

**Baker Willard F.**

# **The Boy Ranchers: or, Solving the Mystery at Diamond X**



Willard Baker

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the Mystery at Diamond X**

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# Baker Willard F. The Boy Ranchers; Or, Solving the Mystery at Diamond X

## THE BOY RANCHERS

### CHAPTER I "SOME RIDIN'!"

Two riders slumped comfortably in their saddles as the ponies slowly ambled along. The sun was hot, and the dust stifling, a cloud of it forming a floating screen about the horsemen and progressing with them down the trail.

One of the riders, a tall, lanky and weather-beaten cowboy, taking a long breath, raised his voice in what he doubtless intended to be a song.

It was, however, more a cry of anguish as he bellowed forth:

"Leave me alone with a rope an' a saddle,  
Fold my spurs under my haid!  
Give me a can of them sweet, yaller peaches,  
'Cause why? My true-love is daid!"

"Bad as all that; is it, Slim?" asked the other, who, now that he had partly emerged from the cloud of dust, could be seen as a lad of about sixteen. He, like the other, older rider, was attired cowboy fashion.

"Eh? What's that, Bud?" inquired the lanky one, seeming to arouse as if from a day dream. "See suthin'?"

"Nope. I was just sort of remarking about that sad song, and – "

"Oh, shucks! *That* wa'n't sad!" declared Slim Degnan, foreman of the Diamond X ranch. "Guess I wa'n't really payin' much attention to what I was singin', but if you want a real sad lament – "

"No, I don't!" laughed Bud Merkel, whose father was the owner of Diamond X ranch. "Not that I blame you for feeling sort of down and out," he added.

"Oh, I don't feel *bad*, Bud!" came the hasty rejoinder. "We did have more'n a ride than I figgered on, but I don't aim to put up no kick. It's all in the day's work. You don't seem to mind it."

"I should say not! We had a bully time. I'd spend another night out in the open if we had to. I like it!"

"Yes, you seem to take to it like a duck does to water," added Slim. "But it's a shame to mention ducks in the same chapter with this atmosphere! Zow hippy! But it's hot an' dusty an' thirsty! Come along there, you old hunk of jerked beef!" he added to his pony, giving a gentle reminder with the spurs and pulling on the reins. The pony made a feeble attempt to increase its gait, but it was no more than an attempt.

The animal that was ridden by Bud – a pinto – started to follow the example of the other.

"Regular mud-turtle gallop," commented the foreman.

"They'll go faster when they top the rise, and see the corral," commented Bud.

"An' smell water! That's what I want, a long, sizzling, sozzling drink of water!" cried Slim, whose name fitted him better than did his clothes. Then he broke forth again with:

"Oh, leave me alone with a rope an' a saddle – "

Slowly the riders plodded along. The sun seemed to grow more hot and the dust more thick. As they approached a hill, beyond which lay the corral and ranch buildings of Diamond X, Bud drew rein, thus halting his pony.

"Let's give 'em a breather before we hit the hill," he suggested to the foreman.

"I'm agreeable, son," was the foreman's easy comment as he slung one leg over the saddle and sat sideways.

Slim Degan and Bud had ridden off to look for a break in one of the many long lines of wire fences that kept the stock of Diamond X somewhat within bounds, and it had taken longer to locate and repair the break than they had counted on.

They had been obliged to remain out all night – not that this was unusual, only they had not exactly prepared for it – and, in consequence, did not have all the ordinary comforts. But, as Bud had said, he had not minded it. However, the ponies were rather used up, and the riders in the same condition, and it was with equal feelings of relief that they came within sight of the last hill that lay between them and the ranch.

"Well, might as well mosey along," spoke Slim, at length. "Sooner we get some water inside us, an' th' ponies, th' better we'll all be."

"I reckon," agreed Bud. "But I don't believe Zip Foster could have done the job any quicker than we did."

"Who?" queried Slim, with a quizzical look at his companion.

"Zip Foster," answered Bud.

"Never heard of him. What outfit does he ride for?" asked the foreman, but he saved Bud the embarrassment of answer by suddenly rising in his saddle and looking off in the distance.

Bud had his own reasons for not answering that seemingly natural question, and he was glad of the diversion, though he was not at once aware of what had caused it. But he followed the direction of the foreman's gaze, and, like him, saw arising in the still air, about two miles away, a thin thread of smoke – a mere wisp, as though it had dangled down from some fleecy cloud. But the smoke was ascending and was not the beginning of a fog descending.

"Can't be any of our boys," murmured Slim. "They aren't out on round-up yet. An' it's too early for grub."

"Indians?" questioned Bud. Sometimes the bucks from a neighboring reservation felt the call of the wild, and slipped out to have a forbidden feast on some cattleman's stock, only to be brought up with a round turn by the government soldiers.

"Don't think so," remarked Slim. "They don't have much chance t' practice their wiles, but, with all that, they know enough not t' make a fire that smokes. Must be some strangers. If it's any of them ornery sheep men," he exclaimed, "I'd feel like – "

"They wouldn't dare!" exclaimed Bud, for being the son of a cattle-ranchman he had come to dislike and despise the sheep herders, whose flocks ate so closely as to ruin the feeding range for steers. The sheep would crop grass down to the very roots, setting back its growth for many months.

"No, I don't reckon it would be sheepers," murmured Slim. "Wa'al, mebbly they know at the ranch. We'll be headin' home now, I guess. Come on there, you old tumble-bug!" he called to his horse, and then he raised his voice and roared:

"Leave me alone with a rope an' a saddle,  
Fold my spurs under my haid!  
Give me a can of them sweet, yaller peaches,  
'Cause why? My true-love is daid!"

Slim's horse started off on a lope, freshened by the rest, and Bud's followed. They topped the rise, and, then as the animals came within sight and smell of their stables, and caught the whiff of ever-welcome water, they dashed down the slope toward the green valley in which nestled the corral and buildings of Diamond X ranch.

"If I wasn't so doggoned tired," said Slim to Bud as they prepared to pull up on reaching the corral, "I'd ride over after supper, and see what that smoke was. I don't perzactly like it."

"Maybe I'll go," offered Bud. "If it *should* happen to be sheepers, dad'll want to know it."

"He shore will, son. But – Zow hippy! What's going on here?" cried Slim. He pointed toward the corral of the ranch – a fenced-off field where the cowboys kept their string of ponies when the animals were not in use. Here, too, spare animals were held against the time of need.

Just now a crowd of cowboys surrounded this corral. Some were perched on the rails of the fence, and others leaned over. Some were swinging their hats as though in encouragement, and one was rapidly emptying his gun on the defenseless air, which was further torn and shattered by wild yells.

