

# JOHN GOLDFRAP

THE BORDER  
BOYS ON THE  
TRAIL

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**The Border Boys on the Trail**

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# **Fremont B. Deering**

## **The Border Boys on the Trail**

### **CHAPTER I.**

### **ON THE BORDER**

"Maguez! Maguez!"

The trainmen began hoarsely shouting the curious-sounding name of the small frontier town near the Mexican border, in the southwest part of New Mexico. Slowly the long dust-covered Southern Pacific express rolled imposingly into "Mag-gay," very slowly, in fact, as if it did not wish to tarry in that desolate, sun-bitten portion of the continent.

As the brakes began to grind down, one of two boys of about seventeen, who had been lounging on the shady side of a forward sleeper, awoke from a semi-doze with a start.

"Hullo! somebody wants Maggie!" exclaimed Ralph Stetson, as he gazed out of the open window. He saw nothing more novel before his eyes, however, than the same monotonous stretch of yellow, sandy wastes, sprinkled with sage brush and dotted by a few wandering cattle, which the train had been traversing for hours.

"You'll have to get used to New Mexican pronunciation of Mexican names, Ralph," laughed his companion, as he also opened his eyes and began looking about him in the half-startled manner peculiar to those abruptly awakened from "forty winks." "'Maggie', as you call it, is our station."

"Station!" echoed the other. "Where is it?"

He stuck his head out of the window as the train gradually decreased speed, but his eyes encountered nothing more suggestive of a town than a stock car on a lonely side track, into which some cowboys, with wild yells and much spurring of their wiry little steeds, were herding a few beef cattle.

"That freight car must be in front of the town," muttered the boy, pulling in his head.

"Over this side, you tenderfoot!" laughed Jack Merrill, pointing out of the left-hand window. "Haven't you got used to Western towns yet?"

"One-sided towns, you mean, I guess," said Ralph, rising and looking out in the opposite direction. "Why in the name of the State of New Mexico do they build all the towns out here at one side of the tracks?"

"So that Easterners can have something to wonder about," laughed Jack Merrill, brushing off the accumulation of white desert dust from his dark suit with a big brown hand.

"Or so that they can at least get a few minutes of shade when a train pulls in," retorted Ralph, gazing at the sun-baked collection of wooden structures toward which the train was rolling. A yellow water tank, perched on a steel frame, towered above the town like a sunflower on a stalk. Apparently it took the place of trees, of which there was not a vestige, unless a few cactus plants be excepted.

"Better follow my example and brush some of the desert off," said Jack, still brushing vigorously.

"No, let the porter do it; here he is," said the Eastern Ralph. Sure enough, with his black face expanded in a grin expectant of tips, the presiding genius of the Pullman approached.

"Come on, cheer up, Ralph!" laughed Jack, glancing at his companion's dismal face, which was turned toward the window and its barren view. "Don't be downcast because my home town isn't surrounded by elms, and meadows, and fat Jersey cows, and all that. Haven't we lain awake many a night at Stonefell College, talking over the West, and here you are in the heart of it."

"Well, it's a good warm heart, anyway!" grumbled Ralph, mopping his steaming forehead.

The train came to a stop with an abrupt jerk, and followed by the porter, carrying two new and shiny suitcases, the boys hastened from the car, into the blinding sunlight which lay blisteringly on Maguez and its surroundings. Everything quivered in the heat. The boys were the only passengers to alight.

"Phew, it's like opening an oven door!" exclaimed Ralph, as the heated atmosphere fell full upon him. "We've come more than two thousand miles from an Eastern summer to roast out here."

"And look at the train, will you!" cried Jack. "It looks as if it had been through a snowstorm."

He pointed down the long line of coaches, each of which was powdered thickly with white dust.

"All ab-oa-rd!"

The conductor's sonorous voice echoed down the train, and with a few mighty puffs from the laboring engine, the wheels once more began to revolve. The porter, clutching a tip in his fingers, leaped back on to his car. All the time they had been waiting in the station the locomotive had been impatiently blowing off steam, and emitting great clouds of black smoke, as though in a desperate hurry to get away from inhospitable-looking Maguez. It now lost no time in getting into motion. As the cars began to roll by, Jack gave a sudden shout.

"Ralph! The-the professor! We've forgotten him!"

"Good gracious, yes! What could we have been thinking of! We are getting as absentminded as he is. Here, stop the train! Hey, I say, we – "

But before the shouts had done resounding, a tall, spare man of middle age stepped out on the platform of one of the front coaches, and after gazing about him abstractedly for a few seconds, swung himself off, landing unsteadily on a pair of long, slender legs. So great was the shock of the professor's landing that his huge spectacles were jerked off his prominent nose, and he had all he could do to retain a hold on a large volume which he held tightly clasped under his left arm.

The boys hurried to pick up the professor's spectacles and hand them to him.

"We almost lost you, professor!" exclaimed Ralph.

"Ah, boys, I was immersed in the classics – 'The Defense of Socrates,' and – "

"Why, Professor Wintergreen, where is your suitcase?" exclaimed Jack suddenly. "See – the train is moving, and – "

"Shades of Grecian Plato!" shouted the professor, glancing about him wildly. "I've forgotten it! Stop! I must get it back! I – "

He made a sudden dash for the train, which was now moving so swiftly that it was manifestly impossible that he could board it in safety. The boys both pulled him back, despite his struggles.

Just then, the car which the boys had recently vacated began to glide by. A black face appeared at the window. It was the porter, and in his hand he held a large green suitcase. It was the same the professor had left behind him when he vacated the car in which they had traveled from the East, and went forward into the smoking car with his book.

"Look out!" yelled the porter, as he threw the piece of baggage out of the window. It hurtled forth with a vehemence indeed that threatened to take off the scientist's head, which it narrowly missed.

"Fo' de Lawd!" the porter shouted back, as the train gathered way. "Wha' yo all got in dat valise – bricks?"

"No, indeed, sir," retorted the professor seriously, as his suitcase went bounding over the platform, which was formed of sun-baked earth. "I have books. The idea of such a question. Why should I want to carry bricks about with me, although the ancient Egyptians – "

By this time the porter was far out of hearing, and the last car of the train had whizzed by. Before the professor could conclude his speech, the suitcase – as if to prove his contention as to its contents by actual proof – burst open, and out rolled several massive volumes. The few loungers, who had gathered to watch the train come in, set up a roar of laughter as the professor – his coat flaps flying out behind him like the tail of some strange bird – darted after his beloved volumes.

"That's what you might call a circulating library!" grinned Jack, as the books bounded about with the impetus of their fall.

"I thought it was a Carnegie Car, you see – " began Ralph, when a sudden shout checked him. He glanced up in the direction from which it had come. A dust-covered buckboard, in which sat a tall, bronzed man in plainsman's clothes, was dashing toward them. The two buckskin ponies which drew it were being urged to their utmost speed by the driver, to whom Jack Merrill was already waving his hand and shouting:

"Hello, dad!"

In the meantime the professor was groping about on the platform, picking up his scattered treasures, and all the time commenting loudly to himself on his misfortune.

"Dear, dear!" he exclaimed, picking up one bulky volume and examining it with solicitude. "Here's a corner broken off Professor Willikin Williboice's 'The Desert Dwellers of New Mexico, With Some Account of the Horn Toad Eaters of the Region.' And what have we here? Eheu! the monumental work of Professor Simeon Sandburr, on the 'Fur-Bearing Pollywog of the South Polar Regions,' is – "

"Slightly damaged about the back!" broke in a hearty voice behind him. "But never mind, professor; the pollywogs will grow up into frogs yet, never fear. We'll soon have those volumes mended; and now let me introduce myself, as my son Jack seems unable to do so. My name is Jefferson Merrill, the owner of Agua Caliente Ranch."

