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by Frank V. Webster**

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COWBOY DAVE

OR

THE ROUND-UP AT ROLLING RIVER

BY FRANK V. WEBSTER

**AUTHOR OF "ONLY A FARM BOY," "BOB THE CASTAWAY," "COMRADES OF THE SADDLE,"
"AIRSHIP ANDY," "TOM TAYLOR AT WEST POINT," ETC.**

ILLUSTRATED

BOOKS FOR BOYS

By FRANK V. WEBSTER

**ONLY A FARM BOY TOM, THE TELEPHONE BOY THE BOY FROM THE RANCH THE YOUNG TREASURER HUNTER
BOB, THE CASTAWAY THE YOUNG FIREMEN OF LAKEVILLE THE NEWSBOY PARTNERS THE BOY PILOT OF THE
LAKES THE TWO BOY GOLD MINERS JACK, THE RUNAWAY COMRADES OF THE SADDLE THE BOYS OF
BELLWOOD SCHOOL THE HIGH SCHOOL RIVALS BOB CHESTER'S GRIT AIRSHIP ANDY DARRY, THE LIFE SAVER**

DICK, THE BANK BOY BEN HARDY'S FLYING MACHINE THE BOYS OF THE WIRELESS HARRY WATSON'S HIGH SCHOOL DAYS THE BOY SCOUTS OF LENOX TOM TAYLOR AT WEST POINT COWBOY DAVE THE BOYS OF THE BATTLESHIP JACK OF THE PONY EXPRESS

COWBOY DAVE

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[Illustration: HE WHEELED AND RODE STRAIGHT AT THE ONCOMING STEERS]

CHAPTER I

AFTER STRAY CATTLE

"Hi! Yi! Yip!"

"Woo-o-o-o! Wah! Zut!"

"Here we come!"

What was coming seemed to be a thunderous cloud of dust, from the midst of which came strange, shrill sounds, punctuated with sharp cries, that did not appear to be altogether human.

The dust-cloud grew thicker, the thunder sounded louder, and the yells were shriller.

From one of a group of dull, red buildings a sun-bronzed man stepped forth.

He shaded his eyes with a brown, powerful hand, gazed for an instant toward the approaching cloud of animated and vociferous dust and, turning to a smiling Chinese who stood near, with a pot in his hand, remarked in a slow, musical drawl:

"Well Hop Loy, here they are, rip-roarin' an' snortin' from th' round-up!"

"Alle samee hungly, too," observed the Celestial with unctious blandness.

"You can sure make a point of that Hop Loy," went on the other. "Hungry is their middle name just now, and you'd better begin t' rustle th' grub, or I wouldn't give an empty forty-five for your pig-tail."

"Oi la!" fairly screamed the Chinese, as, with a quick gesture toward his long queue, he scuttled toward the cook house, which stood in the midst of the other low ranch buildings. "Glub leady alle samee light now!" Hop Loy cried over his shoulder.

"It better be!" ominously observed Pocus Pete, foreman of the Bar U ranch, one of the best-outfitted in the Rolling River section. "It better be! Those boys mean business, or I miss my guess," the foreman went on. "Hard work a-plenty, I reckon. Wonder how they made out?" he went on musingly as he started back toward the bunk house, whence he had come with a saddle strap to which he was attaching a new buckle. "If things don't take a turn for th' better soon, there won't any of us make out," and, with a gloomy shake of his head, Pocus Pete, to give him the name he commonly went by, tossed the strap inside the bunk house, and went on toward the main building, where, by virtue of his position as head of the cowboys, he had his own cot.

Meanwhile the crowd of yelling, hard-riding sand dust-stirring punchers, came on faster than ever.

"Hi! Yi! Yip!"

"Here we come!"

"Keep th' pot a-bilin'! We've got our appetites With us!"

"That's what!"

Some one fired his big revolver in the air, and in another moment there was an echo of many shots, the sharp crack of the forty-fives mingling with the thunder of hoofs, the yells, and the clatter of stirrup leathers.

"The boys coming back, Pete?" asked an elderly man, who came to the door of the main living room of the principal ranch house.

"Yes, Mr. Carson, they're comin' back, an' it don't need a movin' picture operator an' telegraphic despatch t' tell it, either."

"No, Pete. They seem to be in good spirits, too."

"Yes, they generally are when they get back from round-up. I want to hear how they made out, though, an' what th' prospects are."

"So do I, Pete," and there was an anxious note in the voice of Mr. Randolph Carson, owner of the Bar U ranch. Matters had not been going well with him, of late.

With final yells, and an increase in the quantity of dust tossed up as the cowboys pulled their horses back on their haunches, the range-riding outfit of the ranch came to rest, not far away from the stable. The horses, with heaving sides and distended nostrils that showed a deep red, hung their heads from weariness. They had been ridden hard, but not unmercifully, and they would soon recover. The cowboys themselves tipped back their big hats from their foreheads, which showed curiously white in contrast to their bronzed faces, and beat the dust from their trousers. A few of them wore sheepskin chaps.

One after another the punchers slung their legs across the saddle horns, tossed the reins over the heads of their steeds, as an intimation that the horses were not to stray, and then slid to the ground, walking with that peculiarly awkward gait that always marks one who has spent much of his life in the saddle.

"Grub ready, Hop Loy?" demanded one lanky specimen, as he used his blue neck kerchief to remove some of the dust and sweat from his brown face.

"It better be!" added another, significantly; while still another said, quietly:

"My gal has been askin' me for a long, long time to get her a Chinaman's pig-tail, an' I'm shore goin' t'get one now if I don't have my grub right plenty, an' soon!"

"Now you're talkin'!" cried a fourth, with emphasis.

There was no need of saying anything further. The Celestial had stuck his head out of the cook house to hear these ominous words of warning, and now, with a howl of anguish, he drew it inside again, wrapping his queue around his neck. Then followed a frantic rattling of pots and pans.

"You shore did get him goin', Tubby!" exclaimed a tall, lanky cowboy, to a short and squatty member of the tribe.

"Well, I aimed to Skinny," was the calm reply. "I am some hungry."

The last of the cowboys to alight was a manly youth, who might have been in the neighborhood of eighteen or nineteen years of age. He was tall and slight, with a frank and pleasing countenance, and his blue eyes looked at you fearlessly from under dark brows, setting off in contrast his sunburned face. Had any one observed him as he rode up with the other cowboys, it would have been noticed that, though he was the youngest, he was one of the best riders.

He advanced from among the others, pausing to pet his horse which stuck out a wet muzzle for what was evidently an expected caress. Then the young man walked forward, with more of an air of grace than characterized his companions. Evidently, though used to a horse, he was not so saddle-bound as were his mates.

As he walked up to the ranch house he was met by Mr. Carson and Pocus Pete, both of whom looked at him rather eagerly and anxiously.

"Well, son," began the ranch owner, "how did you make out?"

"Pretty fair, Dad," was the answer. "There were more cattle than you led us to expect, and there were more strays than we calculated on. In fact we didn't get near all of them."

"Is that so, Dave?" asked Pocus Pete, quickly. "Whereabouts do you reckon them strays is hidin'?"

"The indications are they're up Forked Branch way. That's where we got some, and we saw more away up the valley, but we didn't have time to go for them, as we had a little trouble; and Tubby and the others thought we'd better come on, and go back for the strays to-morrow."

"Trouble, Dave?" asked Mr. Carson, looking up suddenly.

"Well, not much, though it might have been. We saw some men we took to be rustlers heading for our bunch of cattle, but they rode off when we started for them. Some of the boys wanted to follow but it looked as though it might storm, and Tubby said we'd better move the bunch while we could, and look after the rustlers and strays later."

"Yes, I guess that was best," the ranch owner agreed. "But where were these rustlers from, Dave?"

"Hard to say, Dad. Looked to be Mexicans."

"I reckon that'd be about right," came from Pocus Pete. "We'll have to be on th' watch, Mr. Carson."

"I expect so, Pete. Things aren't going so well that I can afford to lose any cattle. But about these strays, Dave. Do you think we'd better get right after them?"

"I should say so, Dad."

"Think there are many of them?"

"Not more than two of us could drive in. I'll go to-morrow with one of the men. I know just about where to look for them."

"All right, Dave. If you're not too much done out I'd like to have you take a hand."

"Done out, Dad! Don't you think I'm making a pretty good cowpuncher?"

"That's what he is, Mr. Carson, for a fact!" broke in Pete, with admiration. "I'd stake Cowboy Dave ag'in' any man you've got ridin' range to-day. That's what I would!"

"Thanks, Pete," said the youth, with a warm smile.

"Well, that's the truth, Dave. You took to this business like a duck takes to water, though the land knows there ain't any too much water in these parts for ducks."

"Yes, we could use more, especially at this season," Mr. Carson admitted. "Rolling River must be getting pretty dry; isn't it, Dave?"

"I've seen it wetter, Dad. And there's hardly any water in Forked Branch. I don't see how the stray cattle get enough to drink."

"It is queer they'd be off up that way," observed Pete. "But that might account for it," he went on, as though communing with himself.

"Account for what?" asked Dave, as he sat down in a chair on the porch.

"Th' rustlers. If they were up Forked Branch way they'd stand between th' strays and th' cattle comin' down where they could get plenty of water in Rolling River. That's worth lookin' into. I'll ride up that way with you to-morrow, Dave, an' help drive in them cattle."

"Will you, Pete? That will be fine!" the young cowboy exclaimed. Evidently there was a strong feeling of affection between the two. Dave looked to Mr. Carson for confirmation.

"Very well," the ranch owner said, "you and Pete may go, Dave. But don't take any chances with the rustlers if you encounter them."

"We're not likely to," said Pocus Pete, significantly.

From the distant cook house came the appetizing odor of food and Dave sniffed the air eagerly.

"Hungry?" asked Mr. Carson.

"That's what I am, Dad!"

"Well, eat heartily, get a good rest, and tomorrow you can try your hand at driving strays."

Evening settled down over the Bar U ranch; a calm, quiet evening, in spite of the earlier signs of a storm. In the far west a faint intermittent light showed where the elements were raging, but it was so far off that not even the faintest rumble of thunder came over Rolling River, a stream about a mile distant, on the banks of which were now quartered the cattle which the cowboys had recently rounded up for shipment.

The only sounds that came with distinctness were the occasional barking and baying of a dog, as he saw the rising moon, and the dull shuffle of the shifting cattle, which were being guarded by several cowboys who were night-riding.

Very early the next morning Dave Carson and Pocus Pete, astride their favorite horses, and carrying with them a substantial lunch, set off after the strays which had been dimly observed the day before up Forked Branch way.

This was one of the tributaries of Rolling River, the valley of which was at one time one of the most fertile sections of the largest of our Western cattle states. The tributary divided into two parts, or branches, shortly above its junction with Rolling River. Hence its name. Forked Branch came down from amid a series of low foot-hills, forming the northern boundary of Mr. Randolph Carson's ranch.

"We sure have one fine day for ridin'," observed Pocus Pete, as he urged his pony up alongside Dave's.

"That's right," agreed the youth.

For several miles they rode on, speaking but seldom, for a cowboy soon learns the trick of silence—it is so often forced on him.

As they turned aside to take a trail that led to Forked Branch, Dave, who was riding a little ahead, drew rein. Instinctively Pocus Pete did the same, and then Dave, pointing to the front, asked:

"Is that a man or a cow?"

CHAPTER II

THE TAUNT

Pocus Pete shaded his eyes with his hand and gazed long and earnestly in the direction indicated by Dave Carson. The two cow-ponies, evidently glad of the little rest, nosed about the sun-baked earth for some choice morsel of grass.

"It might be either—or both," Pete finally said.

"Either or both?" repeated Dave. "How can that be?"

"Don't you see two specks there, Dave? Look ag'in."

Dave looked. His eyes were younger and perhaps, therefore, sharper than were those of the foreman of Bar U ranch, but Dave lacked the training that long years on the range had given the other.

"Yes, I do see two," the youth finally said, "But I can't tell which is which."

"I'm not altogether sure myself," Pete said, quietly and modestly. "We'll ride a little nearer," he suggested, "an' then we can tell for sure. I guess we're on th' track of some strays all right."

"Some strays, Pete? You mean our strays; don't you?" questioned Dave.

"Well, some of 'em 'll be, probably," was the quiet answer. "But you've got t' remember, Dave, that there's a point of land belongin' t' Centre O ranch that comes up there along the Forked Branch trail. It may be some of Molick's strays."

"That's so. I didn't think of that, Pete. There's more to this business than appears at first sight."

"Yes, Dave; but you're comin' on first-rate. I was a leetle opposed to th' Old Man sendin' you East to study, for fear it would knock out your natural instincts. But when you picked up that man as soon as you did," and he waved his hand toward the distant specks, "when you did that, I know you've not been spoiled, an' that there's hope for you."

"That's good, Pete!" and Dave laughed.

"Yes, I didn't agree with th' Old Man at first," the foreman went on, "but I see he didn't make any mistake."

Mr. Carson was the "Old Man" referred to, but it was not at all a term of disrespect as applied to the ranch owner. It was perfectly natural to Pete to use that term, and Dave did not resent it.

"Yes, I'm glad dad did send me East," the young man went on, as they continued on their way up the trail. "I was mighty lonesome at first, and I felt—well, cramped, Pete. That's the only way to express it."

"I know how you felt, Dave. There wasn't room to breathe in th' city."

"That's the way I felt. Out here it—it's different."

He straightened up in the saddle, and drew in deep breaths of the pure air of the plains; an air so pure and thin, so free from mists, that the very distances were deceiving, and one would have been positive that the distant foot-hills were but half an hour's ride away, whereas the better part of a day must be spent in reaching them.

"Yes, this is livin'—that's what it is," agreed Pocus Pete. "You can make them out a little better now, Dave," and he nodded his head in the direction of the two distant specks. They were much larger now.

"It's a chap on a horse, and he's going in the same direction we are," Dave said, after a moment's observation.

"That's right. And it ain't every cowpuncher on Bar U who could have told that."

"I can see two—three—why, there are half a dozen cattle up there Pete."

"Yes, an' probably more. I reckon some of th' Centre O outfit has strayed, same as ours. That's probably one of Molick's men after his brand," Pete went on.

The Bar U ranch (so called because the cattle from it were branded with a large U with a straight mark across the middle) adjoined, on the north, the ranch of Jason Molick, whose cattle were marked with a large O in the centre of which was a single dot, and his brand consequently, was known as Centre O.

"Maybe that's Len," suggested Dave, naming the son of the adjoining ranch owner.

"It may be. I'd just as soon it wouldn't be, though. Len doesn't always know how to keep a civil tongue in his head."

"That's right, Pete. I haven't much use for Len myself."

"You an' he had some little fracas; didn't you?"

"Oh, yes, more than once."

"An' you tanned him good and proper, too; didn't you Dave?" asked the foreman with a low chuckle.

"Yes, I did." Dave did not seem at all proud of his achievement. "But that was some time ago," he added. "I haven't seen Len lately."

"Well, you haven't missed an awful lot," said Pete, dryly.

The two rode on in silence again, gradually coming nearer and nearer to the specks which had so enlarged themselves, by reason of the closing up of the intervening distance, until they could be easily distinguished as a number of cattle and one lone rider. The latter seemed to be making his way toward the animals.

"Is he driving them ahead of him?" asked Dave, after a long and silent observation.

"That's the way it looks," said Pocus Pete. "It's Len Molick all right," he added, after another shading

of his eyes with his hand.

"Are you sure?" Dave asked.

"Positive. No one around here rides a horse in that sloppy way but him."

"Then he must have found some of his father's strays, and is taking them to the ranch."

"I'm not so sure of that," Pete said.

"Not so sure of what?"

"That the cattle are all his strays. I wouldn't be a bit surprised but what some of ours had got mixed up with 'em. Things like that have been known to happen you know."

"Do you' think—" began Dave.

"I'm not goin' to take any chances thinkin'," Pete said significantly.
"I'm going to make sure."

"Look here, Dave," he went on, spurring his pony up alongside of the young cowboy's. "My horse is good an' fresh an' Len's doesn't seem to be in such good condition. Probably he's been abusin' it as he's done before. Now I can take this side trail, slip around through the bottom lands, an' get ahead of him."

"But it's a hard climb up around the mesa, Pete."

"I know it. But I can manage it. Then you come on up behind Len, casual like. If he has any of our cattle—by mistake," said Pete, significantly, "we'll be in a position to correct his error. Nothin' like correctin' errors right off the reel, Dave. Well have him between two fires, so to speak."

"All right, Pete. I'll ride up behind him, as I'm doing now, and you'll head him off; is that it?"

"That's it. You guessed it first crack out of th' box. If nothin's wrong, why we're all right; we're up this way to look after our strays. And if somethin' is wrong, why we'll be in a position to correct it—that's all."

"I see." There was a smile on Dave's face as his cowboy partner, with a wave of his hand, turned his horse into a different trail, speeding the hardy little pony up so as to get ahead of Len Molick.

Dave rode slowly on, busy with many thoughts, some of which had to do with the youth before him. Len Molick was about Dave's own age, that is apparently, for, strange as it may seem, Dave was not certain of the exact number of years that had passed over his head.

It was evident that he was about eighteen or nineteen. He had recently felt a growing need of a razor, and the hair on his face was becoming wiry. But once, when he asked Randolph Carson, about a birthday, the ranch owner had returned an evasive answer.

"I don't know exactly when your birthday does come, Dave," he had said. "Your mother, before she—before she died, kept track of that. In fact I sometimes forget when my own is. I think yours is in May or June, but for the life of me I can't say just which month. It doesn't make a lot of difference, anyhow."

"No, Dad, not especially. But just how old am I?"

"Well, Dave, there you've got me again. I think it's around eighteen. But your mother kept track of that, too. I never had the time. Put it down at eighteen, going on nineteen, and let it go at that. Now say, about that last bunch of cattle we shipped—"

Thus the ranchman would turn the subject. Not that Dave gave the matter much thought, only now, somehow or other, the question seemed to recur with increased force.

"Funny I don't know just when my birthday is," he mused. "But then lots of the cowboys forget theirs."

The trail was smooth at this point, and Dave soon found himself close to Len, who was driving ahead of him a number of cattle. With a start of surprise Dave saw two which bore the Bar U brand.

"Hello, Len," he called.

Len Molick turned with a start. Either he had not heard Dave approach, or he had pretended ignorance.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded the surly bully.

"Oh, out after strays, as you are," said Dave, coolly. "Guess your cattle and ours have struck up an acquaintance," he added, with assumed cheerfulness.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean they're traveling along together just as if they belonged to the same outfit."

"Huh! I can't help it, can I, if your cows tag along with our strays?" demanded Len with a sneer.

"That's what I'm here for—to help prevent it," Dave went on, and his voice was a trifle sharp. "The Bar U ranch can't afford to lose any strays these days," he resumed. "The Carson outfit needs all it can get, and, as representative of the Carson interests I'll just cut out those strays of ours, Len, and head them the other way."

"Huh! What right have you got to do it?"

"What right? Why my father sent me to gather up our strays. I saw some of them up here yesterday."

"Your father?" The sneer in Len's voice was unmistakable.

"Yes, of course," said Dave, wondering what was the matter with Len. "My father, Randolph Carson."

"He isn't your father!" burst out Len in angry tones. "And you aren't his son! You're a nameless picked-up nobody, that's what you are! A nobody! You haven't even a name!"

And with this taunt on his lips Len spurred his horse away from Dave's.

CHAPTER III

A CONFESSION

Something seemed to strike Dave Carson a blow in the face. It was as though he had suddenly plunged into cold water, and, for the moment, he could not get his breath. The sneering words of Len Molick rang in his ears:

"You're a nameless, picked-up nobody!"

Having uttered those cruel words, Len was riding on, driving before him some of his father's stray cattle, as well as some belonging to the Bar U ranch. The last act angered Dave, and anger, at that moment, was just what was needed to arouse him from the lethargy in which he found himself. It also served, in a measure, to clear away some of the unpleasant feeling caused by the taunt.

"Hold on there a minute, Len Molick!" called Dave, sharply.

Len never turned his head, and gave no sign of hearing.

A dull red spot glowed in each of Dave's tanned cheeks. With a quick intaking of his breath he lightly touched the spurs to his horse—lightly, for that was all the intelligent beast needed. Dave passed his taunting enemy on the rush, and planting himself directly in front of him on the trail, drew rein so sharply that his steed reared. The cows, scattered by the sudden rush, ambled awkwardly on a little distance, and then stopped to graze.

"What do you mean by getting in my way?" growled Len.

"I mean to have you stop and answer a few questions," was the calm retort.

"If it's about these cattle I tell you I'm not trying to drive off any of yours," said Len, in whining tones. He knew the severe penalty attached to this in a cow country, and Dave was sufficiently formidable, as he sat easily on his horse facing the bully, to make Len a little more respectful.

"I'm not going to ask you about these cattle—at least not right away," Dave went on. "This is about another matter. You said something just now that needs explaining."

"I say a good many things," Len admitted, and again there sounded in his voice a sneer. "I don't have to explain to you everything I say; do I?"

"You do when it concerns me," and Dave put his horse directly across the trail, which, at this point narrowed and ran between two low ranges of hills. "You said something about me just now—you called me a nameless, picked-up nobody!"

Dave could not help wincing as he repeated the slur.

"Well, what if I did?" demanded the bully.

"I want to know what you mean. You insinuated that Mr. Carson was not my father."

"He isn't!"

"Why do you say that, and how do you know?" Dave asked. In spite of his dislike of Len, and the knowledge that the bully was not noted for truth-telling, Dave could not repress a cold chill of fear that seemed to clutch his heart.

"I say that because it's so, and how I know it is none of your affair," retorted Len.

"Oh yes, it is my affair, too!" Dave exclaimed. He was fast regaining control of himself. "It is very much my affair. I demand an explanation. How do you know Mr. Carson isn't my father?"

"Well, I know all right. He picked you up somewhere. He doesn't know what your name is himself. He just let you use his, and he called you Dave. You're a nobody I tell you!"

Dave spurred his horse until it was close beside that of Len's. Then leaning over in the saddle, until his face was very near to that of the bully's, and with blazing eyes looking directly into the shrinking ones of the other rancher's son, Dave said slowly, but with great emphasis:

"Who—told—you?"

There was menace in his tone and attitude, and Len shrank back.

"Oh, don't be afraid!" Dave laughed mirthlessly. "I'm not going to strike you—not now."

"You—you'd better not," Len muttered.

"I want you first to answer my questions," Dave went on. "After that I'll see what happens. It's according to how much truth there is in what you have said."

"Oh, it's true all right," sneered the bully.

"Then I demand to know who told you!"

Dave's hand shot out and grasped the bridle of the other's horse, and Len's plan of flight was frustrated.

"Let me go!" he whiningly demanded.

"Not until you tell me who said I am a nobody—that Mr. Carson is not my father," Dave said, firmly.

"I—I—" began the shrinking Len, when the sound of another horseman approaching caused both lads to turn slightly in their saddles. Dave half expected to see Pocus Pete, but he beheld the not very edifying countenance of Whitey Wasson, a tow-headed cowpuncher belonging to the Centre O outfit. Whitey and Len were reported to be cronies, and companions in more than one not altogether pleasant incident.

"Oh, here you are; eh; Len?" began Whitey. "And I see you've got the strays."

"Yes, I've got 'em," said Len, shortly.

"Any trouble?" went on Whitey, with a quick glance at Dave. The position of the two lads—Dave with his hand grasping Len's bridle—was too significant to be overlooked.