As the two wayfarers neared the corral, there dashed from among the cattle punchers surrounding it an exceedingly fat cowboy, whose face, wreathed in smiles, was also wet with perspiration. He swung his hat around in a circle and yelled shrilly:

"Some ridin', boys! Some ridin'! Go to it!"

"What's the matter, Babe?" asked Slim, of his assistant who had thus given vent to his feelings.

"Go look! It's so good I don't want to spoil it!" laughed the fat one. "Two tenderfoots – Oh, my – Hole me up, somebody!" he begged. "Some ridin'!"

Bud had a glimpse, in the corral, of a youth about his own age, flying rapidly around the enclosure on the back of a bucking bronco. The lad was holding on with both arms around the horn of the saddle.

"Get him off!" cried Bud in a high pitched voice, as he recognized the pony to which the strange lad was clinging. "Tartar will kill him! Get him off!"

## CHAPTER II

### A CALL FOR HELP

Without waiting for his pony to come to a stop, Bud fairly flung himself out of the saddle, and with his rope, or lariat, coiled on his arm he ran toward the corral.

"What's matter?" demanded Babe Milton, the assistant foreman, pausing in his repeated exclamations of:

"Some ridin'! Some ridin'!"

"Don't you fellows know any better than to let a tenderfoot ride Tartar?" cried Bud. "That horse is next door to an outlaw, and you wouldn't get on him yourself, Babe!"

"You said an earful!" came the quick response. "I wouldn't!"

"Then how'd you come to let this fellow on? Who is he, anyhow?" cried Bud, as he slipped through a hunch of cowboys who opened to let him pass.

"Fresh tenderfoot," some one said.

"He would ride!" added another.

"Says he's your cousin," added a third ranch hand.

"My *cousin*!" cried Bud. Then he did not stop to do any more talking. He leaped the fence of the corral, and, as he did so he became aware of another stranger – a tenderfoot like the lad on Tartar – standing within the fenced-off place. This lad, who bore all the marks of a newly-arrived Easterner, was rather short and stout – not to say fat. He stood beside an ancient and venerable cow pony, which was never ridden when there was anything else in the corral to throw a saddle on. And this lad was gazing with fear-widened eyes at the figure of the other lad.

"Get off, Nort! Get off!" cried this stout lad.

"Don't tell him to do that!" ordered Bud sharply. "He'll break his neck sure! Stick, and I'll rope Tartar!" he shouted, trying to make his voice heard above the thunder of the feet of the half-maddened horse, and the now somewhat subdued shouts of the cowboys.

Bud Merkel knew his business. He had not lived all his sixteen years on his father's ranch not to learn how to throw a skillful rope, and he now took his position just within the corral, and at a place where he could intercept the dashing outlaw, Tartar, as the animal came around again with the flapping lad clinging to his back.

"Can you manage, Bud?" called Slim, from his cross seat in his saddle, where he was looking on.

"I'll get him!" was the grim answer.

Many thoughts were shooting through the mind of Bud Merkel, not the least of which was the remark of Babe Milton to the effect that the lad on Tartar was Bud's cousin.

"Then the other must be, too," thought Bud as he swung his rope and directed a quick glance at the fat lad now hugging the inner rails of the corral fence. "But how'd they get here, and what made him try that outlaw?"

However, this was no time to spend in asking oneself questions. There was need of action, and it came a moment later.

Hissing and swishing through the air, the coils of Bud's lariat fell around the neck of the plunging, rearing, running Tartar. In another instant Bud had taken a turn or two around a post, and, by carefully applying a snubbing pressure, the pony was brought to a stop.

"Get down – quick!" ordered Bud when the horse was quiet enough to permit of this. And as the other lad obeyed, and shook himself together, limping over toward Bud the latter asked: "Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit," was the laughing answer. "I could 'a' stuck on. He couldn't throw me."

"Don't you fool yourself!" exclaimed Bud, while some of the cowboys went into the corral and loosened his lariat from the neck of the now subdued animal. Tartar, once the offending stranger

was no longer on his back, seemed normal. "Don't you fool yourself! You couldn't have stayed on a second longer."

"Betcher I could!" came the quick response. "If you'll rope him again –"

"Cut it out, Nort!" came from the fat lad, who looked enough like the daring rider to be his brother, as, indeed, he was.

"Oh, let me alone, Dick!" snapped the other. "I can ride!"

"Some ridin'! Oh, boy, some ridin'!" murmured the fat assistant foreman of Diamond X, while his companions grinned.

"You may know how to ride an ordinary horse," admitted Bud with a smile, as he coiled the rope which one of the men handed to him. "But Tartar isn't a regular pony. He's an outlaw, and even Del Pinzo won't take a chance on him. I don't see how they come to let you," he added, gazing somewhat reproachfully at the assembled cowboys.

They had begun to slink away, for they recognized the pseudo-authority held by the son of the ranch owner. Still they could justify their action, somewhat.

"He *wanted* to ride," declared Babe Milton. "Would have it so, and we roped Tartar for him. I told him your pa wouldn't like it if he was here, but –"

"I reckon you thought you'd see some fun," said Bud, half smiling, for though he realized that the strange lad had been in some danger, he also realized that the cowboys, fond as they were of fun and practical jokes, would not have allowed the matter to go too far.

"It's up to me!" declared the slim lad, trying to brush some of the dust and horse hair from his clothes. "'Tisn't their fault at all."

"Good kid," murmured some of the cowboys, glad to be thus vindicated.

"I told him to keep off," said the fat lad, following Bud and the daring rider from the corral. "I told him to pick a quiet horse, but he said he wanted a buckler."

"He shore got it," chuckled Slim Degnan, as he ambled along. "He shore did!"

"Well, I'm glad you're not hurt," exclaimed Bud. "I guess you're my cousins; aren't you?" he asked, holding out his brown, muscular hand to grasp the rather thinner and whiter palm of the lad who had been on Tartar.

"Yes, I'm Nort," was the response. "This is Dick, my brother. We're going to stay all summer – if you'll keep us," he added, with a whimsical smile. "And after this I'll let you pick my horses for me."

"It'll be safer, until you learn to ride," said Bud. "I mean learn to ride western cow ponies," he added quickly, for he did not want to assume this other lad could not ride.

"I guess I don't know so much as I thought I did," confessed Nort.

"Though I did ride a lot at the Academy."

"Well, come on to the house," invited Bud. "Dad's away, but mother's there. Have you met her?"

"No," answered Nort. "We just got here. You see we came ahead of time. Happened to meet one of your wagons over at the depot, and rode out here in it. I sort of lost my head when I struck the ranch and wanted a ride right off the bat. I had it, too!" he added with a smile.