"Delighted to meet you, sir," said the professor. "Proud to encounter a man whose name is not unknown to science in connection with his efforts to uncover something of the history of the mesa dwellers of this part of the world."

"Whose relics, if my son informed me rightly in his letters from school in the East, you have come to study, professor."

"Yes, sir; thanks to your hospitality," rejoined the professor, imprisoning his recovered volumes with a click of his suitcase clasps; "it was extremely handsome of you to invite me, and – "

"Not at all, my dear sir, not at all," expostulated the rancher, a kindly smile spreading on his bronzed features. "Besides," he continued in his breezy manner, "as Latin professor at Stonefell College you will no doubt be able to give an eye to your two pupils, and keep them out of mischief better than I could." Here the professor looked doubtful. "You see, we're pretty busy now, what with cattle rustlers and – "

"Cattle rustlers, dad!" exclaimed Jack. "Hooray!"

"It's nothing to be enthusiastic over, my boy. Several of the border ranchers have suffered severely recently from their depredations."

"Have you lost any stock, dad?"

"No; so far, I have luckily escaped. But the rascals may come at any time, and it keeps me on the lookout. They are well organized, I believe, and have a stronghold somewhere back across the border. So you boys will have to depend on your own devices for amusement. But now come, don't let's stand baking here any longer. There's a long drive before us, and we had better be getting on."

"But, dad, look at all our baggage!" cried Jack, pointing to the heap of trunks the baggage car had dropped. "There'll never be room for all of us in that buckboard."

"So I guessed," smiled his father. "So I had Bud Wilson bring in two ponies for you boys to ride out on. You told me, I think, that your friend Ralph, here, could ride."

"Good for you, dad!" exclaimed Jack impulsively; "it'll be fine to get in the saddle again – and to see old Bud, too," he added.

"Who is Bud?" asked Ralph.

"You'll soon get to know him yourself," laughed Mr. Merrill. "But you boys go and get your horses. While you are gone the professor and I will try to get some of these independent gentlemen

standing about to give us a hand to load the trunks on. Then we'll drive on to the ranch. You can overtake us. Eh, Professor Summerblue?"

"Wintergreen, sir," rejoined the professor in a dignified way.

"Eh – oh, I beg your pardon. I knew it was something to do with the seasons. I hope you will pardon me, Professor Spring – No, I mean Wintergreen."

"Just like dad, he never can remember a name," laughed Jack, as the two boys hastened off to find the ponies and Bud.

"Maybe he is worried about these cattle bustlers – "

"Rustlers, you tenderfoot – you are as bad as dad."

"Well, rustlers, then. They must be desperate characters."

"A lot of sneaking greasers usually. They hustle the cattle or horses off over the border, but occasionally one of them gets caught and strung up, and that's the end of it."

"Then there are no border wars any more, or Indians, or – "

"Adventures left in the West," Jack finished for him, laughing at the other's disappointed tone. Then, more seriously: "Well, Ralph, the West isn't what it's pictured to be in Wild West shows; but we've plenty of excitement here once in a while, and before you go back East, with those lungs of yours in A-one shape, you may experience some of it."

"I hope so," said Ralph, looking up the long dusty street with its sun-blistered board shacks on either side, with a few disconsolate ponies tied in front. The yellow water tower topped above it all like some sort of a misshapen palm tree or sunflower on steel legs. In fact, a more typical border town than Maguez at noon on a June day could not be imagined. Except for the buzzing of flies, and the occasional clatter of a horse's hoofs as some one rode or drove up to the general store – which, together with a blacksmith shop, a disconsolate-looking hotel, and a few miscellaneous buildings made up the town – there was not a sound to disturb the deep, brooding silence of the desert at noonday. Far on the horizon, like great blue clouds, lay the Sierra de la Hacheta, in the foothills of which lay Agua Caliente Ranch.

"So this is the desert?" went on Ralph, as they made their way up the rough wooden sidewalk toward the stable where they expected to find Bud Wilson and the horses.

"This is it," echoed Jack Merrill, "and the longer you know it the better you like it."

"It's peaceful as a graveyard, anyhow," commented Ralph. "Doesn't anything ever happen? I wonder if – "

He broke off suddenly as a startling interruption occurred.

The quiet of Maguez had been rudely shattered by a sudden sound.

Bang!

From a small building to their right, on which was painted in scrawly red letters the words, "Riztorant. Meelz At Awl Howrz," there had come the sharp crack of a pistol shot.

Before its echoes had died away, several doors opened along the street, and a motley crowd of cowboys, Mexicans and blanketed Indians poured out to ascertain the cause of the excitement.

They had not long to wait. From the door of the restaurant a pig-tailed Mongolian suddenly shot with the speed of a flying jackrabbit. The Chinaman cleared the hitching rail in front of the place at one bound, his progress being hastened from behind by a perfect avalanche of cups and other dishes.

Bang!

A second shot came, as the Oriental sprinted up the street. All at once he stopped dead in his tracks as the bullet sang by his ear.

"Well, Ralph, I guess something's happened, after all!" remarked Jack Merrill, as the crowd began to thicken and the restaurant door once more opened. This time a strange figure, to Ralph's Eastern eyes, emerged from the portal. A sinister suggestion was lent to the newcomer's appearance by the fact that in his right hand there glistened an exceedingly business-like looking revolver.



## CHAPTER II.

### THE BOYS FIND TROUBLE

"No shootee! No shootee!"

The blue-overalled Chinaman plumped down on his knees in the thick dust, with his hands clasped in entreaty. Above him, threatening the cowering wretch with his pistol, stood the figure of the man who had emerged so suddenly from the restaurant door. The crowd doing nothing stood stoically looking on.

The tormentor of the Mongolian was a tall, swarthy figure of a man, crowned with a high-peaked, silver-braided sombrero, the huge brim of which almost obscured the repulsive details of his swarthy face. The remainder of his garb was a short jacket, beneath which a broad red sash upheld the most peculiar nether garments Ralph had ever seen. They were tight about their wearer's thin legs as far as the knees, when the black velvet of which they were made suddenly became as full and baggy as the trousers of a sailor. High-heeled boots and a pair of jingling silver spurs completed his fantastic costume – the typical holiday garb of a Mexican, including the revolver.

"By Sam Hooker, I know that chink!" cried Jack, as the boys ran up and joined the crowd. "It's Hop Lee. He used to cook on my father's ranch. I remember hearing now that he had started some kind of a restaurant in town. Here, Hop Lee, what's the matter?"

"Oh, Misser Mellill, you helpee me! No let Misser De Ballios shootee me! I do no halm. Me catch um – "

"What are you boys interfering here for?" demanded the Mexican suddenly, wheeling angrily. He spoke in good English, but with a trace of accent. Jack, despite his brown face and the keen, resourceful look which comes from a plainsman's life, wore Eastern-cut clothes. The Mexican had promptly sized him up for a tenderfoot. "You just run along, or you'll get hurt," he continued menacingly.

He leveled his gun, and brusquely ordered the Chinaman, who had by this time arisen, to kneel once more in the dust.

"Don't do it, Hop Lee. Get back to your cook stove," cried Jack.

"He *will* kneel!" declared the Mexican, facing about, "or – "

"Well, or what?" demanded Jack, looking the silver-braided bravado straight in the eyes.

