

Baker Willard F.

**The Boy Ranchers on Roaring
River: or, Diamond X and
the Chinese Smugglers**



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Willard F. Baker

The Boy Ranchers on Roaring River Or Diamond X and the Chinese Smugglers

CHAPTER I A DANGEROUS MISSION

"Hold up there, you pint o' peanuts! Hold up, I say! Well, for the love of spread eagle! I suppose you boys are lookin' for a job; eh?"

The speaker, a typical, raw-boned cowboy, looked down from his pony at three boys seated on a bench at the side of the cook-house.

"Whether we are or not, we've got it, Kid," answered one of the seated trio, a well set-up youth with light hair. "And the funny part of it is, we don't know what the job is."

"Huh! Got a job and you don't know what it is? Well, Nort, guess I'll have to look into this," and the cowboy whom Nort addressed as "Kid" – or, to give him his full nick-name, "Yellin' Kid" – swung lightly from his saddle. "Hold up there, you pony, you!" this as the Kid's mount started to prance about wildly. "Just got this here dust-raiser, and she ain't used to my ways yet," he chuckled. "Hy' ya', Dick, and Bud! How's the boy, Nort? By golly, ranchin' is sure doin' you fellers good! You-all got some powerful grip!"

The three boys, Nort and Dick Shannon, and their cousin Bud Merkel, grinned widely. They were all of the same mold – clean-cut, straight-shooting lads, their faces bronzed from the prairie sun, and their eyes as clear as the blue sky above them.

"Yes, Kid, ranching has done us good – in more ways than one. In fact it's done us up brown." And Bud laughed a little ruefully.

"What's the matter? Rustlers, or disease?" The Kid's face expressed instant concern as he mentioned these two nightmares of the rancher's life.

"No, not either – but something almost as bad. You tell him, Nort," suggested Bud.

"You started it – you might as well finish out, Bud. You know as much about it as I do."

"Aw, get Dick to. He hasn't said a word yet."

"Well, for Pete's sake, *somebody* tell me before I drop dead from excitement!" burst out Yellin' Kid.

"All right – I'll tell you, Kid," Dick started. "Last week we were to deliver a herd of longhorns to J. K. Jackson, over to Double-O ranch. Sold 'em at a good fat price, too, that would have put us on our feet for the rest of the year. Well, we sent four of our men to ride 'em in. I went along with 'em. We started about sun-up, calculatin' to reach the Double-O before night, and everything was lovely. 'Long about noon we reached the gorge near Galgo. I suggested we ride the cattle as far from the gorge as we could get, 'cause I know how easy a herd of long-horns are started. But no, nothin' would do Sam Holiday but going as near to the big cut as possible, to save time. Sam's our new foreman, you know, and I didn't want to assert myself over him. So we drove 'em close to the edge. I told Sam once or twice to keep away – but oh, no! everything would be all right, and we'd have the cattle in by five o'clock. Well, we had 'em in by five o'clock all right. But not at the Double-O!"

"Just as we were passing the deepest part of the cut we heard a most awful Bang! and I knew in a minute what it was. Stump-blasting. Yes, I knew what it was – but the cattle didn't. And nobody had time to tell them, either. The steers on the extreme right made a sudden lunge – and in three minutes it was all over. Nothin' left but an old cow who broke her leg in the first rush. And the rest – every blessed one of 'em – two hundred feet down, lyin' dead or dyin' in the bottom of the gorge!"

The Kid was the first to break in on the morose stillness Dick's speech had invoked.

"Well now, say, boys, that's right sorrowful – yes, sir, that's what I call right sorrowful! I sure am sorry for you-all! A whole herd of cattle gone to the dogs! Well, well – that's sad. Say, is there anything I can do to – you know, sort of help out – like, well, maybe – "

"No thanks, Kid," spoke up Dick quickly. His glance told the Kid that he realized what the half-spoken offer meant. In the west one man understands his friend more by feeling than by words. "Real good of you to offer, though. No, I guess we'll make out all right. Can't have easy riding all the time. I imagine Mr. Merkel has something for us to do. He sent for us to come over to his ranch. So here we are. That was the job I told you about."

"A blind job, hey? Well, I guess it's O. K. or the boss wouldn't be mixed up in it. Anyway, here's your chance to find out. Here comes Mr. Merkel now."

A tall, pleasant-faced man, hair slightly grayed at the temples, strode out of the ranchhouse toward the four waiting cowboys. His resemblance to Bud – especially around the eyes – was easily noticeable.

"Hello, Nort and Dick! How are you, son? Say, boy, you're getting hard as a rock! What have you men been feeding Bud – leather? He sure looks, as though it was coming through!" The kindly eyes of the older man lighted with pride as he grasped the hand of his son.

"No, Dad – I guess hard luck toughened me up," said Bud, but his smile belied the meaning of his words.

"Yes, I heard about your accident, boys – and that's partly why I sent for you. I thought you might have time to do a little business for me."

"Well, I guess I'll step along, Mr. Merkel," the Kid said, as he realized he might be intruding on a private conversation. "I got that fence fixed up all right."

"Did you? Good! No, Kid, you stay right here. You're in on this too. Where's Billee Dobb? I want him to hear what I have to say."

"He's 'round back, boss. I'll get him."

"Bring him in the house, Kid. My room. Come on, boys – we'll get settled inside and wait for the Kid and Billee."

As the boys followed Mr. Merkel each one wondered what it was all about. Dick voiced the thought of all as he whispered:

"Say, what's up? You know, Bud?"

"Nope! I'm as much in the dark as you are. Dad never said anything to me. We'll soon know, though."

By this time they had reached the ranchhouse. As soon as the Kid arrived with Old Billee Dobb – a grizzled product of ranching who had been with the Diamond X from its start – Mr. Merkel motioned them to be seated and began:

"I reckon the first thing you men want to know is the reason for this gathering. Well, it's nothing very mysterious. I bought a sheep ranch out near Roaring River, and I want you five to take hold of it for me. Now – just a minute. I know what you're going to say, Kid – that sheep nursing is no job for a cowman. But you haven't heard the rest of it. There's been some very funny things happening out near that ranch. I've had a letter from the government official over at Candelaria asking whether I intend to manage those sheep, myself, and if I do would I let him know before I take charge. Now, I'm not going to say just what is the trouble, as I'm not actually sure myself. But I have a hunch. And that's the reason I want you five – men I can trust – to take charge there. Will you?"

His listeners looked at each other. In the eyes of each – with the possible exception of Old Billee Dobb – the light of adventure was shining. Whatever scruples the Kid had about "sheep nursing" had vanished with the word "trouble." And he was the first to speak:

"Sure we will! What do you say, boys? Do we go out? How about it, Dick and Nort? What do you say, Bud? Billee here is just achin' for the experience!" And the Kid laughed, for Billee Dobb's tendency to pretend displeasure at every change of conditions was well known.

