted at the house, and they had managed to slip indoors. They were now waiting to be placed on their several stations by the stockman, who exhibited some of the qualities of a general in managing his affairs.

The saddle boys had taken up their position in a spot close to Ted Conway and Old Hank. In

figuring out just where the intended attack might come, this particular place had been deemed first choice. The direction of the night wind convinced Colonel Haywood that a shrewd man who wished to fire the buildings would be apt to select it as his starting point.

It was a dark night, too, despite the fact that there was supposed to be a moon back of the heavy clouds which covered the heavens.

Once having taken up their position, Frank and Bob knew that they must remain as still as a cat watching for a mouse to show at a hole in the flooring. There was no telling when the enemy might appear. After having started the blaze, if that proved the intention of the rustler, he would have his plans laid to gallop madly away on the freshest horse in the corral, and thus laugh at pursuit.

Tired after the labors of that wonderful day, the cowboys had sought their bunks sooner than usual. By ten o'clock all had become silent around the place. Here and there a fire smouldered, past which an occasional figure might be seen to shuffle; or it might be a dog wandering around, looking for bones.

Frank and Bob lay close, never moving a muscle, though to the latter it was indeed hard work. An hour, two of them, had crept along, and nothing happened. Bob even began to wonder whether after all there might not be some mistake; or whether the rustler's nerve had failed him in the pinch.

Then he felt a slight nudge in the region of his ribs, that came from Frank's elbow. This warned him that his keen-eared chum had caught some suspicious movement close by. Perhaps the rustler was coming, bent on carrying out his scheme of firing the buildings belonging to Circle Ranch! Bob held his breath, and waited to see what would speedily happen.

CHAPTER XXII

CAUGHT IN THE ACT—CONCLUSION

That crackling sound which came to Bob's strained ears he knew must mean that a match had been struck. Yes, he could see the sudden little glow; and even managed to catch a view of a dark face hovering over some fuel that the would-be fire-bug had carried with him to the spot.

This immediately flashed into flame, indicating that Mendoza, in order to make sure of a good start, had soaked the material with some inflammable substance; perhaps kerosene.

Bob knew that something was apt to happen about that time; nor was he at all mistaken. He saw a dark figure drop down upon the crouching fire-bug, and heard a startled exclamation. Then the two men went whirling over the ground, locked in a close embrace.

"This way, Bob!" cried Frank, rushing forward to stamp out the rapidly spreading flames; for that work had been given over to their charge. "Old Hank will help Ted! Kick lively now, and scatter the fire!"

They worked at a furious rate, and soon had the flames under control. Others had meanwhile come dashing to the spot—Scotty, Jeff Davis, Bart, the foreman, and last, though far from least, the stockman himself.

Old Hank Coombs had taken a hand in the game, and Mendoza was speedily overcome, though he writhed and squirmed to the last uttering harsh words intended for the owner of the ranch.

"What will they do with him, Frank?" asked Bob, as he saw signs that indicated a general outpouring of the cowboy legion from the nearby bunk-house, and other places where the overflow had been lodged.

Even Bob realized that if ever these furious fellows laid hands on Mendoza he would meet with a swift fate, which, perhaps, he well deserved, as he had long been the pest of the border, and a thorn in the sides of all cattle raisers.

"Dad will do everything in his power to hold the boys quiet," Frank answered. "See, he's telling Hank and Ted to take him right inside the house; and there he'll be kept. I understood Dad to say he'd sent word to the sheriff to come around with a posse in the morning."

"Oh! then perhaps Mendoza will get a chance to work a few years in the penitentiary, after all," remarked Bob.

"He will, if the sheriff ever gets him to town safe," replied Frank, doubtfully.

Of course the whole place was filled with excitement by this time. The women in the house had been awakened by the noise; but accustomed to all sorts of alarms, they calmly waited to be told what it meant. Those who live on cattle ranches meet with so much bordering on danger, that they learn to control their nerves; and this applies to women as well as men.

Some of the boys demanded that the rustler be given over into their hands, and promised that he would never "rustle" any cattle again. To this, however, the owner of Circle Ranch gave a negative answer.

"Perhaps he deserves all you would give him, boys," he announced, when they came clamoring for Mendoza; "but, fortunately, we were able to nip his miserable scheme in the bud, and no damage was done. So, as the sheriff of the county will be here in the morning, I expect to turn him over, and see that he gets a long term. And remember, boys," he added, seriously; "it would be a dangerous thing for anybody to try and enter this house to-night."

They knew what he meant, and that when Colonel Haywood spoke in that vein he was not to be taken lightly. Though there was more or less grumbling, still the remainder of that night passed away without any disturbance. No doubt Mendoza, having had a chance to cool down, and repent of his rashness, was glad to see the break of early dawn.

The sheriff did come, along about noon, while the cowboys were partaking of their midday

meal. And knowing what a task he might have before him, he brought a large posse of deputies along, in order to protect his prisoner.