"Dad said something about you moseying out this way before snow flew," spoke Bud, as he walked with his cousins toward the main ranch house, which stood in the midst of a number of low red buildings, itself of the same structure and color. "But I didn't expect you so soon, or I'd 'a' been over to the station."

"It was all right – we didn't want any fussing," said Nort. "And, as I say, we started sooner than we expected. Didn't even write."

"No, I guess you didn't," admitted Bud. "Dad sort of mentioned, casual like, that you'd be along sooner or later, but he didn't get any word from you recently."

"Well, we're here, anyhow," spoke Dick, the fat youth, with a sigh of evident relief, as he looked back toward the corral.

"I just got in myself," said Bud. "Been away two days mending fence. Had to sleep out one night, and we weren't exactly prepared for it. But I'm mighty glad you've come! We can have some corking times. I'll get you ponies that'll be – er – better to ride than Tartar," he said, substituting the word "better" for that of "safer" which, at first, he had intended to use.

"That's good!" exclaimed Dick. "I don't claim to be any rider, though I can stick to the saddle once I land there," and he shot a side glance at his more impulsive brother.

"Oh, I could 'a' stuck if there'd been a *saddle*," declared Nort.

"That was the trouble. I'll ride Tartar yet!" he cried.

"Better go slow," advised Bud. "But there's mother in the door now, and I can smell grub. She'll be surprised to see you."

"Who's that girl?" asked Dick, as he noticed one standing beside the stout, motherly-looking woman in the doorway of the ranch house.

"That's my sister Nell," remarked Bud.

"Nell! Say, she has grown!" cried Nort. "I didn't know she was that big!"

"Oh, this is a good country for growing up in!" laughed Bud. "Here's Nort and Dick, Mother!" he called.

"Well, land sakes! I never expected to see *you* two!" cried Mrs. Merkel, hastily wiping off her mouth with the corner of her apron, preparatory to kissing her nephews. "Land! But you've grown!"

"Not any more than Nell!" declared Dick, as he kissed his aunt and girl cousin, an example gladly followed by Nort. For once the fat lad had beaten his slim brother to it.

"Why didn't you write? We didn't know you were coming for a month yet! Where's your trunks? How'd you get here? Come in and wash up and we'll have supper!"

All this Mrs. Merkel showered on the two "tenderfeet" in a breath, at the same time fairly "shooing" them into the house as a motherly hen might direct her chickens toward the feeding coop.

"Oh, we just pulled up stakes and lit out," laughed Nort. "We got tired of the East. Oh, but it's great here!" he exclaimed, as he looked back before entering the house, and saw, through the clear air, the wonderful blue sky, and, in the distance, a range of mountains. "It's just what I dreamed it would be," he softly murmured.

"Glad you like it! We'll have some swell times!" voiced Bud. "But you want to get those duds off," he added, as he glanced at his cousin's clothes.

"We sure do!" declared Nick. "We've got outfits in our trunks. They're in the wagon. Maybe they aren't just the proper clothes for a ranch, but they're old things – "

"The older the better!" interrupted Bud, and he was about to follow his cousins inside when Nell exclaimed:

"Some one is coming! Look!"

They all turned to observe a solitary horseman riding at top speed for the group of ranch buildings. He came from the direction where Bud and the foreman had seen the slim wisp of smoke about an hour before, and as he rode, the man shouted above the thundering thuds of his horse's hoofs:

"Help! Help! Can't you send help!"

## CHAPTER III

### A MYSTERIOUS SEARCH

Nort and Dick Shannon, Bud's "city cousins," seemed to realize, as did the young rancher, his mother and sister, that something was wrong. Prepared as Nort and Dick were for strange and sensational happenings in the west, they sensed that this was out of the ordinary.

The solitary rider had also attracted the attention of the cowboys who, the excitement at the corral being over, had turned toward their bunk house to prepare for the evening meal. Slim Degnan, the foreman, Babe, his assistant, and one or two others started forward as if to intercept the horseman. But a cowboy on foot is like a sailor off the deck – out of his element. They wore high-heeled shoes – boots made especially for the use of spurs, and they were not capable of rapid progress except on their steeds.

The lone rider was past them in a flash, turning into the lane that led toward the ranch house, where Bud and the others could not be seen, having turned at the call for help.

"What's the matter of him – locoed?" asked Babe.

"Looks that way," murmured Slim. "But Ma Merkel will know how to handle him, and Bud has his gun. Still, I don't know but we'd better mosey up that way, so as to sort of back the boy up, as long as his dad's away."

"My idea coincides," murmured Babe. "We'll prospect along up there," he called to the other cowboys, some of whom seemed to show a desire to rush to a possible rescue. "It'll be all right."

By the time the foreman and his assistant had reached the porch on which stood the two tenderfeet eastern lads, with Bud, his mother and sister, the lone horseman had dismounted, not with any degree of skill, however, but slipping off as though greatly fatigued, or rendered limp from fright.

"Can you send help to him?" he gasped, pointing back in the direction whence he had come. "If you don't they may kill him! Oh, such men! Such men!"

"Kill who? What's the matter? What sort of help do you need?" asked Bud quickly, while Nort and Dick looked at the excited man. He bore none of the marks of the west. His garb was of the East as his riding had been, though he sat a fairly good saddle, or he never could have ridden at the speed he did. But he had a good horse. Even Dick and Nort knew enough about animals to tell that. The pony, his sides heaving and his nostrils distended, gave this not altogether mute evidence of his race against time.

"It's Professor Wright," came the panting answer. "He's off there – with his prospecting party. I'm his assistant!"

"I thought he looked like a professor," murmured Dick to Nort.

"Keep still!" sharply commanded Nort.

"I am Professor J. Elwell Blair," went on the still greatly excited rider, "an assistant to Professor Wright. We are camped about three miles from here, over there," and he waved his hand toward where Bud and Slim, on their homeward ride, had seen the wisp of smoke. "Some Mexicans threaten to attack us," went on the man who called himself Professor Blair. "In fact they had already started when Professor Wright bade me ride for help. We knew there was a ranch over in this direction. Can you send us help?" he asked anxiously.

"Sure!" exclaimed Bud.

"Oh, if your father were only here!" murmured Mrs. Merkel.

"Our boys are enough!" declared Nell, with sparkling eyes. "I wish I might go!" she added. "Can't I?"

"No indeed!" declared her mother. "The idea! You must take Slim with you!" she called after Bud, for he was already half way down the lane leading to the corral, calling on Professor Blair to follow, and shouting to Nort and Dick:

"Come on, if you want to see some lively doings!" Bud invited.