"Trouble?" began Len. "Well, he—he—"

"He made a certain statement concerning me," Dave said, quietly, looking from Len to Whitey, "and I asked him the source of his information. That is all."

"What did he say?"

"He said I was a nameless, picked-up nobody, and that Mr. Carson was not my father. I asked him how he knew, and he said some one told him that."

"So he did!" exclaimed Len.

"Then I demand to know who it was!" cried Dave.

For a moment there was silence, and then Whitey Wasson, with a chuckle said:

"I told Len myself!"

"You did?" cried Dave.

"Yes, he did! Now maybe you won't be so smart!" sneered Len. "Let go my horse!" he cried, roughly, as he swung the animal to one side. But no force was needed; as Dave's nerveless hand fell away from the bridle. He seemed shocked—stunned again.

"You—you—how do you know?" he demanded fiercely, raising his sinking head, and looking straight at Whitey.

"Oh, I know well enough. Lots of the cowboys do. It isn't so much of a secret as you think. If you don't believe me ask your father—no, he ain't your father—but ask the Old Man himself. Just ask him what your name is, and where you came from, and see what he says."

Whitey was sneering now, and he chuckled as he looked at Len. Dave's face paled beneath his tan, and he did not answer.

A nameless, picked-up nobody! How the words stung! And he had considered himself, proudly considered himself, the son of one of the best-liked, best-known and most upright cattle raisers of the Rolling River country. Now who was he?

"Come on, Len," said Whitey. "If you've got the strays we'll drive them back. Been out long enough as 'tis."

He wheeled his horse, Len doing the same, and they started after the straying cattle.

"Hold on there, if you please," came in a drawling voice. "Jest cut out them Bar U steers before you mosey off any farther, Whitey," and riding around a little hillock came Pocus Pete.

"Um!" grunted Whitey.

"Guess you'll be needin' a pair of specks, won't you, Whitey?" went on the Bar U foreman, without a glance at Len or Dave. "A Centre O brand an' a Bar U looks mighty alike to a feller with poor eyes I reckon," and he smiled meaningly.

"Oh, we can't help it, if some of the Randolph cattle get mixed up with our strays," said Len.

"Who's talkin' to you?" demanded Pocus Pete, with such fierceness that the bully shrank back.

"Now you cut out what strays belong to you, an' let ours alone, Mr. Wasson," went on Pocus Pete with exaggerated politeness. "Dave an' I can take care of our own I reckon. An' move quick, too!" he added menacingly.

Whitey did not answer, but he and Len busied themselves in getting together their own strays. Pocus Pete and Dave, with a little effort, managed to collect their own bunch, and soon the two parties were moving off in opposite directions. Dave sat silent on his horse. Pete glanced at him from time to time, but said nothing. Finally, however, as they dismounted to eat their lunch, Pete could not help asking:

"Have any trouble with them, Dave?"

"Trouble? Oh no."

Dave relapsed into silence, and Pete shook his head in puzzled fashion. Something had happened, but what, he could not guess.

In unwonted silence Dave and Pete rode back to the Bar U ranch, reaching it at dusk with the bunch of strays. They were turned in with the other cattle and then Dave, turning his horse into the corral, walked heavily to the ranch house. All the life seemed to have gone from him.

"Well, son, did you get the bunch?" asked Mr. Carson as he greeted the youth.

"Yes—I did," was the low answer. Mr. Carson glanced keenly at the lad, and something he saw in his face caused the ranch owner to start.

"Was there any trouble?" he asked. It was the same question Pocus Pete had propounded.

"Well, Len Molick and Whitey Wasson had some of our cattle in with theirs."

"They did?"

"Yes, but Pete and I easily cut 'em out. But—Oh, Dad!" The words burst from Dave's lips before he thought. "Am I your son?" he blurted out. "Len and Whitey said I was a picked-up nobody! Am I? Am I not your son?"

He held out his hands appealingly.

A great and sudden change came over Mr. Carson. He seemed to grow older and more sorrowful. A sigh came from him.

Gently he placed one arm over the youth's drooping shoulders.

"Dave," he said gently. "I hoped this secret would never come out—that you would never know. But, since it has, I must tell you the truth. I love you as if you were my own son, but you are not a relative of mine."

The words seemed to cut Dave like a knife.

"Then if I am not your son, who am I?" Dave asked in a husky voice.

The ticking of the clock on the mantle could be plainly, yes, loudly heard, as Mr. Carson slowly answered in a low voice:

"Dave, I don't know!"

CHAPTER IV

A SMALL STAMPEDE

Dave Carson—to use the name by which we must continue to call him, at least for a time—may have hoped for a different answer from the ranchman. Doubtless he did so hope, but now he was doomed to disappointment, for the words of Mr. Carson seemed final.

"Dave, I don't know," he repeated. "I don't know who you are, who your parents are, or even what your name is. I wish I did!"

Dave sank down in a chair. He seemed crushed. Mr. Carson, too, was somewhat overcome.

"There—there must be some explanation," said the lad at length, slowly.

"There is," was the reply. "I'll tell you all I know. I suppose I should have done it before, but I have been putting it off, I hoped there would be no need.

"I don't know just how Len and Whitey found it out," went on Mr. Carson. "If they had only kept still a little longer you might never have known, for I intended to go away from here soon."

"Go away from here, Dad?"

The endearing name slipped out before Dave was aware of it. A surge of red sprang up into his cheeks, under their tan.

"Don't stop calling me that, Dave," begged Mr. Carson in a low voice. "I have been a father to you—at least I've tried to be."

"And you've succeeded," Dave said, affectionately.

"And I want to keep on in the same way," said the man, softly. "So don't stop calling me dad, Dave. I—"

I couldn't bear that, even though I have no right to it. But you asked me a question just now. I'll answer that before I go on with the story.

"I did plan to leave here. I'm not making this ranch go, Dave, as I'd like to see it. I have been thinking of giving it up. But that was before I knew that my secret about you was known."

"Then you're not going now,—Dad?"

Dave hesitated just a moment over the name.

"No. It would look like desertion—cowardice—as if I went because this matter became known. It will get out soon enough now, since the Molick outfit knows it. But that's just the reason I'm going to stick. I won't fly in the face of the enemy. I won't desert!"

"The real reason why I intended to go, though, Dave, is because the ranch isn't making money enough. It is holding its own, but that is not enough. As you know, I was, up to a year or so ago, pretty well off. But those unfortunate cattle speculations pulled me down, so now I am really, what would be called poor, as ranchmen go.

"But I'll make good!" declared the cattle owner. "I'm going to stick now, until something happens. It may be for the best, or it may be for the worst. But I'll stick until I'm fairly beaten!"

"The ranch needs more water, that's the main trouble. I haven't control of the water rights I need. I can't go into the cattle business on a large enough scale because of the lack of water. Rolling River and Forked Branch, while well enough in their way, aren't big enough to stand the dry years.

"That was the reason I was going to sell out, Dave, but I'm not now. I'm going to stick. And now I'll tell you the secret concerning you—that is as much of it as I know. It isn't much, for I know so little myself, so you will not be much wiser than you are now."

"Won't I know who I am?" Dave asked in a low voice.

"No, Dave, for I can't tell you myself. I wish I could. I wish I could either really find your parents, or know that I had a good legal claim on you. But that is impossible.

"Some years ago, Dave, I was in business in Missouri. I was doing fairly well, but I always had a hankering to get out West and raise cattle. I had lived on a ranch when I was a small lad—in fact all my people were ranchers—and I longed for the life of which I had had only a little taste.

"So I planned to sell out, raise all the money I could, and buy a ranch. I had my plans all made when one spring there came a big flood that practically wiped out the town where I was then living, as well as a number of others along that part of the Missouri River. There was rescue work to be done, and I did my share, I guess.

"Among the others whom I saved from the wreckage of houses, barns and other debris that rushed down the river was a little baby boy."

Dave caught his breath sharply.

"You were that little chap, Dave," went on the ranchman, after a pause. "As cute a little chap as I ever saw. I fell in love with you right away, and so did a number of women folks who were helping in the rescue work. They all wanted you, but I said if no one who had a legal claim on you came for you, that I would keep you.

"And that's what happened. I could not find out where you came from, nor who your folks were, though I made many inquiries. I had been about to start for the West when the flood came, but I delayed a bit, wanting to give your parents, if they were alive, a fair show. But no one claimed you, so I brought you out West with me, and here we've been ever since, living just like father and son."

"And do you think my parents are—are dead?" Dave faltered.

"I am afraid so," was the low answer. "There were many grown folk and children who perished in the flood. At any rate, Dave, I have kept you ever since.

"How this Whitey Wasson learned the secret I can not say. I did hope it would never be brought to your knowledge, though I made no effort, at the time I rescued you, to conceal the fact that I had, in a measure, adopted you. I suppose Whitey must have heard the story from some one who was in the flooded Missouri district at the time and who has since come West.

"But that is how the matter stands. You are not really my son, though you are as dear to me as though

you were. I hope this will make no difference to you—knowing this secret. I want you to continue living here just as you always have. In fact it would break my heart if you were to leave me after all these years. You will stay; won't you?" and he held out his hands appealingly.

"Why—yes," said Dave, after a moment. "I have no other place to go. And I certainly owe you a deep debt of gratitude for your care of a nameless orphan for so many years."

"Don't say that, Dave! Don't call yourself nameless. You can have my name, and welcome! You know that. I want you to have it. I will legally adopt you if necessary. And as for owing me—don't name it! You were welcome to all I could do, and more. Why, you have been like a son to me. I wouldn't know how to get along without you at the ranch here. You must stay!"

"Oh, yes, I'll stay," said Dave. And then he added, with, perhaps, the least tinge of bitterness in his voice: "I have no where else to go."

"Then stay!" was the eager invitation. "I need you, Dave! And if those skunks bother you any more—"

"Oh, I'm not worrying about them," Dave said, quickly. "I don't mind their taunts. After all, it is no disgrace not to know who I am under the circumstances. Perhaps, some day, I may find out."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Carson, softly, but he did not really believe that such an event would happen.

"Is that all you can tell about me—Dad?" asked Dave.

"That's right! Don't forget to call me dad!" exclaimed the ranchman, and his tone showed more delight than at any time since the talk. "For I am just the same as your father. But, Dave, I'm afraid I can't give you any clues. You were only a baby at the time, and I don't even remember just now, much as to how you were dressed. You came down the flood in part of a wrecked house. You were in a cradle in the exposed upper story when I got you out. I was going around in a boat doing what rescue work I could. I turned you over to some women, temporarily, and claimed you later. That's about all there is to it. I came out West with you and—here we are now. And now, since the secret is out, I'm going to make it known to all who care to listen. There is no use trying to keep it under cover any more."

"What do you mean, Dad?"

"I mean I'll tell every one connected with Bar U ranch. We'll take the wind out of the sails of Molick, Wasson and their like. We won't have them sneering at us. I'll tell the men here."

"I fancy Pocus Pete knows something about it," Dave said. "He must have heard what Whitey and Len said to me."

"Well, we'll tell him the whole story. It's no disgrace."

And this was done. Soon all the cowboys on Bar U ranch knew the story, and talk buzzed around concerning it. But no one thought the less of Dave. In fact his friends and those of Mr. Carson were warmer than before. Then the matter was tacitly dropped, and was never mentioned among the cowboys of Bar U ranch.

For a time the knowledge hurt Dave cruelly. Then he grew more accustomed to it. But though he called Mr. Carson "Dad" there was more or less of reserve. And Dave found himself many times, wondering who his real parents could be.

"Some day I may find out," he said.

There was much to do at the ranch, from rounding up cattle, looking after strays and branding, to making shipments. Dave found his time fully occupied, and he saw little of Len and his crony. But one day Len and Dave had a "run-in." Dave, who was riding range, came upon Len in the act of beating his horse. It seems the animal had stepped into a hole and thrown the bully, who, in retaliation, mistreated the animal shamefully.

"Here! You quit that!" ordered Dave, riding up.

"What for?" sneered Len.

"Because I say so!"

"He isn't your horse."

"That may be, but I'm not going to see you abuse him that way. You quit, or I'll give you the worst licking you ever had."

"You will; eh? Mr. Nobody!" sneered Len. "You will?"

"Yes, I will!" and Dave strode forward with such a fierce look on his face that Len hastily left off beating his poor steed and fled.

"Oh! I'll fix you yet!" Len cried, when, at a safe distance, he paused to turn and shake his fist at Dave.

"The mean hound!" muttered Dave.

It was about a week after this that Dave rode over to a small corral where some choice cattle were quartered. These had been cut out and herded by themselves, to get ready for a special shipment. Dave wanted to see if the fence and gate were sufficiently strong.

He rode around the corral, and was soon satisfied that all was right. He was riding away over the plain, glad to be able to report to Mr. Carson that the cattle were in fine shape for shipment, when a sudden noise caused him to turn around.

To Dave's surprise he saw the cattle, in a small stampede, rushing from the corral, straight toward him in an overwhelming mass.

Dave hesitated but a moment, and then clapping spurs to his horse he wheeled and rode straight at the oncoming steers, shouting and waving his hat in one hand, while with the other he fired shot after shot from his big revolver.

CHAPTER V

TREACHERY

"Don't fall now, Crow! Don't you dare to stumble!" breathed Dave, leaning over to speak into the very ear of his coal-black steed. "Don't step in any holes and throw me. For if you do, it's all up with both of us!"

Yet, knowing that danger as he did, Dave never for an instant faltered. He was going to stop that stampede and drive back the valuable cattle before they could stray and get far out on the range or among the wild hills where they would lose much of their prime condition that would insure a good price. Dave was going to stop that stampede though he took his life in his hands to do it.

And for what? he might have reflected. To save the property of a man who was no relation to him.

Yet never for an instant did Dave ask this question of himself. It never entered his mind. For the time being he had forgotten that Mr. Carson was not his father.

"I'm going to save those cattle!" Dave murmured over and over again, as he neared the frightened, tumultuous mass of steers. "But don't you stumble with me, Crow!"

For to stumble meant, very likely, the death of horse and rider. Cattle on the range are used to seeing mounted men—in fact they seldom see them otherwise, and for a mounted cowpuncher it is perfectly safe to ride in front of even a wildly running mass of steers.

But once let a man be on foot, while the cattle do not actually attack him, they seem to lose all fear of him, and may trample ruthlessly over him. Then is when a cowpuncher's life depends on his steed. The cattle seem to regard horse and man as one and as a superior being to whom they must give place. That is why Dave did not want his horse to stumble and throw him. For his life, and that of his fine steed, Crow, would not have lasted a minute under the pounding rush of those sharp hoofs.

While thus riding wildly at the rushing steers Dave had many thoughts in his mind.

"How did they get out?" he mused. "The gate and fastenings were all right five minutes ago. And I wonder if I can turn them and drive them back alone? I've got to, that's all, for I don't see any help coming."

Dave rose in his stirrups and gave a quick frightened, tumultuous mass of steers. "But don't glance ahead of him and over the backs of the steers. He saw no one in sight, and settling in the saddle again, prepared for the work ahead of him.

"Got to have some more shots, anyhow," Dave reasoned. His revolver was empty.

Fortunately Dave had trained Crow so that he could ride him without the use of the reins—merely by the pressure of the knees on either side of his neck. Dropping the leather, Dave broke his gun, scattered the empty shells out on the ground, and filled the chamber with fresh cartridges.

He depended upon the thundering reports of his forty-five, as much as on his voice and his fearless riding straight at the oncoming steers, to drive them back. Now again he was ready for his task, and it was high time, for he was almost at the front line of advancing cattle.

Shouting, waving his big hat with one hand, and with the other working the trigger of his gun, Dave sought to drive back the maddened animals. He put into his action all the energy of which he was capable, rising in his stirrups as though he would hurl himself over the head of his horse at the beasts.

"Steady now, Crow!" he called into the ear of his faithful pony, leaning over far on its neck. The front line of cattle began to divide to let Dave through, or, rather, to pass around him. But he did not want that. He wanted to turn the animals back.

"Oh, if I only had some one to help me!" he cried aloud.

Once more his gaze swept over the backs of the cattle. Yes, there was a figure on horseback, but it was riding away, straight toward the foot-hills.

"Here!" cried Dave. "Come back! Give me a hand here, whoever you are! Come back!"

But the figure did not turn, and then Dave, with anger and disgust showing in his face, thought he recognized in the peculiar style of the rider something familiar.

"Len Molick!" he exclaimed, as he wheeled his horse to ride out of the press of cattle and once more to get ahead of them.

"If that wasn't Len Molick I'll eat my hat!" he soliloquized. "But what is he doing here, and why is he riding away instead of helping me out? I'd help him out if he was in this pickle!"

It was queer to see Len riding away at top speed, providing that it was Len, and Dave felt pretty sure it was. Scarcely a cowpuncher but would render even his enemy help in an emergency of this kind. He might be on just as unfriendly terms as before, after the work was done, but he would give help.

"But that isn't Len's way, evidently," mused Dave, bitterly.

However he had his own work marked out for him, and no time for idle speculation. Somehow or other he must get ahead of the freed cattle and drive them back.

Whooping, yelling, waving his hat and shooting, Dave took after the escaping steers.

"Oh for one man to help," he cried aloud, and it seemed as if his cry was answered. For, riding toward him, and toward the bunch of stampeded cattle, he descried a figure that made his heart leap with joy.

"Pocus Pete!" he cried. "Now we'll get you beasts back!"

And indeed it was the efficient foreman of Bar U ranch who rode up at top speed, his hat off, his revolver spitting fire, and his horse lending itself to the game with all its energies.

"Off to the left, Dave! Bear off to the left!" yelled Pete, indicating that his friend was to head in that direction. Pete himself took the right, and a moment later the two were riding along the front of the steers who were not running so fast now, being somewhat exhausted.

The object of Pete, seconded by Dave, was to turn the stream of cattle—to swing around the front ranks, and so bring those in the rear to a halt.

Often in a cattle stampede the front rank becomes exhausted, and the animals in it would willingly give up and cease running, but there is an irresistible pressure from those in the rear. And if those in front stop they know they will be trampled under foot. So they must keep on or be killed.

This bunch, however, was comparatively small, and easy to handle. Soon, with the help of Pete, Dave had brought the animals down to a walk, and then it was an easy matter to turn them and drive them back toward the corral.

"Whew!" cried Dave, when he had a chance to get his breath. "That was some job, Pete!"

"Yes, all alone, I reckon it was."

"How'd you happen to know about it?"

"I didn't. I just come over here on an errand. Your dad—"

He stopped in some confusion.

"That's all right, Pete," Dave said. "I'm going to call Mr. Carson dad until I find my real one—if I ever do. No matter what happens, even if I do find my real folks, I can't forget that he has been as good as a father to me."

"That's what he has, Dave," said the foreman, solemnly. "An' I hope you don't ever forget that. There's not many folks—not even a fellow's real ones—who can beat th' Old Man. He's th' real stuff an' twenty-four carats fine every time."

Together they urged the now quieted cattle toward the corral.

"As I was sayin'," resumed Focus Pete, "I come over here on a little errand for th' Old Man, an' I thought I'd take a run out here an' see about the prize bunch. It's good I did."

"I should say so!" Dave exclaimed, fervently.

"Wasn't there any one to help you?" asked Pocus Pete.

"Not a soul. I did see Len Molick riding off—sneaking away. I called to him, but he didn't answer."

"How did they break out?" Pete asked next.

"That's what's puzzling me," replied the younger cowboy.

"Say! Look there!" suddenly called Pete, pointing. "That's how they got out. A section of th' corral fence is down."

"The gate didn't come open at all," said Dave. "The steers pushed down the fence."

"Drive 'em through the opening," directed Pete, and this was done. As the last of the cattle passed in, Pete and Dave stood on guard astride their ponies to prevent the animals stampeding out again, and Dave looked at the broken fence. What he saw caused him to cry out:

"Look here, Pete! Some of those posts have been sawed almost through!"

"By the great side saddle!" exclaimed the foreman. "You're right, Dave! There's been treachery here!"

CHAPTER VI

A CRY FOR HELP

Together, Dave and Pocus Pete examined the posts of the corral fence. There was no doubt but that some of them had been partly sawed through, in order to weaken them so that only a moderate pressure was required to break them off short, close to the ground.

"So that was his game; eh?" exclaimed Dave in a justifiably angry voice.

"Whose game?" asked Pocus Pete.

"Len's! That's why he wouldn't stop to help me. He had been here sawing through the posts so our best bunch of cattle would get out and be spoiled. The hound! Wait until I get hold of him!"

"Better go a bit slow," advised Pocus Pete, in his drawling tones.

"Slow! What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean it isn't a good thing t' go around makin' accusations like that, without somethin' t' back 'em up. In this country you've got t' back up what you say, Dave."

"I know that, but—"

"An' what evidence have you got that Len did this mean trick? For mean trick it is, as shore as guns is guns. What evidence have you?"

"Why, didn't I see him riding away as fast as his horse could gallop just a little while ago?"

"Well, s'posin' you did. That's no evidence in a court of law. You didn't see him saw the posts; did you?"

"No, of course not. But look! Here's some fresh sawdust on the ground! The posts have been sawed within a few hours—perhaps even inside an hour. Maybe just before I came." Dave pointed to the moist earth under some of the splintered posts and boards. There was the fine sawdust where it had been preserved from the trampling hoofs of the steers.

"Yes, th' job's been done recent," admitted Pocus Pete, "but that doesn't prove anythin'. Now if we could find a saw with Len's name on it, that might be some law-evidence. But I don't see any; do you?"

There was no saw in sight. The cattle had retreated to the far side of the corral, leaving the part next the broken fence free for examination. But as Pete had said, there was no saw lying about.

"He could easily have carried it away with him when he rode off," Dave said, following up his suspicion.

"Yes, he could, an' he'd be foolish if he didn't—provided it was him as did this," agreed Pete.

"Well, I'm sure he did," Dave insisted. "And I'll take it out of him for trying to spoil dad's best bunch of cattle."

The word slipped from Dave almost before he knew it. But he did not care. As he had told Pocus Pete he was going to regard Mr. Carson as his father—he had thought of him so many years in that relationship that it was difficult to think otherwise.

"Well, you be careful of what you do, Dave; that's my advice t' you," said Pete.

"Why so? I'm not afraid of Len Molick," was Dave's quick response.

"No, maybe not. Yet Len trails in with a middlin' mean crowd, an' though you are pretty good, you're no match for Whitey Wasson an' his bunch of cowpunchers."

"But my quarrel is with Len, for I'm sure he did this."

"That's all right. I have a sneakin' suspicion that way myself, but Len is a coward, as well as a bully, an' he'd howl for help if you went at him. An' Whitey is just th' kind t' pitch in on you if he saw you givin' Len a drubbin'. So you take my advice, an' go a bit slow."

"I will. I won't have it out with Len until I can get him alone somewhere, and then I'll put it up to him."

"Well, maybe that's a good way, though I don't approve of fightin' as a rule."

"Oh, no! You don't!" laughed Dave, for it was a well known fact that Pocus Pete was considered the best man with his fists in that section of the country.

"Oh, of course I'll fight when I have to. But I'm not goin' out of my way t' look for trouble."

This was strictly true, and Dave knew it. Pocus Pete would never needlessly quarrel with any one, but once he had started on what he regarded as a right course, nothing would turn him aside until he had either vanquished or been beaten. And the latter was seldom the outcome.

"Well, that's my case," said Dave. "I'm not going to put this on Len until I give him a chance to defend himself. But now, Pete, what are we going to do? We can't leave these choice cattle here in a broken corral. They'll stray all over the range."