"Yes I am – not! Like as not we'll all get shot full of holes. But if you fellers want to go – guess I'll have to trail along to take care of you-all!"

"Listen to him – Just try to hold him back if there's any shootin' goin' on!"

"Then I take it you'll go?" Mr. Merkel asked.

"Yes, Dad – I'm sure we'll all be glad to take charge out there for you," answered Bud. "I don't suppose you could tell us any more about this government business now?"

"I'm afraid not, son – I want to be sure of my ground before I make any statements. Well, I guess that's settled. You'll leave to-morrow."

Since this was the last night the Kid and Old Billee were to spend on the Diamond X, it seemed fitting to the rest of the boys that there should be some sort of an entertainment. An entertainment to a cowboy means principally music – so after supper the boys gathered around a roaring log fire and sang themselves hoarse. After Slim Degnan, the foreman, and Fat Milton, his chubby assistant, had rendered their duet, and Snake Purdee had given his famous imitation of a prima donna singing "Bury Me Not," Bud, with Nort and Dick, decided to take a stroll about the place to see if anything had changed. Their own particular ranch was several miles removed from Diamond X, owned by Mr. Merkel.

"See your Dad got a new building up," observed Dick, as they came to a newly-painted shack, clearly visible in the bright moonlight.

"So he has. Looks like a new bunk house. Perhaps he – "

"Listen! There's somebody inside! No one is supposed to be in there at night. It isn't open yet." This from Nort, in a low tone.

"Let's find out who it is," Bud whispered.

Silently three boys crept toward the door. Two voices could be plainly heard, and as they came closer they could distinguish words. One voice was that of a foreigner – evidently a Mexican. The other spoke with a typical cowboy accent.

"You have got the money ready – yes?" the boys heard the Mexican say.

"Sure – as soon as you deliver the Chinks you get the money. But no double-crossin' – remember that!" and the speaker emphasized his statement by clicking his revolver ominously.

"Don' you worry – you get the Chinks all right. Shuss – there's someone outside!"

The boys knew they had been discovered, and made a sudden rush for the door of the shack, to see the two men who were inside. But the Mexican and his companion were too quick for them. They ran through a back door, and all the three boys could see of them was two dark forms disappearing in the bushes.

"They beat us to it," Dick said in a disappointed voice. "But if ever I hear that Mexican accent again I'll sure remember it!"

"Me too!" asserted Bud, positively, if not grammatically. "No use hanging around here any longer. We've got to get started early in the morning, and it might be a good idea to get in a little bunk-fatigue. Let's hit the hay, boys!" And wondering and speculating on the meaning of what they had seen and heard, the three went to bed.

The next day dawned clear and cool, and the boys arose with the sun. On their way down to breakfast they met the Yellin' Kid. He was evidently the bearer of startling tidings, as his face was more flushed than usual, and his eyes were shining with excitement.

"Heard the news?" he burst out. Then, without waiting for an answer, he went on:

"The marshal at Roaring River has been shot by a gang of Chink smugglers! They captured one, but the rest got away with an auto load of Chinks! Roaring River, boys – that's where we're going!"

Chink smugglers! That conversation in the new bunk house last night – in a flash it all came back to the boys.

"Say, Dick, I'll bet that's what we heard the Mex talking about!" cried Bud.

CHAPTER II

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

Yellin' Kid looked at Bud in surprise.

"You heard someone talkin' about this here shootin', Bud?" he asked.

"Not exactly about the shooting of the marshal, but last night Nort and Dick and myself were wandering down by the new shack that Dad put up, and inside two men were talking – one of them was a Mexican. We heard this Mex say something about getting some money for the delivery of Chinks. That sure means smuggling, doesn't it?"

"That's what it means all right. Couldn't you see who the two men were?" the Kid wanted to know.

"We tried to, but they got away," said Dick. "We went in the front door and they ran out the back."

"Aw say, do you know what I think, fellows? I'll bet what we heard was just some rancher asking a friend to send him a Chinese cook," suggested Nort, with a faint grin.

"Cook, hey? Why did they sneak in a deserted bunk house to talk about a cook? And how about that remark of 'double crossin'?' And what did they run for? Why?" demanded Dick.

"Oh, all right – all right!" cried Nort, who was now grinning widely. "Have it your own way, Dick. It was probably a great Mexican plot to send a million Chinese to this country and form an army to capture Texas. And after they captured Texas they'd set up a kingdom and the king would have Snake Purdee sing 'Bury Me Not' for him every morning before breakfast."

"You can jolly all you like, Nort – just the same, I'm willing to lay odds that we see some excitement when we reach Roaring River. Let's go, boys – that bacon will be frozen by the time we get to breakfast." And Dick led the way toward the dining room.

Although they were cautioned several times by "Ma" Merkel to eat more slowly, the boys hurried through the meal. Each of them was "rarin' to go," as Kid expressed it, and lingering over the ordinary occupation of eating seemed a waste of time. Within an hour the five – Bud Merkel, Nort and Dick Shannon, Yellin' Kid and Old Billee Dobb – were standing by their ponies, ready to spring to the saddles and be off.

There was a sudden cloud of dust as the five urged their mounts into a gallop. With one last yell to those watching, they streaked across the ground in a typical "cowboy start." Within two minutes they were lost to view behind a ridge.

Now for a moment let us leave them while we learn something of their earlier adventures. The three boys, Bud Merkel, and his eastern cousins Nort and Dick Shannon, were introduced to you in the first book of this series, called "The Boy Ranchers; or Solving the Mystery at Diamond X." In that book was related how Nort and Dick Shannon went on their vacations to the Diamond X ranch, owned by Mr. Merkel, Bud's father. While there they were confronted with a strange situation, regarding the searchings of a college scientist, Dr. Hendryx Wright, who was discovered digging near the Diamond X holdings. At first it was thought that he was looking for a lost gold mine, but later developments brought to light the fact that his purpose was to unearth the bones of a prehistoric monster for his college museum.

The adventures of the boys while on the ranch were also concerned with Del Pinzo, a villainous half-breed, who nearly succeeded in bringing the career of all to a sudden close. After successfully overcoming all their difficulties, Nort and Dick decided to form a partnership with their cousin Bud, and they located on a ranch in "Happy Valley" which Bud's father bought for them.

In the several volumes following was related how the boy ranchers went to camp, and how they took the trail, and the exciting times they had in rounding up a band of Yaqui Indians who had

escaped from their reservation and were raising havoc with the neighboring territory. Following this the boys went to Spur Creek, where they had many startling adventures among the sheep herders. The book immediately preceding this present one is called "The Boy Ranchers in the Desert," and tells of the difficulties they had in their search for some lost gold.

After the first wild dash, the five travelers pulled their ponies into that long loping stride which carries the cowboy for days and days over many miles. Bud and Dick were in the lead, with Nort and Kid and Old Billee Dobb following close behind.