"We sure do!" yelled Nort.

"Hadn't we better change our clothes?" asked the slower Dick.

"Change nothin'!" cried Nort. "Leave your coat off if you want to! I'm going to shed mine!" and shed it he did, dropping it on the ground as he leaped forward.

"What is it, Bud?" asked Slim Degnan, as he and Babe, on their way to the house, met the fleeing young rancher, who had even distanced Professor Blair, though the latter had again mounted his tired horse.

"Don't know – exactly," came the answer. "He's a stranger," and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder back toward the professor. "He and a party are camped over in the hills – where we saw the smoke a while back," he explained further. "He says a bunch of Greasers are trying to do up his boss. Wants help!"

"Wa'al, he come to th' right place," remarked Babe Milton briefly, as, with more speed than you would have believed he possessed, he ran toward the corral.

Already several cowboys, sensing that something was wrong, had begun to catch and saddle enough ponies to provide mounts for Bud, the foreman and his fat helper.

"Give my cousins Baldy and Gimp!" cried Bud to one of the cowboys who were in the corral. "You can ride those, even if you haven't got your old clothes on," he added.

"Lively now!" cried the foreman, assuming, as was his right, command of the little cavalcade. In less time than it takes to tell it, they were riding along the trail, directed by Professor Blair, whose horse seemed, somehow, to have recovered its wind sufficiently to keep pace with the fresher steeds.

"Are you all right, fellows?" Bud called back to his cousins, as he, himself, spurred ahead alongside Slim and Babe. Nort and Dick formed the rear guard with the professor.

"Sure!" declared Nort. "Oh, boy! A fight the first day we get here,

Dick!" he yelled to his brother.

"Don't be too sure," called back Bud. "These Greasers may hit the trail as soon as we head into sight."

"Greasers are Mexicans, aren't they?" asked Dick.

"Yes," answered Professor Blair, who rode between the two easterners. "We had to engage some, and I believe a few Indians, also, in our prospecting work. Our own men are all right, but we were attacked by some strange Mexicans and Indians – or we were about to be attacked, when I rode off for help."

"What started the row?" asked Bud.

The question seemed to embarrass Professor Blair.

"The Mexicans seem to think we have something of value, or at least know where valuables may be," he answered. "I believe they think we are after desert gold, and though we have found some – "

"You have found *gold!*" cried Bud.

"No! No! It is a false rumor!" hastily declared the professor. "But Professor Wright has been obliged to keep secret the object of his search, and perhaps the mystery surrounding it has been misconstrued by the ignorant men. They declare we are after gold, but it is something far more valuable, though I am not allowed to disclose what – "

He was interrupted by the sound of distant shooting, followed by faint yells. Bud Merkel clapped spurs to his horse and shot forward, while Professor Blair excitedly exclaimed:

"Oh, they are killing him! They are killing him!"

## CHAPTER IV SUSPICIONS

With distinct feelings of joy, and no alarm whatever, Nort and Dick watched the hands of Slim and Babe slide toward their holsters, where nestled their .45 guns. Bud had taken his off, on reaching the house, and his two "city" cousins found themselves wishing that they wore those ugly but effective weapons.

It was not that Bud was a "gun man," nor was either the ranch foreman or his fat assistant. But as the classical saying has it:

"You don't always need a gun out West, but when you do need it you need it mighty bad, and mighty sudden!"

The guns, by which are meant revolvers of heavy calibre, were used for many other purposes than shooting at human beings. They were almost a necessity for a lone rider to signal for help, or indicate the need of certain action, and more than one cowboy owed his life to his gun, either in turning aside a stampede of steers, or against some human or animal enemy.

It had been the hope of Norton, and Richard Shannon, as soon they learned they were to spend some time at their uncle's ranch, to "pack a gun," but their advent and arrival had been so sudden, and their time so crowded since reaching Diamond X, that they had to dispense with these luxuries, or necessities, according to the way you regard them.

But the two eastern lads grinned happily at one another as they galloped along, and saw the foreman and his fat helper with their heavy weapons out of their holsters.

"Left mine home!" muttered Bud, as his hand, too, instinctively sought the leather sheath. Professor Blair, as he had called himself, did not seem to be armed.

"They shore is some row going on!" exclaimed Slim, as he clapped spurs to his already well-doing horse, and shot ahead of the others. "How many in your bunch?" he called to the professor.

"There are four of us – Professor Wright, myself and two helpers, Edward Newton and Silas Thorpe," was the answer. "But the other day we engaged some Mexicans and burros, so our party is now about eight."

"And how many are trying to rush you?" asked the foreman, slightly checking his horse to accommodate its pace to the slower gait of the professor's animal.

"I don't know. There seemed about a dozen who were threatening Professor Wright when he told me to go for help."

"Not such bad odds," murmured Bud.

"Is it a real fight?" asked Nort, his eyes sparkling.

"Sounds like it," commented the western ranch lad. "But we'll have to lay low. No guns," he added regretfully.

Dick turned to look back toward the ranch buildings, now out of sight owing to the uneven nature of the country. He might have been calculating whether it would be possible to go back and get weapons.

But he said nothing on this score, though he did let out an exclamation:

"There's another bunch coming along the path."

"Don't say *path*– it's a *trail*," corrected Bud with a smile. "And that's some of our bunch," he added. "Cowboys from Diamond X. Guess mother sent them after us, thinking we'd tackled too big a job alone."

"And it does sound like a lively fracas," observed Babe Milton, wiping his wet and glistening face with the big handkerchief that adorned his neck, and the neck of every cowboy that Nort and Dick had so far observed since coming to the "cow country."

These sometimes gaudy handkerchiefs were not mere ornaments. They served the same purpose to which Babe was then devoting his, and as the eastern lads learned later, the silk or cotton squares formed very effective protection to nose and mouth while riding range in the thick, heavy dust stirred up by the feet of thousands of cattle. So, like the "chaps," the high-heeled boots, the handkerchiefs and the guns, each part of the equipment of a cowboy, has its use.

"Hi! They's some shootin'!" cried Slim, as he spurred forward again, having learned what he wished of the professor.

"Oh, don't let them kill him!" begged the scientist. "It is all a mistake – thinking we are after gold – but they'll make any excuse to try to rob us and get the secret."

"What secret?" asked Bud, but just then a renewed outburst of shots, punctured by shrill yells, told of the need of action as against words.

"They'll kill him! They'll kill him!" moaned Professor Blair.

"'Tain't all one sided!" declared Slim Degnan to Bud, Nort and Dick, as the three boys managed to get their ponies on a line with the sturdy beast of the foreman. "There's two sets of shootin' goin' on there!"