"That's right. We've got to fix that fence, and we'll need help. Some new posts will have to be set, and it's got to be done before dark. Tell you what to do. You ride back to the ranch, and get some of the boys."

"What will you do?"

"I'll stay here and guard the cattle. It won't take long, and your horse is faster than mine."

"All right, I'll go. But first let's make what repairs we can. That will make it easier for you to hold in the cattle."

There was some wire at the corral, and with this, and by using some of the broken posts and boards, the gap in the fence was made smaller so the cattle would not be so likely to try to rush through it.

This done, Pete prepared to mount guard while Dave leaped to the back of Crow and started for the ranch on the gallop, to bring help and to tell the story of the broken corral.

"I wonder if I'd better mention Len?" thought Dave, as he rode on. "I'm pretty sure he did the trick, but I don't want to accuse any one unjustly, even him."

After thinking it over Dave decided that it would be better not to say anything about Len just yet. He would let matters take their own course.

"But I'll be on the watch for him," he made up his mind.

Dave's mind was busy with many thoughts, and his body was weary with the exertions through which he had just passed. But there was a certain sense of exhilaration after all. He had done a good piece of work, and he realized it. Of course Pocus Pete had helped, but Dave was in a fair way to stop the stampede when the old foreman came along.

"I'll get to be a regular cowboy after a while," thought Dave, not without a little smile of gratification.

To get to the ranch more quickly the young cowpuncher took a trail that led through a patch of rocky woodland. It was a curious formation in the midst of the flat cattle country, being a patch several miles square, consisting of some rocky hills, well wooded, with a number of deep gullies in them. More than once cattle had wandered in among them and been lost. And it was said that at one time a noted band of cattle rustlers, or thieves, had made their headquarters in this wood, and had held out a long time against the attacks of the cattlemen.

Dave rode through this not very cheerful place. He had been keeping his eyes open for a sight of Len Molick, but had caught no further glimpse of the bully whom he suspected.

"Hit it up, Crow! Hit it up!" Dave called to his black horse, who was going along a not very safe trail amid the rocks and stones.

Dave was about half way through the place when the silence, undisturbed save by the rattle of Crow's hoofs, was suddenly broken by a cry.

"Help! Help!" Dave heard uttered in somewhat weak accents. "Help!"

The young cowboy was startled for a moment. He reined in his horse sharply, and looked about. He could see nothing, and the silence seemed more pronounced after the echo of the appeal for aid had died away.

"Hello!" Dave called. "Who are you, and what do you want? Where are you?" he asked, for he could see no one.

"Over here. To your right. I can see you, but you can't see me. I'm down behind a rock. I'm caught, and hanging over a gully. Wait, I'll toss up my handkerchief. Watch for it!"

Dave looked as nearly as he could tell in the direction of the voice. An instant later something white flashed up in the air, and fell down softly. Crow started violently.

CHAPTER VII

THE RESCUE

"Whoa there, old boy! Steady!" Dave spoke to his horse, and the animal, that had been frightened by the sudden throwing into the air of the handkerchief, stood still.

"I see where you are!" Dave called to the unknown and unseen one—a man, evidently, by the tones of his voice. "I'll be with you in a minute!"

"Be careful of yourself," was the caution. "I had a bad fall in here, and I don't want to see any one else get into trouble. Go a bit slow."

"Thanks, I will," Dave said "But I know this ground pretty well. Stand still now, old fellow," he went on to his horse. "I don't want you falling, and breaking your leg or neck."

Crow whinnied as though he understood, and Dave, slipping the reins over the neck of the intelligent animal as a further intimation that he was to stay where he was without wandering, climbed from the saddle, a bit wearily it must be confessed, and started for the rock, behind which lay the injured man, and from which point the young cattleman had observed the white handkerchief.

"Careful now," cautioned the voice again.

"All right, don't worry about me," said Dave, easily.

A moment later he had turned around the intervening rock, and saw, stretched out on the ground, hanging half way over a deep and rock-filled gully, a man about twenty-seven years of age. Dave guessed this much though he could see only a part of the man's body, for his head and shoulders were hanging down over the ledge.

"What are you doing there?" was Dave's first question. "Why don't you get up?"

For it was exactly as if the man were lying face downward on top of a cliff, looking down.

"I can't get up," the man answered, his voice being a bit muffled because his head was hanging over the cliff. "My foot is caught in a cleft in the rocks, and I'm afraid to move for fear it will pull loose. If it does I'll lose my balance and topple, for I'm hanging more than half-way over this cliff now. And it doesn't look like a good place into which to fall."

This was true enough, as Dave knew, for the bottom of the gully was covered with jagged rocks. More than one straying steer had fallen over there and had been dashed to pieces.

"Steady!" called Dave. "I see how it is. I'll soon have you out of that. I'm going back for my rope."

"Are you a puncher?" asked the man.

"Yes," answered Dave, briefly. "But don't talk. Save your strength. I'll have you out in a jiffy."

He hurried back to where he had left his horse, and took from the horn of the saddle the rope which no cowboy is ever without. With this Dave took a turn about the man's waist, passing the rope under him. He then carried an end back to a stout tree and tied it there, working, the while, deftly and swiftly.

"That will hold you in case you slip when I loosen the rocks and free your foot," Dave explained. "You are pretty well overbalanced. But I'll get you up, all right."

The man was in a peculiar and perilous position, but Dave thought that he could cope with the situation. His life on the plains, and amid the perils of the range had made him resourceful, and quick to take advantage of all the chances for safety.

Dave looked at the man's foot. It was firmly wedged in between two rocks that came together in the form of a large V. Considerable pressure must have forced the man's foot there, for Dave could see that the stout leather of his riding boot was cut and scraped. The foot was twisted, and Dave remarked, in a low voice:

"If you haven't a badly sprained ankle I'll miss my guess!"

"Watch yourself now," David cautioned the man. "You can't fall, even if you slip over, for the rope's strong enough to hold you; but you may get a bad jerk when you bring up suddenly if you fall after I release your foot."

"I'm ready," said the man.

Dave looked at the two stones between which the man's foot was wedged. Then with a heavy tree branch, inserted in such a way as not to bring any crushing force on the stranger's leg, Dave used the branch as a lever and pressed down with all his might.

"It's giving!" the man cried. "I can feel it giving!"

"Look out for yourself!" Dave shouted.

Once more he pressed down hard on the tree lever.

The rocks were pried apart. The man's foot slipped free. Dave, seeing this, dropped the branch, made a grab for the leg, for the man's body was going over the cliff. Of course he could not fall *far*, as the rope would hold him, but Dave wanted to save him this jerk if possible.

The young cowboy caught the stranger's boot. Dave was aware of a cry of pain from the man, and realized that the ankle must be severely injured.

"I can't help it," thought Dave, grimly. "I've got to hurt him some to save him more," and he held on desperately.

Dave was strong, and the man, now that his foot was free, was able to use his hands to push himself back, up over the edge of the cliff. After a few seconds of rather strenuous struggle Dave, with the help of the man himself, was able to get him to a sitting position on the edge of the cliff that overhung the gully.

The man was pale, and his face was scratched and bleeding. His clothing was disheveled, and he showed many signs of the struggle through which he had gone.

"Thank—thanks," he gasped, weakly.

"Now don't try to talk until you get your breath," Dave advised him. "Here, drink some of this. It's warm, but it's wet."

Dave carried with him a water canteen, and this he now put to the lips of the man. The latter drank greedily.

"That's good," he whispered. He lay back weakly, Dave supporting him in his arms. The man's eyes closed, and Dave feared he was about to faint. Quickly the young cowboy whipped off his coat, and folding it in pillow shape, put it on the rocks, and laid the man's head down on it.

The stranger opened his eyes.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "I'm not going to die. I'm just getting my breath back. I was hanging there a good while I guess."

He closed his eyes again, and moved his foot—the one that had been caught between the rocks.

A groan came through his clenched teeth and tightly pressed lips, and, accompanied by a sudden wave of whiteness that made his face paler than before, a shudder passed over him.

"He's fainted this time, for keeps," decided Dave, grimly.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. BELLMORE

Dave Carson had some knowledge of rough and ready first-aid work. There was often occasion for it on the ranch, and though fainting men were not common sights, still, now and again, such a contingency would arise. Cowboys often get severely hurt, and it is not always within the nerve power of a man to hold back when a deathly faintness overcomes him.

"I've got to get help to tote you back to the ranch," Dave said, as he sprinkled some water from his canteen in the face of the stranger.

"You've got to be looked after. Maybe the ankle's broken."

He glanced at the injured foot, but did not offer to touch it, for he knew how sensitive it must be, when even a slight movement sent the man off in a faint.

The water had the desired effect, or perhaps the faint was only a slight one, for presently the man opened his eyes, looked about him in some wonder, and murmured:

"Oh, I remember now. Was it last year I tried to fall over the cliff?" He smiled wanly.

"No, it was only a little while ago—or at least it was only a little while ago that I pulled you back," Dave said. "I don't know how long you had been hanging there, though."

"It seemed ten years," was the answer given with another wan smile. "Well, what's the next move? I hope it isn't mine, for I don't know how I can manage it. My ankle is either broken, or badly sprained."

"I'm afraid so," Dave answered. "Now I don't know where you came from, or where you're going, but our ranch—Bar U—is the nearest place you can get help. I can put you on my horse—I guess I can manage that—and walk with you, but it will take a long time. Crow won't carry double, I'm afraid. Certainly not with the way I'd have to put you on."

"I had a horse," said the stranger. "He can't have gone very far. I left him beside the trail while I came in here to look about. He must have wandered off a way."

"A horse!" cried Dave, eagerly. "That's good, if I can find him. We'll not have any trouble getting you to the ranch in that case, Mr.—er—"

Dave paused significantly, adding, after a moment's thought:

"My name is Dave—Dave Carson." He had hesitated, and then quickly reflected that this was no time to enter into explanations about his lack of parentage. "My father, Randolph Carson, owns Bar U ranch."

"Yes, I have heard of him," the man said. "In fact I was going to call on him within a few days in regard to a certain matter. I am afraid I can't reach my card case, but my name is Bellmore—Benjamin Bellmore. I'm from Chicago, but I'm out here representing the Rolling Valley Water Company."

"Never heard of them," Dave said. "They don't deal in cattle; do they?"

"No, they hope to deal in water; that is later on. But I'll go into details after a bit."

"Pardon me, Mr. Bellmore!" burst out Dave. "Here I am keeping you talking, when I ought to be looking for your animal, and helping you to our ranch. I don't know what's got into me. But I just had some trouble with a bunch of our cattle, and I guess I'm thinking of that yet."

"I was on my way to the ranch to get help, when I took this short cut and heard you call. I'll go and see if I can find your horse. If I can't we'll use mine, and I can walk. It won't be the first time, though we cowpunchers are more used to a saddle than we are to our own legs."

He gave Mr. Bellmore another drink from the canteen, and then seeing that the man was as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, went back to the trail to look for the missing horse. Dave saw his own steed contentedly munching some of the scanty herbage, and, speaking to him, passed on.

Reaching a point where he could look down into the valley below, Dave peered long and earnestly for a sight of a riderless horse. To his delight he saw the animal almost at once.

"Well, you didn't run far," he murmured, "and if you don't get a tantrum, and gallop off when I come up, I'll soon have you."

Going back to where he had left Mr. Bellmore, Dave reported:

"Your horse is down in the valley. I'll jump on mine and try to catch him for you. If I can, we'll not have any trouble, and I'll soon have you at our ranch."

"Thanks," murmured the representative of the water company. "His name is Kurd," he added. "My horse's, I mean," he explained, with a smile. "He generally comes when I call him, but here are some lumps of sugar I give him. He'll be sure to come if you hold these out to him."

Dave took the sweets, which Mr. Bellmore extracted from his pocket, and hurried back to where he had left Crow. A moment later Dave was moving off down the trail toward the valley.

"Careful, old boy," he cautioned his steed, for the going was anything but good. "It won't do for you to slip and stumble now."

But Crow had no intention of doing anything of the sort, and a little later Dave was galloping rapidly—across the grassy plain toward the lone horse.

"I hope he doesn't bolt and give me a chase," reflected the young cowboy. "I haven't much time," and he looked at the declining sun, and thought of Pocus Pete on guard at the corral, waiting for help to mend the broken fence.

"It's all Len's fault, too—the mean skunk!" said Dave. "If it hadn't been for him the cattle wouldn't have gotten loose. Though I suppose if they hadn't I wouldn't have ridden home this way, and I wouldn't have discovered that man. Maybe it'll be a good thing, in the end."

Just how "good" this chance was to prove to Dave, the young cowboy little dreamed.

"Here Kurd! Kurd!" he called, as he approached the horse. Dave wondered how Mr. Bellmore had hit on that odd name. "Here, Kurd!" the youth called.

The horse, a beautiful and intelligent beast, raised his head, and looked at Dave approaching on Crow.

"Here you are, old boy. Kurd!" called the young ranchman again.

The other pony, who had been cropping the grass, moved off a short distance.

"That won't do!" Dave murmured. "If he once starts he'll keep going. Looks as if he had speed, too, but I think you can beat him, Crow, old boy," and he patted the neck of his faithful beast.

Kurd continued to amble slowly away. Then Dave thought of the sugar. He took the lumps out of his pocket and held them in the palm of his hand, at the same time bringing Crow to a stop.

Kurd raised his head, whinnied once or twice, stretched out his velvet muzzle, as though to smell what Dave held out, and then came slowly toward the youth.

"That's more like it," Dave murmured. "Now if you don't take a sudden notion, and bolt off just as I reach for your reins, I'll be all right. Steady boy! Come on Kurd!"

The strange horse seemed to have cast his suspicions to the wind, and came fearlessly. A moment later he and Crow were sniffing at each other, and then Kurd took the sugar from Dave's palm. Then the lad grasped the reins, and, turning about, riding his own horse and leading Kurd, made for the place where he had left Mr. Bellmore.

"Good luck!" Dave called as he came in sight of the prostrate man. "I've got your horse, and now we'll soon be at the ranch."

"Fine! Now I'm going to ask you to do something else for me. This foot of mine is paining worse every minute, but I think if I could get my boot off, to allow room for that swelling to expand, it would ease me."

"I'll try," Dave said.

However, it was found impossible to pull off the footgear without so yanking on the injured foot that Mr. Bellmore nearly fainted again.

"Guess I'll have to cut it," Dave said, dubiously.

"Do then."

"It's a pity to spoil a good boot."

"Well, the chances are I won't be able to wear one again for a few weeks, and I simply can't stand this pain."

"Here goes," Dave said. With his keen knife he slit the leather. A sigh of relief came from the man.

"That's better—a whole lot better," he murmured.

It was no easy matter to get him astride his horse, but Dave finally managed it, and wrapped the swollen ankle in his own coat to prevent its striking against the side of Kurd as they rode off.

"How did you come to fall?" asked Dave, as he got into his own saddle, ready for the trip to the ranch.

"I'll explain later. I can't talk very well now. But I was prospecting around, looking at the rock formation, when I slipped. I thought it was all up with me, but my foot caught, and I was held suspended over the gully."

"I see," Dave replied. "Well, we'll doctor you up."

Carefully they made their way out of the rocky woodland, and started across the plain, toward Bar U ranch. As Dave took the lead, making as much speed as was possible under the circumstances, he saw, some distance in advance, a solitary horseman.

Again something in the peculiar saddle position of the rider attracted his attention.

"There's Len Molick again!" he exclaimed aloud. "I suppose he's hanging around to see how his trick worked!"

"Len Molick!" exclaimed Mr. Bellmore. "Why I want to see him. I have been looking for him!"

CHAPTER IX

DAVE MEETS LEN

Dave looked curiously at the man he had rescued. From him he glanced toward the figure of the young bullying cowboy whom he suspected of having been instrumental in causing the stampede.

"Do you know Len Molick?" asked Dave slowly, as he guided his horse along the trail.

"No, but I want to know him," was the answer. "I have a letter to him, and I understand that he is one of the influential cattle raisers in this vicinity."

Dave breathed easier. It was evident a mistake had been made.

"I guess it's Len's father, Mr. Jason Molick you want to meet," Dave said.

"That's right. Jason is the name!" admitted Mr. Bellmore. "I heard you mention the name Molick and I didn't pay much attention to the first part. So there are two of them?"

"Yes, Len and his father,"

"Do you know them?"

"Oh, yes, every one around here knows them."

"You don't speak very enthusiastically," said Mr. Bellmore, with a strange look at the boy. "Is it possible that some error has been made on the part of those who gave me letters of introduction? Is not Mr. Molick influential in these parts?"

"Oh, yes, that's all right," assented Dave, and still his voice had no ring to it. "Mr. Molick is influential all right—too much so, at times."

"You don't seem to like him," said Mr. Bellmore. "I wish you would be frank with me. I am a stranger in these parts, and I have to depend on residents here for my information, and, in a large part, for my success. I know nothing about the Molicks."

"Well, since you asked me to be frank," went on Dave, "I will be, and I'll say you haven't missed much by not knowing the Molicks—especially Len. I'm after him now, for I suspect him of having tried to do us a serious injury."

"Is that so! That's too bad. If I had known that—"

"Oh, don't let me prejudice you against them," Dave went on. "Mr. Molick may be able to do business with you in the way you want. I am not speaking from the business end of it. Personally I don't like the Molicks," and Dave mentioned the cattle stampede.

"Well, if he did that I should say he wasn't a person to be trusted," said the Chicago man. "But still—"

"Of course. I'm not certain of it," Dave continued. "I'm going to find out about the sawed posts, though. But see Mr. Molick yourself, and make up your own mind about him."

"I will, but I shall be on my guard on account of what you have said. It is well to know the character

of the man one is dealing with. I'm afraid though," he added as a spasm of pain crossed his face, "that I sha'n't be able to do any active business for a while," and he glanced down at his injured foot.

"We'll soon be at the ranch," Dave remarked. "The rest of the trail is easy."

Dave was thinking of many things as his pony ambled on, followed by Mr. Bellmore's horse. It was strange, the manner in which he had come to help the injured man, and it was stranger still that the latter should be seeking to do business with the Molicks of whom the members of the Bar U ranch had no very high opinion.

"I was on my way to Mr. Molick's place, when I got off the trail to look after that rock formation," resumed Mr. Bellmore after a pause. "Rocks always interest me, for I am always looking to see what the possibilities are for striking a supply of water."

"Why water?" asked Dave.

"Because I am an irrigation engineer," was the reply. "That is my business. I have been sent out here by a concern, recently formed, called the Rolling Valley Water Company. Our concern has acquired rights in the valley of the Rolling River, and I have been sent out to see what the chances are for getting the ranchmen and other land-owners interested."

"I thought irrigation schemes had only to do with farming," said Dave.

"No, irrigation takes in much more than that. Of course farmers need water, and we hope to develop some big farms out here. But ranchmen also need water for their cattle."

"Yes, that's true," said Dave. "My—my father was saying only the other day, that he could do a lot more if we had a better water supply."

"Then he's one of the men I need to see!" exclaimed Mr. Bellmore. "Perhaps he already has some rights in the water supply of this valley that we could negotiate for."

"You see our idea is," he continued, "to get the whole water supply under one head in a big company, of course giving those who sell us their rights, a certain control. Then we intend to build a big dam to conserve the water supply. As it is here now I imagine, from what I know of other places, at one time you have too much water, and at another you don't have enough."

"That's just it," Dave admitted. "It isn't even."

"Well, that's what we irrigation engineers are aiming to do—make the water supply even the year around. I certainly must talk with your father. Maybe, after all, it's a good thing I sprained my ankle, though it certainly does hurt!" he exclaimed, with a sharp indrawing of his breath.

"Well, of course I'll be glad to have you see Mr. Carson—my father," and again Dave rather hesitated and stumbled over the word. "But, as a matter of fact, some of the rights he has in Rolling River are subject to some agreement with Mr. Molick. I know my father doesn't like it, for it makes him too dependent on this man, but he could do nothing else. He had to have water for his stock."

"Of course," agreed Mr. Bellmore. "Well, perhaps we can get together and form a company so he can have more water and will not have to worry about it."

"I hope so," Dave said.

A little later they came within sight of the ranch buildings, which were glowing in the rays of the setting sun.

"What a fine place!" exclaimed Mr. Bellmore.

"Yes, I like it," Dave made answer. Then a pang seemed to shoot through him. What if he had to leave the place? He could not count on always staying there, as he might have done had he been Mr. Carson's son. Even though the ranchman might love Dave as one of his own blood, when Mr. Carson died there would be other heirs very likely, who would step in and claim the place. Dave was not legally adopted. He might inherit nothing.

He had always counted on taking up as his life work, the cattle business. But now, since the disclosure had been made, this was, perhaps, impossible. And He sighed again as he looked at the group of buildings set down in a little valley, with Rolling River in the distance glistening in the slanting rays of the setting sun. On all sides stretched the vast prairies on which grazed the hundreds of cattle—not only from the Bar U ranch, but from the Centre O, and others.

"Yes, that's our place," said Dave. For the present, at least, this man need not know his secret, though he might find it out soon enough. "And I guess you'll be glad of a chance to lie down; won't you?"

"Indeed I will," was the answer.

A moment later the two rode up toward the main ranch buildings. The cowboys had come in from their day's labors, and were washing themselves at their bunk houses, in readiness for supper. From the quarters of Hop Loy, the Chinese cook, came a grateful odor.

"That certainly smells good!" exclaimed Mr. Bellmore.

The cowpunchers looked curiously at the drooping figure on the horse that followed Dave. It needed but a glance from their sharp eyes to tell that the man was hurt. Mr. Carson came out.

"Well, Dave," he began, "I was just wondering where you were. Are the cattle all right?"

"They are now, Dad, but they weren't for a time. They got out of the corral, but Pocus Pete and I got them back again. I'll tell you about that later.

"Here's a gentleman who needs help. He's a Mr. Bellmore from Chicago interested in irrigation. He was in the rock-grove, caught by the foot. I got him out. You look after him, Dad. I've got to get some of the boys, with fence material, and go back to relieve Pete. He's on guard there."

"Say! It takes you to tell it!" exclaimed Mr. Carson with a smile. "Welcome to Bar U, Mr. Bellmore. I don't exactly understand all that boy of mine has gotten off, but it's all right. We will look after you. Sprained ankle; eh? Well, I know something about them. Come boys, one of you help Mr. Bellmore down, and make him comfortable.

"You'll stop and get something to eat, Dave, won't you, before you go back?"

"Yes, just a bite, Dad. We haven't much time."

A little later Mr. Bellmore was comfortably installed in the ranch house, while Dave and two other cowboys, after a hasty meal, were on their way back to relieve Pocus Pete, and repair the broken fence.

This work was soon under way. While Pocus Pete had been on guard a cattleman, passing, had given him an important message for Mr. Carson.

"So you'd better ride back and tell him, Dave," Pete said, as he and the other punchers began to work on the fence, a snack having been brought for Pete's supper.

"But I want to stay and help you," objected Dave.

"You'll do better work by getting back with that message," the foreman said, and once more Dave turned his horse's head toward Bar U ranch.

It was getting dusk now, but it was not so dark but that Dave could make out, after he had ridden some distance, the figure of a horseman just ahead of him.

"Len again!" he murmured. "I'm going to see what he has to say, and why he's hanging around here. We may have to guard those cattle all night."

At a word Crow leaped forward in a gallop, and in another moment, though Len made an effort to spur on ahead, Dave had ridden alongside of him.

"Trying to see how your trick worked?" asked Dave, with a sharp look at his enemy.