"Or you will!"

Question and answer came sharp as pistol shots.

The Mexican raised his pistol menacingly. But at the same instant a foot suddenly projected between the Spanish-American's slender legs and twisted about one limb. The next instant the gaudily garbed bully lay prostrate in the dust, the pungent stuff filling his eyes, mouth and nose.

It was Ralph Stetson's foot which had tripped the man. The boy had acted in a sudden excess of fear that the Mexican was about to shoot his chum. As a matter of fact, the fellow had had no such intention. But now he had shared the fate of many another man who has made a bluff, only to have it promptly taken at its full value.

A sort of murmur of alarm went through the crowd as the Mexican measured his length in the dust.

"Say, pard," said a short, chunky little cowboy behind Ralph, "you've done it now; that's Black Ramon De Barrios."

"Well, he's white now!" laughed the boy, as the Mexican rose to his feet with his features smothered with white dust.

"Looks as if he'd been taking a dive in the flour barrel!" laughed Jack. He turned to Ralph with a quick, "Thanks, old fellow. I see that you're as much on the job here as on the football field. But I don't think he meant to shoot – "

"No, he *did* not, but he *does* now!"

De Barrios approached the boys, his pistol leveled and his black, serpent-like eyes glinting wickedly. "I'll show you what Black Ramon can do! He never forgets an insult nor forgives an injury!"

Aghast at the threatened tragedy, the crowd did nothing, and the boys stood rooted to one spot. Closer and closer, like a snake, the Mexican crept, determined, it seemed, to get the full measure of anticipation out of his revenge for his tumble. Jack never flinched, but his heart beat unpleasantly fast.

The Mexican's brown, cigarette-stained forefinger trembled on the trigger. He was quite close now.

The fat little cowboy gave a yell of alarm, and sprang suddenly forward.

"Look out! The varmint's going to shoot!"

But at the same instant a strange thing happened. A snaky loop whizzed through the air and settled about the bully's neck. The vengeful Mexican was suddenly jerked off his feet as it tightened, his long legs threshing the air like those of a swimming frog.

"Roped, by ginger!" yelled some one in the crowd, as De Barrios, at the end of a lariat, went ploughing through the dust on his face for the second time.

And roped, Ramon De Barrios was. So absorbed had the crowd been in watching the tense scene before them that few of them had noticed a cowboy mounted on a small calico pony who had ridden slowly up from a point behind the boys. This cow-puncher, a long-legged, rangy, sun-burned fellow, in typical stockman's garb, had watched everything attentively till the critical moment. Then, with a quick twist, he had roped the Mexican as neatly as he would have tied a calf on branding day.

"Well done, and thank you, Bud!" shouted Jack, running up and shaking the cowboy's hand.

The latter had halted his pony a short distance from them. But the distance had been quite far enough for De Barrios, whose method of traveling had been far from comfortable.

"Where did you spring from, old fellow?" Jack went on.

"From the corral up the street," said Bud, displaying no more emotion than if he and the boys had had an appointment to meet at that spot under quite ordinary circumstances. "Just wait till I get this here sidewinder of a greaser cut loose, and I'll talk to you."

All this time De Barrios had lain prone in the dust, with the rope stretched tight, just as the trained cow pony had kept it. Bud now cast loose the end which he had wound about his saddle horn, and the Mexican, with a sulky look, rose to his feet and threw off the rawhide loop.

"Here's your gun," said Bud Wilson, leaning from his saddle and picking up the fallen weapon from the dust.

"Hold on, though," he said suddenly. Breaking the weapon open, he "sprung" the shells out of it. This done, he handed it to the Mexican, who took it with a sinister look.

"To our next meeting!" he grated, as he turned away.

"Well, stay on your feet next time!" rejoined Bud composedly, amid a roar from the crowd.

"Now, Hop Lee," demanded Jack Merrill of the Chinaman, as De Barrios strode off without a word, but with a black look on his swarthy face, "what was the trouble in there?"

"Why, the Chink spilled a spot of grease on the brim of the Mexican's sombrero," volunteered somebody, "and when he wouldn't wipe it off again, De Barrios got mad."

"Well, I don't know as I blame the greaser so very much, those being the circumstances," remarked Bud dryly. "These Chinks has got to be kep' in order some way. Now get back to your chuck wagon, Hop, and don't give no more dissatisfaction to your customers."

Ralph now learned who Bud Wilson was – a cow-puncher who had worked for Jack's father for many years, and had practically brought Jack up on the range. Bud had two strong dislikes, Mexicans

and Apaches, and his services against the latter had given him his nickname of Apache Bud. For tenderfeet, Bud had merely pity.

"Poor critters," he would say, when at his ease in the bunkhouse, or when sweeping across the range on his favorite calico pony, "I s'pose it ain't their fault – being raised unnatural – but the most of 'em is dumb as a locoed coyote."

"What ponies have you brought for us, Bud?" asked Jack, as, with the two boys walking beside him, the cowboy rode slowly back to the stable, from the door of which he had first espied their difficulty.

"Waal, I brought Firewater fer you," said Bud, "and Petticoats, the buckskin, for your tenderfoot friend here."

"Petticoats!" said Jack in a tone of vexation. "Why, Petticoats is the tamest old plug on the ranch."

"That's all right, Jack," said Ralph, bravely choking back a feeling of mortification. "I guess, when I've shown I can ride, I'll get a chance at a better animal."

Bud Wilson gazed at him with a kindlier expression than he had yet bestowed on the rather pale-faced young Easterner. Although an athlete and a boxer, Ralph had had some slight bronchial trouble of late, and had been recommended to spend his vacation in New Mexico as a means of effecting a complete cure.

"So you kin ride?" Bud asked.

"A little," said Ralph modestly.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Stetson, the railroad magnate, owned several good horses, and had always encouraged his son Ralph in using them. In this way Ralph had had plenty of experience with one or two of the Eastern "drag hunts," and had played polo a little. Jack Merrill knew this. It mortified him, therefore, to think that old Petticoats had been brought for his guest.

"I tell you, Ralph," he said generously, "you take Firewater and see how you like him."

"Not much, Jack," exclaimed Ralph. "He's your own pet particular pony. I've often heard you speak of him. No; I'll take old Petticoats. I guess we'll get on all right together."

Both ponies were saddled and ready for them when the party reached the stable. De Barrios, who had had his heavy black horse in the corral, was riding out as they came up. The Mexican gave them a black look, to which they paid no attention. The Mexican, whatever he may have looked like on foot, presented an impressive sight on his black horse – a superb, long-tailed animal with a glossy coat and great, restless eyes. De Barrios's saddle and bridle and martingale were covered with silver, and both horse and rider were typical productions of the border.

"Even you will admit that that's a good horse," said Jack to Bud, as the Mexican loped off at an easy, swinging gait, and the boys started into the barn.

"Oh, yes. He's all right; but give me my calico here for a traveler," said Bud, patting the neck of his beloved Chappo.

Poor Petticoats was certainly not an imposing-looking pony. She was a small buckskin, and appeared to be a good enough traveler; but she had an ewe neck, and a straggly tail, and a lack-lustre eye, very unlike Jack's glossy-coated, bright bay pony.

"I thought you said she was a quiet old plug," said Ralph, as his eyes fell on the mare for the first time.

"So she is, why?" asked Jack, who had been too busy tightening Firewater's cinch to notice the really remarkable antics of Petticoat.

"Well, look at that!" exclaimed Ralph, as Petticoats lashed out at him.