The sound of fighting, and yells, whether of defiance or fear, increased in volume now, and came from a little glade at the base of the wooded foothills, which formed a sort of stepping stone to the grim mountains behind them, along the base of which flowed a river. These hills, or part of them, marked one of the limits of Diamond X ranch, though at another point the holdings of Bud's father extended well to the summit of one of the mountains.

Urging on their horses by heels and voices, the little party swept into the glade, following a path, or "trail," as it should be called. This trail had been worn by countless cattle going to the river to drink, and the feet of the ponies now clattered along it.

A moment later, swinging around a little clump of trees, greasewoods and sagebush, Bud and his cousins saw a sight which thrilled them through and through, though perhaps Bud was more accustomed to such stirring scenes than were the city lads.

In the midst of an encampment of tents, several men were kneeling down, using packs and baggage as a barricade. They were firing over this line of defense at objects unseen, but which, as the white puffs of smoke showed every now and then, were easily guessed to be humans, with more or less sinister motives.

There was a regular fusillade, as the party of cowboys approached, and in addition a series of sharp and wild yells which, now that the scene was reached, could be heard as arising from the underbrush outside the camp.

The attackers of Professor Wright, for he later proved to be the owner of the camp, were using their voices as well as their weapons to intimidate the defenders.

"Greasers and some Indians!" cried Slim, as he swept on along the trail. "Come on, boys!" he yelled and instantly his gun was in action, as was that of Babe Milton.

"Oh, why didn't I bring mine?" mourned Bud.

"Tough luck!" exclaimed Nort.

The advent of the rescue party had an instant effect. No sooner had Slim and Babe begun firing than there was silence on the part of the attackers. A few scattering shots were fired, one or two more wild yells smote the air and then there was more silence.

"That settles 'em," grimly observed Slim, as he began to reload his weapon, an example followed by Babe. At the same time those in the little camp, who had had their backs turned toward the rescue party, swung about with evident signs of relief on their faces.

A tall, slim man, with prematurely gray hair, stepped forward, resting the butt of his rifle on the ground as he surveyed the newcomers. Then his eyes sought those of Professor Blair.

"I see that you found help," he remarked quietly. "And just in time, too. They were about to rush us, I fear."

"I'm glad we came in time," the other scientist remarked. "I don't know your names, gentlemen," he went on, turning to Bud and the others, "but this is my chief, Professor Hendryx Wright."

"I shall take some other occasion to thank you," spoke Professor Wright, with a smile that included all the rescuers from Slim to Dick.

"But just now one of my men, possibly two, need attention from a doctor. They have been shot."

"Better let me have a look at 'em," suggested Slim. "I'm not a doctor, but that brand isn't plenty out here. If they're too bad, we can take your men to the ranch. Where are they?"

Professor Wright waved his hand toward one of the tents, and while Slim dismounted to make his way there, Bud and his cousins had time to look about them.

In addition to four white men, which included the two professors, and two who were apparently assistants, there were several Mexicans or half-breeds. These were all armed and had, in common with their white employers, been firing at the attacking party. Of the latter no glimpse had been had. They seemed to have vanished into the forest with the approach of the rescuers.

"Do you have things like this happen every day, Bud?" asked Nort, with sparkling eyes, as the foreman disappeared into the tent where the wounded men lay.

"No, indeed. This is as much a surprise to me as it is to you fellows.

I didn't even know this camp was here."

"What do you reckon it is?" asked Dick.

"Give it up," answered Bud. "I reckon even Zip Foster couldn't make anything of this."

"Who's Zip Foster?" asked Nort.

"That's what a lot of us would give a deal to know, son," chuckled Babe, who was rapidly making a survey of the camp. "He's a secret friend of Bud's, an' – "

"Oh, cut it out!" exclaimed Bud, and even his tan did not altogether hide the blood that surged into his face.

While the two professors were conversing together in low tones, and their helpers, including two white men (evidently the Ed Newton and Silas Thorp spoken of by Professor Blair) were putting to rights the somewhat disrupted camp, Slim, the foreman, came from the tent.

"They're not much hurt," he declared. "Only flesh wounds, but they ought to be treated with some dope I've got at the ranch house. They can ride over, and I'll fix 'em up as best I can," he offered.

"You are very kind," murmured Professor Wright. "But it might be dangerous for them to do so."

"Dangerous!" exclaimed Slim.

"Yes, I mean it might inflame their wounds."

"Oh! Yes, it might," agreed the foreman after a moment of thought. "Wa'al, I can send one of the boys back for the medicine. Here they come now," he added, as, with whoops of delight at the prospect of a fight, a troop of other cowboys from the Diamond X ranch rode up. As Bud had surmised, his mother had sent them after the advance party.

"What's the row?" cried "Yellin' Kid" Watson, as he unlimbered his gun. It needed but one utterance of his to establish his nickname. He shouted almost every word he used.

"All over," said Slim, succinctly. "Don't know just what it's about, but it's all over."

The newcomers rode their horses into the camp, and Yellin' Kid, whose animal was a bit restive, nearly brought down one of the small tents. As it swayed, a flap opening because of the breaking of one of the ropes, Professor Wright sprang forward with a sharp cry.

"Don't go in there! No one must enter that tent!" sharply commanded the scientist.

"I wasn't aimin' to," remarked Yellin' Kid somewhat tartly and in rather grieved tones. "Come out of that, you soap footer!" he cried to his steed. "What do you mean, slippin' all over creation?"

He backed his animal away, but Professor Wright, summoning to his side Professor Blair, quickly fastened the tent shut again, paying no heed during this operation, to the cowboys.

"Seems mighty much afraid we'll see something we hadn't a right to," commented Bud to his cousins.

"Yes, he does act queer," agreed Dick.

"Suspicious, I call it!" whispered Nort. He was impulsive, and much more prone, than was his brother, to ascribe motives to others. "Maybe, after all, they have gold in there!" he said.

## CHAPTER V

### HITTING THE TRAIL

Bud Merkel shook his head as Nort Shannon offered this possible explanation of the action of Professor Wright.

"Never's been any gold found in these regions all the years I've lived here," he said.

"There's always a first time," countered Nort, while the cowboys gazed about them, talking in low voices.

"It must be something else," said Bud. "This is a prospecting bunch, it's easy to see that, but they're not after gold. These two professors are from some eastern college, I take it," he went on. "They may be after specimens of plants, or stones. Using their vacation this way. I've heard of it being done."

"That's right!" chimed in Dick. "Two of the professors from our Academy spent all one summer in the Adirondacks, getting material for a new geology book they were writing. Maybe that's what these professors are doing," he suggested.

