

Baker Willard F.

**The Boy Ranchers in Camp: or,
The Water Fight at Diamond X**



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Willard F. Baker

The Boy Ranchers in Camp Or The Water Fight at Diamond X

CHAPTER I

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

"Look out there, Bud! Look out! There you go!"

"Side-stepping soap dishes! What's the idea? Whoa, there, Sock!"

The pinto pony reared, swerved sharply to one side as a black streak shot across the trail almost under his feet and then, when the animal came to a sudden stop, there shot over his head the boy who had given vent to the last exclamation.

Bud Merkel came down sprawling on all fours in a bunch of grass which served, in a great measure, to break the force of the catapult over his pony's head. And then, as the lad righted himself and limped over to catch his steed, he cried:

"What in the name of the petrified prune pie was that, Billee?"

"A jack, Bud! A jack rabbit, and as black as gunpowder! Yo' shore are in for some bad luck, now!"

"Bad luck! I should say so! Almost breaking my neck, and laming Sock," and the lad looked anxiously at his pinto, being relieved to find, however, that the animal had suffered no harm.

"But this won't be all!" declared Billee Dobb. "I never see a black jack shoot in front of a man yet that bad luck didn't follow!"

"Well, let's make it go some to catch us!" suggested Bud as he leaped to the saddle, after making sure that the girths were tight. "Black jack! First one I ever saw," and he looked off in the distance toward a streak of dust, which was all that now represented the frightened rabbit that had shot across the trail so unexpectedly.

"They aren't plentiful; thank your stars!" exclaimed the old cowboy. "I'm glad it didn't happen to *me*."

"Yes, if you'd a' toppled over your critter's head there'd be a bigger crack in the ground!" laughed Bud, as he looked at his companion's greater girth and weight. "It came as sudden as a flash of lightning, that jack!"

"Bad luck allers does come that-a-way," croaked Old Billee Dobb.

"Oh, you and your bad luck!" laughed Bud. "Come on now, hump yourself! Hump yourself, you old soap-footing specimen of a slab of saltpeter!" he cried to his pony. "Mosey along!"

"What's your rush, Bud? Anybody's take a notion t' think you was in suthin' of a hurry, t' hear you talkin' that-a-way t' your critter," remarked Billee as he ambled along behind his more impetuous companion.

"Hurry, Billee? Of course I'm in a hurry!" admitted Bud, a tall, well-tanned lad as he adjusted himself to his saddle, and dashed ahead of his companion on the dusty trail. "I reckon you'd be in a rush, too, if your cousins that you hadn't seen since last fall were coming to camp all summer with you!" and Bud Merkel swung around in his creaking saddle to note the pace of his companion.

"Them two tenderfeet comin' out to Diamond X ag'in?" asked Old Billee Dobb.

"Course they are!" answered Bud. "But they're a long shot from being tenderfeet, now, since they helped get rid of Del Pinzo and his cattle-rustling gang, and did their share in solving the mystery of the Triceratops. Tenderfeet! Guess you'd better not let 'em *hear* you call 'em that!"

"Mebby not, son! Mebby not!" agreed Old Billee, rather mildly as he tried to urge his slower-going animal to keep pace with Bud's. For the pinto, responding to the spur of voice and heel, had shot ahead. "I sorter forgot your cousins did have a hand in the lively doin's at Diamond X last season. So they're coming out again, be they?"

"Yes, and we're going to make a camp of it, over in Flume Valley. I'm going to raise there the finest bunch of steers you ever hazed to the stock yards, and Nort and Dick are going to help me. I'm riding to meet them now at the water-hole, and we're going back to stay all summer in Flume Valley."

"Hum! Flume Valley!" mused the older cowboy, for both riders were of that class, though Bud Merkel was the son of the man who owned Diamond X, and other important western ranches. "Flume Valley! That's where your paw started that irrigation scheme; ain't it?"

"Yes," replied Bud. "It was only a waste bit of land before dad ran the water through the tunnel-flume from Pocut River, but now it grows the best grass you ever rolled your bed in. And the steers – you ought to see 'em, Billee!"