For a quiet steed, Petticoats certainly was jumping about a good deal. There was a restless look in her eyes. She rolled them back till only the white showed. Her ears were pressed wickedly close to the side of her not very shapely head.

"Say, she's acting queerly, for fact," said Jack. "Maybe she's been eating loco weed. Shall I ask Bud to look her over before you mount?"

"No, don't. He'd only josh me about her. I guess she's only restless. Just come off pasture, maybe."

So without a word to Bud, who had remained outside the barn while the boys were getting their ponies, Ralph swung himself easily into the saddle.

His body had hardly touched the leather before the placid – or, rather, supposedly placid – Petticoats leaped into the air with a spring which would have unseated a less-experienced rider, and then came down with all four feet stiffly braced together in a wicked buck.

If Ralph had been a less plucky rider, he would have been unseated, and almost to a certainty seriously hurt. As it was, however, he stuck to the saddle.

"Whoa, Petticoats, whoa!" shouted Jack, steadying his own pony, which was getting excited and prancing about as it saw the other's antics.

"W-w-w-what's the m-m-matter with her?"

The words were jerked out of Ralph's mouth, as Petticoats plunged and reared and gave a succession of stiff-legged bucks.

Jack had no time to reply before the buckskin, with a squeal and a series of running leaps, was out of the stable door.

"What in the name of the great horn spoon!" yelled the startled Bud, as a buff-colored streak flashed past him. The next instant, with a rattle of hoofs and an alarming crackling and flapping of saddle leathers, the little pony was off in a cloud of dust, headed for the desert.

"Locoed?" shouted Jack, as he and Bud Wilson dug their big, blunt-rowelled spurs into their mounts and started in pursuit.

"I dunno," muttered Bud, shaking a big loop out of his "rope," as they tore along at break-neck speed, "but we've got to catch him."

"Why? If he doesn't fall off he'll be all right. She'll soon run herself out."

"No, she won't, either. Since you've been East they've put through a big irrigation canal out yonder. That cayuse is headed right for it, and if the kid can't stop her, they'll go sky-whooping over the edge."

"Wow! We've got to get him."

"That's what. Spur up now, and get your rope ready. Now's your chance to show me you haven't forgot all I ever taught you about roping."

Jack unslung the thirty feet of plaited rawhide from the right hand of his saddle horn, and shook out a similar loop to Bud's. Both ponies were now going at the limit of their speed, and the distance between them and the runaway seemed to be diminishing.

"Will we get him in time?" gasped Jack.

"Dunno. There's the canal yonder. It's a twenty-foot drop."

The cowboy pointed dead ahead to where a dark, purplish streak cut across the dun expanse of desert.

"We've *got* to beat him to it!" said Jack, gritting his teeth.

## CHAPTER III.

### A RACE FOR LIFE

Fast as they raced on, Jack and the cow-puncher seemed to gain on the flying Petticoats with aggravating slowness.

"Consarn that mare, she's plumb locoed, I reckon!" growled Bud, as they rocketed along, flogging their ponies to renewed efforts with their heavy quirts.

"She runs like a quarter horse!" gasped Jack, his mouth full of alkali dust; for he had no neck handkerchief to pull up over his mouth, vaquero style.

But with their splendid mounts they were bound to gain on the suddenly crazed Petticoats, and gradually they drew so close that all three riders were blanketed by the same cloud of dust.

Behind them came a second great cloud, in which rode a score or more of riders from Maguez who had hastily mounted and galloped out to see the fun as soon as they heard there was a runaway.

"The canal!" shouted Jack suddenly.

A wandering breeze for a second swept aside the dust cloud before them, and showed the fresh, raw wound gaping in the level surface of the desert. It was fully thirty feet wide, and as the canal was a new ditch, its sides were almost as steep as a wall.

Bud Wilson said nothing, but set his lips grimly. With an imperceptible movement of his wrist, he gathered his trailing loop into the air and began to whirl it above his head, first slowly and then faster and faster. The rawhide loop opened out till it was ten feet or more in circumference.

"Now!" he yelled, and at the same instant the released loop went swirling through the air.

"Yip-yip!" yelled Jack.

Bud had won proudly many a prize for roping, and was the most expert man with the lariat in his part of the West. Had he wished, he could have roped the flying Petticoats by the heels. But to have done so would have been to have brought the crazed pony down with a crash, and probably have seriously injured, if not killed, her rider.

Swish!

The great loop settled as accurately as if hands had guided it about the maddened pony's neck. Bud took a twist of his end round the saddle horn and checked the calico.

"Got her!" screamed Jack. "Yi-hi!"

But there came a sudden shout of dismay from Bud.

The calico's foot had caught in a gopher hole, and over he went, turning almost a complete somersault.

Jack gave a shout of horror as he saw the catastrophe. He feared Bud had been killed, but the lithe bronco buster was up in a second, stumbling toward his fallen horse.

But the rope did not prove equal to the sudden strain put upon it by the collapse of the calico. The instant the pony had fallen, of course its full weight had come on the rawhide, instead of there being, as Bud had planned, a gradual strangling down of the runaway. It had been, in effect, a tug of war between the flying Petticoats and the suddenly checked calico.

Crack!

The rope twanged taut as a stretched fiddle string and parted with a snap just as Bud reached back into the hip of his leathern chaperaros for his Colt.

He had determined to shoot the runaway and risk disabling Ralph, rather than have the pony take the twenty-foot plunge over the brim of the canal. But at the moment his finger pressed the trigger there came a shout from Jack, who was now only a few paces behind Petticoats. The boy's hastily thrown lariat had missed altogether.

Before their horrified eyes, the runaway buck-skin and her rider the next instant plunged in one confused heap over the bank of the canal and vanished from sight.

Jack was within a breath of following them over the brink, but in the nick of time he wheeled the carefully trained Firewater round on his haunches and averted a second calamity.

Controlling his half-maddened steed, the boy pressed to the edge of the canal. The bank was new and smooth, and as steep as the roof of a house. Ralph and his pony had rolled over and over down this place in one inextricable heap. But by the time Jack reached the edge of the steep bank, Ralph had kicked free of the big, clumsy Mexican stirrups and was struggling in the water.

The flood was rushing along in a yellow, turbid swirl. There had been a freshet in the mountains a few days before, and to relieve the pressure on the land company's dam up there, the spillways had been opened to their capacity. The canal was carrying the great overflow. It tore along between the high, steep banks like a mill race.

"The flood gates!" came a frenzied shout from Bud. He pointed westward.

In a flash Jack realized that the flood gates below must be open, and at the instant of this realization came another thought.

If he did not act and act quickly, Ralph would be carried through the gates to probably certain death.

"Ralph! Ralph!" he shouted, as he gazed down at the brave struggle his chum was making to reach the bank; but the current swept the Eastern boy away from it every time. His pony had gained the bank, and was pawing pitifully at the steep, sandy slope.

It did not need more than a glance to see that Ralph's strength was giving out. He turned up a white, despairing face to Jack, by whose side there now stood Bud Wilson.

"Quick, Jack! Chuck him the rope!" shouted Bud in a tense voice.

Inwardly angry at himself for not having thought of this before, Jack sent his rawhide snaking down the bank. Ralph, his face white and strained above the tearing yellow current, reached out in a desperate effort to clutch the rawhide. Even as his fingers gripped it, however, the current proved too much for him. He was swept away on its white-flecked surface like a bit of drift.

"Ride, boy, ride! We've got to beat him to the sluice and close the gates! It's his only chance!"