"Say, Kid," Bud called back, after a while, "what would you do if you saw a smuggler come along now with a herd of Chinks with him?"

"Tell you what I'd do, Bud," Yellin' Kid replied, "I'd stop the Chinks and find out what happened to a shirt I sent out to be washed the last time I was in Dallas!"

"You mean that shirt with the yellow dots on, Kid?" Dick asked with a grin. "If that's the one, I can tell you what became of it. They thought it was an oil painting that got in the wash by mistake, and they had it framed and hung up in the picture gallery!"

"Never you mind about the color of that shirt, Dick – it was a shrinking violet compared with the vest you bought over to Alamito. Purple and green – wow! First time I saw it it was three o'clock in the afternoon, and I had to look at a watch to make sure it wasn't morning. Thought the sun was comin' up."

"Got you that time, Dick!" Nort laughed. "That's one you owe him. Say, is that a new pony you're ridin', Kid?"

"Yep! What do you think of her?"

"Looks good. How far can she go on a gallon?"

"Twice as far as yours can – and twice as fast!"

"Think so? Try it – see that bush up ahead? Race you to there!"

"Right! Let's go!"

"Hey, hey! Wait a minute, you fellows! We're not goin' on a picnic, you know. We've got a good long ride before us. Take it easy." This from Billee.

"What's the matter, Billee? Gettin' old?" asked Bud mischievously.

"Old? Who, me? Say, young feller, I can give you a head start half way to that bush and still beat you there!"

"How about me? If there's a race, I'm in it too!" cried Dick.

"All right. Tell you what – we'll start from here, and the last man there has to kiss a sheep!"

"Right! All set? Ready – go!"

"Ye-e-e-ow!"

"Yip-yip-yip-yipee-ee!"

"Ride 'em cowboy!"

"Leggo that leather!"

"Gangway – gangway!"

The five riders flashed over the ground almost on a line. Kid's mount was running easily, head well up. Dick pulled a little ahead. Nort just touched his pony with the spurs, and in a moment he was even with Dick. There was a sudden rush behind them – and Old Billee Dobb, hat fanning his pony's withers, hair streaming in the wind, streaked to the front!

"Look at the old boy go!"

"Stay at it, Billee – stay at it!"

"Two bits he wins!"

And win he did. He reached the bush a full length ahead of the others, who were laughing so hard they could hardly stay on their horses. The spectacle of the gaunt, elderly man sitting straight up in the saddle, teeth clenched and bowed legs wrapped around his pony, was too much for them. They leaned on their pommels weakly and roared with laughter.

"Attaboy, Billee!"

"Golly – did you see the old boy streak it out!"

"Oh, cracky! hold me up, somebody, or I'll fall off!"

"Now – who's gettin' – old!" panted Billee. "Beat me, hey? Not in – a million years!"

"What do you say, boys – we give Billee a salute!"

Four guns flashed out of the holsters and were raised aloft.

"Bang!"

They roared as one.

"Sure sounds like a celebration," chuckled Nort as he blew the few remaining grains of burnt powder from his smoking barrel, and replaced the gun. "Billee, accept my congratulations!"

"Granted, youngster – if that's what I'm supposed to say," Billee retorted, his eyes twinkling. "And just remember – a man's not old out here until he can't ride no more."

"You look as though you might be good for several hundred years yet, if that's the case," laughed Dick. "Anyway, you sure showed me a few things. Say, that race made me pretty thirsty. Is there a water hole near here, Kid, or shall I use my canteen?"

"Save it – I think I can find water for you. Guess the ponies could use a little too. Let's see now – 'pears to me there should be a water hole right over here to the left. You boys stay here while I go look. Be back in a jiffy."

Leaving the four on the trail, Yellin' Kid rode swiftly away to the left. Water holes are few and far between in that section, and a cowboy who rides a country a great deal knows the location of every single one. Often that knowledge means the saving of a human life.

The Kid had been gone ten minutes when Bud said:

"Thought Yellin' Kid said he'd be right back? I guess he's all right though. He knows the country about here pretty well, doesn't he, Billee?"

"Like the palm of his hand, Bud – like the palm of his hand! But maybe his pony broke his leg in a prairie dog hole – seein' as how it's a new pony, he might do that. Tell you – I'll just have a look. You fellows wait here for me."

The three boys watched Billee ride off in the direction the Kid had taken. It was a deserted, lonesome place.

Fifteen minutes later Billee rode back – alone.

"The Kid show up yet?" he asked as he pulled up.

"No – couldn't you find him?" Dick asked, a look of anxiety on his face.

"Nope! Neither hide nor hair! Something sure must have happened. The Kid isn't one to go wanderin' off and get lost. I'm afraid he's in trouble, boys!"

CHAPTER III

A SUSPICIOUS VISITOR

The three looked at each other in alarm.

"Golly, I never thought anything could happen to the Kid," Bud said slowly. "He was brought up in this country, and always said he could find his way about blindfolded."

"Perhaps the water hole was farther away than he thought," suggested Nort hopefully. "It's easy for any man to go astray on a matter of distance, you know."

"Well, maybe – but I doubt it. What I think happened is that his pony stumbled into a hole and lamed himself. Well – we'll have to go looking for him, that's all. Nort, you and Dick branch out here to the right. Bud, you take the left trail. I'll try straight ahead. Now remember your trails, boys – we don't want no more accidents to happen. We'll all meet here in one hour. If anything happens, fire three shots. Git along there!" And Billee Dobb, together with the rest set out to find Yellin' Kid who was so mysteriously and unaccountably lost.

Nort, who was riding with Dick, was the first to pick up a possible clew.

"Looks as though someone passed here in a hurry," he said as he pointed to a newly beaten path through some heavy brush. "Now if I was just going along easy like I'd have ridden 'round that bush. The pony that went through there got a few scratches."

"Wonder if it could have been the Kid?" Nort mused. "Though why he should be in such an all-fired hurry I can't understand. Unless he was chasing someone."

"Or being chased," Dick added.

"Perhaps he met a smuggler, Dick."

"Smuggler – 'way up here? Not a chance! Say, Nort, you've got smugglers on the brain. You seem to think they ride around with big signs pinned on them – 'I am a smuggler – shoot me.' Suppose the Kid did meet a smuggler – how'd he know him from any other man?"

"That's right – guess he wouldn't," admitted Nort, a trifle shamefacedly. "But you know what he told us about that marshal being shot."

"Oh, yes, but marshals get shot nearly every day, somewhere – and maybe it wasn't a Chink smuggler that shot him after all – maybe it was just an ordinary gang of rustlers."

"Well, you can say what you like, Dick, but I'll lay odds we see some excitement when we reach Roaring River."