"Well, I'm aimin' to, right soon," responded the old man. "Your paw was sayin' suthin' about putting me over there, but I didn't pay much attention to it. So you and the eastern lads are going to camp in Flume Valley, be you?"

"Yes, because, being an experiment, dad didn't want to build any ranch houses there yet. But if we make good on the deal, and can raise steers on the grass that's grown since the water was let in, why, I'm to have it for my own ranch, when I come of age, and Dick and Nort will be my partners. We'll call it Diamond X Second."

"Good name! Mighty good name! Look out there, you old piece of bacon fat!" he called sharply to his animal, pulling the pony quickly up as it stumbled. "There aren't any prairie dog holes here for you t' go puttin' your foot in! What's the matter of yo'?"

But though Old Billee and Bud spoke thus in seeming harshness to their horses, there was no unkindness in their treatment of the animals. It was just their picturesque, western manner of talking, and hardly had the echo of Old Billee's words died away on the hot, dusty air than he was gently patting the neck of the pony he rode.

"Did dad say you were to help me over in Flume Valley?" asked Bud, as he slowed down the pace of his animal to keep alongside that of the older cowboy.

"Yes, he said I was to be your helper. And first I sorter hated to leave Babe, Slim, Snake and the rest of the bunch. But if you say your cousins are coming out, and if we can raise better cattle there than on the home ranch, why, mebby it won't be so worse."

"Of course it won't!" cried Bud. "Why, even in the short time the steers have been in Flume Valley, Billee, they've improved."

"You say there's stock there now?" asked the old man, for he was gray-haired, "Well, if they've been thrivin' by themselves so far, what's the good of you an' your cousins campin' there to watch 'em eat?"

"Lots of reasons," answered Bud, as he and his companion started up a hill, on the other side of which they would reach the water-hole, where the main trail from Diamond X came in. "For one thing this is something new, and dad wants it watched carefully. Then, too, the water pipe and reservoir will need looking after. But, more than anything else, it's Del Pinzo and his gang of rustlers."

"Those scoundrels didn't get what they deserved for tryin' to run off our stock last year!" complained Billee. "Now they're raisin' ructions again; be they?"

"They sure are!" declared Bud. "It wasn't that they didn't get what they deserved, for they were sentenced to long terms. But the trouble was they didn't stay in jail where they were put."

"I reckon they look at it just the other way!" chuckled Billee.

"Yes," agreed Bud. "But it's going to make trouble for dad and all the other cattle raisers around here having that bunch of Mexicans and Greasers loose. That's one reason why we've got to watch

out at Flume Valley, where we're going to try to raise some cattle that will beat those at Diamond X. I'm glad you're going to be with me, Billee."

"Hum! You don't care what sort of trouble th' old man gits into; do you, Bud?" and he smiled a toothless smile at his employer's son. "Well, it's all in th' day's work, I reckon. But I'm not expected t' come with you to-night; am I? Slim said I was to report t' him at the main buildin's."

"No, you don't have to come right away," replied Bud. "I'm to meet Dick and Nort at the water-hole – they were due at our ranch this morning – and you're to come when you can."

"Might as well be quick as sooner," laughed the old cowboy. "I don't take much to new-fangled notions. But orders is orders, I reckon."

"Oh, there isn't so much new at Flume Valley," said Bud. "All it ever needed to make one of the best places in this part of the country for raising cattle was water. Now, since dad had the big pipe flume put in from Pocut River, where it can fill the reservoir and water the grass and the cattle at the same time, things are going to boom!"

"They are to hear you tell 'em!" chuckled Billee. "Well, I wish you all good luck, Bud, I'll help all I can. I'll be over to-night, if I can make it, though it's some of a ride after a day's work."

"Oh, I won't expect you," said Bud. "I've got everything all laid out for the camp there. Nort and Dick will be with me, but we'll be on the lookout for you to-morrow. Bring what things you need, and some grub. And if my mother has any pies baked, just pack a few of them."

"Only a *few*?" asked Billee, with a grin.