It was Bud's voice once more.

Somehow, Jack found himself in the saddle, with Firewater racing under him as that brave little bay had never raced before. Close alongside came Bud, rowelling his bleeding-kneed calico cruelly to keep alongside. Far behind came shouts and yells from the crowd. The buckskin, the cause of all the trouble, managed to clamber to the edge of the stream, where the water was slightly shallower, and was dragged out by ropes. While the race for life swept onward, she stood dripping and shivering on the summit of the bank.

From his flying pony Jack caught occasional glimpses of Ralph in the stream below. The boy was a good swimmer, and now that he was being carried along with the current, instead of fighting it, he was able to keep his head above water most of the time.

"Stick it out, Ralph, old boy!" yelled Jack, as he dashed past the half-drowned lad whom the rapid current was carrying almost as swiftly as the over-run ponies could gallop.

"We'll be in time!" exclaimed Jack, through his clinched teeth. Right ahead of him he saw some grim, gallows-like looking timbers reared up against the sky line, which he knew must mark the sluice.

Hardly had the thought flashed through his mind, when Firewater seemed to glide from beneath him. An instant later Jack found himself rolling over and over on the level plain.

The same accident as had befallen Bud had happened to him. A gopher hole – one of those pests of desert riders – had tripped Firewater and sent his rider sprawling headlong.

"Hurt?"

Bud Wilson, on the calico, drew up alongside Jack, who had struggled to his feet and was looking about in a dazed sort of way.

"No, I'll be all right in a second. But Firewater!"

The bay had risen to his feet, but stood, sweating and trembling, with his head down almost between his knees. He could not have expressed "dead beat" better if he had said it in so many words.

"Blown up!" exclaimed Bud disgustedly.

"What shall we do?" choked out Jack.

"Here, quick! Up behind me!"

Bud reached down a hand, kicked a foot out of his left stirrup, and in a second Jack was swung up behind him and they were off.

"I hope to goodness we strike no more gopher holes," thought the boy, as they raced along, scarcely more slowly than when the plucky little calico had only a single burden to carry. Never had the brave little beast been used more unmercifully. Bud Wilson plied his heavy quirt on the pony's flanks as if he meant to lay the flesh open. To every lash of the rawhide the calico responded bravely, leaping forward convulsively.

"We'll beat him to it!" cried Jack triumphantly, as both riders fairly fell off the spent calico's back at the sluice gates.

"Yep, maybe; but we've got to get 'em closed first!" was Bud's laconic response.

Paying no further attention to the calico – which was too spent, anyhow, to attempt to get away – the two, the man and the boy, ran at top speed across the narrow wooden runway which led to the big wheels by which the gateways of the sluice were raised and lowered.

"If Ralph can only hold out!" gasped Jack, who, far up the stream had espied a small black object coming rapidly toward him, which he knew must be the head of his chum. Ralph was swimming easily, taking care not to wind himself, and looking out for any opportunity which might present itself to reach the bank. No sooner did he attempt to cross the current, however, than the water broke over him as if he had been a broached-to canoe. He confined his efforts, therefore, to keeping his head above water. Of the deadly peril that lay ahead of him he had, of course, no knowledge.

"Hurry, Bud!" cried Jack, in an agony of fear that they would be too late.

"All right now, take it easy, Jack. No use hurrying over this job," replied Bud easily, though his drawn face and the sweat on his forehead showed the agitation under which he was laboring.

"Consarn this thing! How's it work!" he muttered angrily, fiddling with the machinery, which was complicated and fitted with elaborate gears and levers to enable the terrific pressure of the water to be handled more easily.

Beneath their feet the stream – a mad torrent above – developed into a screaming, furious flood at the sluiceway. It shot through the narrow confines at tremendous velocity, shaking and tearing at the masonry buttresses as if it would rip them away.

To Jack's excited imagination, it seemed as if the swollen canal was instinct with life and malevolence, and determined to have human life or property in revenge for its confinement.

Suddenly the boy's eyes fell on something he had not noticed before. Beyond the floodgate the engineers of the irrigation canal, finding that the confinement of the water at the sluiceway tended to make the current too savage for mere sandy walls to hold it, had constructed a tunnel. This expedient had been resorted to only after numerous experimental cement retaining walls had been swept away.

Just beyond the buttresses on the other side of the sluice, the entrance of the tunnel yawned blackly. Like a great mouth it swallowed the raging flood as it swept through the sluice.

"Bud! Bud! Look!" cried Jack, pointing.

"Great jumping side-winders! I forgot the tunnel!" groaned Bud, his usually emotionless face working in his agitation. He had been handling the sluice desperately, but without result.

"We *must* close the gates within a second, or it will be too late!" shouted Jack, above the roar of the water. Ralph's despairing face was very close now.

"My poor kid, we can't!" wailed Bud.

"Why not?"

"The double-doggoned, dash beblinkered fool as looks after 'em has padlocked 'em, and we can't git 'em closed without a key!"

There was not a second to think.

Even as the discovery that it would be impossible to close the gates was made, Ralph's white face flashed into view almost beneath them.

Bud made a quick snatch at Jack's lariat, which the boy still retained, and snaked it down over the racing water.

"Missed!" he groaned, as Ralph's upturned face was hurried by.

At the same instant there came a splash that the cow puncher heard even above the roar of the water as it tore through its confines.

Bud glanced quickly round.

Where Jack Merrill had stood a moment before were a pair of shoes, the boy's coat and his shirt.

But Jack had gone – he had jumped to Ralph's rescue. As Bud, with a sharp exclamation of dismay, switched sharply round, he was just in time to see the forms of the two boys swallowed in the darkness of the irrigation tunnel.



## CHAPTER IV. THROUGH THE GREAT DARKNESS

Little given to emotion as he was, Bud Wilson reeled backward as if about to fall, and gripped the woodwork of the sluice till the blood came beneath his nails. His eyes were still riveted on the yawning black mouth of the tunnel, and the white-flecked, yellow water racing into it, when the followers of the chase for life came galloping up, leading the ponies of the two boys who had vanished. Blank looks were exchanged as they learned what had happened.

"Not a chance for them." was the consensus of opinion.

Jack Merrill was not a boy who does things without due thought, however. When he had jumped into what seemed certain death he had done so with a definite plan in his head.

In moments of intense mental strain the mind sometimes acts with lightning-like rapidity, and Jack had reasoned like a flash that the irrigation tunnel, being built to convey water to the lands of the Maguez Land and Development Company, probably emerged on their lands, which lay not more than a mile away. Of course, he was not certain of this, but the life of his friend was at stake.

Spent as his chum was, Jack thought Ralph could hardly last throughout the passage of the tunnel, while he, Jack, was fresh, and also a stronger swimmer. These thoughts had all raced through his mind while he kicked off his boots and tugged his shirt over his head.

Then had come the swift flash below him of Ralph's white, imploring face – and the leap.

For a second the current, as he struck it, seemed to be tearing Jack limb from limb. The undertow at the sluice caught him and dragged him down, down, and held him under the turbid water till it seemed that his head must burst open. At last, however, he was shot to the surface like a cork out of a bottle. Joyously he filled his lungs and began swimming.

As his hands struck out they encountered something.

To his intense joy, the next instant Jack found that the current had thrown its two victims, himself and Ralph Stetson, together, and none too soon.

Ralph's eyes were closed, and though he still floated, he seemed incapable of further effort.