"We'll see some excitement sooner than that, if we don't find the Kid. See here – if he made this trail, he was going fast – and in this direction. Let's get on our way."

"Better go back, do you think?" Nort asked as he looked up toward the sun. "We've been gone at least an hour, and Billee said to return within that time."

"Yes," Dick responded, a little sadly, for he and Yellin' Kid were close friends. "I sure hope the Kid's all right. Perhaps some of the others picked him up."

"Perhaps. Let's hope so. At any rate, we haven't had much success – and I doubt even that the torn brush we saw was done by the Kid."

"Can't tell, he may have ridden through there and then taken a sudden turn to the right or left. Or back again, for that matter. Well, let's get started."

As the two arrived at the agreed meeting place there was no need to ask the others if they had had any luck. The Kid was nowhere in sight.

"We saw a trail through some bushes that might have been made by the Kid, Billee," said Nort to the old rancher.

"Yes, and it might have been made by any number of other things, too," Billee declared, in a despondent tone. "Not that I am sure it *wasn't* the Kid's trail. It *might* have been – but that doesn't help us much. No, I guess the only thing for us to do is to go right on lookin' – and hopin' he's O.K."

It was almost dusk when the four gathered together again. The Kid was still missing, and anxiety was written on the faces of all as they prepared to camp for the night. Each man carried a blanket with him, and also a small snack of food and a canteen of water. As darkness settled down a fire was started, and huddled in their blankets the boy ranchers prepared to make the best of it.

The silence of the night hung close over the four blanketed figures. The firelight threw weird shadows about them, but above the stars shone calmly on, quietly reassuring. A light breeze rustled softly through the mesquite bushes. Now and then a coyote yowled in the distance.

Suddenly Bud jerked upright. He nudged Dick, who was lying beside him.

"Dick!" he whispered, so as not to disturb the others, "do you hear anything?"

"Eh? What? What's that? You speak to me?" Dick muttered sleepily.

"Listen! Can't you hear a noise like a horse walking?"

Dick sat up, now wide awake.

"Say, I believe I do! Wait a minute – " and he tossed some wood on the fire – "let's have a look!"

"Kid?" Bud called hopefully.

The approaching pony gave a sudden leap forward.

"Yea boy!" yelled its rider. "Home again!"

"It is the Kid!" Dick cried exultingly.

"Nort! Billee! The Kid's back!"

In a moment Yellin' Kid was surrounded by the four who shot questions at him as fast as they could talk.

"Where in the name of the spread eagle have you been?"

"What happened?"

"Did you get lost?"

"Are you all right?"

"Hey, hey! Not so fast! Gimme time! Wait 'til I get down off this here pony. Oh, baby – that feels good." And the Kid stretched long and high. "What a ride! Say – got anything to eat?"

"Sure! Sink your teeth in this," Billee said, handing him a cold beef sandwich from his kit. "And here's some water. Are you all right, Kid?"

"Me? Sure! Except tired and hungry. Been ridin' most of the day an' night. S'pose you-all would like to know what it's all about, hey?"

"Well, if you haven't anything to do at present, you might let us in on the secret. We looked all over Texas for you," Dick said, grinning, happy now, that their lost comrade had returned.

"Just a second while I put this little paint pony of mine over with the others. Old boy – you sure had some journey to-day!" and the Kid rubbed the horse's nose. "Stood up well, too. To-morrow I'll give you a big feed – what you need now is rest – like me. Well, boys, guess I'll turn in."

"You'll what?"

"You will not – not until we hear what happened!"

"He'll turn in – well for the love of Pete!"

"All right boys – all right!" the Kid laughed. "Seems you want to hear something about my trip, hey? Well, to start from the beginning, the day dawned clear an' bright. The wind was ticklin' my ears as I rode – "

"Cut it out!"

"Let's have the story, you locoed dust-raiser!"

"All right, we'll cut the kiddin'. Tell you what really happened. I found the water hole where I thought it would be, and I found something else, too. There was a horse standin' near it, and by the side of the horse was a Chink – on his hands an' knees, crawlin' around on the ground. Thinks

I, here's a crazy man. So I rides up slow, and when I got up close I asks he Chink what he's lookin' for. He don't pay no attention to me whatever. I gets off my horse and says it again. Then the crazy Chink looks up at me and says "Chock Gee." That's all. Just "Chock Gee." Me, not knowin' Chinese, I can't tell what he's after. But I see it won't do no good to insist on knowin' so I starts to help him up, thinking maybe he's hurt. Soon as I touched him, what does the crazy Chink do but jump like a cat for his saddle, give my paint a terrible crack with his quirt, and set off like a scared rabbit, my pony after him, leavin' me stranded, high an' dry!"

The Kid looked at his eager listeners and grinned.

"That new pony of mine – she's sure got some speed. She was out of sight in two seconds. An' then, boys – I had to depend on the ole legs! So I went huntin' for her. Caught her about four miles from where her an' me parted company. Then I went huntin' for you-all, but you was nowheres to be found. And from then 'til now, I was ridin' around, lookin' for you."

"And the Chink – what happened to him?"

"Blessed if I know! But if I ever see him again I'll give him something to remember me by."

"So that's where you were all that time! We thought you'd been blown to Dallas on a cyclone. Anyway, we're glad you're back. Reckon you could stand a little sleep, eh?" Bud said.

"You bet. I'll sling my blanket down by you, Dick, and we'll get started for Roarin' River as early as possible. It's still a good ways ahead. Good night, boys!"

"Hey, you men!"

From the darkness came a sudden voice. All five turned swiftly, five hands reaching for revolvers together. Into the firelight rode a tall horseman.

"Hey, boys!" he called again. "Any of you see a Chink wanderin' around here?"

CHAPTER IV

THE HIDDEN GUNMAN

"Who wants to know?" the Kid asked, staring hard at the mounted visitor, his hand firm on the butt of his gun.

"Now, boys, take it easy – take it easy! I've got good reason's for wantin' to know, which same I'll explain if you give me a chance. If you don't mind I think I'll park here for the time bein'." And he dismounted and came closer.

By the light of the fire the ranchers saw a tall, rangy cowboy of about forty. Two deep-set eyes above a hooked nose gave him a hardened, desert look which his manner emphasized. He was, evidently, one to whom life had proved anything but a pink tea party. Yet, withal, he had something about him which seemed to inspire trust.

"Well, stranger, you're welcome, but we haven't much to offer," Bud said. "We weren't expecting to camp to-night, and we're somewhat shy on provisions. But I guess we can rustle up something for you."

"No need of that – no need of that at all," the stranger heartily assured them. "All I want is a little information. Guess I'd better introduce myself first. I'm Joe Hawkins, special deputy over at Roaring River."