"Are you speaking to me?" demanded Len.

"I certainly am."

"Well, I don't want to talk to a nobody!" was the retort.

CHAPTER X

Giving utterance to this sneering remark Len Molick began to urge his horse forward, but, though his face flushed, and a sense of anger choked him, Dave remained cool as he put out a hand and caught the bridle of the other's steed.

"Not so fast, Len Molick!" Dave exclaimed.

"You may not want to talk to a nobody—that's your business—but you're going to talk to a somebody right now, and that somebody is I!"

"Huh! you don't even know your name!" Len sneered, but he did not try to break away.

"Names don't matter," said Dave, trying to retain his calmness. "You can call me Injun Jack if you like, but I want to ask you a few questions."

"Well, I'm not going to answer them," snapped Len, "and I want you to let me go! If you don't—"

He raised a riding quire he carried, and seemed about to lash it into Dave's face.

"Look here!" Dave cried. "If you try to strike me with that I'll pull you off your pony and give you the best drubbing you ever had." He snatched the quirt from Len's wrist, breaking the thong, and flung the little whip far out on the prairie.

"Oh!" mumbled Len, and he shrunk away in fear.

"I won't touch you—at least not now—if you don't try any more of your underhand work," promised Dave. "But I'm going to converse with you right here and now. Why did you cut the posts of our special corral? Answer me that!"

"I didn't cut any posts!" was the sullen answer.

"You didn't; eh? Well, I think you did, and I'll prove it too, sooner or later. What are you hanging around here for now?"

"Isn't this a free range? Haven't I a right to ride it if I want to?"

"Yes, you have, but you must have some object in it, and I believe you want to see our cattle stampede. But I fooled you that time, Len Molick, and I'll fool you again. Now I want to know something else. Is Whitey Wasson the only one who told you I—that I wasn't Mr. Carson's son?"

For the life of him Dave could not help the falter that crept into his voice.

"Yes; he's the only one who told me," was Len's sullen answer.

"How did he find out about it?"

"Huh! How should I know? Ask him!"

"I intend to after I get through with you."

Len winced again.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not going to thrash you—at least not now," said Dave, grimly. He was willing that Len should get what satisfaction he could out of that promise.

"Well, if you're through with me, you let me go!" the bully demanded. "You haven't any right to hold me up this way."

"I've just as much right as you have to take a saw and cut through our fence posts, so that the least pressure by the cattle would crack 'em off short," retorted Dave.

"I didn't saw any of your posts, I tell you!" insisted Len.

Dave was working his horse around to get closer to Len. Before the bully suspected it Dave had suddenly slipped his hand in under Len's coat, and had pulled out a short saw.

For a moment Len was too surprised to utter a word. Then he cried:

"Here! Give me that!"

"No, I don't think I will," Dave said, coolly. "I may need it as evidence. I thought you said you didn't saw any posts."

"I—I didn't!"

"Then Whitey Wasson, or some of your crowd, did. I suppose they passed the saw to you to get rid of, which you would have done if you were wise."

"I—I found that saw on the plains," stammered Len.

"Probably where Whitey dropped it," Dave retorted. "Now look here Len Molick," he went on. "You say you didn't saw those posts, but I think you did, and I'm going to try to prove it. This saw is part of the proof. I guess I'll just keep it."

"And one thing more. If I catch you hanging around our special corral, even if you are on free range land, I'll tackle you. Don't forget that!"

"If you dare to touch me!" fairly screamed Len, for he was very angry now, "if you dare to touch me I'll have you arrested! My father knows the sheriff—"

"You can't scare me by any talk like that," Dave said, coolly. "You know I'm a nobody, and I can't be disgraced like any one who bears the name of Molick!" and he laughed mockingly, though there was a sore spot in his heart.

After all it is small satisfaction to be a "nobody."

Dave released his hold on the bridle of Len's horse, and urged his own steed back toward Bar U ranch.

"You just wait! I'll fix you for this," Len threatened.

"I'm a good waiter," Dave told him. Then, speaking to Crow, he galloped off through the gathering darkness.

On reaching the ranch Dave found that Mr. Bellmore was very comfortable. Mr. Carson had applied rough and ready, but effective treatment to the injured ankle, and the two men were deep in a talk of irrigation matters when Dave entered the room.

"Back again, son?" remarked Mr. Carson, and there was no hesitancy in his endearing tone. For of course he had known, all along, that Dave was not his son, though, as he had said, he so loved and so regarded him.

"Yes—Dad, back. Perkins sent word about that bunch he was speaking of," and he delivered the message left with Pocus Pete.

"Well, Dave, you have done a good day's work since morning," commented Mr. Carson.

"You saved that valuable bunch of special cattle, and you bring me as a guest a man, who, I think, can do me a lot of good."

"I'm glad to hear it, Dad!"

"Yes, your father and I have been talking irrigation, Dave," said Mr. Bellmore, who had taken a sudden liking to the young cowboy. And to himself Dave could not but admit that the more he saw of Mr. Bellmore the better he liked him. "We think we can get together on this irrigation project," the Chicago man went on.

"Of course that is if we can deal with Molick," suggested the ranchman.

"Oh, yes, it depends a great deal on Molick," Mr. Bellmore admitted.

"I wish it didn't," Dave said.

"Why, son?" asked Mr. Carson.

Then Dave told his story, which was received with rather ominous shakes of the head on the part of Mr. Carson.

"Well," said the owner of Bar U ranch, when Dave had finished, "there's no two ways about it! I wish it hadn't happened, and I think as you do, Dave, that Molick, or some of his friends, had a hand in it. However, that isn't proof, and we can't move until we get better evidence than just a saw."

"Another thing I'm sorry for—this may make more bad feeling between Mr. Molick and myself. There's not much love lost between us as it is," he went on, "and this will only add to his feeling."

"I'm sorry, Dad," Dave began.

"Oh, it isn't your fault," said Mr. Carson, quickly. "You acted as you thought best, and I haven't a word of fault to find. It just had to be so, I reckon. But I'll know how to act—that's one thing sure. I'll be on my guard from now on."

"It will be best so," said Mr. Bellmore.

A little later Pocus Pete and one of the cowboys returned, to report that the fence had been repaired.

"Where's Gimp?" asked Dave, referring to the other cowpuncher who had ridden with him.

"Oh, he stayed there on guard. Thought it best t' leave him there—to-night anyhow," the foreman said to Mr. Carson.

"I understand," was the answer. "We can't afford to lose any of those steers."

They were all up late at Bar U ranch that night, for the day had been a momentous one. Then, too, the visit of Mr. Bellmore had created a little diversion. He and Mr. Carson sat up for some time after the others had retired, talking irrigation matters.

"I wonder if I'll ever have a part in them?" reflected Dave, as he went to his room. "How long can I stay here, now that I know I am not Dave Carson—but somebody else? And who am I?"

Dave's wonderings were not of the most cheerful sort as he fell into an uneasy slumber.

CHAPTER XI

HAZARDOUS WORK

Cowboys rushing here and there. Dust arising in clouds, settling into a hazy mist, only to be shattered again, as some rushing rider rode recklessly through it. Yells, shouts, the snapping of whips, the barking of heavy calibre revolvers, now and then the shrill neigh of a cow-pony.

Above all a deep resonant note—a sort of distant thunder—a pounding of the earth as thousands of hoofs smote it at once.

That was the scene on which Dave Carson gazed, as he rose in his saddle, his breath coming in quicker measures, while a fierce light shone in his eyes, for he was having a part in it all.

It was one of the many round-ups on the Bar U range, and there was work for all, more than enough.

"Hi there, Gimp! Watch where yo-all are a-ridin'!"

"Swing him over there! I'll handle that critter!"

"What's the matter with your fire? Can't git no kind of an impression with irons as cold as a chunk of ice!"

"Look out for that cayuse! He's shore a bad 'un!"

"Over this way now!"

"That's talkin'!"

This was only some of the talk, part of the shouts, a few of the yells that were bandied back and forth, as the cowboys rounded up the herd, cut out the designated steers or cows, branded the new ones that had never yet felt the touch of the hot iron, and generally did the work that falls to every ranch at certain times of the year.

Dave had been among the busiest, now roping some refractory steer, now helping a cowboy heat the big irons, with their mark "Bar U.", now scudding out of the way on the back of his fleet pony, Crow.

Now finding a moment of respite, he galloped up to where Mr. Bellmore was sitting in the shade of the chuck wagon, as the cooking outfit is known.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked the young cowboy, as he pulled his horse back sharply, so that Crow reared. But he was used to that, and Dave was exceptionally gentle with him.

"It's just great!" exclaimed the man who had been a semi-invalid since coming to Bar U ranch. "I never imagined there was so much work attached to a round-up."

"Oh, there's work all right," said Dave, removing his big hat and wiping the sweat from his brow with a big handkerchief. "It isn't much like locating a water trail, I expect?"

"Not much," assented the visitor, who had now been at the ranch about a week, and who was progressing favorably. His ankle would not yet permit him to step on it, but he managed to get about with the help of his horse. To-day he had ridden out in the chuck wagon to witness the round-up.

"Locating a good place to plant an irrigation scheme is child's play compared to this cattle business," went on Mr. Bellmore. "Still I suppose you get more or less used to it."

"In a way, yes," said Pocus Pete, who rode up just then. "But there are always some things you never can count on. Gimp's horse just broke his leg," he added, more to Dave than to the visitor.

"You don't say!" exclaimed the lad. "That will make Gimp feel bad."

"Well, it's all in the game," added the foreman with a shrug of his shoulders. "That's the end of him," he went on as a shot rang out. There had been little firing of late, for the work of branding the strays and other cattle was almost over.

"Did he shoot him?" asked Mr. Bellmore.

"Th' horse? yes!" said Pete sententiously.

"That's all we can do for a horse when he breaks a leg. He ain't no good to anybody. That's the law of th' range. Yo've got t' make good or quit!"

"Poor Star," murmured Dave. "He was a good horse."

"While he lasted," added Pete. "But Gimp pulled him around too sudden like, I'm thinkin', t' get out of the way of an onery steer. Well, that's th' way it goes!"

And Dave, as he thought of his own new and peculiar position, wondered if that was to be his way. He was really no one now. Would he be thrust aside, and not counted as one of the family?

And yet, as he reflected on the fact that Mr. Carson had always known of their relation—or, rather their lack of relation—he would not be likely to change.

"I wonder if I'll ever find out who my parents are?" thought Dave. "I must have some folks, somewhere."

But as he recalled what had been told him—how he had been swept down the river in a great flood—the chances that he had any kin living seemed more and more remote.

But the boy was awakened out of his momentary brown study.

"Hi there!"

"Look out for that critter!"

"He's a bad one!"

"Rope him!"

Such were the wild cries that greeted Dave as he spurred away from the chuck wagon toward what seemed more than the usual commotion. A steer that had been roped and thrown that a new brand might be put over the almost obliterated one, had broken away and regained its feet and was wildly rushing here and there.

A lasso had been thrown over his head, and this now trailed in the dust. Several of the cowboys, clapping spurs to their ponies, set off either to throw more ropes about the escaping beast, or else to grasp the trailing lariat.

"Take him, Dave!" cried Pocus Pete, who wanted the lad to get as much practical experience as possible.

"I'll get him," was the instant call in response.

"Look at him go!" murmured Mr. Bellmore, who half rose from a pile of blankets to watch the antics of the steer.

"Yes, that boy of mine can ride!" said Mr. Carson, who was looking on. A tender look came into his eyes.

No one looking at him would have suspected that, only a comparatively short time before, he had confessed to this same lad that there was no real relationship between them. That they were actually, strangers, save that there was a love between them that could only come of long association.

"Yes. He surely can ride," murmured the ranch owner. "If he lives I hope he'll succeed me as operator here. And if I can put through your irrigation scheme it will make Bar U one of the best ranches in this part of the country."

"Oh, we'll put it through all right," said the Chicago man. "Don't worry about that. We'll put it through."

"If Molick doesn't kick up a row," observed Mr. Carson.

"Yes, of course we've got to look out for him. But I think—"

Mr. Bellmore never finished his sentence.

"Look out, Dave!" he yelled, as if he could warn the lad who was riding toward the rushing steer.

"Oh! Oh!" gasped Mr. Carson.

The next instant they both saw the trailing rope on the steer's head tangle around the legs of Dave's pony. The plucky Crow made a brave effort to keep his feet. But a moment later he went down heavily in a cloud of dust with his rider, while the maddened steer, brought up short, reared and seemed to fall backward on pony and cowboy.

CHAPTER XII

THE FIGHT

With one bound, it seemed, Mr. Carson leaped away from the side of his invalid guest, and was in the saddle of his favorite pony, that had been standing near the chuck wagon.

"He's killed!" was the thought that came instantly into the mind of Mr. Bellmore. "No rider could suffer such a fall, and live!"

Such an idea, too, it seemed, was in the thought of the ranch owner, for he was slightly pale underneath his coat of tan as he spurred his steed forward.

A number of other cowboys had seen the happening, and those who could leave the work in which they were engaged, started for the scene of the accident. But there were some, holding down a refractory steer, or engaged in putting on the hot branding irons, who only looked over, shrugged their shoulders, and kept on with their tasks.

For that, too, was the law of the range. If a man had a fall, he was either killed or he was not killed. If he was killed there was no use dropping important work to go to his aid. If he was not killed he must either help himself, or take such help as could be sent to him at the time.

Cruel, perhaps you will say, but it was eminently practical, and, after all, that is life.

If Dave was really dead no power the cowboys could exert would save him. The accident had happened—it was over with—and that was all there was to it.

Of course some did go to his aid—Mr. Carson and several of the less busy punchers. And, to do justice to the others, not a man but, would have rushed to help Dave had he been in a position to do so. But the work of the ranch must go on—and it did.

Long before Mr. Carson reached the scene, or, for that matter, before any of the others were in a position to help Dave, a movement was observed in the tangle of pony, rider and steer. Just who, or which, was doing the moving it was hard to determine, as the haze of dust still overhung everything.

"Can a person live after that mix-up?" asked Mr. Bellmore, speaking aloud, unconsciously.

"Oh, him plenty mluch alive!" glibly replied the Chinese cook. "Dave he plenty mluch hab fall, an' he come up smilin'."

"Oh, he does; eh?" asked the Chicago man.

"Sure!" was the answer, given with a bland grin. "He clum' up smilin'."

"Well, I hope he does," was the comment.

By this time it could be seen that Dave was at least alive. Out of the haze of dust he limped, But the steer lay prone.

Mr. Carson jumped from his horse, and an instant later had the young cowboy in his arms.

"Dave! Dave!" he cried. "My boy! My boy! Tell me you're not hurt!"

As the other cowboys rode up one of them gave a look at the prostrate steer.

"He's done for," he commented.

It needed but a look at the curiously and grotesquely twisted neck of the animal to tell that it was broken.

"Dave, are you hurt?" gasped the ranchman.

"Well, I've felt better," Dave answered, slowly, making a wry face as he limped to one, side. He leaned heavily on the arm of Mr. Carson.

Then, as if remembering something he had forgotten, Dave looked toward his pony. To his great relief he saw Crow rise to his feet, shake himself and run off a little way, seemingly little the worse for his adventure.

"Thank goodness!" murmured Dave, and there was a prayer of gratitude in his heart. "I thought he was a goner."

"And we thought you were," put in Tubby Larkin, as he strode up. "That was some fall—believe me!"

"Must have got tangled up in the rope," commented Pocus Pete, who had finished a task he was at, and who now spurred forward.

"That's what happened," Dave explained, as he rubbed the back of his head and threw out one leg as if to test whether or not it had been knocked out of joint. "I didn't see the trailing lasso, and it got around Crow's feet."

"Yes, that's how it happened," said Mr. Carson. "But I certainly thought both steer and pony fell on you."

"I managed to roll out of the way," said Dave, grimly.

"Lucky for you," commented Pocus Pete. "That's one of the biggest and worst steers on the ranch, and he weighs something, too."

"His own weight broke his neck," said Tubby, reflectively. "Well, we was needin' some beef an' now we've got it."

"I'm sorry he had to go," remarked Dave, as he walked off toward his pony, having made sure that none of his bones was broken.

"Better him than you," murmured Mr. Carson. "Are you sure you're all right, Dave, my boy?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh, yes I'm a bit shaken up, but I'll be all right. I can go on with the round-up."

"You can—but you'll not!" was the ranch owner's decision. "I want you to take a little rest. The worst of the job's over, anyhow."

Dave was nothing loath to have a little respite, and as he came up to the chuck wagon, where Mr. Bellmore was eagerly waiting for him, the Chicago man said:

"Well, I never expected to see you come up this way, Dave," and he held out a welcoming hand.

"Oh, we get used to little things like that."

"Little things!" exclaimed the irrigation engineer. "Well, I thought I had a hard time when I was hanging over that gully. But that wasn't a circumstance to yours."

"It's all in the day's work," said Dave with a shrug of his shoulders, as he sank down on a pile of sacks.

"He's grit clear through," thought the visitor. "I like him more every day I see him."

As for Dave, in addition to the thankfulness in his heart that he was not hurt, and that his favorite pony had escaped, was a deep sense of gratitude for the manner manifested toward him by Mr. Carson. No father could have showed more love toward his own son than the ranch owner did toward his ward, his nameless ward.

The excitement caused by Dave's fall soon passed, for, after all, such things are comparatively common on the ranch, and he had really been more than usually fortunate.

And so the work of the round-up went on, day after day. Hard, hot, sweaty and dusty work it was, too, with little of the romance that attaches to the book stories of life on a cattle range. But no one complained, least of all Dave Carson.

It was about a week after this that Dave was sent out again to look up some stray cattle. He was not riding his own pony Crow, who had, after all, developed a lame shoulder from his fall. So he was left in the stable for a day or two.

As the animal Dave had was rather strange he took the precaution of staking him out as he halted for a bite to eat at noon. Dave was taking his nooning, resting lazily on the silent plain, when he heard a noise that caused him to rouse up suddenly.

What he saw brought an exclamation of anger to his lips, for in the act of cutting the rope that held the somewhat restive pony was Len Molick. Dave had caught him in the nick of time.

Len had looked around, to make sure he was unobserved, but his back was toward our hero, who was down in a little hollow.

"The sneak!" murmured Dave.

Then, silently, he began stalking the bully, who was preparing to go back to his own horse, that was standing with reins over its head.

Len's object was plain. He wanted to let Dave's pony run back to the ranch, so our hero would have a long walk. But his plan failed.

Just as Len was about to sever the lariat Dave sprang up, and with a yell that startled both horses, fairly threw himself on the back of the bully.

"At last I've got you just where I want you, Len Molick!" Dave cried. "Maybe I can't prove you sawed the fence posts, but I don't need any more evidence than I've just had of what you were going to do. I've got you!"

"You—you let me alone!" whimpered Len, who was a coward, as most bullies are.

"I will, when I've finished," said Dave, laying aside his coat.

"What are you going to do?" asked Len, who had straightened up, after having been rolled on the ground by Dave.

"What am I going to do? I'm going to give you the best drubbing you ever had. Stand up and fight now, you big coward!"

CHAPTER XIII

SOME NEWS

Perhaps if Len had done the manly thing—if he had owned to some of his misdeeds, and had promised not to repeat them, Dave might have forgiven him. For Dave was not a fighter by nature.

Physically the two were well matched, with the advantage, if any, in favor of Len, who was larger than Dave. And if Len had acknowledged that he was afraid to fight, Dave would not have pressed it.

But the bully and coward made the mistake of his life. As he sprang to his feet he caught up a stone and suddenly hurled it at Dave. The latter ducked just in time to save his head. And then his anger welled up.

"So that's your game; is it?" he cried.

Even then Len might have gotten out of it, only he did not. He aimed a wild blow at Dave, and then the fight was on.

Len was no match for Dave in skill. The young cowboy easily dodged the blows aimed at him, and for a moment, he refrained from hitting Len hard. Then, as he saw Len again look about for a stone, Dave struck him so hard that the bully toppled over.

"It's no more than you deserve!" Dave exclaimed.

Len got up, and with a cry rushed at his opponent. Again, Dave sent him down.

But I am not going to give you all the details of that fight which was soon over. Len, bruised and sore, cried out that he had had enough.

"That'll teach you to behave after this, I guess," said Dave, as he moved over toward his horse.

Len did not answer for a moment. He, too, approached his steed. And when he was mounted he cast a look full of anger and hate at Dave, and said:

"You wait! I'll get even with you yet!"

It was the usual retort of a sneak and coward.

"You had your chance," said Dave, grimly. "If you couldn't take advantage of it that's not my fault."

Then he rode off, collected the strays he was looking for, and made his way back to the ranch.

"What's the matter, Dave?" asked Pocus Pete, as he saw the lad leap from his pony. "Did you have a fall?"

"No, it was the other fellow," was the grim answer.

"Len?"

"Yes."

"Does he look anything like you?"

"Worse!"

Dave's face was scratched and one eye bruised.

"Well, I s'pose it had to be," chuckled Pocus Pete. "What'd he do, try to rope you?"

"No. He wouldn't have much chance at that, even if I was not on Crow."

Then Dave told the story of the encounter.

"Well," said Peter reflectively, "I reckon, just as some one said about dogs, that a certain amount of fleas was good for 'em, a little fightin' is good for some fellows. Are you sure Len got enough?" he asked anxiously.

"He said so," replied Dave, sententiously.

"Well, he ought to know," was Pete's dry comment.

Life at Bar U ranch went on in much the same way for many days. There was a great deal of work to be done, and Dave did his share. But, all the while, he could not shake from his mind the memory of the revealed secret regarding himself.

"I wonder who I am?" he asked himself again and again. But he could not answer. He made up his mind that some day he would have a long talk with Mr. Carson, and see if there was not some way in which clues to his lost parents could be obtained.

"There must be some," reflected Dave.

Mr. Bellmore had almost recovered now. He could ride his horse about, and often accompanied Dave on the latter's trips. The Chicago man could limp about fairly well, but in the West, at least on the cattle ranges, little walking is done. If a person has only to go across the street it is the most natural thing in the world to leap to the saddle to cover the distance.

"Well, I think I must get busy on that water business now," said Mr. Bellmore one day, when he and Dave had come in from a little round-up. "It won't do to wait any longer. My people will be wondering why I am taking such a long vacation."

"They know you were hurt; don't they?" asked Dave.

"Oh, yes, but I'm practically well again."

"What are your plans?"

"I must see if I can get some concerted action in forming an irrigation company. I think I shall talk to Mr. Molick, even if his son and you are not on friendly terms."

"Oh, don't let that stand in the way of business," Dave said, heartily.

"I hope you won't misunderstand my motives," said the water agent.

"Not at all."

It was a few days after this that Pocus Pete, coming in from a distant part of the range, said to Dave and Mr. Carson.

"I see they're putting up some new fences along the river on the Centre O ranch."

"Is that so?" asked Mr. Carson. "That's news to me, I wonder what that means?"

"Perhaps I can tell you," said Mr. Bellmore. "I have made some arrangements with Mr. Molick about water rights. He is going into the irrigation scheme with me. I really need him, as he owns certain patents in the water course. I meant to mention it to you, but it slipped my mind."

"So you are going in with Molick?" asked Mr. Carson, in a curious tone of voice.

"Yes. Is there any objection?"

"Well, I don't know but what there is," was the reply of the ranch owner. "Sit down, and I'll tell you a few things you ought to know, Mr. Bellmore."