Hardly had Jack time to note this, when the light was suddenly blotted out, as if a great curtain had been drawn across the sun. There was a mighty roaring, like that of a thousand huge cataracts in his ears, and he knew that they had entered the water tunnel.

Where would it lead them?

Fortunately, to Jack, fresh as he was, it was not hard to support Ralph, who was almost exhausted, and keep his own head above water at the same time. All that the Western boy now feared was that he would give out before they reached the mouth of the tunnel, or a still more alarming possibility which he hardly dared to dwell on.

What if the tunnel narrowed?

In that case they would be completely submerged, and if the water were enclosed in an iron tube for any great distance, they would inevitably be miserably drowned. The roaring in the tunnel was terrific, but at least it meant one thing, and that was that there was space for sound to reverberate.

On and on they shot, borne like straws on the surface of the mad torrent.

"Does this thing never end, or have they run it clear through to the Pacific?" Jack began to wonder.

It seemed to him they had been traveling for hours. In reality it was only a few minutes.

All at once the boy was hurled against the side of the tunnel, and his feet touched bottom. If it had not been for the velocity of the current, he could have stopped his mad course right there. But the smooth sides of the tube afforded no hand hold, and the rapidity of the stream precluded all idea of attempting to stem the torrent.

But this incident meant to Jack that what he had dreaded most was actually happening.

The subterranean watercourse was narrowing.

Hardly had the thought flashed through his mind before he felt himself sucked by what seemed an invisible arm below the surface. At the same instant Ralph was torn from his arms, and both boys, submerged in a narrow part of the tunnel, were drawn through the dark tube at the speed of an express train.

"The end!" was the thought that flashed through Jack's mind as he felt that his worst apprehension had come true.

But it was not the end, for an instant later he was shot out of the terrible restriction of the narrow irrigation tube into brilliant, blinding sunlight.

"Why, this is a sort of scenic railway!" was the whimsical idea that sped across the boy's mind as he gazed about him. The current had ceased dashing him about, and he was floating in a large pool from which ramifications of sluiceways led in every direction. It was the main retaining basin of the irrigation works. Weakened though he was, Jack found no difficulty in swimming here, and, to his delight, not many feet from him Ralph was still struggling feebly for life. A few strokes brought the boy to his chum's side, and a few strokes more brought them both ashore.

They reached the shallow bank, and Jack laid Ralph down. As he did so, the other boy fainted in good earnest. As Jack bent over his chum he was startled to hear a voice above, and looking up, saw a man in irrigation boots, with a big shovel in his hand, gazing at them curiously.

"Say, are you real, or just what the ground grew?" demanded the stranger. "The advertisements of this land company say their land'll grow anything, but dear land of Goshen! I didn't know it grew boys. That's a crop I've no use for. I've four of my own, and –"

"We're real boys, have nothing to do with any land company, and don't want to, either, after our experience in their water tunnel; and if you can help me get my chum up on the bank and help me revive him, I'll be much obliged," rejoined Jack, all in one breath.

"Well, if you came through that tube, it hasn't hurt your wind any," said the rancher admiringly, dropping his irrigation tool and clambering down the bank. Together he and Jack soon had Ralph stretched out on the warm sandy soil in a big peach orchard, and it was not long before the Eastern boy opened his eyes and looked about him. It was longer, though, before he recollected what had happened. When he did, he knew that it was Jack who must have held him above water at the most critical stage of their wild trip through the tube.

"Thank you, Jack," he said simply.

"Oh, pshaw!" said Jack, reddening. "Didn't you trip up that Mexican and save me getting a bullet through my head?"

At this moment a great shout caused them both to look up. Riding toward them among the trees were a hundred or more mounted men, who broke into cheers as they saw the boys. They were the men who had found Bud Wilson at the sluice gate, and who had at once insisted on his mounting and riding on to the end of the tube to ascertain if by some marvelous chance the boys had survived. When Jack and Ralph stood up – for they had been sitting on the ground, relating to their interested host their adventures – the cheers broke out afresh.

Bud Wilson did not say much. He was not a man of words, but his face expressed what he felt when he exclaimed in a voice that trembled a little in spite of his efforts to keep it steady.

"Waal, I knowed you'd come out of it all right, Jack Merrill."

"I wasn't so sure of it myself, I can tell you!" laughed Jack.

"Say," said Ralph, after the first outburst of questions and answers had subsided, and the boys had had to tell over and over again every detail of their perilous trip, "what I can't understand is why you call that plug," pointing to the now downcast Petticoats, who had been led along with the party, "why you call that animal 'quiet.' What do *wild* horses do out here, eat you alive or breathe fire?"

"There was a blamed good reason fer Petticoats' ructions," said Bud slowly; and while the eyes of all were fixed intently on him, he held up a red-stained spur.

"A Mexican tickler!" cried Jack.

"That's what, and some one placed it under Petticoats' saddle blanket before the boy mounted," rejoined Bud solemnly.

"Poor beast! No wonder she cut up didoes," said Ralph.

"I should say not. Look at this."

The cowboy lifted the hind flap of Petticoats' saddle, and raising the blankets, showed her back raw and bleeding from the cruel roweling she had received.

"But however did that spur get there?" gasped Ralph.

"Not hard to guess. Can't you imagine?" asked Jack Merrill.

"No, unless – "

"It was that greaser you knocked out," Jack finished for him.

"Consarn the heathenish rattlesnake!" exclaimed the livery stable keeper, who had been among those to follow the wild chase of the canal-carried boys. "I seen him monkeying around your ponies just before he rode out of the barn. If I ever get my hands on him – "

A low growl running through the crowd finished his threat for him. It would have fared badly with Black Ramon had he been there then. But he was far away, riding for the mountains, where he would be safe from the ranchmen's vengeance.

"Waal, we'll run acrost his tracks some day," growled Bud Wilson, "and when we do – Waal, let's talk about the weather."

The boys said nothing, but their faces spoke volumes. By this time, such was the heat of the sun, Ralph's clothes had almost dried out, and he was assured that he would suffer no ill effects from his immersion. As Jack was also almost dry, the rancher, who, it turned out, was a friend of Mr. Merrill's, invited the Agua Caliente party in to have something to eat while their houses were rubbed down and fed. After more congratulations and expressions of wonderment, the horsemen from Maguez rode back to town, and when they had spread the story, the atmosphere of that part of the country would have proved very unhealthful for Black Ramon. Indeed, there was talk of fitting up an expedition to go out and get him, but it was surmised that the Mexican had probably ridden over the border and taken sanctuary in one of his retreats.

"Speaking of irrigation, I'm afraid we are going to have serious trouble with the water some day," Mr. Hungerford, the rancher, remarked as they sat at their meal.

"You mean your orchards will be overflowed?" inquired Jack.

"Oh, no. I'm not afraid of that. That pool in which you landed from the tunnel is drained by a score of small ditches which ought to be capable of handling any overflow. No, the ranches I mean are the ones back under the hills – the cattle ranges. The dam back near Grizzly Pass is none too strong, I am told, and if at any time following a cloudburst the sluiceways should not be opened in time, the retaining wall might burst, and the whole country be swept by a disastrous flood. Damage to thousands of dollars' worth of property and the death of scores of men and cattle might also be a consequence."

"But surely the dam is well guarded?" asked Ralph.

"That's just the trouble," said Mr. Hungerford seriously. "At night, I understand, only one old man is on watch there, and if he should meet with an accident there would be no one to watch for the safety of the ranchers in the foothills."

"Yep, if she'd carry away, she sure would raise Cain!" agreed Bud Wilson.