The others exchanged glances in the dim light of the fire as the visitor continued:

"Here's my badge. Don't know whether you heard about the trouble we had, but if you didn't, I'll tell you. Roaring River is right on the Mexican border, you know, and there's been a lot of Chink smugglin' goin' on, with Roaring River as the key to the whole smugglin' situation, so to speak. We don't know who's the boss of these smugglers, but we'd give a lot to find out. Two thousand dollars, to be exact.

"Well, anyway, two days ago we had a tip that a car-load of Chinese was about to be rushed over the border just outside of town limits. So we got all set. Sheriff Townley and me and three other deputies hid in the bushes where we thought the car was goin' to pass. But we lost out.

"The car came by all right – and we hopped into the roadway to stop them. They never stopped a-tall. Goin' like a crazy steer they flew by on two wheels, lettin' ride with every gun they had. Got poor Townley good. We buried him yesterday. So – now you know what it's all about."

"And the car – did you see it again?" Dick; asked excitedly.

"No – but last night a Chink came to town and got oiled-up on pulque, and said a few things more than he meant to. When I jumped him he lit out for the open spaces. This morning I thought I'd take a look around, and see if I could spot him. Sure enough I did, but the old yellow-skin got away before I could reach him. I don't suppose you boys saw anything of him?"

"Well now, that's mighty strange," drawled the Kid. "It so happens that I *did* see your man – at least I'll take odds that he was the one you're after. This afternoon I was trapin' around for that water hole over yonder about three miles – you know the one," and the Kid told of his adventure with the "crazy Chink."

"That's him, for all the money in the world!" the deputy exclaimed. "Lookin' for a 'chock gee' was he? I'll chock gee him if I catch him."

"Say, what's all this about a 'chock gee'?" Nort wanted to know.

"Well, it's a government immigration office paper every Chink in this country is supposed to have, showin' they're here legitimately. Those that haven't got 'em try to get one from another Chink, and there's unlawful trading goin' on all the time."

"Like a passport, eh?" Billee Dobb suggested.

"Something like that. Where you men bound for – if you don't mind me askin'?"

"To a ranch just outside of Roaring River," spoke up Bud. "My father, over at Diamond X, bought it, and we're going to take charge."

"Your father Mr. Merkel?" Joe Hawkins asked suddenly, with new interest.

"Yes – do you know him?"

"Not exactly. But I know of him. When I heard that the Shootin' Star was changin' hands I wrote to Mack Caffery, the boy on the job over at Candelaria, askin' him to get in touch with the new owner. That's how I got the name Merkel. Did your dad hear from him, do you know?"

"Yes, he did. So that's what Dad meant when he said there might be trouble, eh? Well – we're ready for whatever comes. What do you say, boys?"

"Right!" the others chorused.

"Say, mister, what was that there you said about two thousand dollars?" Billee Dobb broke in.

"There's two thousand dollars' reward, offered by the government, for the capture, dead or alive, of the head of the Chink smugglers," the deputy said impressively.

"Two thousand bucks! Say, boys, with that you could buy yourself a new herd of cattle, to make up somewhat for the bunch you lost!" cried Yellin' Kid.

"We sure could – and then some," Bud agreed. "But I guess there's not much chance of us collecting the reward. We'll be busy enough at the ranch without trying to round up any smugglers. Say, Mr. – what did you say your name was?"

"Hawkins – Joe Hawkins."

"Well, how about bunking with us to-night? We can all start out in the morning together, and perhaps we'll come across your Chinese friend. It's pretty late now, and you can't make Roaring River 'til long after daylight."

"Well, now, men, that's right kind of you to suggest that – but I don't want to butt in. I can just –"

"You're not butting in at all!" insisted Bud. "We'll be glad to have you. Got a blanket?"

"Oh, I got a blanket, thanks. Thought I might need it on this Chink hunt of mine. Well, since you boys don't mind, I'll put up my pony and flop down here by the fire. Feels good at a time like this. Good-night, all!"

The remainder of the night was uneventful. The six slept soundly, tired out as they were, and with the morning they all awoke refreshed and eager to be on the way. After a meager breakfast they set out for the water hole the Kid knew of, as they wanted to let their steeds drink before starting for the Shooting Star, which was the name of their new ranch. Joe Hawkins went with them.

"What time do you calculate we'll hit the ranch, Kid?" Bud asked.

"Be there in about three hours, Bud. It isn't so far from the water hole. Why? You anxious to begin sheep herdin'?"

"Not exactly," Bud laughed. "But I do want to see what the place looks like. Hope we don't have to do much repairing."

"No, the Shooting Star is in pretty fair shape," Joe Hawkins said. "Your father got a good buy – if you can get hold of it all right."

"What do you mean, get hold of it all right?" asked Bud curiously.

"Well, the feller that's got it now isn't exactly a pleasant customer. There's something queer about him – we've been watchin' the Shooting Star for over a month now. I couldn't say for sure that there's anything wrong – but it looks suspicious. That's the reason I wanted to have the government official find out who the new owner was going to be. I'm right glad I met up with you boys. You may be able to help me out some time."

"And collect that reward," Billee Dobb put in. His mind seemed set on the two thousand dollars the deputy had spoken of.

"You might," admitted Hawkins. "It's waiting for the person who brings in the head of the smuggling system."

"Well, we'll do our best," the Kid said, with a side glance at Bud.

"Say, Kid, we're not down here to capture smugglers!" cried Bud. "We've got to take charge of the Shooting Star. Of course, if we *do* happen to run across – "

"I knew that would get a rise out of you!" laughed the Kid. "Catch Bud duckin' any excitement! Why, even Billee here wants to trail the smugglers – don't you, Billee?"

"Never you mind!" came back the old rancher. "Want another race?"

"At-ta-boy, Billee!" Nort yelled. "Guess that'll hold him! You didn't know Billee Dobb was a champion racer, did you?" Nort said to Hawkins.

"I didn't, no," responded the deputy with a smile. "But I believe it. Takes old birds like us to show these youngsters up, eh, Billee?"

"Sure does!"

"Well, here we are," declared the Kid, as they came in sight of the water hole. "Right down there is where I saw the Chink on his hands and knees. Hey, take it easy there!" This to his pony, who strained toward the water. "I know you're thirsty, but so are the others. Easy – easy!" The Kid dismounted and led the panting horse toward the water. Leaning over he filled his hat, and held it to the mouth of his pony. "Start in on that. Slow! Or you don't get any. 'At-ta-boy. Here's another hatful for you. Feel as though you can control yourself now? All right – go to it!" By this time the intelligent animal got the idea, and drank in small mouthfuls. The other ponies, restrained by their masters from drinking too fast, did the same.

"So it was here that you saw the Chink, eh!" asked Joe Hawkins.

"Yep – right in this spot. He was leanin' over here by this little bush, lookin' for – " the Kid stopped suddenly and picked up something from the ground. It was a folded paper. The Kid looked it over swiftly.

"Lookin' for —*this*!" he exclaimed, holding it out.