The last the saddle boys saw of the Mexican rustler, he was galloping off between several heavily armed riders, and laughing mockingly at the crowd that gathered to see him depart.

The stockman did all in his power to keep any of his employers from deserting the round-up, in order to try and wrest the prisoner away from his guards; and so successful were his efforts that Mendoza was landed in the lock-up. It might be said of him that in due time he received the reward of his crimes, and was sent to the penitentiary for a long term. Unless he should manage to escape at some time, the cattlemen of the Southwest can breathe easy for years to come; for the rustler will, in all probability, never be seen again.

The old Moqui had arrived at the ranch about midnight. Indeed, he was just in time to see the capture of the man who had caused him so much mental suffering in connection with his one daughter, Antelope.

Colonel Haywood was not the one to forget a promise he had made; and as soon as the grand round-up was a thing of the past he set to work trying to find where Mendoza had hidden his Moqui wife.

As one of the cattlemen had been able to give him a hint concerning this, success greeted the efforts of the ranchman before long. Havasupai was enabled to once more claim his daughter.

He could not return to his village, for there was a perpetual edict of banishment issued against him; so, as the stockman offered him a chance to remain at Circle Ranch, and be entered on the regular payroll as a scout, hunter, and tracker of lost cattle, Havasupai settled down to his new life.

The boys were glad of this, since both of them had taken a decided liking to the old Indian. And Hank Coombs struck up a close friendship with Havasupai, they having many interests in common.

On the very day after the grand round-up had closed, with Circle Ranch resuming its ordinary aspect, the saddle boys started out on what everybody supposed was simply a hunt for fresh venison; or a chance to pot some daring wolf found abroad in the daytime. But Bob had another mission on his mind.

"Oh! I hope I find it there, Frank," he said for the fourth time, as later on they drew rapidly near a *motte* of timber that marked some spring-hole, miles away from the ranch proper.

"Well, I give you my word I wish it just as much as you can do," chuckled the other, giving his chum a meaning look.

"I suppose I have bothered you a heap, Frank, what with my guessing, and asking all sorts of silly questions," Bob went on; "but if you only knew how much I think of that knife you wouldn't be surprised."

"Oh! I'm not blaming you, Bob, not a bit of it," laughed the other. "I was only thinking of that dream you had, and wondering if it could come out true, with the knife sticking in that tree just as you saw it while asleep. If it does turn out that way, why, I'll believe your spirit must have wandered out here while your body lay there alongside me. But in a few minutes now you'll know the worst."

"Say the best, Frank!" cried Bob. "Don't discourage me, right now, when you can see how I'm keyed up to top-notch pace."

"There's where you crept up on the deer, and fired," Frank remarked, pointing.

"Yes, and I can follow the track I took into the timber, every foot of it," Bob called back over his shoulder; for in his eagerness he was outstripping his chum, though Frank was content to have it so. "But seeing that I cut up the deer, as you said, I couldn't have lost the knife beforehand, that's sure!"

"Well, there you are; and I can see the trees at the foot of which the buck dropped. Hold your breath now, Bob, and wish hard you're going to find the lost blade."

The Kentucky lad drew his big black horse up sharply, and with a bound was out of the saddle. Frank, who had also come to a sudden stop, saw him glance around eagerly, while a look of bitter disappointment flashed across his face.

"Your dream—remember that it was around in the crotch of the tree you saw it, Bob! Feel there, and see!" cried Frank.

The other hastened to do so. Immediately a yell broke from his lips, and Frank saw him bring forth a knife that had been lodged in the crotch.

"Found!" shouted Bob, beginning to dance around the place in his great satisfaction. "Now after this I'm going to believe there may be something in dreams, aren't you, Frank?"

"Shucks!" laughed the other, "chances are you just partly remembered putting it up there, and the fact appealed to you while you slept, that's all. If a small part of the silly dreams I've had ever came true, I'd be in hot water all the time. Where one happens to hit the mark, fifty fall down. But I'm glad you've got that knife again."

The Fall round-up was over, and had been a great success. Circle Ranch had done far better than any year since it was started, and could easily be set down as the banner cattle raising combination in the whole State. Then, besides, there was the wonderful success that had resulted from the effort to rid the community of Mendoza, the rustler. From now on peace would hang over the cattle ranches from the Grand Canyon of the Colorado down to the Mexican border.

The saddle boys had many adventures still awaiting them, and what some of these were will be related in another volume, entitled: "The Saddle Boys on Mexican Trails; Or, In the Hands of the Enemy."

Impulsive Bob, the Kentucky lad, still has much to learn about Western ways; but with such a chum as Frank Haywood to show him the secrets of forest, plain and trail, he at least bids fair to,

in time, become well versed in the accomplishments that mark the true son of the wilderness. Until such time as perhaps we may once more gallop in the company of the saddle boys we will say to our young readers, good-bye.

THE END

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