"As many as Nell will let you take," laughed Bud. "But there's Nort and Dick! Whoop! Oh, boy! Come a-runnin'!" and the young rancher beat a tattoo with his heels on the sides of his steed, and raced down the slope toward two other lads who, like himself, were attired in conventional western costume. Old Billee pulled his steed to a halt and watched the greetings.

"It's a great thing to be young!" sighed the old man. "The greatest thing in the world! But maybe I can do something yet! Only I don't like that black jack – I shore don't! Never heard of anythin' but bad luck followin' one of them nimble cusses! I don't like it for a cent!"

"Well, here we are!" cried Nort Shannon, flinging his broad-brimmed hat into the air, and catching it on the end of his .45 before the headpiece could touch the ground.

"Came right on time, too! Zip Foster couldn't 'a' made it better!" joyously declared Bud, clapping his palm into that of Nort.

"Haven't you run him off the ranch yet?" asked the other lad, who was rather short and stout, not to say fat.

"Run who off?" asked Bud.

"Zip Foster!" repeated Dick. "Last I heard of him – "

"Never mind *him*!" and Bud seemed somewhat annoyed at having mentioned the name. "Oh, but I'm glad you fellows are here! Have a good trip? Are you hungry? Did you have grub enough? Can you ride right out now? How's everybody at my house?"

Nort looked at his western cousin, and then, with a deliberate motion pretended to mop his face free of some imaginary perspiration, brought out by the rapid-fire questions on his cousin's part.

"Say! Go a bit easy, will you, Bud?" he begged. "One at a time! Line forms on this side!"

"We're going right out with you, and everybody's fine!" answered Dick, summing up matters. "Your father said we were to ride out and meet you here at the water-hole. We've got as much of our outfits as we'll need for a few days, and so let's mosey along. Oh, but it's great to be back out west!"

"You got off a ripe one that time!" agreed Nort. "Who's that up there?" he asked, pointing to the figure of a solitary horseman on the hill down which Bud had ridden.

"Looks like Yellin' Kid," commented Dick.

"It's Old Billee," answered Bud. "He's going to be with us out at Flume Valley. Did dad tell you of the new venture?" he asked his cousins.

"Yes, and it sounds good. Must have been quite a trick to bring water from Pocut River, Bud."

"Well, it would have been if Professor Wright hadn't showed dad how to use an old underground water course for part of the way. Then it was easy. And say – you ought to see what a difference water has made in that valley! It was almost a desert before we irrigated."

"I'm anxious to see it!" said Nort.

"We can't get there any too soon to suit me," added Dick. "Just think! We're going to be our own bosses – boy ranchers for fair!"

"You intimated plenty that time!" cried Bud. "Well, let's hit the trail!"

The three boy ranchers started off, Nort and Dick accompanying Bud back over the way the latter had come. As they rode up the hill Old Billee passed on down another trail, leading to Diamond X proper.

"Howdy, boys!" called the old cowboy from the distance to Nort and Dick. "See you a bit later over at your own ranch!" he added, and then, with a friendly wave of his hand, he went down into a little swale, or valley, and was lost to sight.

"Now for some good times!" cried Bud, as he rode between his two eastern cousins, who had again come to spend the summer with him in the great western outdoors.

"If it's anything like last year we sure will have a bang-up vacation!" declared Nort.

"Well, I can't promise anything like that – with cattle rustling and digging up animals ten million years old," laughed Bud. "But I think we might have a little excitement."

"How?" asked Nort and Dick eagerly.

"Tell you later," promised Bud.

They rode on, talking over old times and planning new ones, and as the shadows began to lengthen they rode down into a triangular valley, at one end of which a rude dam could be noticed, while, scattered over the green carpeted floor, were hundreds of grazing cattle.

"Say, this is some slick place!" cried Dick.

"The best ever!" affirmed Nort. "And is this where we are to camp and ranch it?"

"Right here," declared Bud. "Course we haven't any ranch house yet. But we've got a tent – there it is," and he pointed to a white canvas shelter not far from the dam.

"A tent! Oh, boy! better and better!" yelled Dick, as he urged his pony forward.

As the three boy ranchers neared their headquarters, represented by two or three tents grouped together, there emerged from among them the figure of a man on horseback.