CHAPTER XIV

A WARNING

Dave, who had heard what was said between Mr. Bellmore and the ranch owner listened with interest and expectation to what would come next. There was an odd manner about the proprietor of Bar U—a sort of constraint, and Dave fancied there was a little feeling, almost of hostility toward the man he had rescued from such a perilous position.

Up to now Mr. Bellmore had enjoyed to the utmost the hospitality of Bar U ranch. Mr. Bellmore had been made very welcome, and he had had every care and attention while unable to use his injured foot.

Now it seemed that a spirit of hostility had cropped out.

"Before I go on to say what I intend to-to give you a warning in other words," said Mr. Carson, "let me ask you, Mr. Bellmore if you know why Molick is putting up new fences along the water course? I'd like to know the reason for that before I give you my warning."

"A warning!" exclaimed the irrigation man, and there was evident surprise manifested in his tone.

"Yes, a warning," repeated the ranch owner. "But please do not mistake my meaning. I'm not warning you of any threatened danger, but only of being careful what business dealings you have with Jason Molick, or any of his men."

"Oh, I thought you meant you were going to warn me to move on," and Dave fancied his friend laughed with an air of relief.

"Nothing like that yet," said Mr. Carson, smiling. "But about the fences, concerning which Pocus Pete spoke to me?"

"Well, I suggested to Mr. Molick that he'd better put them up," said Mr. Bellmore.

"You did!" There was great surprise manifested in the exclamation of Mr. Carson.

"Why, yes, I did."

"What for?" asked Mr. Carson.

"Of course you know that if land is allowed to go unfenced for twenty years—or for a longer or shorter period according to different states—that the land becomes public property, or at least the public has a right-of-way over it and it can not be closed off. I did not want, in case our irrigation company took up Mr. Molick's land, to have a public right-of-way over it, especially so near the water. It might spoil our legal title. So I told him to fence it in before we did any business."

"Then you haven't done any business yet?"

"Not actually closed it, no. I am about to, and then I hope to do some business with you."

Mr. Bellmore smiled frankly, but Mr. Carson's face was grave as he answered:

"Well, I don't know. I'm afraid you can't do business with both of us, Mr. Bellmore."

"Why not?" asked the Chicago man, somewhat surprised.

"Because Mr. Molick and I—to be frank about it—don't pull together any too well. I'm not saying whose fault it is, but he and I have been on the outs for some time, and his men are continually seeking to pick quarrels with my men. He has taken more than his share of the water that is supposed to be for our joint use, and when I objected he was very ugly about it."

"I feel it my duty to warn you that if you have any business dealings with him to look well to your own interests. He will take every legal advantage, and some that, in my opinion, are not legal."

"You surprise me!" exclaimed Mr. Bellmore. "I did not know that he was that kind of man."

"Well, he is," put in Dave. "You mustn't think we cowpunchers are in the habit of giving our neighbors black eyes, Mr. Bellmore," went on the young cowboy, "but it is for your own interests that my father is speaking."

Dave did not hesitate at the word of relationship now. Mr. Bellmore did not know the secret.

"Oh, I think I understand," the water-man said. "I'm sorry I began negotiations with Molick, but I don't very well see how I can get out of them. I need his water rights."

"Perhaps he hasn't as many rights as you think he has," suggested Mr. Carson.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there's a dispute about the river boundary lines. I claim more water than I'm getting, but I'm not in a position to enforce my claims just at present. That is why I wanted to know about the fences. It

may be that Molick is encroaching."

"I'd be sorry to hear that," Mr. Bellmore said. "When I told him to go ahead and fence in certain open tracts, so we would know just where the water boundaries extended, I had no idea I would cause you trouble, Mr. Carson."

"You haven't—yet," was the dry answer.

"And I don't intend to!" went on the Chicago man.

"Oh, if there's any trouble, I'll not lay it at your door," went on the ranch owner, smiling grimly. "It will be Molick who causes it, if anybody does. But I want, for your own good, to warn you against this man. He has done a lot of mean things in this section, and he is capable of doing more. He's as mean as they make 'em, and I truly hate to say that about a neighbor."

"Oh, I accept it in confidence," replied Mr. Bellmore.

"I know you do, and that's why I didn't hesitate. I thought it my duty," resumed the owner of Bar U ranch. "I've come to like you a heap since Dave brought you here. Seems almost as though you were kin to us. That's why I'd hate to see you wronged. And you surely will be outwitted if you don't watch Molick. He'd take the eye teeth out of a stuffed alligator if he wasn't watched, and sell 'em for watch charms. Dave knows him!"

"Oh, yes. He's made a lot of trouble for us," Dave assented.

"Well, I don't know exactly what to do," said Mr. Bellmore, slowly. "I have asked Molick to go ahead, and have practically promised to do business with him. I can hardly back out now. If I did he might begin suit against my company, claiming a breach of contract."

"He'd do that if he had half a chance," answered Mr. Carson. "But perhaps matters are not so bad as they seem. He's just begun to build the fences, so Pocus Pete says. It may not be too late to stop him. We'll take a run out that way to-morrow and see what's going on. Meanwhile, consider yourself warned against Jason Molick, Mr. Bellmore."

"I shall, and I thank you for telling me. I hope to do business with you, also, in this water matter."

"Well, if Molick has his way I won't have any water to negotiate about," said the ranch owner grimly. "However, we'll go and take a look at the fences to-morrow."

CHAPTER XV

RETALIATION

Benjamin Bellmore's injured foot was now so nearly healed that he had no difficulty in getting about on horseback. True, he had to favor the injured member somewhat, but that did not greatly hinder him; accordingly, early on the morning following the conversation of warning, the irrigation man, Dave, Mr. Carson and Pocus Pete set out across Bar U ranch to see what the Molicks were doing.

"Well, they're at it, I see," remarked Dave, as the little party topped a rise and saw, down in the river valley below them, a number of men erecting fence posts and stringing barbed wire.

"Yes, he doesn't lose any time, that's one thing I'll say for Jason Molick," answered the ranch owner.

Indeed Molick's forces were very active. They seemed to be in a hurry to get a certain length of fence up before night, and as Dave looked at the cowboys and others employed, he realized that the owner of Centre O ranch had called in from the distant parts of his holdings most of his employees and set them to work on the fence.

Nor was this all. Farther off another gang of men, with picks and shovels, seemed to be erecting a small dam, partially across a narrow part of Rolling River.

"Hello!" exclaimed Mr. Carson in surprise, as he saw their activities. "What does that mean?"

"It's some irrigation work," explained Mr. Bellmore. "Molick didn't believe me when I said that even a small dam would impound enough water to supply not only a good herd of cattle but would also water the dry land. So I told him to try it himself, and see how it worked. I thought if he had a practical demonstration he would be willing to go into the scheme with me. But that was before I had your warning," he added with a look at the ranchman.

"Hum, yes," said Mr. Carson, musingly. "Well, Molick has a right to do as he pleases on his own land, of course—at least I reckon so. But I don't like that business of putting a dam across part of the river."

"Why not?" asked Dave.

"He might shut off too much water," was the answer.

"That's so!" put in Pocus Pete. "Quite a bunch of our cattle depend for a drink on what they get from Rolling River, and we've got a lot of cattle below there now," and he pointed to a section south of that part of the valley in which the work was going on.

"Oh, well, we'll not cross a bridge until we come to it," said Mr. Carson. "I'll not assume that Molick is going to do anything wrong. But when he does," he added reflectively, "then he'd better look out."

"I hope I sha'n't have started a quarrel," put in Mr. Bellmore.

"Don't worry," laughed Dave. "It doesn't take much to start a quarrel with the Molicks. Maybe it'll not amount to anything, anyhow. Say, but he is putting up some fence all right!"

Indeed the operations were on a large scale, and seemed to indicate that the Molick outfit had made good preparations.

Mr. Bellmore seemed very thoughtful. He sat on his horse, looking at the work, for the starting of which he was, in a measure, responsible. Then he remarked:

"I think I'll get out of this while I can. I'm sorry I made any tentative proposition to Molick but there's time enough yet to withdraw. I'll tell him our irrigation company can't go into that water deal with him. Can I depend on you to make some arrangements with me, regarding your water rights?" he asked of Mr. Carson.

"Well, if you give me all the particulars, and I find them to be as you say, I wouldn't have any objections to going in," replied the ranchman slowly. "I surely do need more water for my cattle and land, and if irrigation, conservation, or whatever you call it, is going to bring it about, I'll be only too glad to go into it with you. Isn't that what you say, Dave?"

The youth hesitated a moment. He felt a warm glow in his heart that the man he had so long regarded as his father reposed this much faith and confidence in him, when the secret had been disclosed.

"Yes, Dad," said Dave, slowly, "I should think it would be a good thing to go in with Mr. Bellmore's company."

"I thought you'd say so. And now let's hear from Pocus Pete. I always like to let my foreman have a word to say," he added to the Chicago man.

"And I think you do right," was the comment.

"What's your idea, Pete?" asked Mr. Carson.

"Why, I say go into it! That is, if we can get away from Molick. I never did like the idea of him controllin' so much of Rollin' River. Now if we can have all the water of our own we want, so much the better. Go into it, I says!"

"Then it's decided," announced Mr. Carson. "We'll go in with you, provided you are not so tied up with Molick that you can't unfetter yourself."

"I think there's no danger of that," said Mr. Bellmore. "I only made a tentative arrangement with him. I'll go over at once and tell him I've reconsidered my plans."

"There he is now," said Dave, pointing to two figures on horses, riding down toward the Centre O workers.

"Yes, and that bully, Len, is with him," added Pocus Pete. "Do you want to turn back, Dave?" he asked with a mischievous glance.

"Indeed I don't!" was the quick reply, and the eyes of the young cowboy flashed.

Mr. Carson's land, at this point, extended down to the edge of Rolling River, where the stream made a sharp turn. On the opposite shore were the Molick workmen. And as Dave, the ranchman and the others rode forward, Jason Molick and his son also approached the stream from their side of it.

Len glanced up and looked at Dave, but gave no other sign. Probably he had not told of the drubbing he had received.

"Can I ride across here?" asked Mr. Bellmore of Mr. Carson, after a few minutes conversation, during which Jason Molick was inspecting the progress of his workmen.

"Yes, the river, is very shallow here. Go ahead! We'll wait for you. I don't want to go on his land."

The irrigation man left his friends and, crossing the stream on his horse's back, was soon approaching Mr. Molick.

"Well, how do you think we're coming on?" asked Len's father. "I took your advice, you see—I'm going in with you on this deal. I think it's a good one, I'm ready to sign the papers whenever you say so."

"Well—er—I don't want to disappoint you, after what has taken place, Mr. Molick," began the Chicago man in rather an embarrassed fashion, "but the truth of the matter is that I guess there won't be any papers to sign."

"No papers to sign! What do you mean?"

"I mean that the deal is off!"

"The deal off? You mean the irrigation scheme you agreed to go into with me?" and Mr. Molick's voice rose.

"Yes, that deal is off," went on the engineer. "You remember I only broached it to you. I did not clinch it. I pointed out its advantages to you, and you were eager to go in. I said I would talk to you later about it."

"And now you come and say you don't want to go into it with me?" asked Molick in sneering tones.

"Yes, that is a right I reserved, you remember."

"Huh! I know what has made him back out!" exclaimed Len.

"What?" asked his father.

"He's been talking to them!" and Len pointed to Dave and the others from Bar U ranch across the stream.

"Ha! So that's the game!" exclaimed Mr. Molick. "Well, I'll show you that two can play at it, Mr. Bellmore!" he sneered. "If you don't want to go into this scheme with me, after promising—"

"I never promised!" interrupted the other.

"Well, it was the same thing. But if you don't want to go in I can get along without you. I guess you'll find you're not the only one around here who knows about dams and irrigation ditches. I and my son have some brains. We'll show you a thing or two!"

"That's what we will!" boasted Len.

"I'm sure I don't wish to curtail your activities in any way," replied the Chicago man. "I hope you have all sorts of success. But I do not feel like going on with the scheme I outlined."

"Because, I suppose, you're going in with the Bar U folks?" suggested Len.

"I haven't said so," was the quiet retort.

"No, but I can read signs. Well, there's one thing I want to tell you!" Len went on in threatening tones. "I warn you off our land—you and the Carson bunch. And as for that Dave, if I catch him I'll give him the worst licking he ever had."

"Seems to me it was the other way around," retorted Mr. Bellmore, with a grim smile. "At least it was the last time you met."

"Huh!" snorted Len. "Well, tell him to look out, that's all!"

"I don't think there is any need of that," said Mr. Bellmore. "I think Dave can look after himself. But now I'll bid you good day."

"And don't you trespass on Centre O ranch again!" was Mr. Molick's warning. "I've seen enough of you."

Mr. Bellmore felt the same way about it, but did not think it necessary to say so.

He rode slowly back across the stream and rejoined his friends.

"Well?" asked Dave.

"It's all off," the Chicago man said. "I've ended negotiations with them, and I'm sorry I ever tried to do business. But it will be all right. They can do business in their own way, and we'll do ours as we please. I'll look into the irrigation possibilities on your property now, Mr. Carson. We'll not hear anything more from the Molick outfit."

But Mr. Bellmore failed to reckon on the mean characters of the Molick father and son. It was only a few days after this that one of the cowboys came riding post-haste to the ranch house. He dismounted in a cloud of dust, and seeing Dave and Mr. Carson standing together hurried toward them, calling out:

"Th' bottom must have dropped out of Rolling River. It's almost dry down below there, where I've got that bunch of fine cattle, and they can't get anything to drink. What are we going to do? Something must have happened to th' river."

"What can it be?" cried Dave. "Has an earthquake occurred, or has the river unexpectedly taken an underground course?"

"Neither one, I imagine," said Mr. Carson, slowly. "This is retaliation, I fancy. I'll go back with you Skinny, and see what has happened. But I'm sure it's retaliation."

CHAPTER XVI

UNAVAILING EFFORTS

Dave, who had heard this talk, leaped on the back of Crow, and followed Mr. Carson and the cowboy who rejoiced in the euphonious title of "Skinny."

"What do you mean by retaliation, Dad?" he asked. "Has it anything to do with the Molicks?"

"A whole lot to do with them, Dave, I'm afraid," was the reply.

"You mean they have diverted some of your water?"

"Some of it! Better say all of it!" exclaimed the disgusted Skinny. "There ain't enough comin' down Rollin' River, over where I come from, t' make a cup of coffee."

"As bad as that?" asked Mr. Carson in alarm.

"Well, almost. I got skeered and made up my mind I'd come and tell you about it."

"You did just right, Skinny. We may be able to get ahead of these chaps after all."

"I hope we can," murmured Dave.

Though Dave had seldom, for any length of time, lost sight of the fact that he was a "nobody," still he could not help feeling an interest in the ranch, which had been the only home he had known for a long time. In fact it was really the only home he knew, for he did not, of course, recall his days of babyhood. And now, though Dave knew that he was not Mr. Carson's son, though he realized that he might never

inherit the broad acres over which roamed thousands of cattle, still he retained the feeling of loyalty and fealty that caused him to hope for the best.

"I wonder if I'll ever find my real folks," mused Dave, as he rode on with Mr. Carson and Skinny. "It's hardly possible, after all these years."

Over the rolling plains they rode, now and then catching sight of distant herds of cattle under the guard of cowboys, again gaining a view of the distant Centre O ranch. But they saw no sign of Molick or Len, nor could they catch, in the direction they were going, a glimpse of the place where the fence work and dam building had been going on.

A little later they topped another rise, and began to descend into a sheltered and fertile valley where Mr. Carson usually sent his choice cattle to fatten before shipping them to the dealers in Chicago and elsewhere.

As the three came within sight of this valley they saw a strange sight. Instead of the cattle quietly grazing, with perhaps small bunches of them wandering now and then to the banks of the stream to get a drink, the whole herd seemed scattered along the water course. And instead of quietly drinking the cattle seemed fighting among themselves. Pushing, struggling, rearing with heads up against one another, bellowing and stampeding.

On the outside vainly rode two or three cowboys who were doing their best to keep the rearmost cattle from rushing over those in the front rank, who were nearest the water.

"What does it mean?" demanded Mr. Carson of Skinny, as he urged his horse forward. "What does it mean?"

"It's a stampede!" cried Dave. "Maybe Len is trying some of his mean tricks again."

"It's a trick, but it isn't any like that," said Skinny. "None of that Molick crowd is around here now."

"But what's the matter?" demanded the ranchman.

"Water—or, rather lack of water," said the cowboy briefly. "The cattle are half mad with thirst I expect. And I guess maybe it isn't so much of a real thirst as it is the fear that there won't be any water left after an hour or two. Cattle know more that way than we give 'em credit for."

"This is serious!" exclaimed Mr. Carson.

"I thought you'd think so. That's why I come for you," Skinny explained.

The three rode down the slope, the confusion among the cattle increasing every moment.

"What can you do?" asked Dave.

"Have to drive 'em over to the other range, there's water there, I should think," Mr. Carson answered. "That is, if Molick and his bunch haven't tried any of their tricks there."

"No, they can't stop the supply there," said Skinny. "It's only here, where the river takes a sharp turn above us, that they could cut off the supply."

"Then you think there's no question but that they did it?" as had Dave of Mr. Carson.

"Hardly any doubt," was the reply. "But of course I'll look into it. Watch out now, Dave. Those cattle are fairly wild, and I don't want you to be hurt."

The ranchman looked affectionately at the youth, and Dave felt a warm spot in his heart for the man who had done so much for him.

"I don't believe we can drive 'em back until they've licked up every last drop," said Skinny. "Then they'll know there's no use in stayin' and we may be able to do somethin' with 'em."

"Is it drying up as badly as that?" asked Mr. Carson.

"You'll soon see," was the answer.

Only skillful cowpunchers could have made their way through that maddened, seething, wild herd of cattle. But Dave, Mr. Carson and Skinny were more at home in the saddle than afoot. Their intelligent ponies pushed their way through the heaving mass of steers until the three of them stood on the brink

of what had been a fair-sized branch of the Rolling River but a few hours before.

Now all that showed was a small, narrow ribbon of muddy water, in the clay-like expanse of what had been the bed of the original stream.

"Whew!" whistled Mr. Carson. "This sure is bad!"

"I should say so!" exclaimed Dave.

A sharp bend in the course of the stream above them cut off all but a very limited view. But, as far as they could see, the same conditions prevailed. There was only a small trickle of water. It was in the very middle, the lowest point of the stream, and up to the very edge of this the thirst-tortured cattle pressed, sinking down deep in the soft mud.

"We've got to get 'em out of that," declared the ranchman. "A lot of 'em will be mired if we don't."

"There are some mired now," said Skinny, pointing. "Ed and Foster are trying to yank 'em out."

He indicated two cowboys who, with ropes around the mired steers, were trying to drag them to solid ground. Other animals, though, were pressing in to make their way to the water.

It was a hot day, and bore a promise of being hotter. It needed but a glance to show that the water would soon fail entirely. And it was evident what had caused it. At some point, higher up, the supply had been cut off or diverted.

"Well," said Mr. Carson quickly, like a general on the field meeting a reverse, and deciding on the best way to save the day, "well, the only thing we can do is to get the cattle off this range. Take 'em over to the spring, Skinny-you and the rest of the boys. Fight 'em hard-it's the only way. I'll ride on up and see what's happened to our water supply. Dave, you ride back and get Mr. Bellmore. Maybe he can tell us a way out of this trouble. He's a water engineer."

Thus were the orders issued, and the cowboys and Dave prepared to carry them out. Hardly had Mr. Carson ceased speaking than Skinny rode off with a whoop to aid his fellows.

Dave watched for a moment as the cowboys prepared to move the herd of valuable cattle. It would be hard work to get them away from the water while a drop yet remained in the muddy pools. But it must be done, for if the steers were allowed to remain there many of them would be mired, and in the fight for water others would be trampled on and killed.

As Dave galloped back to the ranch to summon the irrigation engineer he saw Mr. Carson head his pony for the bend, above which was the beginning of the Centre O ranch.

Then the young cowpuncher gave a look at the strenuous efforts of the cowboys to move the maddened cattle.

"They'll have their own troubles," Dave reasoned. "I'll help them as soon as I get back."

He covered the distance to the ranch in record time, and found Mr. Bellmore busy over some calculations. The engineer was surprised to learn what had happened, and at once jumped on his horse and galloped off with Dave.

When they again reached the valley Mr. Carson had not yet returned from his trip to the bend, but the cattle were in a worse tangle than before. The cowboys efforts to drive them away from what was now nothing but a long mudhole, were unavailing.

"Something's got to be done!" cried Skinny. "We've lost some already, and more will die soon. We've got to get 'em away from here. But we can't as long as they smell even the mud. What's to be done?"

Dave looked gloomily on, but could not answer. Could the engineer solve the problem?

CHAPTER XVII

THE ROUND-UP

Again and again did the weary cowboys try to force the maddened cattle to move away from the now veritable mud hole, that they might drive them to another range where there was water for them to drink. But the steers, usually intelligent in this matter, seemed to have lost all their instinct. They only wanted to remain near the spot where they had been accustomed to drink.

"Say, this is fierce!" cried Mr. Bellmore.

"It certainly is," agreed Dave. "What can we do?"

"Let's see if we can't lend a hand to get the animals off, and on the move," suggested the engineer. "Those cowboys need help."

Skinny and his mates certainly did. They were almost exhausted from their strenuous labors.

But even with the experienced help of Dave, and the well-meant efforts of Mr. Bellmore, the cattle could not be moved. They fought for places at the edge of the stream—which was a stream no longer, but only a slough, in which more than one fine steer was now mired.

"It's of no use," said Skinny, wearily, after a bit. "You can't budge 'em! They'll have to die here."

"No they won't!" exclaimed the engineer.

"How are you goin' t' stop 'em?" asked another of the cowboys. "They can't get any water here, they won't leave, an' everybody knows that without water cattle can't live long."

"If we can't drive 'em to water we'll have to do the next best thing."

"And that is—" began Dave.

"Bring the water to them!"

"But how can we? The supply is cut off somewhere above. Dad went to see about it, but he hasn't come back yet."

"Then we'll go up there too. Something's got to be done. It may take desperate measures, but if the Molicks have built a dam, to divert your water from here, we'll have to open it; that's all."

"Will they let you?" asked Skinny, settling wearily in his saddle.

"We'll do it whether they let us or not!" exclaimed the engineer. "It's my fault, in a way, that they did this, for I pointed out the advantage it would be to them to have a dam, and I'll do my best to make good the trouble caused. Come on, Dave. Well ride up above and see what we can do. Meanwhile, you boys do your best to keep the cattle from stampeding. They won't let themselves be driven away, that's sure, so we've got to bring water to them."

"If we only can," murmured Cowboy Dave. He felt it to be a hopeless task.

Now that the cowboys had given over their efforts to drive the cattle away from the water-hole the beasts were quieter. Left to themselves, they scattered somewhat and sought for places where little pools might have formed, and where they could slake their thirst. It was not much water that remained, and the bellowings of the cattle, and their panting appearance as their parched tongues fairly hung from their mouths, filled the hearts of Dave and his friend with pity for the poor beasts.

"We haven't any time to lose," said Mr. Bellmore, as he urged his horse, Kurd, toward the bend of the stream. Dave, on Crow, followed, wondering what would be the outcome. Dave glanced back from time to time at the thirst-maddened cattle. Some of them forced their way into the muddy sloughs in spite of the desperate efforts of the cowboys to drive them back. Then it was necessary to try to pull them out by lariats attached to them, and extending to the horns of the saddles.

"Poor beasts!" murmured the young cow-puncher.

He and Mr. Bellmore had ridden for perhaps a mile when they saw a figure galloping toward them.