"Then why are they keeping so blamed secret about it for?" asked Nort, impulsively. "There's no crime in getting rock specimens, or in making up a new geology, only I wouldn't want to do it," he finished with a grin. "I get enough of study all winter. We came out here to have fun!"

"And we've started in right!" declared his brother. "Fun and excitement."

"I reckon we'll have to let these fellows have their way," murmured Bud. "They aren't on our ranch, and this is a free country. They may have permission from the Double Z people to look for specimens here."

"Is this Double Z land?" asked Dick.

"Right about here is," answered Bud. "Our line runs over there, and back where we came from," and he motioned toward the ranch buildings. "Better be hitting the home trail too, soon," he commented. "It'll be dark in no time, and I'm as hungry as they make 'em!"

"You said something then!" declared Babe. "I don't see that we can do anything more here – they don't appear to want us overly much," he added.

Perhaps Professor Wright was aware that a little feeling had arisen over his hasty warning to Yellin' Kid, for he hastened toward the foreman and said:

"I shall be most grateful to you if you will send over something for the two wounded men. I don't like to let them go to your place, hurt as they are, and I don't like to deplete my force. Those rascals may return."

"That's right," agreed Slim. "Wa'al, I reckon we can accommodate you. I'll send one of the boys back with a bottle of antiseptic stuff right after grub. Wash out the wounds, pour some of this stuff on and bind 'em up. The men'll be all right. Greasers don't mind a little thing like a bullet through the arm or leg. You know 'em?"

"No, I only hired them three days ago to help with our camp outfit. Some of my men deserted, and I have reason to believe it was some of them who led the attack on us."

"Any special reason why they should shoot you up?" asked Slim. "That is if it isn't askin' a personal question," he added, mindful of the reception accorded Yellin' Kid.

"It is all due to a foolish mistake," said Professor Wright, with a quick glance at his assistant, Professor Blair. "We are here on a scientific mission, as perhaps Professor Blair told you, and a few of the deluded men I engaged to help me make some excavations imagine I am after gold. That is far from the truth, for –"

"It is far more valuable than gold!" exclaimed Professor Blair.

"Eh – well, yes, in a way," said the chief, as Bud caught a look of warning flashed at the man who had ridden for help. "But that is neither here nor there," went on Professor Wright. "The point of

the matter is that I had to discharge the leader of my uneducated helpers because he persisted in trying to find out what we were after. He took some of the men with him, necessitating the hiring of others. Then the climax came this afternoon, when, unexpectedly, we were attacked. In my wanderings I had seen your ranch buildings, and I ventured to hope you would send us help when I dispatched my assistant to you."

"Wa'al, we did what we could," said Slim. "Of course you know your own business best, but I wouldn't take any chances with Greasers. They may come back, if you have any valuables here."

"We have," said Professor Wright, with a glance at the tent, the flaps of which he had tightly closed. "But I do not fancy they will again attack us soon. We wounded some of them before you came, and we shall now be on our guard. If I can have the antiseptics for those two men, I shall be grateful."

"I'll send 'em over later," promised Slim, and then he called to the cowboys: "Don't 'pear to be much further need of us, boys. Let's mosey back!"

And while the cavalcade was on the trail leading to Diamond X ranch, Bud's cousins had a chance to tell him how it was they had come West so unexpectedly.

They had long been promised by their parents that they might spend a summer in the great open, but, for one reason or another, the visit had been postponed from time to time.

But about a week back Mr. Shannon found that his business called him to South America. He decided to take his wife with him, and this would break up their home for the time being.

"So he decided to let us hit the train for here," explained Nort, whose name, as you may have guessed, was Norton. "We didn't take time to write – just packed up and came on," he added.

"We did telegraph," said Dick. "But we knew we could find you, whether you met us or not, Bud."

"I never got your message, and I don't believe dad did, either," remarked the young rancher. "But he may have for all that. He's been terrible busy lately, arranging for a big shipment of steers, and our telephone has been out of order, so maybe they tried to 'phone the message to us and could not raise us, and it got laid aside. But I'm sure glad you're here now."

"So are we!" exclaimed Dick.

"Do you mean to say you have a telephone?" asked Nort, with something of disappointment in his voice.

"Of course!" laughed Bud. "This is a big ranch, and we couldn't get along without a 'phone. We're hooked up with other ranches, and we have a private line of our own from one ranch to the other. We're on the long distance, too. Oh, we couldn't manage without the wire."

"It doesn't seem like the wild west, if you have a 'phone," complained Nort.

"Oh, you will find it wild enough!" declared Bud. "Didn't you get your fill on Tartar, and haven't you seen a real man-fight first crack out of the box?"

"Yes, I had all I wanted on Tartar," confessed Nort with a smile. "I hope your dad won't think I was too fresh, getting on one of his horses without having permission," he said.

"Tartar was the one who was fresh," laughed Bud. "But the boys shouldn't have allowed you on him."

"That was my fault," confessed impulsive Nort. "As I told you, Dick and I arrived at the station without being expected by you, as it now turns out. We scouted around, and found one of your wagon outfits there, and of course the driver was decent enough to bring us in.

"I saw that corral full of ponies first shot, and as I can ride – a little – " he quickly qualified his statement, "I just hopped aboard the liveliest pinto in the pack."

"You sure did pick a lively one!" chuckled Bud. "I don't see how you stayed on as long as you did. Tartar is next door to an outlaw. He's a buckner and a roller, and they do say he killed a man once. I don't see why dad keeps him. There aren't two men around here who can ride him."

"Well, I'm not going to qualify," declared Nort. "But, as I said, when Dick and I arrived we didn't stop to do any thinking. We hit the corral, and though some of the men did warn me, I was foolish enough to try and stick on that wild colt. You came along just in time."

"Yes, there might have been trouble," agreed Bud. "You'll have all the riding you want if you stick around here. We don't know what walking means on Diamond X, though dad does talk of getting a flivver. I wish he would."

"There's lots of level country around here," observed Dick.

"Plenty, and the other kind too," added Bud nodding toward the hills at their backs. "Well, we sure will have good times."

"We want work, too," declared Nort. "We want to learn to be ranchers."

"You'll have that chance, too," declared his western cousin. "But now let's lope along a little faster. If we don't get to the table the same time as the boys there won't be a smell left. Supper's going to be late to-night."

For a time the pace forbade conversation. The only sounds were the beating of hoofs on the ground, the clatter of buckles and the squeak of damp leather. Then the cowboys, and the young ranchers, trotted down the slope that led to the corral, and Nort and Dick had a glimpse, in the doorway of the ranch house, of their aunt.