"There's old Buck Tooth," said Bud.

"Who?" asked the eastern cousins.

"Buck Tooth – a Zuni Indian that dad picked up somewhere. He's one of the best herd-riders you'd want, and he and I are great friends. Wonder what's the matter, though? He acts as though something had happened."

Bud pulled rein, to allow a better observation of the figure that was, obviously, riding out to meet him. Nort and Dick also halted their ponies. But Buck Tooth rode to meet them at great speed, sitting in the saddle as though part of it and the horse. He rode in a manner that made Nort and Dick envy him.

"What's the matter, Buck?" asked Bud, as soon as the Indian was within hailing distance. And then Nort and Dick could see why he was called that. A large, yellow-stained tooth protruded from his mouth, giving him not exactly a pleasant expression.

"What's wrong, Buck, you ride so *pronto* like?" demanded the young western ranch boy.

"Heap wrong!" came the answer in guttural tones. "You no shut off water in pipe; eh?"

"Shut off the irrigation water? I should say not!" cried Bud. "Why, has anyone?"

"Water no come! All gone! No run splash-splash now!" and Buck Tooth waved his hand toward the reservoir made by a dam that curved out in a half circle from the wall of natural rock.

"The water gone!" cried Bud. "This is strange! Let's have a look!"

He and his cousins rode at top speed to the reservoir that had reclaimed Flume Valley from the semi-desert it had long been. Dismounting, they climbed the slope and saw that from the great iron pipe, which was wont to spout a sparkling stream, there came only a few drops and trickles.

"It's disappeared!" said Bud in a low voice. "The water has taken another course! This means the end of Flume Valley, I reckon!"

CHAPTER II

A NIGHT RIDE

The boy ranchers stood looking down into the reservoir, which was almost full of water, but which was slowly running out through the different gates, some to concrete drinking troughs where thirsty cattle congregated, and some to distant meadows where it supplied moisture for the grass on which the steers of Diamond X Second fed. From the slightly ruffled surface of the reservoir, as the evening wind blew across the water, the gazes of Bud, Nort and Dick sought the faces of one another.

"This looks had!" murmured Bud, while Buck Tooth, the Zuni Indian, grunted something in his own incomprehensible dialect.

"What does it mean?" asked Nort, as he looked down the slope from the reservoir to the group of tents that was to form the home of himself, his brother and cousin for several months, while they were in camp.

"It means the water supply, on which I depended to raise these steers, has petered out," answered Bud, and there was a worried note in his voice.

"You mean stopped for good?" asked Dick.

"I hope not," went on Bud. "But from what you can see – no water coming through the pipe line that dad laid to the Pocut River – I should say there was a break in it somewhere, and it will have to be fixed right away – that is, if I'm to keep these cattle here," and he looked down the valley where the bunches of steers were ever on the move, seeking new places to feed, or coming to drink water from the supply flowing out of the reservoir.

"We seem to have struck a job right off the bat!" remarked Dick, as he picked up a stone and tossed it into the reservoir.

"Just as we did when we came west before, and had to jump out and help the queer professors," added Nort. "But we're ready to go to work, Bud. All you'll have to do is say the word and –"

But Bud did not seem to be paying much attention to what his cousin was saying. Instead his gaze followed that of his Zuni Indian helper. Buck Tooth was looking off up the hill under which the big pipe ran to the distant Pocut River on the other side of the mountain. And as Bud and Buck Tooth looked, and as the gaze of Nort and Dick was bent in the same direction, they all beheld a figure on the back of a fast-moving pony, riding up the trail that led over Snake Mountain.

"Who's that, Buck? See him!" yelled Bud.

"No can tell. Old Billee, mebby!" grunted the Indian.

"No! Old Billee just left me! He's back at the ranch house. But that's a stranger, and I don't like strangers sneaking around my ranch – especially when there's a break just happened to my pipe line!" exclaimed Bud. "I'm going to look into this!"

"Hi there! Hold on a minute! I want to talk to you!" he yelled, making a megaphone of his hands and directing it at the figure on the back of the sturdy pony that was scrambling up the mountain trail. "Wait a minute!"