"What is it?"

"Let's have a look!"

The deputy walked over to the Kid.

"Mind if I see it?" he said quietly.

Without a word the Kid handed it over. He recognized the fact that it was the deputy's right to demand it.

"That's what the Chink was looking for," Hawkins declared after a moment. "See here! This paper – "

"Bang! Bang!"

"Duck!" cried the Kid. His hand reached for his gun as he hit the ground.

"Bang!"

Billee's hat went sailing from his head.

"He means business!" Dick yelled. "Down, everybody!"

CHAPTER V

ARRIVAL AT THE RANCH

Another report rang out, and a bullet went singing overhead. By this time guns were out ready for action. From behind a small knoll, about one hundred and fifty yards away, hazy smoke could be seen arising.

"Dick, you stay here and keep me covered," said the Kid in a low voice. The boys were all hugging the ground in the shelter of the brush. "I'm goin' to sneak around an' see if I can't connect with the onery skunk that's doin' the shootin'."

"Take it easy, Kid," Dick cautioned. "You can't tell how many men there are over there."

"Right! Now you pass the word to the others to keep that hill peppered with lead. As soon as you see a sign of life, let ride. If you can keep whoever's doin' all this out of sight, I'll have a chance. So long!"

Yellin' Kid had started. With a simple "so long" he was off on a mission which might – and very likely would – end in his death. Men who spend their lives on the prairies have no time for heroics. They do their job – and say nothing.

Slowly the Kid crept forward. The hidden gunman seemed to be withholding his fire. In the brush by the water hole lay the five watching men – Billee Dobb and Joe Hawkins with long-barreled Colts ready for action, Dick, Nort and Bud squinting along the barrels of their shorter guns. Closer, closer, the Kid crawled. Seventy-five yards! Seventy! Now, Kid – now —

"Well, by the ghost of my aunt Lizzie's cat!"

The Kid was standing upright, his mouth open, his gun hanging loosely by his side.

Not a soul was in sight!

A quick look about verified this. The country beyond the knoll was perfectly flat, and for over five hundred yards was bare of even the smallest bush. Whoever the mysterious shooter was, he had, apparently, vanished into thin air.

"Hey, you guys, come over here!" yelled the Kid. "We been blazed at by a ghost!"

One by one the men by the water hole got to their feet.

Dick was the first to reach the Kid's side.

"He's right, boys!" called back Dick, as he saw the empty space behind the little hill. "Nobody here. But let's have a look at the ground. We can tell if it's been disturbed, anyway."

A careful search revealed not only the traces of someone having lain down on the loose earth, but also two empty shells.

"That makes me feel a little better!" cried the Kid as he saw this. "I don't hanker to be shot at by someone I can't see. Now the thing to do is to find out what happened to our late playmate."

"He's gone, ain't he?" asked Billee Dobb incredulously, as he came shuffling along. Off his horse Billee was a bit awkward.

"You don't say! Well, now, I never noticed that! Say, Billee, you a de-tect-a-tive by any chance?"

"Go on, laugh, Kid! You spent enough time sneakin' up on a whole lot of nothin', didn't ye?"

"What do you think about this, Mr. Hawkins?" Bud asked of the deputy, who was looking around quietly.

"Not much, youngster, not much! Seems mighty funny to me. Doesn't hardly appear likely that a man could get away in this flat country without us seeing him. But that's what happened all right. Never knew a cowpuncher to have that much sneakin' ability in him."

"Maybe it wasn't a cowboy," Nort suggested. "Maybe it was a – Chink."

"Never knew a Chink to use a forty-four in my life," the Kid declared. "These here shells come from a gun big enough to knock a Chineese clean off his slippers. Nope, this here job was done by a puncher – or – " and he stopped a moment – "or a Greaser."

"A Mexican!" cried Bud. "Say, Dick, remember the conversation we heard in Dad's new bunk house? Maybe it was the same Mex that did the shooting!"

"What's this all about, boys?" asked Joe Hawkins. "Anything I ought to know?"

"It might help you," offered Dick. "It was two nights ago." And he told of hearing the voices in the shack.

"Well, I don't know. I don't mind telling you that the crowd we're after for the smugglin' is Mexican – at least we're pretty sure they are. Think you'd recognize the voices if you heard them again?"

"Certain sure I could tell that Greaser's tones in a million," Dick declared. "I'll never forget him."

After another survey of the terrain, it was decided to start for the Shooting Star ranch. Joe Hawkins said he would ride to Roaring River with them and make his report, and see if anything had developed in town. So, filling their canteens, the six set off.

On the way the Kid offered a tale of a tarantula fight. These bouts were carefully arranged by the cowboys, the scene being set in a deep washbowl. Two females were the combatants, and the one who first amputated all the legs of the other was declared the winner. Occasionally a particularly vicious spider would forsake his natural enemy and leap high at one of the spectators, inflicting a painful, though not necessarily dangerous, bite. Hence these contests were not without excitement.

"I used to have a pet tarantula I called Jenny," told Yellin' Kid. "She was absolutely the meanest critter I ever see! She could just about straddle a saucer, that's how big she was. Had a coat of hair like a grizzly. She won five fights for me, and I was all set to match her against a spider some puncher brought all the way from Oklahoma, when she took a sudden likin' to Jeff Peters, and her ca-reer was brought to a sudden close. I cried fer near a week – but Jeff, he was more sore than what I was. She got him good before he killed her!" And the Kid chuckled rememberingly.

By this time the riders had come in sight of Roaring River. They had all been through the town, if it might be so dignified by a name, and of course Joe Hawkins lived there, so it was no new sight to them. But it was a change from the surroundings the Boy Ranchers had been used to, and when they remembered that it was here all the smuggling was going on, all were conscious of a feeling of excitement. They decided to feed-up in town before going to the ranch, which lay about three miles out.

They headed for "Herb's Eating Place," the one and only restaurant with tables. The meals they ordered would have done justice to a hungry bear.

"We have arrived!" cried Bud, when he swallowed sufficiently to allow himself to talk. "After a long and hazardous journey through the bad-lands of Texas, we finally came to this little gem, nestling among the hills, resplendent in – "

"Roas' biff, roas' pork, and lem'," Nort finished. "How do you get that way? Food always do that to you? Look at the Kid here. Not saying a word."

"Good reason for that," laughed Bud. "He couldn't talk if he wanted to. Hey, Kid, they serve supper here, you know."

"Yea? But I'm takin' no chances! This place may not be here to-night. Wow! What a meal! Help me up, boys! Help me up!" And the Kid struggled slowly to his feet. "Guess that'll hold me for a while," he sighed.

"How about some more pie, Kid?" asked Dick with a grin on his face.

"Pie? More pie? Well, now – what kind is there left?"

"Apple, and apple, and – apple."