"Who's that?" asked the engineer, pulling up suddenly.

"Dad," answered Dave. "He rode up to investigate. He'll be able to tell us what happened."

"It's easy enough to guess," said Mr. Bellmore. "The Molicks have built an intercepting dam, to get even with you and me."

And this was exactly what Mr. Carson reported as he rode up.

"They've cut off our water supply," he called to Dave and the engineer. "They've made a board and mud dam right across the river, and turned the water onto their own land. They're making irrigating ditches now as fast as they can work."

"I suspected as much," Mr. Bellmore said, "Is the dam a very big or strong one?"

"Not especially so. But the water is low at this season of the year, and it doesn't take much of a dam to block it off from me. This dam is made of boards, banked up with clay and stones."

"Would it be easy to break away?" asked the engineer.

"Yes, I suppose so. But Molick will take precious good care that it doesn't break away, They're strengthening it all the while."

"Oh, I didn't suppose it would break away of its own accord," the engineer said. "I meant would we have much trouble in making a breach in it?"

"We?" cried Dave. "Do you mean—"

"I mean that we've got to break that dam to save your cattle!" the engineer said. "It's the only way!"

"Break the dam!" murmured Dave. Yet his eyes sparkled at the thought.

"Yes," assented the irrigation engineer.

"But we can't do that," objected Mr. Carson. "It's on Molick's land, and if we go there, and start something, he'll fight us. He is a desperate man."

"And so ought you to be with your cattle dying of thirst," said Mr. Bellmore.

"I am, but—"

"There aren't any buts about it," declared the other. "This is a desperate situation, and we'll have to meet it desperately. Morally, right is on your side, and I think it is legally, too. I've been looking into the records and titles of lands along this Rolling River and I find that you have not received all the water rights that belong to you, Mr. Carson. On the other hand Molick has taken more than his share.

"And there is no doubt that he had no right to build the dam in the way he has. He should have let some water come down to you. Now the only way to accomplish this is to make a breach in the dam. This will let your cattle drink."

"But if we do that—break the dam—he'll either fight us to prevent it, or he'll build it up again," Dave said.

"He may fight, but I doubt it. He was warned once before that he was exceeding his property rights, and he can't claim ignorance now. And while it is true that he may build the dam over again, after we cut through it, I don't so much care for that."

"A change will have to be made anyhow, but if you can get a little water, temporarily, to your cattle it will save them, and you can drive them to other ranges."

"Yes, I could do that," admitted the ranch-man.

"Then on to the dam!" cried the engineer, turning his horse as he spoke.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Dave. "That's the way to talk!"

Urged on by the thought of the suffering cattle, the three made good speed to the place where the river turned. There, as Mr. Carson had seen a short time before, was the newly-built dam. A number of cowboys were about it, and Dave saw Len, his enemy.

"Are you game?" asked the engineer.

"I am!" exclaimed the ranchman.

Dave said nothing, but there was a flash in his eyes as he nodded his head that told more than mere words.

"You and I will go up and have a talk with them," suggested Mr. Bellmore. "Meanwhile Dave can ride and get some of your men, Mr. Carson. We'll need help if it comes to a fight, though I hope it won't. We'll make a formal protest first. Hurry, Dave, every minute may mean a steer's life."

Dave whirled his steed about and rode hard and straight for the nearest range where some of the Bar U men were guarding the cattle. Meanwhile Mr. Carson and the engineer crossed the stream below the dam, and rode toward the Centre O boys.

"Well, what do you want?" surlily demanded the young heir of the house of Molick. "This is private land, and no trespassers are wanted. Get off!" he snarled.

"We came on business," said Mr. Carson. "Where's your father?"

"I don't know. But he told me if you came on this land to order you off, and that's what I do!"

"Ordering and going are two different things," said the ranchman, with a grim laugh. "You've cut off my water down below, with this dam, and I order you to open it up. My cattle are dying from thirst. Open this dam!"

"Not much!" sneered Whitey Wasson, Len's crony.

"But I tell you my cattle are dying, man!" exclaimed Mr. Carson. "You know what it means to steers to be without water this kind of weather."

"You ought to have thought of that before you pastured them down there," sneered the cowboy.

"Then you refuse to open the dam?" asked Mr. Bellmore.

"We certainly do!" returned Len.

"Then you must take the consequences," said Mr. Bellmore, speaking solemnly. "You will be sued for the value of every animal that dies of thirst, as well as being obliged to pay heavy damages for the trouble you have caused. I know the situation of water rights in this valley, and I tell you that you are acting illegally. Now do you still refuse to open that dam?"

Len looked a bit frightened at this warning, but Whitey whispered to him, and the son of Jason Molick answered:

"Go on! We're not afraid. This dam is on our land and you can't touch it!"

At that moment a distant whoop sounded. Mr. Carson and the engineer looked around and saw a cloud of dust approaching. It soon resolved itself into Dave, leading a number of cowboys who bore picks and shovels—rather unusual implements for cowpunchers. On they came, hard-riding, singing and shouting, eager for the fray. They outnumbered the Centre O outfit.

"Well, since you won't open the dam, we'll have to do it for you," went on Mr. Bellmore. "Lively, boys!" he called, as Dave and his friends rode up. "Tear out the dam and let the water down where it ought to run. Lively now!"

"Don't you touch that dam!" screamed Len.

"Go on! I order you to tear it away!" said Mr. Carson to his men.

"Whoop!" they yelled in response, and a moment later, flinging themselves from their horses, they swarmed into the water and began the work of destruction.

Dave, Mr. Carson and the engineer looked anxious for a moment, feeling that the Centre O boys might put up a fight. But not a gun was drawn.

Perhaps the cowboys employed by the Molick outfit were disgusted with the tactics of their employer, when they heard the story of the thirst-dying cattle. No true cowboy would countenance that sort of thing. So they looked on idly while the Bar U men tore away the dam.

A little trickle of water came through, flowing down the course from which it had been diverted. Gradually it grew in volume until a gushing stream filled the muddy bed of the stream.

"That's what was needed," murmured Dave. "That will save our cattle."

"Stop it! Let that dam alone!" yelled Len, over and over again. But no one paid any attention to him—not even the cowboys of the Centre O. They only smiled and rolled cigarettes. Perhaps they were glad

to see Len beaten.

But the bully and Whitey Wasson were whispering together, and soon they rode off at a gallop.

"They've gone to get the Old Man," said one of the Bar U cowboys.

"We don't care," Dave said. "Enough water has gone down now to save our cattle, and it will be some time before they can build up that dam again."

"That's right," agreed Mr. Bellmore. "You needn't try to save any of the boards," he added significantly to the cowboys who were destroying the obstruction.

And so the work went on, and when it had been accomplished the Bar U boys rode away to their usual tasks. For much remained to be done.

"We've got to get the cattle off that range," said Mr. Carson. "Molick will have that dam in place again as soon as he can, and it will be the same story over again."

"That's what he will," assented the engineer. "And though I think you could stop him by legal action, it would take so long that your cattle would die of thirst. The best way is to remove them, and fight him afterward."

The pent-up waters were now rushing down their accustomed channel, and when the cattle range was reached the steers were drinking their fill. Most of them had been saved, only a few died, but some choice ones were included in this number.

"And now for the big round-up!" exclaimed Mr. Carson, when the cattle, their thirst slaked, were willing to be driven on. "I'll move all my stock to some place where Molick can't kill them off. Then I'll fight him to the last ditch!"

"Hurrah!" cried Dave.

"Hurrah for the round-up!" yelled the cowboys. It meant hard work, but it meant excitement, too, and that was a large part of their lives.

CHAPTER XVIII

A MIDNIGHT BLAZE

Once the thirsty cattle had satisfied their longing for water, it was a comparatively easy matter to drive them from the temporary range where they had been sent to fatten. The river was running at its usual rate, but of course it could not be said how long this would continue.

"Len and his father will get busy and build that dam again," remarked Dave, as he and Mr. Bellmore, with Pocus Pete and the cowboys, herded the cattle together to drive them away.

"Yes, I suppose so, until we can take legal action against him," assented the water agent, who was rapidly learning the rudiments of cow-punching.

"And legal action is going to take a long time," said Mr. Carson. "I haven't done any more of it than I've had to in my life, but it is mighty slow action."

"But it is sure in the end," said Mr. Bellmore. "And I am positive that right is on your side."

"Well, we won't take any more chances with the cattle getting water here—at least for a while," said the ranch owner. "We'll make the main round-up while we're at it, and then we'll see what we can do. I'll sell off a big supply of steers, and that will mean less water will be required. Then I'll be in a better position to make a fight against Molick and his crowd."

"That's a good idea—reducing your cattle until the water matter is settled," the Chicago man said.

Talking and laughing among themselves, at the manner in which they had destroyed the dam, and let in the water to its former course, the cowboys rode along, driving the cattle. Not all who had been summoned for this work were needed to drive the steers, since they went willingly enough.

"So some of you had better ride on ahead to the ranch house, and get ready for the round-up tomorrow," said Mr. Carson. "There'll be busy times, then. And, too," he added in a low voice, "I rather want them around the place just at present."

"Why?" asked Dave.

"Oh, you never can tell what Molick will do," was the answer.

"You mean he might try to be revenged on you for opening the dam?" asked Mr. Bellmore.

"Something like that—yes. It wouldn't be the first time if a barn or bunk house or a pile of fodder should go up in smoke. Such things have occurred here."

"And was it never found out who did it?"

"Well, we had our suspicions. Almost always the one who suffered was on the outs with the Molick crowd."

"I think I'll ride back myself," Dave said. "I've got a few possessions I wouldn't like to have damaged."

"I'll go with you," offered Mr. Bellmore. "There are some valuable papers on this irrigation scheme that I wouldn't like to lose, or see fall into the hands of strangers."

"Oh, I don't really believe there is any danger," went on Mr. Carson. "I was just taking the utmost precaution. But ride on if you want to, Dave. We can handle the cattle all right now, and I want to talk to Pocus Pete about the round-up."

So Dave and his friend rode on ahead, following some of the cowboys who had been summoned to tear away the dam. Now that the excitement was over Dave felt a little reaction, which generally follows high tension. As Dave looked at the young man riding beside him he could not help contrasting their two positions.

"I guess he knows all right who he is," mused Dave. "No worrying about his father and mother or about his future. As for me, I don't know whether I'm a rag-picker's son, or whether I came from a millionaire's family."

Yet, as he thought it over more soberly, Dave could not help thinking that he must have had as parents persons in that broad, and altogether desirable, middle class.

"If they were millionaires they would hardly have been living in a small Missouri town," reasoned the young cowboy, "and if I came from rag-picker ancestors I'd have had on such ragged clothes that Mr. Carson would have noticed that and spoken of it. And that reminds me. I must ask him about the clothing I wore, and about how old I was. Maybe he kept the garments, and they might form a clew. Yes, that's what I'll do. I'll ask Mr. Carson about it."

To himself Dave always thought of the ranchman as "Mr. Carson," though when he spoke he called him "Dad," for he did not want strangers to surmise concerning the secret, nor did he wish to hurt the man who had been a father to him.

"Anything wrong?" Inquired Mr. Bellmore, as they cantered along.

"Wrong? No. Why?" asked Dave, looking up suddenly.

"Why you're as glum as an owl, and as silent as one of these prairie dogs," went on the engineer. "You haven't said a word for over a mile. Is something troubling you?"

"Yes—that is, no!" exclaimed Dave. "I was—just thinking."

"Oh, I could see that," returned the other with a laugh. "Well, if it's anything about this water business, don't worry. Molick and his crowd may bother your father for a time, but Bar U ranch will win out—I'm sure of it!"

"I hope so," murmured Dave. "They're a mean crowd, though," and he thought of the cowardly taunt of Len Molick—the taunt which had first given him the clew to his lack of identity.

"Well, I'll do all I can for you and your father," went on the engineer. "I owe a great deal to you both. In fact I am convinced that I owe my life to you."

"Oh, pshaw!" deprecated Dave.

"Yes, that's a fact," went on Mr. Bellmore. "I might have lain caught there in that gully until I died, for it is a lonely place."

"Yes, that's true enough," agreed Dave.

"And so, in a small way, I'm going to do all I can to repay you," said the Chicago man. "I know something about water rights, irrigation and title deeds to streams, even if I'm not much on the cowpunching," he added with a smile, "and such knowledge as I have is at your service."

"Well, I'm sure we'll appreciate it—dad and I," said Dave. "Now let's try a little run. Crow is just spoiling for a good gallop, and the way from here home is as fine a track as you'd want."

Calling to his horse, Dave set him at a gallop, being followed by Mr. Bellmore on Kurd, and the two indulged in an impromptu race, reaching the ranch house at the same time.

"Hi there, Hop Loy!" called Dave. "Grub ready?"

"Alle same leady velly soon," said the amiable Chinese, with a cheerful grin, "How you like plan-cakes?"

"Plan-cakes strike me as about right; don't they you, Mr. Bellmore?"

"I should say they would be eminently fitting and proper," returned the engineer with a laugh.

Presently there were busy scenes being enacted at Bar U ranch as the cowboys came in from their various stations, including those men who were with Mr. Carson, driving in the cattle that had been in such danger.

"Grub" in other words, supper, was served, a prodigious number of "plan-cakes" being consumed. But far from being annoyed, Hop Loy was pleased the more the boys ate. His shrill voice, singing a Chinese song, rose higher and higher as he toiled in his kitchen, baking stack after stack of the brown cakes.

"Velly much glood eat!" he exclaimed with a grin.

"Hop, you're all right!" cried Pocus Pete.

"Your pig-tail is safe with us!" declared Tubby Larkin, as he passed his plate for more cakes.

Preparations for the round-up were made that night, and the real work began next morning. A round-up on a cattle ranch, as I suppose you all know, means just what the word implies. A rounding up, or bringing together, of all the beasts, that a count may be made and some disposed of.

When the cattle roamed freely about the plains there was an intermingling of herds, and the only way one man could tell his "critters" from those of his neighbor, was by the brand marks on their flanks, or cuts in the ears. Of course in later years when there were more fences, the work became easier.

In the round-up the calves born since the last accounting are branded, and cattle matters generally are straightened out, and settled for the ensuing year.

And this was the work that Dave and his cowboy friends did. The main object of having it done now at the Bar U ranch was to provide for the water contingency. Mr. Carson realized that Molick would probably soon again shut off a portion of his supply.

"And if I can't get enough water for all my cattle I'll have to keep a smaller number until the tangle is straightened out," said the ranchman, "I'll sell off while I have the chance, and buy later in the fall."

These were busy times. From distant ranges the cattle were driven in. Those needing branding were "cut out," or separated from the rest of the herd. With skillful throws of their ropes Dave and the others would lasso the creatures, throwing them and holding them to the ground, while another cowpuncher, with an iron made hot in a hastily built fire, imprinted on the flank of the unbranded cow or steer the device of a letter U with a straight bar across it. This marked the animal as Mr. Carson's.

Riders dashed here and there, shouting, yelling, now and then laughing, and occasionally firing off big revolvers to turn some refractory steer.

The dust-cloud was thick over everything. It coated the faces of the cowboys until they appeared to be wearing masks. Now and then one of them would have a fall, but seldom with any serious results.

It was work, toil, sweat, ride hard, gallop here and there, yell, shout, leap, stumble, fall and get up again. And gradually something like order came out of the chaos.

Over at the chuck wagon Hop Loy stood ready to serve a hasty lunch whenever it was called for. Water, thickened with oatmeal, or made spicy with vinegar and ginger, "switchel," as it is called, served to quench the thirst.

"Well, I guess we have 'em pretty well where we want 'em," said Dave, at the close of the day. "Pretty good round-up; eh, Dad?"

"Yes, but it isn't over yet," was the answer. Mr. Carson cast a look at the sky. All his cattle were now gathered in one immense herd, branded, and ready for division during the following few days. A large number would be shipped away, and others would be scattered over the ranch on ranges where the water supply could not be tampered with by Jason Molick.

"Thinking of a storm?" asked Mr. Bellmore, for a midnight storm will sometimes stampede a bunch of cattle more quickly than anything else.

"Well, I don't like the look of the sky," the ranchman said. "But it may blow over."

Night on the prairies. Night, with a great herd of cattle to be looked after. The cowboys rode slowly around the immense herd, singing their own peculiar songs. Some claimed that the cattle were quieter if they heard singing.

"Though th' way some of those fellers howl is enough t' give any self-respectin' cow critter th' nightmare," declared Pocus Pete.

"Go on! You're just jealous 'cause you can't warble!" said Skinny.

Gradually those who were not on night duty rolled themselves up in their blankets and forgot the cares of the day in heavy slumber. Dave lay near Mr. Carson and Mr. Bellmore. But for some reason or other the young cowboy could not sleep. He stared up at the stars which had been dim, but were now quite bright.

"I don't believe we're going to get a storm," mused Dave.

He arose to get a drink of water, thinking perhaps this change might bring slumber. As he stood for a moment, after quenching his thirst, he gazed over the great dark mass of slightly moving cattle. He heard the distant songs of the cowboys. And then, suddenly, Dave saw something else. It was a glow off to the west—a red, dull glow that nearly caused his heart to stop beating.

"That's a fire!" he murmured. For a moment he thought of the ranch buildings, but an instant later he knew it was in the opposite direction.

The glow increased. It lighted the sky. Dave sprang toward the place where the ranchman slept.

"Fire! Fire!" he cried. "The prairie is on fire!"

CHAPTER XIX

FIGHTING FIRE

The cry of fire at any time, is a dreadful one to hear. Whether it be in the crowded city, or in the lonely country; whether on board a ship on the heaving ocean, or an alarm given where factory workers are assembled; it is fearsome, always.

And though Dave and his friends were out on the great, open prairies, where the fire might have full sweep without ever coming near them, yet the cry of the young cowboy roused all instantly.

For fire on the prairies means more than would at first seem, and when a herd of cattle is in its path it is a warning that must be heeded at once if one would save the stock.

If there is not actual danger from the fire itself, there is the risk of its stampeding the cattle causing them to make a mad rush in which many will be killed.

"Fire! Fire!" yelled Dave, but his first cry was enough. All the sleepers jumped to their feet, and an echoing cry came from the cowboys who, on the far side of the herd of cattle were riding around them

to keep them from straying.

As yet the animals had not taken the alarm. They could not smell the fire, for it was too far away, and the dull, distant glow in the west, as yet, meant nothing to them.

Nor had Dave's cries, and the answers thereto, given them any alarm. They were accustomed to the shouting and yelling of the cowboys day and night, and a little more or less of this noise did not startle them.

"Fire did you say, Dave?" cried Mr. Carson, as he shook his blanket from him.

"Yes, Dad. Over there!"

Dave pointed to the glow. It was brighter now.

"Yes, it's a fire sure enough," was the ranchman's remark. "And traveling fast, too."

"Wind's blowing her this way," remarked Pocus Pete, who had joined the two. "Got t' get busy, boys." That last to the cowboys who were now up, ready for business.

"A prairie fire!" cried Mr. Bellmore. "How are you going to fight it?"

"There are only two ways," said Pocus Pete. "By plowing, or by firing a strip so wide that the main fire can't cross. We won't have time to plow. We've got to fight fire with fire. Come on, boys."

"Oh, if we only had water!" murmured the engineer.

"It wouldn't do us much good," said the ranchman. "When that fire gets here it will be a mile or more wide, and no hose would reach that far."

"That's right," chimed in Dave. He had not seen many prairie fires, but he knew something of their danger. "I guess we'll have to back fire. Though we could send for some plows, Dad."

"Yes, and I think I'll do that," the ranchman said. "The wind may shift, and I'd feel better if I had some plowed furrows between that blaze and my cattle."

Plowing and burning a strip are the two principal methods used in fighting prairie fires. The dry grass of the plains, when it starts to burn, goes like tinder. If it can be done in time, it is often effective to light another fire in front of the one that is rolling forward. This consumes the grass on which the flames feed, and when they reach that spot there is nothing for them to burn. And if one stands on the area burned he will be comparatively safe. Of course care must be taken not to get singed in the back-fire.

Another method is to plow the ground, turning the dried grass under, and leaving only the bare earth exposed. If a strip can be plowed wide enough the fire can not leap over it.

"Lively now, boys!" called Mr. Carson. "Dave, you go over and help keep the cattle from stampeding. Keep 'em milling." This means keeping the animals going around and around in concentric circles, like a mill wheel. When they can be made to do this they seldom break and run wild.

"Oh, Dad! Let me go to fight the fire!" pleaded the youth.

"All right. Only take care of yourself," was the caution.

"I'll go and help the boys mill the cattle," offered the water engineer. "I believe I can do that."

"I think so, though it isn't going to be an easy task," said the ranchman.

The glare of the distant fire was now brighter, and a dull roar could be heard. The cattle seemed to be aware of the danger, and it required hard work on the part of the punchers to keep them from breaking. With shouts and yells, with lashings from their shortened lariats and with shots from their heavy revolvers the punchers did manage, however, to keep the creatures in a compact mass.

Some cowboys, leaping into the chuck wagon, had started to drive to the ranch buildings to bring back plows and plow horses. They might, if they were lucky, return in time to help in keeping back the flames.

But the main fighting force, which Dave joined, rode straight toward the onrushing flames in the desperate endeavor to fight fire with fire. They would need to reach a spot, though, where the wind was blowing away from them and the cattle, and toward the main blaze. Such places can often be found in

the rolling prairie, with its many glades and swales. Then, too, the heat of the big fire often creates a vacuum, or back draft, causing air to rush in toward the leaping flames, and making a wind blow toward them that will carry with it the fire started to offset the menacing one.

"Here's a good spot!" exclaimed Pocus Pete at length. "Scatter along here, boys, and set the grass ablaze."

Leaping from the backs of their ponies, the cowboys gave the reins into the hands of one of their number to hold, for the horses could not be trusted to stand alone with the fire coming ever nearer them. And without their mounts the cowboys would be lost.

The spot where the party now found itself was down in a little depression, or swale, and the wind was blowing away from them and toward the main conflagration.

"Light, boys!" cried the foreman, as he struck a match and applied it to a bunch of dried grass that made a rude torch. The others, including Dave, did the same. Soon little spurts of flame in the grass showed where the contending fire was started.

"Watch it now, boys!" Pocus Pete warned them. "If you see it starting to creep back on you swat it out. Take your blankets, and see if you can't find a water hole. Sozzle your blankets in that and swat the blaze if she starts to run back on you."

A spring, or, rather a mud-hole that passed for one, was found, and in this the blankets were wet. Then, as the contending fire burned onward, some little tongues of flame crept back toward the spot where the cattle had been left. These were "swatted" with the wet blankets as fast as seen.

"Well, she's going!" cried Dave, as he saw the fire they had set to fight the other leaping onward as though to meet the blazing enemy. "That ought to burn a safety strip."

"If th' wind doesn't turn," murmured Pocus Pete. "If th' wind doesn't turn."

Anxiously now they waited, looking the while to see that no stray sparks set a fire behind them. Dirty, dusty, choking and smoke-begrimed, the cowboys fought the oncoming fire. Back of them their comrades worked hard to hold in check the frightened cattle, while others were racing back with the plowing outfit.

And off to the west glowed, roared and crackled the menacing prairie fire.

CHAPTER XX

THE CHASE

"Lively boys! Swat it out! Farther off to the left there, Skinny!"

"All right, Pete! I get you!"

"Dave, there's a flicker behind you. Swat it out!"

"Out she goes!" answered the young cowboy.

"Tubby, step along with a little more life!" the foreman cried. "Th' fire'll git yo' if yo' don't watch out!"