A quick survey of the party told Mrs. Merkel that there had been no casualties, and, with a satisfied sigh, she went back in the house, and began to put the supper on the table, with the assistance of Nell and two women workers.

"The boys'll eat us out of house and home to-night," she remarked to Nell.

"It's lucky we have plenty," commented Bud's pretty sister.

And plenty there was, as Dick and Nort amply testified to a little later, as they drew chairs to a long table at which they sat with the ranch hands, who had made hasty toilets after their fast ride.

For a time there was heard only the rattle of table utensils, but, with the sharp edge of appetites dulled, talk and joking retort ran about the board. Bud took his part, but the two easterners were silent, preferring to listen and learn. And they picked up many a gem of slang from the repartee that flashed forth.

"Any of you boys ever see that outfit before?" asked Bud's mother, when an account of the professor's camp had been given.

No one had, but "Snake" Purdee, so called because of his deadly fear of rattlers that were occasionally met with, remarked, after disposing of a mouthful of biscuit:

"Some of the Double Z boys was tellin' me of a locoed tenderfoot who was grubbin' for diamonds, or suthin' like that, an' I reckon this is him."

"Shouldn't wonder," commented Mrs. Merkel. "You say you're going to send over some liniment?" she asked the foreman.

"I was aimin' to do it," he answered. "That is if you –"

"Oh, of course!" interrupted Mrs. Merkel. "One of the boys can ride over this evening. I don't want anybody to suffer when I can help."

Nort nudged Bud under the table.

"Can't we go, too?" asked the city lad.

Bud hesitated a moment and then answered:

"Why, yes, I reckon so." To his mother he said: "I'll ride over, too, with Nort and Dick."

"Will it be safe?" asked Mrs. Merkel, with a quick look at the foreman.

"I wish Mr. Merkel would come."

"Oh, it'll be *safe* enough," the foreman answered. "Those Greasers won't come back, especially after dark. They'll lay low. I'll send Babe over with the boys."

"Oh, joy!" murmured Nort, and the eyes of Dick sparkled. This was living life as they had dreamed it – a night ride to a camp that had been attacked by savage men!

"Get on some other clothes," suggested Bud to his cousins, as they left the table. "You'll spoil those in no time, on a horse."

"All right," agreed Dick, and soon he and his brother had made the change. If not exactly attired as were the cowboys, their outfits were sufficiently practical for the time being.

"Can't we have guns?" asked Nort, while some of the ranch hands were saddling ponies for the little party that was to take the antiseptics to the wounded men.

"Know how to shoot?" asked Babe, who felt his responsibility at taking two tenderfeet on the trail at night.

"A little," admitted Nort, and Dick nodded in agreement.

"Wa'al, I don't reckon you'll have any use for 'em," said the assistant foreman, "but it's just as well to pack 'em. I'll get you a couple guns," and he started toward the bunk house while Bud and his cousins mounted their ponies and prepared to take the trail.

"They'll do," Babe said to Bud in a low voice, after passing to Dick and Nort the guns. "Lots to learn, but they've got the grit, and they ain't too much set up. They'll do."

Then they hit the trail.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE RUSTLERS

Diamond X ranch was one of the largest in that part of the country. Mr. Merkel's holdings were in one of our western states, not far from the Mexican border, which fact was not altogether pleasing to him. It made it too easy for cattle thieves to operate, and more than once Diamond X had suffered from depredations of the "rustlers," as they were called, doubtless from the fact that they "rustled" or "hustled" cattle that were not their own, off lawful ranges.

But it was all part of the day's work, and Mr. Merkel's ranches were too valuable to be disposed of easily, even though their proximity to Mexico, the home of lawless "Greasers" and half breeds, was too close for ease of mind.

Diamond X, like many other western ranches, took its name from the brand used to mark the cattle that fed on its succulent grass and drank its abundant water. The brand was a diamond with the letter X in the centre, a mark easily recognized, even at a distance. Other marks were used on other and adjoining ranches, Mr. Merkel owning two others, one of which went by the name Square M, from the fact that the distinguishing brand was a square with the letter M inside. The other's mark was a triangle with a B in it, that ranch being known among the cowboys as the Triangle B.

Double Z was a ranch adjoining that of the Diamond X on the north, Hank Fisher being the proprietor, while to the west was the Circle T ranch, its cattle being marked with a large circle, in which the letter T appeared, it being owned by Thomas Ogden, a friend of Mr. Merkel.

"Gosh! But your father has a lot of cows!" exclaimed Nort, as he and his brother rode along through the early evening, beside Bud. "Must be a million of 'em," added the city youth as, from a rise, he caught a glimpse of many herds, some restrained from wandering by fenced ranges, and others being slowly driven along by cowboys, who waved to Babe, Bud, and the city lads.

"Not quite a million!" laughed Bud. "And we don't call 'em *cows*, though some of 'em are, of course. They're cattle, or steers. Mother keeps a cow or two for the sake of the milk, and of course our men are called cowboys, or punchers, and this is cow country. But we don't speak of 'em as herds of cows."

"Glad you told me," murmured Nort. "I'm going to be a ranchman some day, and I want to learn all I can."

"Same here!" commented his brother.

It was a wondrously beautiful night, calm and clear, with the stars shining overhead more brightly than Nort and Dick had ever before seen them. It is the clearness of the atmosphere in the West that renders objects so plain at a distance, that brings out the beauty of the stars and which also enables such wonderful moving pictures to be made. In the East the day is rare when there is not some haze. It is just the reverse in the West.

Through the silent night rode the boy ranchers, for Nort and Dick were beginning to think of themselves in that class. The cousins rode together, with Babe in the rear, lugging the bottles of antiseptics that were destined for the injured men.

"What are those cowboys riding around the cattle for?" asked Nort, as they turned aside from a large herd restlessly moving amid a constant dull rumble.

"They're driving 'em over to the railroad, to be shipped," explained

Bud. "That's what dad raises cattle for – ships 'em away for beef.

This bunch has been fattened up on a range we keep specially for that.

This is a good time to sell now, prices are high, so we're disposing of as many as we can.

"The cowboys will drive 'em to the railroad, taking their time, so as not to run all the fat off the steers. The heavier they are the more money we get for 'em. I guess they won't go much farther to-

night, though," he added, with a look back at the herd they had passed. "This is the first day they've been driven, and we always go a bit slow at first."

"Say, but it's great! Wonderful!" exclaimed Nort, half rising in his stirrups and breathing deep of the pure, keen air, for it was now chilly.

"You said an earful!" commented his brother. "I wouldn't have missed this for anything!"