"Huh! Don't like them. Guess I'll take apple. Yes, a small piece of apple would just about finish me off."

Billee Dobb put down his fork and gazed up at the Kid.

"Did I understand you to relate that you was goin' to eat some more pie?" he asked carefully.

"You did – why?"

The veteran rancher arose and, walking over to another table, he seized a bunch of artificial flowers that were set in a vase. Carrying them over to the Kid, he held them reverently out before him.

"My little offering," he murmured, "to one who will be with us no longer."

The diners in the restaurant, all of whom were observing the scene, let out a roar of laughter. It was so ludicrous to see the old puncher indulge in a joke that it seemed twice as funny as if anyone else had done it. Billee Dobb certainly scored heavily.

As the ranchers were leaving the restaurant they passed a Mexican who was coming in. Dick looked sharply at him. Something about the shape of his back seemed vaguely familiar, and the boy was about to say something when Joe Hawkins, who was the last out, exclaimed:

"Did you see that Greaser just going in Herb's? One of the worst men in town. I'm telling you because he works on the next place to yours. If I were you I'd leave him entirely alone. Not that you'll have trouble with him – but forewarned, you know. Well, boys here's where I leave you. Got to get back to the office, and see how things are. I reckon I'll see you right soon, as you're so close, and anything I can do for you, let me know ime-jit! Think I'll take a run out to your place within the next week, and see how you make out. Well, *adios*, boys. Good luck!"

With a wave of his hand he was off. The boys were sorry to see him leave, for he was very pleasant company.

"I have an idea he'll be a good friend," declared Nort as they rode toward the ranch. "And if anything turns up, we may need a couple of such friends."

"He's regular, all right," the Kid agreed. "Looks as though he could handle himself in a fight, too. Doesn't talk much, but when he does – he says something. Yep, he suits me to a T."

"Good thing we met him," Dick said. "Well, boys, here we are!"

In front lay the ranch. As the five drew closer, they could see that the houses were well built. It was indeed in good shape.

"Say, here comes somebody that's sure in a hurry," Billee Dobb said suddenly. "Wonder what he wants?"

Riding toward them, dust raising under his bronco's feet, came a lone horseman.

CHAPTER VI

THE THREAT

Pulling their ponies to a halt, the five gazed curiously at the approaching rider. As he drew closer, they noticed he carried a sawed-off "scatter-gun," otherwise a shotgun. This in itself was strange. No true Westerner ever sports one of these, and they are looked upon with derision by the regular "gun-totin'" cowboy. A long-barreled Colt is the puncher's favorite weapon.

The stranger reined up sharply as he came within talking distance and looked piercingly at the ranchers as he called out:

"Anything I can do for you?"

"Well, I don' know," answered the Kid slowly. "You might, and then again you might not. What happens to be your special line?"

The stranger scowled.

"That's my business. What I'm aimin' to find out is, what's yours?"

"This is the Shooting Star, isn't it?" broke in Bud.

"It is."

"Well, we're the new owners. My name is Bud Merkel – my father just bought this ranch, and we came over to take possession. This is Dick Shannon, and his brother Nort. Billee Dobb and Yellin' Kid on my right. Will that do you? Now how about tellin' us who you are?"

"Me? Oh, Jim'll do, I guess. I happen to be the boss hand on this here sheep ranch. So you're the new owners, hey? Wonder what old 'J. D.' will have to say to that. You got papers, I suppose?"

"Certainly. Here is the bill of sale, and –"

"Take it easy, Bud, take it easy," Billie Dobb cautioned in a low tone of voice. "I don't exactly care for this feller's looks."

"Who's 'J. D.' – the one tendin' the ranch now?" asked the Kid.

"Yea – only he's not exactly tendin' it. He's here, and something tells me he's goin' to stay here – new owners or not. 'J. D.' don't care much about owners. What he's interested in is keepin' what he's got. And as far as I can see, he's still got the Shootin' Star."

"I don't like to dispute your word," Nort said hotly, "but we might have something to say about that ourselves. Come on, boys, let's ride in."

"Just a minute – just a minute! Where you-all countin' on headin' for?" sneered the lone horseman.

"The ranch house, of course!"

"Now just you let me give you-all a little piece of advice. I won't charge nothin' for it, and it *might* be useful. If I was you boys, I'd turn *right* around and ride the other way. Tell you what you do, youngster –" this to Bud – "you tell your father you couldn't find the ranch."

There was a moment's ominous silence. The Kid was the first to speak.

"Well, now, stranger, that's kind of you. Yes, sir, I think that's right kind of you to take an interest in us like that," he drawled. "But you know how it is. We sort of want to find out things for ourselves. So if you don't mind –" his tone changed suddenly. "We'll be gettin' along to the ranch. Out of the way, puncher! Let's go, boys!"

The stranger's eyes narrowed. He half raised his rifle, then apparently thinking better of it, let it drop again. As the five moved forward he rode slowly along in the rear.

They reached the corral at the side of the house, and Bud and Dick dismounted. Nort, Billee, and the Kid stayed on their ponies. Walking to the door of the house, Bud knocked boldly. There was no answer. He knocked again, this time a little harder. Still no result.

"Wonder if there's anyone around?" asked Dick. "Suppose we take a look at the side."

"Here's someone," Bud declared as there was a sound of a key grating in a lock. "They certainly keep things tight down here."

The door opened slowly. In its frame stood a man of slight build, and, by cowboy standards, dressed effeminately. He wore a "boiled" collar, small black string tie, low cut vest and gray trousers. His long black hair, with a slight shine on it, was brushed straight back.

"What'll you have, gents?" he asked. "Lookin' for me?"

"We're looking for the man in charge of the ranch," Dick said slowly. "If you can qualify, then I guess it's you we want to see."

"Right! And what can I do for you?"

"This will tell you," spoke Bud, handing him a copy of the bill of sale for the ranch. "We're the new owners. You rent the place, don't you? I believe the deed says your term was up last month. Sorry to have to put you out, but business is business. Can you get ready to shift by to-morrow morning, do you think? We'll make out down in town for to-night."

The man in the doorway didn't answer. He read over the paper Bud had handed him and then looked up. His expression was anything but friendly.

"And I'm supposed to beat it out of here, hey?" he asked coldly.

"Afraid so," answered Bud.

The man suddenly stepped to one side.

"Come in a minute, boys," he suggested. It was evident that his manner had undergone a change. He seemed more friendly.

"You just get in?" he asked.

"Yes – we were delayed on the way, or we would have gotten here sooner."

"Sit down, boys."

As the slightly-built man was drawing up chairs Bud cast a quick glance at Dick. "Watch out!" his look signaled. But there seemed no need for suspicion. "J. D.," as they had heard him called, appeared harmless.

"I take it you boys are sensible?" he began when they were seated.

"Hope so," Dick answered with a slight grin. "We've never been in any asylum that I know of."