"Engineers are figuring on some means of strengthening the retaining wall now, I understand," rejoined Mr. Hungerford. "I hope they will complete their work before any storm breaks."

Soon after, the subject was changed, and at the conclusion of their meal, after thanking their hospitable host, the little party set out for Agua Caliente.

"What does Agua Caliente mean, anyhow?" asked Ralph, as they rode out of Mr. Hungerford's place.

"Hot water," rejoined Bud; "and it looks to me as if we didn't have to go as far as the range to get in it."

"There are some hot springs on one part of the ranch," explained Jack.

As the sun grew low they were still in the saddle. The desert had now been passed and they were traversing foothills – rough, broken ground, covered with scrub oak and split and riven by dried water courses. Behind were the dark slopes of the Sierra de la Hacheta. They appeared black and menacing in the dying light.

"They look like regular robbers' roosts," said Ralph, regarding them as the horses picked their way over the rough road, which was scarcely better than a track.

"Robbers' roosts, I guess so," laughed Bud; "and there are some robber roosters among 'em, too," he went on. "Those mountains are on the border, and some place over beyond them is the most pestiferous band of cattle rustlers and horse thieves that ever bothered a nice, peaceable community. Why, before Sam Hickey shot Walter Dodge at –"

But the boys had broken into a roar of laughter at Bud Wilson's idea of a peaceable community. Their merriment was brought to a sudden halt, however.

From the road ahead had come the sudden clatter of a horse's hoofs. The animal was evidently being urged ahead at full speed.

Bud's hand slipped swiftly back to his hip pocket. The boys realized by this almost automatic action that they were in a country where men are apt to shoot first and ask questions afterward.

Presently a little rise brought the galloper into view.

At the sight of the advancing party, he too slackened speed, and his hand made the same curiously suggestive movement as had Bud Wilson's.

"Howdy!" called Bud tentatively to the dark form outlined against the sombre background of brown, scrub-grown foothill and purple mountain.

"Howdy, Bud Wilson!" came back the hail. "I'll be switched if I didn't think it was Black Ramon and some of his gang, for a minute!"

"Why, hello, Walt Phelps!" hailed Bud cheerfully, as the other advanced. "I didn't know but you was some sort of varmint. How be yer?"

"First class, 'Frisco to Portland, Oregon. Hello, Jack Merrill! Well, you're looking natural. Welcome to our city!"

The stranger spurred his horse nearer, and Ralph saw that he was a boy about their own age, on a big, raw-boned gray horse that seemed capable of great efforts. Fast as the other had been advancing, the gray's flanks hardly heaved.

"Ralph, this is Walt Phelps. He and I used to play ball together when we weren't off on the range some place," said Jack, turning in his saddle to make the introduction. "He's a neighbor of ours. Lives on the next ranch. What are you hurrying so for, Walt?"

The other shoved back his broad sombrero, and the evening light shone on a freckled, good-natured face and the reddest hair Ralph had ever seen.

"Guess you ain't heard the news?" he asked curiously.

"No, what?"

"Why, those cattle rustlers have broken out again. Raided Perkin's last night and got away with fifty head."

"Phew!"

"And that's not all. They know who's at the head of the gang now."

"Who?"

"Why, that bullying greaser – what's his name? That Mexican who's been in trouble a dozen times –"

"Black Ramon De Barrios?"

"That's the rooster! We heard he had the nerve to show up in town, and I'm riding in to see if I can't pick up some fellows and head him off."

"I guess you're too late, Walt."

"How do you know? You only just got in to-day from the East. I met your father a while back, and he told me."

"I know, but we've had time to meet Black Ramon and put something on our side of the book against him."

"Say – tell me." The other's tone held amazement.

"Come on and ride back with us, and I'll tell you as we go along. Black Ramon's on Mexican soil by this time or soon will be."

Their adventures were soon related, and by the time Jack's narrative was concluded, the lights and welcoming voices of Agua Caliente were before them.

## CHAPTER V. THE RUSTLERS AT WORK

"Jack!"

"Um-um-um-huh!" from Jack Merrill, as he turned over in his cot.

"Listen! There it is again – What is it?"

Ralph Stetson sat bolt upright in bed, listening with all his might to the strange and shivery sound which had awakened him. It was shortly after midnight, following the evening of the boys' arrival, and both were sleeping – or rather had been sleeping – in a room set aside for them in one wing of the low, straggly ranch house in the foothills of the Sierra de la Hacheta.

"Wow-wow-wow!" came the cry once more from somewhere among the dreary, moonlit hills outside.

"Oh, that!" said the ranch-raised boy, with a laugh. "That's coyotes!"

"Oh," rejoined Ralph wisely. "Coyotes, eh?" But he did not lie down again. Instead, he listened more intently than before. Presently came another howl from some distance off.

"They're conversational beasts, aren't they?" inquired Ralph.

"What do you mean?" sleepily muttered Jack.

"Why, some friend of the one I just heard is answering him. Hark!"

Jack Merrill became suddenly interested as he heard the second howl. His eyes grew round as he listened intently, and he, too, sat up in his bed.

"Say," he remarked, "that *is* funny. And hark! there's another one – off there to the south."

"What do you suppose they are up to?"

"I've no idea, but I tell you what – if you like, we'll take the rifle and sneak out and see. What do you say?"

"Um – well, it's a bit chilly to go coyote hunting, but I should like to get one. Professor Wintergreen said at supper last night that he would like to have the hide of one of the beasts for his collection. Let's go!"

"All right. Just slip on a few clothes. The magazine of my rifle's full. Don't make a racket getting out of the house, though. I don't just know how dad would take it."

"But he'll hear the rifle if we shoot one."

"That's so; but it will be too late then."

Silently as cats, the two boys got out of bed and dressed, an operation which was performed by slipping on trousers, shirts and boots over their pajamas. Then, with their sombrero hats on, they were ready to creep outside. The moon had been up for an hour, and was shining down in a radiant flood, illuminating the heaving surface of the foothills as if they had been a silver sea.

"Which way will we go?" whispered Ralph, as they stole along in the dark shadow of the low timber house like two culprits.

"Over there. Down toward the corral. The chicken house is down there, and those four-footed thieves are fond of chicken *au naturel*."

Taking advantage of every bit of shadow that offered, the two lads crept toward the corral, a big inclosure about half an acre in extent, in the center of which stood a fenced haystack. The horses of the ranch were generally turned loose in it to browse about at their will. Usually not more than enough for the use of the ranch-house family were kept there, the rest being driven in from the "remuda" as required.

"Say, it's silent, isn't it?" whispered Ralph, as they crawled along behind a big stack of wild-oat hay.

"Well, you didn't expect to find a roaring city in the heart of the foothills of the Hachetas, did you?" inquired Jack, with vast sarcasm. "Hush! Now I think I saw something!"

"Where?"

"Off there to the south. It was slipping along among the hills. There, there it is again!"

Ralph strained his eyes into the darkness, but could see nothing of the object Jack had indicated. It had gone as utterly as if it had not been there.

Suddenly the wild howls that had awakened Ralph broke out once more. This time they came quite close at hand, and neither boy could repress a start at the sound. It gave an impression of an outburst of demoniac mirth.

"Wow! ow-ow-ow-ow-ow!"

The cry was immediately echoed from the direction in which Jack had declared he had seen a gray shadow flitting in and out. The next instant both boys gave an involuntary shout of surprise, which they hastily checked, realizing that they were face to face with a stern necessity for silence.

Outlined as clearly against the moonlight as if it had been cut from black paper, the *figure of a horseman* had momentarily appeared, and then as abruptly vanished.