"I'm goin' along as fast as I can, Pete."

"Well, move faster. We've got to beat this fire!"

Thus with friendly gibes and taunts Pete kept his men at work. The fire was coming nearer, but the burned strip was widening too, and soon would be too broad for the flames to leap over.

They would separate, of course, and travel down on either side of the charred section, but the cattle might be saved.

Up and down the length of the line of fire they had started to offset the other, keeping well back of it, and watching that no stray sparks or wisps of burning grass got behind them, Dave and his comrades

worked hard. The immediate danger seemed to have passed, but a shift in the wind might come at any time, and render their task futile.

"A little more, boys, and we'll call it done!" exclaimed the foreman, wiping his grimy, sweaty face on his sleeve. It did not greatly improve his countenance, however.

Dave and the others lengthened the line of back-fire, and then, seeing that they had burned a strip sufficiently wide to make it comparatively certain that the oncoming fire would not leap over it, they turned back to help plow the furrows, or to keep the cattle in order and from stampeding.

Leaping on their snorting ponies the cowboys rode back, leaving behind them two fires where before there had been but one. But soon the two would merge into one, leaving a broad, blackened barren strip, that contained no fuel for the flames.

"It's lucky we struck that swale where the wind blew in the other direction," Dave remarked.

"Mighty lucky," assented Pocus Pete.

Of course where a strong wind is blowing a prairie fire toward one, another method of escape can be taken. If there is time a fire can be started where one is standing. The wind will carry it in the same direction as that in which the main blaze is advancing, but ahead of it. Then, as the grass is burned off, and the ground cools, one can follow the second fire, getting far enough in toward the center of the area one has burned to be safe. But this method can not be used where the second fire would consume buildings or cattle, as would have been the case here.

"How'd you make out?" demanded Mr. Carson, as Dave and the others, smoke-begrimed and weary, rode up.

"All right. There's a big burned patch between us and the fire now," said Pocus Pete. "Have the plows come?"

"Not yet."

"Hark!" exclaimed Dave. "What's that?"

A thunder of hoofs could be heard, thudding on the ground.

"The cattle—a stampede!" gasped Tubby Larkin.

"No, it's the boys coming back with the plow outfit," said Dave. "I can hear the rattle of the wheels on the chuck wagon."

And his guess proved correct. A little later the wagon rumbled up. Led along behind it were a number of horses kept for use on the farm that was attached to the ranch. The animals were quickly hitched to the plows—several of them—and then began the turning over of a number of damp furrows of earth, which would offer no food for the flames.

The fire was increasing, for it found much dry material on the sun-baked prairie. It had not yet reached the strip that had been burned to stop it. Would it pause there, and divide? Or would it still come on toward the cattle?

Those were questions each one was asking.

The cattle were becoming more and more excited as the sky was lighted more brilliantly by the bright glare. The smell of fire and smoke was in the air, and the crackle and roar of the flames sounded louder. The cattle heard and were afraid.

"Come, Dave!" called Pocus Pete. "Guess we'll find our work cut out for us over there now. They won't need us to help with the plowing."

Indeed the cowboys in charge of the cattle had their hands full. Every now and then some steer would make a break, and if he were not quickly turned and driven back it meant that others would follow. Quick action was required.

And while the men selected for that work attended to the turning over of the brown earth, Dave and the others, under the direction of Pocus Pete kept the cattle from stampeding.

The prairies were now as well lighted as at early dawn. In fact with that dull, red glare over everything, it was not unlike a dawn—the dawn that brings a storm in its wake.

The roar of the fire sounded like distant thunder, and there was a smoky taste to the air, which was hot and stifling.

"Look out for that fellow, Dave!" called the foreman, as a big steer made a break for liberty.

"I'll get him!" shouted the young cowboy, as, whirling his lasso in readiness he spurred after the animal.

As Dave rode on, another steer, thinking perhaps to take advantage of the distraction, started out after the first one, and directly behind Dave. With lowered head the animal took after the horse and rider, seemingly with the intention of trying to overthrow them.

"Look out, Dave!" yelled Mr. Bellmore. "He'll toss you!"

The engineer sent his horse on the run toward Dave, but it is doubtful if the Chicago man could have done anything, not being an expert in handling the rope.

But Skinny had seen Dave's danger, and with a yell he took after the second steer. An instant later his lasso had settled over the animal's head, and as the pony stopped short, and braced back, the steer fell, his feet kicking in the air.

Dave himself was not aware of what had happened, so intent was he on driving back the brute he was after. And it was not until he had done this, and looked back, seeing the prostrate creature, that our hero was aware of what had happened. Then he understood at once.

"Thanks, Skinny," he said, pantingly.

"Don't mention it," replied the other. He shook free his rope, and the steer, now subdued, and tractable, rose to his feet and went back to the herd.

It needed every effort and attention on the part of the cowboys to keep the cattle from stampeding, but they managed to do it. The fire came on, halted at the burned strip, hesitated as if considering a leap across, and then divided, rolling down either side of the bare strip.

"That does the trick," said Mr. Carson. "I guess we've saved our stock."

"And we didn't need the plowed strip after all," Dave said, for, so far, the blaze had not approached within danger-distance of the herd.

"Well, it isn't over yet," said the ranch owner. "That fire still has plenty of ginger in it, and the wind may shift any minute. Dave, you worked well!"

"Oh, no better than any of the others."

"Yes you did! You worked well, and I shan't forget it. But I'd like to know how this fire started. No cowman would be so careless with matches when he knows how dry it's been. And I don't believe lightning set it. I'd like to know how it started."

"So would I," said Dave, "and I think I'll investigate."

"How? Where?" asked the cattleman.

"Why, I'll go over there where the fire started. I may be able to learn something."

"Better take one of the boys with you," Mr. Carson cautioned him. "That's in the direction of Molick's ranch, and they may be in a bad humor. Take some one with you."

When Dave's intention was made known Pocus Pete and Mr. Bellmore offered to accompany him. Dave was glad to have them.

They rode over the blackened, scarcely-cooled area, there being light enough from the distant flames to enable them to see well. But there was nothing to observe—that is at first.

Finally, however, as they went on, Dave gave a sudden exclamation.

"What is it?" asked the engineer.

"Hush! Not so loud!" was Dave's caution. "Don't you see some one crouched down in the grass there, lighting matches?"

The other two looked to where he pointed. They did indeed see a dark figure. Suddenly it became

plain, and the three saw some one stooping over in the dry grass, setting fire to it with matches.

"The scoundrel!" cried Mr. Bellmore. "Who is he?"

"I don't know, but we'll soon find out," said Pocus Pete, grimly. "Come on, boys!"

He spurred forward, followed by Dave and Mr. Bellmore. The person in the grass heard them, and, leaping to his saddle, leaving the little blaze to grow, he was off at a gallop. But Dave and his two friends chased on after him.

"Looks like he was the very man we want," murmured Pocus Pete.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ESCAPE

"What about that fire?" asked Mr. Bellmore, as he galloped on beside Dave.

"I don't know," was the doubtful answer. "What do you say, Pete?"

"What's that?" called back the foreman, his eyes never leaving the dim figure that was racing on ahead.

"The fire he started," replied Dave. "Won't it eat back to the cattle?"

"It may. But they've got enough men to fight it now, and the plowed strip will stop almost any blaze. Come on, we want to get that skunk!"

"Do you think he set the big fire, Pete?"

"I don't know what to think, I'm goin' to catch him first!" was the grim reply. "I'll do my thinkin' afterward."

The glow of the big fire was dying away now. One reason for this was that the blaze was working its way behind a range of hills. Another was found in the coming of the dawn, the fire paling before the glow of the rising sun.

Dave gave a look back at the blaze in the grass he had seen started by the crouching figure. The flames were spreading in the dry, tinder-like grass, and for a moment Dave was worried. Then he reflected that the cowboys who were with the herd ought to be able to handle it, and, as Pete had said, the plowed strip would act in the same manner as had the burned area.

"We've got to take a chance," murmured Dave, "and it can't be a much worse chance than the one we took earlier in the night. And we must get that fellow!"

It would be the worst possible procedure to leave loose in the country so desperate a character as one who would deliberately start a prairie fire. He could do untold damage.

"I wonder who he is?" mused Dave. Yet in his heart he had an answer ready. "Some of the Molick crowd," he whispered. "Their ranch would be safe with the wind blowing the way it does now, and they must know it would send the fire right down on us. It was the Molick crowd, I'll wager a hat!"

He hurried on with the others. Dawn was breaking rapidly now. It seemed scarcely more than a few minutes since Dave saw that glow in the midnight sky, yet it was several hours. But so crowded had they been with work and worry that it seemed hardly more than one—or, at most, a few minutes.

The figure ahead was riding desperately to escape.

"He's got a good horse critter," observed Pete, admiringly. He could admire even an enemy's mount.

"Yes, but he can't keep up that speed," said Mr. Bellmore. "And our animals are fresh."

This was true, as during the fire-fighting the ponies of the Bar U ranch had been able to rest. Now they were fresh for the chase that was on. And a fierce chase it was.

Setting a prairie fire, when the person who did it could not but know it would eat its way toward a bunch of cattle, was a crime not far from horse stealing, than which there is no blacker offense in the West, where a man's life depends on his horse. And the person who was riding thus desperately away must have known, or at least feared, that quick vengeance would be dealt out to him.

"Th' skunk!" muttered Pete, as he and the others swept on. "Th' mean, onery skunk!"

Up came the sun from below the horizon, shining red in the smoke-filled air—red and dim, like some great balloon. The morning was hot with the heat of the fire, and it would soon be warmer and more depressing from the heat of the sun's rays.

"It's a good thing dad has his cattle where there's some water for them," said Dave.

"Yes," agreed Pete. "There isn't much, but it's better than being over at the other place, where Molick and his crowd can cut us off altogether."

"If worst comes to worst, and he's built up that dam again," said the engineer, "we'll go and tear it down once more."

"That's what we will," Pete said. "I'm not going to lose the cattle for want of some water, when we saved 'em from the fire."

Dave was about to make a remark, when he gave a cry of surprise instead.

"What's up?" asked Pete.

"Look! If that isn't Len Molick I'll eat my rope!" cried the young cowpuncher. "Len Molick started that fire!"

"It's him all right," agreed Pete, after an instant's glance.

The figure racing on ahead so desperately had turned for a moment in the saddle, and this turning gave a view of his face. Dave had seen it was his enemy—the enemy who had taunted him with his lack of knowledge concerning his birth and parentage.

"And we've caught him with the goods," remarked Pete, indulging in the slang which meant so much. "He'll go to jail for this."

"If we catch him," suggested Mr. Bellmore.

"Oh, we'll get him," declared Pete. "Come on here you cayuse you!" he called merrily to his mount.

But alas for Pete's hopes. Whether the extra burst of speed was more than his horse could respond to, or whether in the excess of his zeal Pete forgot his usual caution probably would never be known.

But the fact of the matter was that his horse stepped into the burrow of a prairie dog, and, a moment later, the foreman went flying over the head of his steed, landing on the soft grass some distance away.

Dave and Mr. Bellmore pulled up at once, but they had hardly done so before Pete leaped to his feet.

"Ride on I Ride on!" he yelled. "Don't mind me. Get that skunk!"

"But you may be hurt!" Dave called.

"Hurt? No, not a bit! I'm all right!"

"What about the horse?" asked the engineer.

The animal had picked himself up, and walked with a limp toward his master, for Pete had trained him well.

"Poor brute's got a twisted shoulder—I'll have to ride him slow after I rub him down," Pete said, mournfully enough. "I can't make any kind of speed on him. Ride on, you fellows! Don't let that skunk get away!"

It was the law and custom of the range. When a chase was on, if one failed and fell behind, the other, or others, must keep going. It was a hard law, but life on the range was not easy, nor was it one for children.

"All right!" called Dave, recognizing the necessity for prompt action. "We'll get him!"

"And watch out for him," Pete warned them. "He'll be desperate if he finds you're closing in on him."

"We'll watch out," said Mr. Bellmore.

Again he and Dave dashed on, leaving Pete to minister to his injured horse. The foreman at once proceeded to rub vigorously the strained shoulder with a bunch of grass. His steed winced at the pain, but seemed to know it was for its own good.

"I'll have to go back," Pete said, mournfully. "But I hope they catch that skunk!"

It was the meanest name he could think of to call Len Molick.

The chase was resumed. Pete's accident had cost Dave and his companion some precious moments and they had lost distance. But they felt that, eventually, they must win. For their horses were fresher than was the mount of the youth who had set the fire, and already they had appreciably lessened the distance between them.

Len's horse had shown a wonderful burst of speed at first, and he had secured a quick start.

"But it won't do him any good," said Dave. "We'll have him ridden down in ten minutes more."

"I hope so," murmured Mr. Bellmore, "Why. Can't Kurd stand it?"

"Oh, yes, but I'm afraid I can't. This is more riding than I've done since I had my accident, and my ankle is paining me."

"Say, you drop out," Dave urged him. "I can manage Len all right."

"Indeed I'll not drop out! I'm going to stay in to the finish, but I'll be glad when it comes. This Western life is, indeed, rough and ready, Dave."

"Then you're not a Westerner by birth?"

"No, I came from the East. I'll have to tell you my story some day. It's rather a curious one."

Dave reflected that his own was, also, but he was not so sure he wanted to tell it. Every day had increased his admiration for Mr. Bellmore, but there are some facts that we keep even from our best friends.

They were on a downward slope now, and the going was better. Slowly but surely they were overtaking Len. Now and then he glanced back over his shoulder, as if to measure the distance separating him from his pursuers.

"Do you think he'll shoot?" asked Mr. Bellmore.

"He may," said Dave, calmly. "He's a big enough bully to do so, but he's the worst shot you ever heard of. I really believe he's afraid of a gun."

"Still, sometimes those chaps make a bull's-eye out of pure luck."

"We've got to take the chance," Dave said. "Keep well down on your horse's neck."

But Len showed no intention of drawing a weapon. Probably it was all he could do to manage his now fast-tiring steed.

Suddenly the stillness of the morning was broken by a prolonged shrill screech.

"What's that?" cried Mr. Bellmore.

"Railroad train," said Dave. "The line passes just below us. You can see the smoke of the train in a minute. There she is—a fast freight. Whistled because they're going to stop for water I guess. Yes, there she goes up to the tank."

Down below them they could see the crawling freight. As they watched they saw it draw up to the tank and stop. Water poured into the tender of the engine.

"Why, look at Len! He's riding straight for the freight!" cried Dave.

"That's what he is," echoed Mr. Bellmore. "Maybe he's going to take it!"

"If he does—" murmured Dave.

They spurred on, but were too far away. A moment later they saw Len leap from his horse, abandon the creature, and jump on one of the freight cars. The engine whistled, started off and rapidly gathered speed, taking Len away from his pursuers.

"Well, if that isn't tough luck!" bitterly said Dave, as they pulled up. Len had escaped. There was no use in chasing the fast freight.

CHAPTER XXII

TANGLES

Sitting astride his tired horse Dave looked lung and earnestly at the fast-disappearing freight, as it went around a bend in the hills. He could not see Len, but he knew the young bully was aboard.

"Well, you're gone now, but there'll come a time when you may want to come back," mused Dave. "And when you do, I'll get you. I think you started the big fire, but I'll give you a chance to prove you didn't."

He sat there musing for a while longer. The freight was out of sight now but there came to his ears, faintly through the heavy morning air, the sound of the distant puffing. And he could see the trail of smoke.

"Smoke! Ugh!" exclaimed Dave. "I've seen enough, and smelled enough, in the last few hours to last me a year!"

His eyes smarted from the acrid fumes of the burning prairie grass, and his mouth was parched.

"Guess you must want a drink too, Crow," said Dave aloud, and his horse whinnied as though understanding. Dave saw Len's horse, which the young rascal had abandoned, taking a long drink from a pool that had formed under the railroad tank.

Dave's horse needed no urging toward the inviting water and soon both master and beast were drinking deeply. Dave also plunged his head down in a puddle and soused his arms and hands in it.

"There, I feel better," he said. "A heapsight better. And now what am I going to do with you?" he asked as he saw Len's abandoned horse cropping the grass near the tank. "I can't leave you here for rustlers to make off with. You're too good an animal, if you do belong to a mean skunk. And yet I don't feel like doing Len any favor. If I take you I may get into trouble with Mr. Molick, too.

"Oh, I'll take a chance though. Can't see a horse suffer," Dave went on, and when his own mount had sufficiently refreshed itself with water and food, the young cowboy leaped to the saddle and rode up to Len's animal.

He had no difficulty in catching the pony, as it was quite exhausted from the run. And thus leading his prize, Dave started back. Mr. Bellmore, who had done as Dave had, taken a long drink and a wash, was also much refreshed.

"It surely was tough luck," remarked the engineer, "but it couldn't be helped. We did our best!"

"I should say so!" exclaimed Dave. "I regard it as a pretty sure sign of his guilt—that running away; don't you?"

"Well, most people would, I think," said the Chicago man slowly, "and yet, from what you have told me, I guess Len would run from you anyhow, wouldn't he, if he saw you take after him?"

"He might," admitted Dave, with a grin, as he thought of the encounter he had had with the bully. "Yes, I guess he might. But we saw him start one fire; didn't we?"

"Yes, but of course he could claim that he was starting a back-fire, just as we did."

"Huh!" Dave mused. "I didn't think of that. But I'm sure Len did start the big blaze, anyhow. He wanted to either stampede our cattle, or burn some of them, and you can't make me think any differently."

"Oh, I'm not trying to," said Mr. Bellmore. "I'm only giving you an idea of the view a judge and jury might take of it, if you had Len arrested."

"I didn't think of that," Dave said. "I guess it won't come to an arrest, as far as that is concerned. We Western folk generally administer the law ourselves. If we waited for judges and juries we'd get left in a good many cases. But I don't believe Len will come back, in a hurry."

"Perhaps not. But what are you going to do with his horse?"

"I don't know. Take it back with us for the time being. It's a good animal I might hold it as a sort of hostage until Len claims it. But I don't believe he will. Whew! That was some chase!"

"It certainly was," agreed Mr. Bellmore.

They rode back slowly. The air was gradually clearing of the smoke from the prairie fire, though far off it could be observed burning yet. But the worst of it was over. Bar U ranch was no longer in danger.

"What's the next thing on the programme?" asked Mr. Bellmore.

"Finish the round-up, get rid of as many cattle as we can, provide for the rest so they'll have plenty of water in the dry spell, and then fight the Molick crowd," said Dave.

"Plenty of room for action there," commented the engineer with a smile.

"I guess so," assented Dave. "But we're depending on your help."

"And I'll give it to the best of my ability. I think it is wise to undertake legal action as a starter to regaining control of your water rights. If they don't help us—"

"Why, then we'll try some of our Western persuasive ways," finished Dave. "I guess dad will be anxious to get busy right away. This fire shows how desperate that other crowd is."

"Yes. And if the Molicks had a hand in starting it, which seems reasonable to believe, they probably did it out of revenge for the breaking of the dam. But we had a perfect moral, if not a legal, right to do that," the Chicago man said.

They rode back slowly, and soon overtook Pocus Pete, who was ambling along on his injured pony.

"How'd he get away?" asked Pete, as he saw Dave leading the riderless horse. "Was there any shootin'?"

"No, nothing like that," Dave replied. "He jumped on the fast freight, and left his animal behind."

"Huh! Well, maybe it's jest as well," the foreman said. "It's one skunk less in a country that's got more than its share. That's a good horse," he went on, sizing up Len's mount.

"Yes," said Dave. "You'd better take it for awhile, and give yours a rest."

"I will," said Pete, dismounting and leaping to the saddle of the other. It was a great relief for his own mount, whose shoulder was badly wrenched.

"This is forcin' th' enemy to give us aid an' comfort," commented Pocus Pete, as he settled to the saddle, having put on his own in place of the one Len used, which did not fit the foreman.

Back over the burned prairie they rode. It was hot with the heat of the sun, which rose higher and higher in the sky, and the air, though it was morning, still seemed to have in it some of the heat from the big fire.

Dave and his friends found Mr. Carson and the cowboys waiting anxiously for them. The story of the chase and its failure was soon told.

"Well, you did your best, Dave, and I'm much obliged to you," said Mr. Carson. "I agree with you that it looks as though the Molick crowd was getting desperate, and trying to drive us out of the country either by a stampede or by fire. If you hadn't discovered that blaze in time there's no telling what might have happened. Now I've got to plan what to do."

"And let me help—Dad," said Dave in a low voice. "I want to do all I can for you and the Bar U."

Mr. Carson did not reply at once, but he held out his hand and Dave grasped it in a firm clasp. They understood one another.

A conference was held, and it was decided that the round-up should be finished as soon as possible, and the cattle intended for shipment driven to the nearest railroad point. The others would be scattered over the different grazing ranges Mr. Carson owned.

"And then we'll take up this water fight," said Mr. Bellmore. "If I had my papers here I could begin some preliminary work now."

"What you folks most need is a rest," said Mr. Carson. "You've been up the best part of the night, fighting fire, and on this chase. Now get some breakfast and stretch out in the shade of the chuck wagon. There's nothing to be done right away. Hop Loy, get 'em something to eat!"

"Slure I glet bleckflast!" exclaimed the happy-faced Celestial. "Plenty hungly Mlister Dave?" he asked cheerfully.

"Yes, plenty hungry," Dave assented.

While he, Pocus Pete and Mr. Bellmore rested after the meal Mr. Carson and the others finished the round-up work, branding such cattle as had not already felt the iron. Then the herds were separated, the ones for shipment being cut out from the others.

The next few days were busy ones, the work going on from the first peep of daylight until it was impossible to see. And in due time the shipment was successfully made.

"Well, I can breathe more easily now," said Mr. Carson, when the train had departed, some of his cowboys going with it to see that the cattle were fed and watered on the trip. "No matter what Molick does now he can't ruin me completely."

"That's so, and now we'll take up this water matter," said the engineer. "I'm afraid it's going to prove a legal tangle, though."

And so it did. The chief fight was about the ownership of the water rights at the point where Molick had built the dam that the Bar U boys had destroyed.

It had at once been rebuilt, as was expected and all water was shut off from Mr. Carson's land in that vicinity. But as he was not pasturing any cattle there for the present, no damage resulted.

"But you have a right to that water, and I'm going to see that you get your share of it," said Mr. Bellmore. "It was partly my fault that Molick built that dam, for if I had not mentioned it to him he probably would never have thought of it. So it's up to me to make this fight for you, and I'm going to."

Nor was the fighting all on one side. Molick brought suit against Mr. Carson for the destruction of the dam, but it would take some time to settle this, since many questions were involved.

In turn Mr. Carson sued the owner of Centre O ranch for shutting off the water supply. Mr. Carson, Dave and Mr. Bellmore also went before the Grand Jury and gave information about having seen Len starting a prairie fire. That body lost little time in returning an indictment against the missing bully. But of course it was out of their power to go after him and bring him back.

"But if he ever does come back I'll get him," the sheriff assured Dave. "He daren't set foot in this county again. Of course I'm not saying he's guilty, but I'll arrest him and he'll have to prove his innocence."

"That's all we want," said Dave.

Meanwhile the legal tangles increased. A number of suits were started on both sides, and as a result there were several physical clashes between the cowboys of the Bar U and the Centre O ranches.

The horse of Pocus Pete was more seriously hurt than he had at first thought, and he had to give his mount a long rest.

"But I've got Len's critter!" Pete chuckled, "and I'm goin' to ride that."

