

Baker Willard F.

**The Boy Ranchers in Death  
Valley: or, Diamond X and  
the Poison Mystery**



Willard Baker

**The Boy Ranchers in Death Valley: or,  
Diamond X and the Poison Mystery**

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# **Baker Willard F.**

## **The Boy Ranchers in Death Valley; Or, Diamond X and the Poison Mystery**

### **CHAPTER I**

#### **BAD NEWS**

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

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

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

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

"Try it again, Bud!"

"You missed him clean, that time!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fly paper! What for?" demanded Bud.

"So you can stick on!"

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

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

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

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

"Turn him loose, Billee!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kid.

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

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

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

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

"Wow!" yelled Dick Shannon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Look who's here!"

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

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

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

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

"What's all the excitement about?"

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

"I saw you risk your neck, if that's what you mean," answered Mr.

Merkel with a half smile.

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

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

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

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

"You needn't worry about the ranch work, Dad!" interrupted Bud, eagerly. "It's all been 'tended to. Herd riding, looking after fences, cattle all shipped off just as you left word when you went away and

all that. We got everything cleaned up and I thought we could take a little time off to practice for the rodeo."

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

"A new job!" cried Nort, eagerly.

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

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

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

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

"Send us where?" Bud wanted to know.

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

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

"That's good news!" commented Nort.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's right, Billee."

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

"That's the place, Billee."

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## CHAPTER II

### UNDAUNTED BY FEAR

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

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

"You aren't getting my new Dot and Dash ranch mixed up with Death Valley in the Panamint Mountains of California; are you?" asked Mr.

Merkel. "I know that place – four hundred feet below sea level – alkali – borax and all that sort of stuff. Do you mean – ?"

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

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

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

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

"This is no *yarn*!" declared the veteran puncher in an ominous voice.

"It's gospel truth. I'll tell you all I know."

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

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

In that story was related how Norton and Richard Shannon had gone out west, from New York, and how they took up life on the ranch of their uncle Henry Merkel. There they found Bud, who had been among horses and cattle all his life. Nort and Dick soon assimilated the traditions of the west, became accomplished riders and able to punch cows with the best of the hands on Diamond X. The lads from the east also learned what it was to come to grips with rustlers, led by that notorious halfbreed Del Pinzo.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Death to whom, Billee?" asked Bud.

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

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

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

"How is it, then, Billee," asked Mr. Merkel, "that nothing happened to me? I just came from there. I don't buy a pig in a poke. I went to

Dot and Dash and sized the place up before I closed the deal with Jed

Barter. How is it Death Valley didn't get me, Billee?"

Nothing daunted the old man replied:

"You didn't stay there long enough."

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

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

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

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

Purdee.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bud.

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

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

Broadcast it, Billee!"

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

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

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

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

"Let him keep it, Boss."

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

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

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

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

"Couldn't you hold down the job?" chuckled Babe Milton, who was Slim

Degnan's assistant, and as fat as Degnan was lean.

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

"And what happened?" asked Dick.

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

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

"Yes, but they were natural deaths!" declared Billee. "And they didn't keep happenin' one after another like at Dot and Dash."

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

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

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

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

"Rustlers," suggested Slim.

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

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

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

"Wasn't there?" asked Dick.

"Not a hole."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You mean about mysterious deaths?" asked Dick.

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

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

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

"What do you mean, son?"

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

He looked at his fellow boy ranchers.

"Nothing to it!" declared Dick, valiantly.

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

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

## CHAPTER III ON THE TRAIL

Slowly the owner of Diamond X began to speak.

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

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

"Watch me get him!" whispered Bud to his cousins. Then, addressing Old

Billee he went on: "I don't reckon, if we hit the trail for Dad's new

Dot and Dash ranch – I don't reckon you'll come with us; will you – Billee?" and he drawled the last few words with a wink at Nort and

Dick.

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

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

"Course I'll go with you an' you know it!" snapped the old man. "Hu!

What you think I am, anyhow?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then we will!" cried Bud.

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

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

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

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

"But we never had no reason, before, for speakin' of 'em," remarked

Squinty Lewis. And that, generally, was the sentiment. But though he could not have guessed his employer was on a mission to Los Pompan,

Billee reproached himself for not having sounded a warning.

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

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

"Maybe lightning struck 'em," suggested Nort.

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

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

"I'm not going to ask you to try and sell it for me, so I won't bestuck," the ranchman said after his decision was made. "I'm not going to palm off a death-dealing place on somebody the way Barter, so it appears, loaded me up with it. But I don't yet admit anything is wrong. However, if you boys find there is, just close up shop and we'll forget it."

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

"What'll you do then?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hit the trail!" echoed Nort.

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

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

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

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



"Where's that outfit heading for?" asked a passing puncher from CircleT ranch, the nearest to Diamond X, and a place owned by Thomas Ogden, who was quite friendly with Mr. Merkel.

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

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

"Know anything about it?" asked Babe.

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

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

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

## CHAPTER IV

### A NIGHT ALARM

"Well, Dick, how they coming?"

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

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

"How about you, Nort?"

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

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

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

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

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

"And there's still plenty of time for things to happen before we get to

Dot and Dash and see what Death Valley looks like," suggested Nort.

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

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

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

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

They were now on their third day of travel, after two uneventful nights spent in the open, and, so far, nothing had happened. Truth to tell, Dick and Nort were beginning to get a bit discouraged. They had heard much about the great and glorious west before coming to live at Diamond X and the things that happened shortly after they arrived were quite "up to sample," as Dick used to remark. And in the succeeding season they passed with Bud, riding fence, helping at the round-ups and at the cutting out of cattle for shipment, enough had taken place to satisfy any reasonable lad.

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

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

"Are you looking for trouble?" chuckled Bud.

"Well, I'd like enough to keep from getting lonesome," was the reply.

"You take it now – "

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" chorused Nort and Dick.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shall we stand guard?" asked Nort.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER V

### THE WARNING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A horse thief, Billee!"

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

"Horse thieves, eh?" cried Billee in ringing tones. "The varmints!"

Come on, boys! We'll get 'em!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Horse thieves don't generally send word they're comin'!" chuckled

Billee. "But it strikes me you've made a mistake, Dick."

"A mistake, how?"

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

"What else was he?"

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

Count for yourself."

It took only a few moments to enumerate the riding and pack animalstethered near the camp and the count was found to total correctly. Notan animal was missing.

"Guess you were too quick for him," commented Nort to his brother.

"It's lucky you woke up."

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

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

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

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

"I'll take first shot at it," said Dick. "I'm wide awake now and since

I saw this old man I'll know him again if he comes sneaking back."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER VI

### AT DOT AND DASH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You never can tell what young fellows will do," murmured Old Billee.

"But I'm glad to hear you three say you had nothing to do with it."

Sort of relieves me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not yet," said Billee Dobb significantly. "But we'll soon be able to. I've got my mind made up, now. I'm going to see this thing through to the finish!" and he smote his right fist into his open left hand with a sound like the report of a small gun.

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

"I raised the alarm as soon as I could wake myself up," was the answer.

"But I guess we were all sleeping pretty sound."

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

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

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

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

"I guess we all will," echoed Nort.

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

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



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