"Check! Now I'd like to talk business with you. First of all, could you use one thousand dollars?"

At this surprising query Dick and Bud started. One thousand dollars! It represented a small fortune. Bud thought of the herd of cattle they had just lost and was about to reply affirmatively, when he felt, rather than saw, a cautioning look come into Dick's eyes.

"That's a lot of money," declared Dick, before Bud could speak. "We could certainly use it, but you know it pays to be careful how one earns it. Robbery is a bit out of our line."

"Oh, it's nothing like that – nothing like that at all," the other assured them quickly. "This thousand that I speak of can be yours for just doing me a favor."

"Sounds like a high price to pay for a favor," Dick said. "But let's hear the proposition."

"Sure! It's simply this: you boys let me stay on at the ranch here, for, say, six more months, and as rental I'll pay you one grand."

"But certainly this place can't be worth that much to you," broke in Bud thoughtlessly. It was a very unwise remark, for it was obvious that this excessive figure was offered for something more than the mere use of the ranch. "J. D." had made the mistake of going too high in his offer, and it instantly awoke suspicion in the minds of Dick and Bud. But now that Bud had blurted out this suspicion, the possibility of being able to secretly find out why they had been offered a thousand for the place disappeared. The cards were on the table.

"As to that, I'm the best judge," "J. D." said sharply. "If you want to accept, say so. If you don't – well – ."

"Can we have until to-morrow to think it over?" asked Dick.

"Nope – sorry, but I have to have your answer now. All you have to do is to sign the present owner's name to a renewal clause – and since he's your father, he won't object to that," said the man, turning to Bud.

Evidently he was anxious to get things settled as soon as possible – perhaps before the boys had a chance to investigate.

Dick looked at Bud, and saw that he had permission to take things into his own hands. Dick arose.

"Well, sir, we can't do it, and that's that. We were sent out here to take charge of this ranch, and we're going to do it, unless Mr. Merkel tells us to do otherwise. You must get in touch with him if you want a renewal of your lease. And until that time we must take control here. We are sorry, but we must ask you to make ready to leave by to-morrow morning."

The man seated opposite did not move.

"Is that your last word?" he asked, slowly.

"Yes, it is. If we can offer you any assistance in getting ready we'll be glad to do it."

The man made no response. He arose suddenly, walked over to the door and flung it open. Then he turned to the two boys and with a sneer upon his face, said:

"Very well! You've had your say, and now I'll make my little speech. You guys come over here and think all you have to do is to tell me to move out, and you move in. I don't know who you are – never saw you before. For that matter I don't want to know. You show me some kind of a paper that you may have written yourselves, and expect me to accept it as a bill of sale. Well, that's out. I don't go.

"And another thing! I don't know how many men you brought with you, but I've got twelve here that will stick close to me. So don't start anything. Good-day, gents!"

It was a moment before Bud and Dick realized the import of what had just been said. Then, tight-lipped, they started for the door. Neither said a word as they passed out, and behind them the door slammed shut.

As they approached the three waiting by the corral they must have shown by their expressions that things had not gone well, for Nort said:

"What's the trouble, Dick?"

"Let's ride around a bit," spoke the Kid quickly. The rider with the saw-off shot-gun was still within hearing. "Great weather we're havin', ain't it? Though it might rain soon," and he looked over to where the other sat with one leg resting against his saddle horn.

"Not so good, hey?" this cowboy called over. "Come see us again, when you can stay longer," and he chuckled at his joke.

"We will," answered Nort grimly. "In fact, we intend to –"

"Now do you know, I think it looks a mite like rain myself," interrupted Billee Dobb in a musing tone of voice. "Them clouds over there are pretty heavy. You say you want to ride around a bit, Kid?"

"Yea. Just a little. Let's go, men."

CHAPTER VII

A SHEEPLESS SHEEP RANCH

With as few words as possible Bud told the Kid of their talk with "J. D." Riding slowly along, the Kid made no comment for several minutes. Finally Dick burst out:

"For Pete's sake, Kid, let's hear you say something! Don't you think it's mighty queer behavior for a tenant of a sheep ranch? The way I understand the facts, he hired the place to raise sheep on, about thirteen months ago. Now when his year is up he refuses to get off. There are plenty of other farms further back from the border he could get. I don't think your father bought the sheep with this ranch, did he, Bud?"

"I believe he contracted with the owner that one thousand heads of woolies were to be sent to him within a month of taking possession. This tenant, whoever he is, will walk his sheep when he goes, of course. I thought it was unusual to hire a ranch to raise sheep on for only one year, but Dad said the sheep get some sort of a disease if they're not walked frequently, and I guess this fellow sort of figured on trying it out for a year before settling down to a permanent place. The owner of the ranch lives up north somewhere, and Dad simply bought him out. Why Dad wanted to go in for woolies I don't know, but he must have had his reasons."

"Then we won't have to start sheep nursin' right away," Nort said.

"We'll have to get this 'J. D.' out before we can do anything," declared Bud. "What do you think about it, Kid? I don't want to run to Dad at the first sign of trouble, but it looks as though we had a job on our hands before we really begin herding."

Yellin' Kid pushed his sombrero to the back of his head and looked up.

"Well, boys, I'll tell you," he said slowly. "While Bud and Dick were inside gassin' I took a good look around. And I'll tell you a funny thing; I didn't see no sign of sheep ever being on this here ranch at all. No feedin' troughs, no hurdles, no nothin'. Billee, how about it? Did this look like a sheep ranch to you?"

"Not any," the veteran puncher answered laconically. "Of course I'm no sheep expert, but I can tell a sheep ranch when I see one. Usually they have a feedin' ground around somewhere, for the woolies to feed in durin' the winter. And they have troughs to put the fodder in when they can't get to the range to graze, for sheep are dam perticular what they eat off of. Maybe it was away 'round the back somewhere, but I couldn't spot it."

"That's what I thought," went on the Kid. "Of course he may have sold all the sheep a while back, and cleared his truck away at the same time, but it don't hardly seem likely he could get rid of all traces. Where ever sheep go, you can usually tell they been there." He paused reflectively and added:

"Sort of queer that deputy we met didn't say something about there bein' no sheep here. Did you tell him we was expectin' to find a sheep ranch?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't believe I did," Bud answered. "I said we were going to take charge of a ranch. He probably thought we were bringing the cattle over later."

"Probably. So your friend in the house told you he'd give one thousand bucks if you'd let him stay, did he?"

"Yep. That made me suspicious right away, and I foolishly spoke up and told him as much. Then he said it was his affair if he wanted to pay that much to stay on. I knew that Dad wouldn't want me to allow him to do that without his permission, so I refused – asked him if I could let him know later. But no, that wouldn't do. He wanted me to sign an extension right away. Then when I told him I couldn't do that, he threatened to stay anyway, and practically dared us to put him off."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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