This he did to his own great satisfaction. Several times when he and his boys got into more than verbal arguments with the Centre O crowd Pete used Len's horse.

"It's like gettin' th' enemy's ammunition an' firin' it at him," said Pete with a laugh. "I guess they don't relish it none."

And Molick and his crowd did not. They did not make a claim for the horse, however, since this would have involved admitting that Len rode it to escape from the country, and they did not want to do this.

So Pocus Pete kept the contraband horse.

Work was easier on Bar U ranch after the big cattle shipment, but still there was plenty to do. Mr. Bellmore was busy working up his water irrigation project, in addition to helping Mr. Carson fight the Molick crowd. After a number of suits had been started Molick brought an action against the engineer for breach of contract.

"He claims I promised to go into the water matter with him, and then backed out," said Mr. Bellmore. "Well, I did nothing of the sort. I might have gone in with him, if you had not warned me, though Mr. Carson."

"Well, I'm glad I warned you, for he'd have you all tangled up if you had gone in with him."

"I guess you're right. But well get straightened out after a bit, I think."

The Molick outfit was the only one that fought the irrigation project. All the other ranch owners in the vicinity recognizing the value of it to their places, entered into it.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CLEW

"Dave, are you fit for a little ride this morning?" asked Mr. Bellmore, about two weeks after the prairie fire.

"Why, sure," was the answer. "What's on?"

"I want to go over to the stone valley, and make some calculations of the flow of water there. It isn't much of a stream, to be sure, but if we're going into this irrigation scheme, we can't neglect even a small flow of water. We might want it in dry weather. I need some one to help me make the measurements."

"Why sure I'll go. Be with you in a little while. There's a little matter I want to see dad about, and then I'll come."

Though Dave spoke thus lightly of a "little matter," it was one that meant a great deal to him. For it was nothing less than an attempt he had made, or, rather, started, to solve the mystery of his identity.

All along, ever since Dave had been told the truth of his rescue from the Missouri flood, he had sought some means of finding out who he was. Mr. Carson had said there was no means of knowing, since he had made inquiries at the time in the vicinity of the flood, and no one had laid claim to the then small baby.

"Which led me to believe, Dave," the ranchman said, "that your parents and all your relations were drowned."

The young cowboy was silent after this, and a look of sadness came over his face.

"But there is a bare chance that some—even distant relatives—might have been saved," he said. "And on that supposition, if I had some little clew on which to start it might put me on the right track.

"How was I dressed when you found me? Wasn't there any distinguishing mark?"

"Huh! Well, now I come to think of it, perhaps there might have been," Mr. Carson had said. This conversation had taken place some time previously.

"What was it?" asked Dave eagerly. "Was there a note pinned to my dress? I suppose I must have worn dresses, if I was so little at the time?"

"Yes, you wore dresses," the ranchman said, with a far-off look in his eyes. He was struggling to recall the dim and distant past. "Yes, you had on a dress. I think it must have been white at the start, but the muddy water had stained it a dark brown. But there was no note or anything like that pinned to it. I looked for that. But you did have on something that perhaps might prove a clew."

"What was it?" asked Dave eagerly.

"It was a sort of life-preserver," said the cattle man. "At least I took it to be that.

"A life-preserver!" echoed Dave.

"Well, maybe I'm wrong about it, for I never had much to do with water or the sea," admitted Mr. Carson. "But it was some sort of a cork jacket. It was made from a lot of bottle corks, all strung together, and wound around in a sort of belt."

"They don't make life-preservers that way," said Dave, who had been on a trip East, and had seen the life-saving apparatus on a steamer. "A life-preserver is made from broad sheets of cork, sometimes granulated, and pressed together. I never heard of one being made of corks from bottles strung together."

"Well, that's what you had on," said the ranchman. "Maybe it was a home-made one. Come to think of it, that's probably what it was. I reckon it saved your life, too, for though you were on a pretty big piece of wreckage, you looked as though the waves had washed up over you a number of times. Yes, that home-made cork life-preserver undoubtedly saved you."

"What became of it?" asked Dave. "I suppose you threw it away. You must have had your hands full, looking after a small baby."

"Why, no, I didn't throw it away," said Mr. Carson slowly. "I sort of had an idea it might prove a relic, so I kept it."

"Where is it now?" asked Dave, eagerly.

"Well, I didn't take it all over with me," went on the owner of the Bar U ranch. "I left it in Denver with a lot of other things of mine. It's there yet I reckon, in storage."

"Could you get it?" exclaimed the youth, his eyes shining with eagerness.

"Yes, I reckon so. But what good would it do, Dave?"

"It might—it might prove my identity."

Mr. Carson shook his head.

"I'm afraid not," he said. "There wasn't anything to it but a lot of corks strung together. They were wound around you like a belt."

"But could you send for it? I should like to see it. And it might—it might, after all, be a clew."

"Well, I'll get it, of course. I suppose you aren't satisfied to be just what you are. You know I'll look after you all your life. You know that, don't you, Dave?" asked the ranchman softly.

"Yes—Dad—I know that," and the youth's voice faltered. "But I want—I just want to know who I am. I don't intend to leave you. I guess you know that. I haven't any other place to go. But I would like to know who I am. Maybe—maybe," and Dave's voice was husky, "I might have a—a sister somewhere in this world. Oh, what I'd give if I had!" and unshed tears shone in his eyes.

"Well, Dave, I never thought of it in just that way," said the ranchman. "Yes, what you say may be true. I'll send for this life belt of bottle corks, and let you look at it. Mind, I don't believe it will be of any use as a clew, but I'll send for it."

And so the matter had ended for the time being. There had been so much to do, what with the fire and the trouble over the water rights, that there had been a delay in sending for the old relic of the flood.

But finally Mr. Carson had written for it, together with some of his other goods in storage in Denver, and they had arrived that day. He had promised Dave to unpack them, and show him the belt, and it was this matter that the young cowboy wished to see about before going over to the stone valley with Mr. Bellmore.

"Well, Dave, there it is," said Mr. Carson, as he opened a trunk, and took out several articles. "Here's the little dress and the other things you wore when I hauled you from the water."

He held up a white garment, clean, but yellow with age, and smelling faintly of some perfume.

"It doesn't look as though it had been through a flood," said Dave.

"No, I had it washed and ironed, and then a lady I knew packed it away in rose leaves for me. She said that's how she kept the baby clothes of her own little ones. Those are the shoes you wore," the ranchman went on, as something fell to the floor, when Dave unrolled the dress.

The shoes, too, had once been white, but were soiled now, not having responded to the cleansing process as had the dress. They were stuffed out with wads of paper.

"It would be some job to get in them now," Dave remarked with a smile as he glanced down at his booted and spurred feet. "Some job!"

"Yes," assented Mr. Carson. "And here's your petticoat, Dave. I reckon that's what you call it," and he held up some other garments. "I saved 'em all," he said, "thinking they might be a clew, but they never turned out so."

"But where is the cork belt?" Dave asked. He was impatient to see that. He realized that baby dresses must be more or less alike, with seldom a distinguishing mark. But the cork belt impressed him with the possibility of being different.

"Here it is," said Mr. Carson.

From amid the contents of the trunk he pulled out a queer object

Dave held it up to get a better view of it. As Mr. Carson had said it was a belt, composed of a number of corks strung together on a strong cord, there being many rows of them, one above the other. The corks were of all sizes, the cord passing through them on the short axis. There were two holes for the arms, and a sort of tape by which the belt could be tied around one.

It was small, clearly made for a child, though for a larger one than Dave could have been at the time he was picked up in the flood.

"I must have rattled around in that?" he said, with a questioning look.

"Yes, it was lapped around you a couple of times," said the ranchman. "But, just as I said, Dave, it isn't much of a clew. They are just common corks."

This was so. There were no marks on the corks, as far as Dave could see, by which any identification could be made. He looked closely at the odd life-preserver.

"I say, Dave, are you coming?" called Mr. Bellmore from without.

"Right away," was the answer.

Dave sadly laid down the cork jacket and went out.

CHAPTER XXIV

BROTHERS

Profound indeed was the impression made on Dave by the sight of the childish things in the trunk Mr. Carson had received from Denver. Sadness, too, was mingled with his feelings. Somehow he felt as though the last hope had gone from him, for he did not see how he could find any clew to his identity in the corks, strung into such a queer jacket.

Dave tried to look cheerful as he came out to join Mr. Bellmore for the ride across the prairies to the place where they were going to measure the flow of water. He did not want his companion to suspect anything.

"Feel like taking it on the gallop?" asked the engineer.

"Yes, I guess Crow can stand it if your animal can," Dave said.

"Oh, I'll bank on Kurd!"

Together they were off at a fast pace that fairly ate up the distance, and soon they were half-way to

the place where a small stream had given Mr. Bellmore hopes that he could add it to his water conservation scheme.

"I wonder how it would be to take a trip over to the Molick dam, and see what they're doing?" suggested the water man. "It's just as well to keep tab on those fellows."

"Go ahead, I'm with you," said Dave.

They changed their course slightly. The whole day, or, rather, the best part of it was ahead of them, for they had made an early start. Dave had not much to do at the ranch since the big cattle shipment, though Mr. Carson was getting ready to increase his stock as soon as the question of providing water for them was settled.

"Looks as if something was going on," commented Mr. Bellmore, as they approached the place where the Molick dam had been rebuilt.

"Yes, there's a crowd there, anyhow," agreed Dave. "And some of them are on our land, too!" he exclaimed, excitedly.

"Now take it easy," advised his friend. "This matter must take a legal course, since we have started it that way. Keep cool."

"Oh, I will," the young cowboy promised, as he spurred on, followed by the engineer.

They found Molick and several of his men making a sort of supplementary dam, the water having backed up more than they had calculated on, so that some of it was now flowing in the old bed of the stream over Mr. Carson's property. It was to prevent this that another dam was being made.

"He wants to get every drop!" said Dave, bitterly.

"Yes," assented the engineer. "He isn't satisfied with a fair share."

Some of the workmen who knew Dave seemed a bit embarrassed as he caught them on the Carson land, for it was necessary for them to go there to complete the dam. The young cowboy, however, said nothing, preferring to leave it to Mr. Bellmore. The latter looked significantly at Molick, and remarked:

"Seems to me you're overstepping a bit; aren't you?"

"I don't know that I am," was the surly answer.

"Why, you're on Bar U land—or some of your men are."

"I know it."

"What gives you the right?"

"The law. It says I can go where I have to, to recover my property. I guess that's right enough."

"Where is any of your property on Mr. Carson's land?"

Molick pointed to the trickling water.

"That's mine," he said. "It's escaping from my pond over the dam. I'm making the dam bigger, and if I have to go on Bar U land to do it, to save my property, the law gives me a right. I know what I'm talking about, for I've looked it up."

As this was a point on which the engineer was not certain of the rights of Mr. Carson, he thought it better to say nothing. He observed, however, that there was more water than even he had calculated on, and that though the dam were raised it would overflow again, thus necessitating further trespassing on the Bar U property.

"And if the flow keeps on increasing," the engineer reasoned, "it will give us a water supply in spite of all Molick can do. Guess I'll let matters take their course for a while."

He said as much to Dave in a low voice, and the two rode away. They had seen all they needed to.

"Dad can pasture here again soon," said the young cowboy.

"Yes," assented the engineer, "I guess we don't need to worry much. There'll be more water than Molick can impound unless he raises a big concrete dam, and before he can do that we'll have legally established our own rights, I think."

They resumed their way to the valley to measure the water there, and for some time were kept busy, Dave helping his friend make the calculations.

"Well, there isn't as much as I thought there'd be," was the comment of the engineer, "but every little helps. We'll make a different section of this a year from now. If it wasn't for Molick standing out against the irrigation scheme we'd have the whole of Rolling River Valley in it."

"Is there any way of forcing him?" asked Dave.

"There may be, after he sees what he's missing."

Together they rode home in the early evening. Now that the work of the day was over Dave's mind went back to the scene of the morning, when he had handled his baby garments and the cork jacket. His manner must have been strange and distracted, for Mr. Bellmore said:

"What's the matter, Dave? You act as though you had lost your last friend."

"Well, I have, in a way," was the unexpected answer.

"You have! What do you mean? Seems to me, if I were you, with the kind of a father you have, and a dandy ranch like this I'd be the happiest fellow on—"

"I haven't any father!" burst out Dave. "And that's the trouble. Oh, it's just as Len Molick said—I'm a nameless nobody!" and his voice choked and broke.

Mr. Bellmore rode his horse over beside Crow. He put his arm around the lad, who hung his head.

"Look here, old man!" said the engineer. "I don't want to intrude, but if it will do you any good, tell me all about it!"

"I will!" exclaimed Dave, taking a sudden resolve. "I wasn't going to tell you," he went on, after a pause, "for, though some of the fellows at the ranch know it, and though some over at Centre O do, also, still I wasn't going to tell you. I was so happy before I knew it."

Then, slowly, and haltingly, he told how Len Molick had fired the taunt at him and how, upon making inquiries of Mr. Carson, the latter had confirmed the rumor, saying that Dave was not his son, though he loved him as such.

"And where did you say he found you?" asked the engineer. There was a curious light in his eyes, and an eager expectancy in his manner.

"It was during a flood somewhere in Missouri. I've forgotten the exact name of the place. He can tell you. He picked me up on some wreckage, and looked after me. That was a long while ago—or at least it seems so," Dave remarked with a smile.

"It couldn't have been so very long ago. You're not more than twenty; are you, Dave?"

"Nineteen, I think. Of course I don't know my exact age."

"No, I suppose not. Then I'm not so much older than you. I'm twenty-seven. But yours is a strange story. Dave, we are brothers in misfortune."

"Brothers in misfortune! What do you mean?" cried the young cowboy.

"I mean, that I haven't any near relatives either. And while I do know who I am, and who my parents were, still that isn't much satisfaction. I have lost them."

"Lost them?" Dave echoed.

"Yes, and in a flood, such as nearly claimed your life. I must find out just what town you came from. It may be that our folks lived in the same place. It would be a strange coincidence, but it might be that it is so. I lost all my folks, including a baby brother in a Western flood. I don't know many of the particulars, for I was with relatives in Ohio at the time, so I escaped.

"I am anxious to hear Mr. Carson's story. It interests me mightily. To think that we have gone through much the same sort of suffering. But I should have thought so small a baby as you must have been at the time would have been drowned."

"I would have been if it hadn't been for one thing," returned our hero, with an odd little smile.

"One thing? What was that?"

"I doubt if you can guess."

"Maybe you were bound fast to the wreckage, or it didn't float into deep water."

"I don't know about being bound fast, but I do know the wreckage floated around, or rather, down stream. But that wasn't what I referred to."

"What was it?"

"Can't you guess?"

"I don't think so."

"I had on a cork life-preserver," said Dave. "I was looking at it this morning when you called to me."

"A cork life-preserver?" excitedly repeated Mr. Bellmore. "Was it—was it any particular kind, Dave?"

"Why, yes, it was. But why do you look at me so strangely?"

"Never mind that now! Tell me about that life-preserver. How was it made?"

"From bottle corks strung together and made into a belt. I had it around me when dad—I mean Mr. Carson—picked me up. I—I thought the preserver might be a clew but it isn't, for—"

"A clew! Of course it is!" fairly shouted the engineer. "Hurrah, Dave it *is* a clew. Put her there, old man! Shake! I said a while ago that we were brothers in misfortune! We're more than that.

"We're real brothers, Dave Carson—no, not Dave Carson any longer! Dave Bellmore! We're brothers, I tell you! brothers!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE NEW RANCH

For a moment the two remained with clasped hands, looking deep into the eyes one of the other. Then Dave, with a deep breath, murmured:

"Brothers! Is it possible?"

"Not only possible, but probable!" cried Mr. Bellmore. "We are brothers, I tell you, Dave! Your mention of that cork life-preserver almost proves it to me."

"Why so?"

"Because, before I went away to the East, to visit, I made one just like that with which to learn to swim. I did learn, too, with it. Of course I'd have to see this one to be dead sure, but it isn't likely that there would be two cork life-preservers made in that way. I'm sure it was mine you had on when you were rescued. Come on, we'll gallop to the ranch and find out."

They set off at top speed, Dave's heart beating madly with hope.

"Oh, if it should prove true, after all!" he murmured over and over again.
"That I really have some folks at last!"

As they rode Mr. Bellmore briefly told how, as a boy of about ten, he wanted to swim in the stream that ran near his home.

"This was in Missouri, too," he said, "so that adds to the assurance I have that we are brothers, since it was in Missouri that you were found by Mr. Carson. I made that life preserver out of a design from my own head. I know I had to beg and borrow corks from all the neighbors before I had enough. But with that on I simply could not sink, and so I learned to swim.

"I wanted to take it East with me, but my folks persuaded me to leave it at home. And poor mother or father must have fastened it on you when the flood came. Oh, I'm sure it's the same one. We are brothers!"

Once more they clasped hands and looked into each other's eyes.

It was two excited individuals who burst into the ranch house of Bar U a little later. Fairly leaping from their steeds Dave and Mr. Bellmore sought Mr. Carson.

"Dad, where is that cork life-preserver?" asked the young cowboy. The use of the word "Dad" seemed perfectly proper under the circumstances.

"The life-preserver?" repeated the ranchman, wonderingly.

"Yes, Mr. Bellmore—Benjamin," said Dave, using the name for the first time, "Benjamin thinks it's one he made, and if it is I'm his brother!"

"His brother?" Mr. Carson looked from one to the other, as if doubting whether he had heard aright.

Slowly the cattleman again produced the old relic. At the first sight of it Mr. Bellmore exclaimed:

"Yes! That's it! I'd know it anywhere! Dave, there's no doubt but that you are my brother! Shake!"

"But are you sure?" asked Mr. Carson.

"Positive!" exclaimed the young engineer. "See, I can point out a dozen little points about this belt that makes me certain it is mine," and he did. He even recalled where he got certain oddly-shaped corks from the neighbors.

Then he related his story—how he had lived as a boy in the town where, later, the flood came and swept away the Bellmore home, taking Dave with it. The future engineer was away at the time of the disaster, and he knew nothing of the particulars of the rush of the waters, save what relatives told him afterward.

"But they said my whole family was drowned, including my little brother," he went on. "His name wasn't Dave, by the way, but Charles."

"I named him Dave," said Mr. Carson.

"And I'm going to keep it," Dave said.

"It's just as well," decided Mr. Bellmore. "But, as I said, all I know is what I was told. I was only about ten years old at the time, and you must have been about two, Dave. How it happened we can only guess, but mother or father must have put my odd cork life-preserver on you when they saw the waters rising, and it probably saved your life when the house was carried away. What a strange coincidence!"

"Isn't it?" agreed Mr. Carson. He could add little to the story, for all he knew was the finding of the baby. His inquiries had come to naught, so it was assumed that all the rest of the Bellmore family had perished in the high waters.

"And what did you do when you heard you had no folks left?" asked Dave of his brother.

"Well, I was too young at the time to realize all that it meant. My Eastern relatives came to Missouri with me in the hope of finding some of our folks, but we never did. Then they took charge of me until I grew up, and entered upon my profession.

"And all these years I've been thinking I had not a near living relative, when, all the while I had a brother!" and he looked fondly at Dave.

"And to think I believed myself a nameless nobody!" Dave returned.

"Well, you're Dave Bellmore, from now on."

"Dave *Carson* Bellmore," corrected the other softly.

"Oh, I see!" Mr. Bellmore exclaimed. "Of course."

And so it was arranged. The story created no end of wonder at Bar U ranch, and Dave and his brother were congratulated on all sides. The Eastern relatives were communicated with, and one sent a letter mentioning a certain birthmark on Dave's arm, which would be there if he was really the Bellmore baby. The mark was found, and thus the matter was fully proved.

"Well, now that you've found your brother, I suppose you'll shake Bar U ranch—and me," said Mr. Carson some time later.

"Not much!" cried Dave with shining eyes, as his arm went around Benjamin. "I'm a cattleman first, last and always. If you haven't any room for me here I'll have to start out and work for some one else, I guess."

"Not while I've got a horse to ride," said the ranchman significantly.

A few days later the matter of trying the various lawsuits came up. It was a tedious proceeding, with which I will not burden you, but to be brief I will say that Mr. Carson won nearly everything.

It was settled beyond dispute that the Molick ranch had no right to build the dam and shut off the water from the fine pasture. So that was saved to Mr. Carson. And not only that, but certain other water rights that Mr. Molick had claimed, were taken from him, and restored to Bar U.

"That means I can go into the cattle-raising business on a larger scale than ever," declared the ranchman.

Mr. Molick was allowed to retain enough of the water for his own stock, so that his ranch was as valuable as ever. He recognized when he was defeated, and when the court business was over he approached Mr. Bellmore, rather shamefacedly, it is true, and requested that he be allowed to come into the general water and irrigation scheme.

"No, sir!" exclaimed the engineer. "You had your chance and would not take it. It's too late now. All our plans are made and your ranch isn't included."

"Then if you won't take me in I'll sue you and make you."

"Go ahead," was the cool response. "You had your chance and turned it down. We aren't depriving you of any water. You'll have all you need, but you won't have any over, as the rest of the ranchmen will. Go ahead and sue."

Molick did, but he was defeated, and then, as his son Len dared not return to the vicinity on account of the fire indictment, there came an unexpected turn to affairs.

"I hear Molick wants to sell out," said Pocus Pete, coming to the Bar U ranch house a few days after the defeat of the bully's father. "And he'll sell out cheap, too."

"Will he?" asked Mr. Bellmore. "Then I know some one who will buy."

"Who?"

"I will! Dave, I've been thinking for a long time of going into the cattle business. I think it will pay better than water engineering. I've been hoping for a chance to get a good ranch, and now that Molick's is on the market, I'm going to take it."

"Good!" cried Mr. Carson. "I'll have decent neighbors all around me then. And if you want any money, Mr. Bellmore—you and Dave—"

"Thanks, but I'm pretty well off. I've saved a bit. I think I'll invest it in Centre O, but I'm going to change the name, with your permission."

"What are you going to call it?" asked Dave. "Bar U-2. How does that strike you?"

"Fine!" Dave exclaimed.

"Couldn't be better!" declared Mr. Carson. "We'll combine the two ranches into a new one, and with the water supply we'll have there won't be a place in this country that can hold a candle to us. Shake!"

"Do you really mean it?" cried our hero, his eyes shining with delight.

"Sure I mean it," answered the man who had been a father to him, with much feeling.

"It's a fine thing to propose," put in our hero's newly-found brother. "A fine thing indeed."

"I've got to do it—to keep Dave by me," answered Mr. Carson.

"I'll stay—don't worry," answered the boy, with a happy grin.

And so it was arranged. The Bellmore brothers, as they were now called—Dave and Benjamin—purchased the Molick ranch and it was added to the Carson holdings under a general partnership agreement. More cattle were purchased, and to-day the Bar U-2 is one of the finest ranches in the

West. The water irrigation scheme, planned by Mr. Bellmore was a complete success, though when he took up ranching with Dave, another irrigation engineer succeeded to the managership. The Molicks—father and son—disappeared, but most of the cowboys, with the exception of Whitey Wasson, were hired by Dave and his brother.

"Though if it hadn't been for Len and Whitey I might never have found you, Ben," said Dave, with shining eyes.

And that is the story of Cowboy Dave—a "nameless nobody" no longer—but an honored and respected member of the community. And Mr. Carson, who had no near kith or kin, has promised to make the Bellmore brothers his heirs.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK COWBOY DAVE; OR, THE ROUND-UP AT ROLLING RIVER ***

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