But this the stranger seemed unwilling to do. The watching group near the reservoir saw him raise his quirt, or short whip, and bring it down savagely on the back of the pony, which, already, was doing its best to carry its master out of distance.

Then, with a quick motion, Bud drew his .45, and though both Nort and Dick saw him aim it high above the man's head, in order to shoot over him, horse and rider went down in a tumbled heap at the sound of the report, which followed as Bud pulled the trigger.

"You've winged him!" cried Dick.

"Shucks! Didn't mean to hit him – just shot to scare him!" declared Bud. "But we'll have to see about it now! Come on!" he cried, and he ran down the side of the reservoir to where he had left Sock, his pony, followed by Dick and Nort who also headed for their steeds.

"Hu!" grunted the Indian, as he came on down more leisurely. "No water – man shot – new boys come – big time, mebbly! Hu!"

And Buck Tooth was more than right. Big times impended in Flume Valley.

While Bud Merkel and his two cousins who had arrived from the east only the day before were mounting their ponies, to ride up the side of Snake Mountain, and seek the man Bud had shot, I shall have a chance to tell my new readers something about the boy ranchers, and the volume that immediately precedes this one.

The book is entitled "The Boy Ranchers; or Solving the Mystery at Diamond X." Norton, or Nort, and Dick, or Richard, Shannon were sons of Mr. and Mrs. Thornton Shannon, and their home was in the east. When Mr. Shannon, the summer previous, had been obliged to make a trip to South America, with his wife, he sent his sons to spend their vacation at Diamond X, one of the western cattle ranches owned by Henry Merkel, Mrs. Shannon's brother.

Almost immediately on their arrival Nort and Dick, who were then rightly classed as "tenderfeet," became involved in a strange mystery. A call for help came, and they took part in the rescue of two college professors who had been attacked by a band of Mexicans and "Greasers," the latter being a low-class Mexican.

The professors were rescued, but the mystery only deepened. What it was, and how it came to be solved, you will find set down at length in the first volume. Sufficient to say, here, that Nort and Dick, as it were, "cut their eye teeth," during the exciting experiences that followed their arrival at Diamond X.

The eastern boys learned how properly to ride a pony cowboy fashion, they learned the use of the branding iron, the lariat and "gun," as the .45 revolvers were universally called. They learned, also, how to "ride herd," "ride line" and how to live in the open, with the prairie grass for a bed and the star-studded sky for a blanket, their saddle forming the pillow.

Mr. Merkel, Bud's father, owned several ranches besides Diamond X, so named because that brand was used on the cattle from it. He had Square M, and Triangle B, the explanation of which names are obvious.

When it came time for Nort and Dick to return east, as winter approached, they left, promising to return as soon as their summer vacation should arrive, for they were determined to become boy ranchers in earnest, an ambition in which Bud shared.

Now it was summer again, and Nort and Dick had once more journeyed to their uncle's ranch, to be met by Bud, as arranged, at the water-hole. For between the two visits of the easterners some changes had been made at Diamond X.

Bud had been clamoring to be allowed to raise some cattle "on his own," and his father had consented. Off to the north of Diamond X, and in a depression between the Snake Mountains on the east and Buffalo Ridge on the west, was another valley, well sheltered from the wintry blasts. This valley was owned by Mr. Merkel, and though part of it was timbered, and some scattered sections produced an excellent variety of grass for stock, there was no dependable source of drinking water available. And without water at hand it is impossible to raise cattle in the west – or any place else, for that matter.

How to get water to "Flume Valley," as it came to be called, was a problem. It would have been put to use raising cattle long before this had Mr. Merkel been able to get any water there for the animals to drink, and also some to irrigate the more arid portions so that fodder would grow.

At the foot of the eastern slope of Snake Mountains ran the Pocut River, which served to supply not only Diamond X, Square M and Triangle B ranches with water, but also those of Double Z and Circle T, the respective holdings of Hank Fisher and Thomas Ogden. But though Pocut River gave

plenty of water to Bud's father and the other ranchmen, none was available for the isolated valley which, except for this, would have been an ideal place to raise steers.