"Glad you like it," murmured Bud.

"What's that – a wolf? A prairie wolf?" asked Nort, suddenly as a sort of whine broke the silence of the night, punctuated otherwise only by the soft footfalls of the horses.

"Wolf? No!" chuckled Bud. "Don't let Babe hear you say that. It's him – singing! Lots of the men do it."

As Bud's whisper died away, the assistant foreman let his voice soar from a whine into a more or less of a roar, as he intoned:

"Oh, sing to me not of the joys of a city  
Where innocent cowboys are left in a trance.  
Give me a hoss, an' some room to do ridin',  
When I am daid bring me back to the ranch!"

"Does he get that way often?" asked Dick in a whisper, as the cowboy began on the second verse of what promised to be a lengthy song.

"More or less!" answered Bud. "The cowboys sing a lot, and some haven't half bad voices. The songs, too, are corkers, some of 'em. They sing 'cause it's lonesome ridin' line, and then, too, it seems to sort of soothe the cattle. Dad has told us, lots of times, where a stampede has been stopped just by the bunch singing songs."

"Good idea," commented Nort. "Oh, but this is the life for me!" he chanted.

"Only this ride isn't lasting long enough," said Dick. "That's the camp, down in there; isn't it?" he asked his cousin, pointing ahead toward where, in the light of the newly risen moon, could be observed some white objects.

"Those are the professors' tents," declared Bud. "We got here sooner than I expected. Talking to you chaps made the time pass quickly."

"What do you think of those fellows, anyhow?" asked Nort, in a low voice of his cousin. It was evident he referred to the two scientists who had been attacked that afternoon.

"I don't know what to think," admitted Bud, frankly. "I never heard of anything in this part of the country, more valuable than gold, that was worth prospecting after. There hasn't even any gold been found, as far as I know, though there were rumors that once a prospector made a lucky strike about ten miles from here. But these men do seem to have something they're afraid will be taken from them."

"Well, it needn't worry us," commented Dick. "We're going to be cow punchers – not miners."

"You said it!" declared Nort.

By this time they were within the range of several fires gleaming in the midst of the camp of the scientists, and a moment later Professor Blair emerged from the tent that had been so jealously guarded during the day.

"Oh, it's you; is it?" he asked as he recognized the boys and Babe.

"It is very kind of you, to take this trouble."

"Sall right," remarked the assistant foreman, as he handed over the bottles of medicine. "Tell th' boss to use it just as it is – don't need any dilutin' with water."

"Oh, you mean Professor Wright," said the other, so translating the cowboy's use of the word "boss."

"Yep," answered Babe. "Tell the boss to use it straight."

"Well, he isn't here just now," said the other. "The men who were shot seem to be doing well, however. I'll attend to them myself. Thank you again."

His voice was cultured and his manner pleasant. But it was evident that he invited no confidences.

Little could be made out, even in the moonlight and the gleam of the fire, save the usual scattered camp outfits, and the white tents.

The boy ranchers and Babe had done what they set out to do – deliver the medicine, and no incident had marked their trip, unless the singing of the assistant foreman can be called such.

"Some of us'll ride over to-morrow," promised Babe, as he and the boys turned to take the trail back to the ranch.

"Thank you, but we may not be here," remarked Professor Blair. "We may move on. But thank you, just the same."

"Don't mention it," begged Babe, slightly sarcastic of the other's cultured accent and words. "We aim to please, an' be neighborly."

"Of which you have given ample evidence," was the rejoinder.

"Guess that'll hold him for a while," murmured Bud to his cousins.

"Good-nights" were called and the outfit from Diamond X ranch was on its way again. Nort and Dick were eagerly questioning Bud about western matters, learning to their delight that there would be chances to go hunting and fishing after the big round-up, and Babe was beginning on about the forty-seventh verse of his favorite song, when Bud suddenly stopped in the midst of telling some incident, and gazed intently across the rolling range.

"What's the matter?" asked Dick in a whisper, for the silence of the night, and the strangeness of their surroundings, seemed to call for whispers.

"I thought I saw cattle moving," said Bud. "Yes, I do!" he went on, quickly. "Look, Babe!"

Babe broke off his song at a point where a dying cowboy was begging to be "toted back to the chuck house," and looked to where the boy rancher pointed.

"That's it, shore as rattlers!" the assistant foreman said. "It's about time they tried suthin' like this! Got your guns, boys?"

"What for?" asked Nort, a thrill of excitement leaping through his veins. "What is there to shoot?"

"Rustlers!" said Bud, grimly. "Somebody – Greasers, likely – are trying to run off some of our fat steers! Come on, we'll ride 'em down!" He clapped spurs to his horse, an example followed by Nort and Dick, but, quick as they were, Babe had shot ahead of them, and in the moonlight the city lads caught the gleam of his gun as he pulled it from the holster.

## CHAPTER VII

### A CRY IN THE NIGHT

Needless to say that Nort and Dick were thrilled through and through. Having lived in a city nearly all of their lives, though with the usual city lad's dreamings of adventures in the open, of camps, of desperate measures against desperate men, they had never hoped for this.

"Crickity! Think of it!" hoarsely whispered Nort to his brother as they galloped along side by side. "We haven't been here a day yet, and we're run into cattle rustlers!"

"Great!" commented Dick. "Oh, boy!"

"We haven't run into 'em yet, that's the trouble," spoke Bud grimly, as his pony worked in between the two brothers. "But we will in a little while – Babe'll fix 'em."

"Can't we take a hand?" asked Nort eagerly, as his hand sought the weapon at his side.

"We may have to," Bud admitted, "but dad doesn't think I'm old enough, yet, to mix up in a man-sized fight. Maybe he's right, but he always tells me to hold back until I'm needed."

"We can take a hand *then*, can't we?" asked Nort eagerly.

"Sure thing!" exclaimed Bud. "But there may not be any need of a scrap. These rustlers know they're caught now, and they may run for it. They can't get away with the steers, anyhow, without a fight. Of course if they get Babe covered – and us – they'll make their getaway, but he may bluff 'em off."

"What does it all mean, anyhow?" asked Dick, as the assistant foreman spurred off through the night, following the trail of the now running steers. If there were rustlers driving the cattle away the men themselves gave no sign, but remained hidden.

"It means cattle rustlers – that's all," explained Bud, as he led the way for his cousins to follow, since the young representative of the Diamond X ranch knew the trail. "Rustlers are just men who take other folk's cattle, drive 'em off, change the brands and sell 'em wherever they can. Sometimes they get away with it and sometimes they don't!"

"And are they running off your dad's cattle now?" asked Nort.

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