At the same instant there came a wild disturbance of hoofs in the corral, and before the boys' astonished eyes four more horsemen dashed from it and swept off toward the south. Behind them there trailed half a dozen of the animals which had been feeding or sleeping in the corral. To the neck of each was attached a lariat, and they followed their captors at breakneck speed.

"Horse thieves!" shouted Jack, springing to his feet and giving the alarm by firing a volley of bullets after the retreating rustlers.

Instantly the sleeping ranch galvanized into active life. Lights flashed here and there, and from the bunkhouse on a hillside below the main house there poured a strangely assorted score of hastily aroused cowboys. Some of them were trouserless, but all carried their revolvers.

"What's the matter? What is it?" shouted Mr. Merrill's voice.

"Dad, it's horse thieves!" shouted Jack.

"Some of Black Ramon's bunch, for a bet!" roared Bud Wilson, emerging with a lantern and vaulting into the corral.

"Oh, the dirty scoundrels!" he broke out the next instant.

"What is it? What have they done, Bud?" cried Jack, who realized from the usually impassive vaquero's tone that something very much was amiss.

"Why, they've taken the pick of the bunch! Look here, Firewater's gone, my calico, and –"

"But they've left some horses. Quick! Let's get after them. We can overtake them!" urged Mr. Merrill, who had hastily thrown on some clothes, and, followed by the professor, was now down at the corral.

"We can't," wailed Bud; "the precious rascals have hamstringed all the horses they didn't want."

A chorus of furious voices broke out at this. Black Ramon, if it were he or his band that had made the midnight raid, had planned it cleverly. It would be hours before fresh horses could be rounded up from the "remuda," and the poor animals remaining had been crippled fatally. Few minds but that of a Mexican could have conceived of such a fiendish act. The unfortunate animals, uncomplainingly, as is the manner of horses, were lying about the corral, looking up at the men about with mute agony in their large eyes.

"Oh, blazes! if I could get my hands on that greaser!" roared Bud Wilson.

"Steady now, Bud, steady!" said Mr. Merrill, though his own frame trembled with rage at the needless brutality of the raiders. "Hard words will do no good now."

"Let's keep quiet a minute. Maybe we can hear the clatter of their hoofs," said one of the cowboys, a young chap who had come to the ranch from a peaceful California range not long before.

"Not much chance of that," said Bud Wilson bitterly. "Those chaps had the hoofs of their own mounts and the ones they stole all muffled – you can bet your Sunday sombrero on that."

"That's why they made so little noise when they led them off," said Ralph. But in the general agitation no one paid any attention to him.

Everybody was rushing about asking questions, giving orders, hastening this way and that with lanterns. Even the Chinese cook was out with a frying pan in his hand, seemingly under the impression that it was up to him to cook something.

It was Mr. Merrill who first found his head.

"Silence!" he cried in a stern, ringing voice. "You, Bud, select two men and put these poor brutes here out of their pain."

"If it's all the same to you, boss, will you give that job to some one else?" said Bud, with a queer little break in his voice. "I've rode some of them plugs."

"All right, then. Your job will be to round up a dozen of the best nags you can find from the Escadillo pasture. Get a bite to eat, take two men with you, and start right now. Don't lose a minute."

Bud Wilson hastened off. He didn't want to be near the corral when the shots that told that the ham-strung beasts were being put out of their misery were heard.

"What are they going to do?" whispered Ralph, as two cowboys finally climbed into the corral with their revolvers drawn.

"Kill those poor brutes. It's the only thing to do with a hamstrung horse," said Jack bitterly, turning away.

Ralph, having no more wish than his friend to see the final chapter of the raiders' visit, followed him. As they turned they almost ran into the professor.

The estimable scientist, in his agitation, had just thrown aside a valuable book, and held tightly to a piece of straw, under the impression that he had thrown away the straw and kept the book. Jack picked up the volume and handed it to the professor. To his surprise, however, the man of science waved the book aside, and the boys could see in the moonlight that a new light, foreign entirely to their usual mild radiance, beamed in his eyes.

"No, no!" he said in a sharp voice, one which the boys had never heard him use before. "No books now. What I want is a rifle and a horse. I never knew I was a man of blood till this moment, but – but I'm hanged if I wouldn't like a shot at those – ahem – I believe they are called greasers, and a good name for the rascals!"

"Good for you, professor!" exclaimed Jack; "and if we have our way, you'll get your chance before long. We're going to take the trail after those rascals as soon as Bud and the others get the horses."

"Oh, Jack, are we to go?" gasped Ralph.

"Well, if we don't, something's going to drop!" said Jack in a determined tone. "They've taken my little Firewater, and I've got something to say to them on my own account."

"Say," exclaimed Ralph suddenly, as the professor and the boys hastened toward the house, "I want to take back something I said yesterday."

"What's that?"

"That there are no adventures left in the modern West."

Jack, even in the midst of his agitation, could not help laughing at Ralph's earnest tone.

"I wonder what they'd think at Stonefell if they could see us now," he mused. Suddenly he pointed toward the professor, who was angrily shaking a fist at the Southern sky, where the saw-like outline of the Hachetas cut the moonlit horizon.

"And what would his Latin class say if they could see him?"

"That he was all right!" rejoined Ralph, with deep conviction.

Inside the great living room of the ranch house, with its brightly colored rugs on the dark wood floor and walls, and a blaze leaping in its big open hearth, for the night was chilly, the Chinese cook was already setting out a meal, when the boys entered. Mr. Merrill, his brow furrowed with deep thought, was walking up and down. He looked up as his son and Ralph entered, and spoke quickly.



"You boys had better remain at the ranch," he said. "We are not likely to be gone long and – "

He stopped short. The blank faces of the two lads had caused him to break into a broad smile despite the seriousness of his mood.

"Why, why," he said amusedly, "surely you didn't expect to come along?"

"Why, dad, of course. They've taken my Firewater, the rascals, and I've got a personal interest in the thing."

"And I, sir," began Ralph, "I am out here for experience, you know."

"Well, you certainly seem to be getting it. I am half inclined to allow you to come. I must attach one condition to it, however, and that is that you obey orders implicitly, and if any danger arises that you will do your best to conceal yourselves from it."

"What, run away – oh, dad!" began Jack, but his father cut him short.

"Accept my conditions or stay here, Jack."

"Very well, then, dad, we accept – eh, Ralph?"

The Eastern boy nodded. Not for the world would he have missed what was to come. And now the professor spoke up.

"Mr. Merrill, sir, I shall take it as a favor if you will provide a horse for me. In my young days I was not unaccustomed to equine pursuits, and I feel that I should make one of your party. I could wish, sir, to be in at the – the finish – if I may say so – of those ruffians."

"There is small likelihood of our catching them, professor," said Mr. Merrill, smiling at the other's excitement. "They have a long start. I am afraid you would only have a long, tiring ride for your pains."

"I am willing to chance it," said the professor simply. "I feel, in fact, that such a dash across the er – er, Rubicon would be classic, sir, classic, if nothing else."

"That being the case," said Mr. Merrill, checking his amusement, in view of the professor's evident earnestness, "you shall certainly come. But now breakfast, or supper, or whatever one may call the meal, seems to be ready. Let us sit down and eat, for we have a long ride ahead of us."

During the meal Mr. Merrill was plied with questions by the eager boys. In fact, so numerous did the queries become, that he was relieved at last when a diversion offered in the shape of a clattering of hoofs outside the door.

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