And it was here that the good services of Professor Wright, one of the scientists mentioned in the first volume, came into play. For Professor Wright discovered an ancient underground water course, connecting with Pocut River, and when this had been partly tunneled, re-opened at places where it had caved in, and a big iron pipe laid part of the way, water came gushing out into Flume Valley, as Bud renamed the place, it having been called Buffalo Wallow before that time; probably when there was water in it and the buffalo made it a rendezvous.

And when the water came through the iron pipe, falling into the reservoir that had been built to hold it in reserve, Bud was allowed to begin his experiment in stock raising.

His father provided him with the cattle, and Bud was a boy rancher in reality now. His cousins had agreed to help him in the venture on their arrival, and Bud had been expecting them when he rode out with Old Billee that day. Old Billee was one of the Diamond X cowboys, and he might have been made a foreman, except that he had no executive ability. He could do as he was told, and that was about all. He was reliable and dependable, but had no initiative for big undertakings. Old Billee, with Buck Tooth and some other cowboys, had been assigned to help Bud in his venture.

As Bud has told his cousins, when he rode to meet them at the water-hole, on the trail from Diamond S ranch, there was no time, yet, to construct ranch houses in Flume Valley. Tents would have to serve the purpose, and the boys were rather pleased, than otherwise, with this.

"It will be just like camp!" said Bud.

And so the easterners had arrived, and, almost with the moment of their coming, there had begun the first act in what was to prove a drama of almost tragic happenings.

"You stay at the camp, Buck!" called Bud to the Zuni, as the three boy ranchers mounted and prepared to ride up to where the unknown man had collapsed after Bud had fired. "You stick around! Old Billee, or some of the boys from Diamond X may ride over, though I don't expect them until morning. Stay here, Buck!"

"Me stick!" gutturally answered the Indian. "You catchum man mebbly – git back water."

"Maybe," agreed Bud, as he and his cousins trotted off up the trail, which wound around the reservoir and over the mountain.

Dusk was falling as the boys reached the vicinity of the place whence they had seen the lone rider emerge from the bushes, spurring his horse up the rocky trail that led over Snake Mountain, as the whole ridge was known.

"Must have been about here," said Dick, as he reined in his steed, for which the panting animal, doubtless, was grateful.

"Little farther on, I think," said his brother.

"No, it was right here," declared Bud, as he dismounted and began to scan the ground. "Here's where his horse slipped," and he pointed to the tell-tale marks on the trail.

"Yes, and look – you hit him all right!" added Dick.

He indicated some dull, red spots on the stones. Bud reached down and gingerly touched them.

"Blood!" he murmured. "Guess I did wing him – or the horse – but I don't see how I could. I fired high."

"But where did he go?" asked Nort, following the marks left by a horse that had, obviously, been hard pressed. "See, the sign goes right up to this rocky wall, and then stops. He couldn't have gotten up there, could he?"

"Not unless he wore wings," said Bud grimly. "But it's getting too dark to see well. We'd better be getting back to camp."

"I thought you were going to follow this up, and see what had happened to your pipe line," suggested Dick.

"I am, but we can't ride on without some grub. No telling what we may stack up against. We'll have to make a night ride of it, I'm thinking, and I'd like to have Buck Tooth along. He's a shark on following a blind trail. Come on, we'll go back to camp, get some grub and then take this up again. I hope I didn't kill him, though," murmured Bud, as he again leaped to the saddle, an example followed by Nort and Dick.

"Who was he?" asked the latter, puffing slightly from his exertions, for he was much stouter than his brother Nort.

"Search me!" replied Bud. "Looked mighty suspicious, though, the way he rode off. And if he wasn't up to something wrong he'd 'a' stopped when I hailed him."

"Do you think he had anything to do with the break in the pipe?" asked Nort.

"You've got me again," confessed his western cousin. "We'll have to make a night ride of it and find out."

They rode back to the camp tents, to find Buck Tooth calmly smoking his red-stone Indian pipe, and gazing off in the darkening distance at nothing at all, as far as the boys could determine.

"Anybody been around, Buck?" asked Bud.

"Nope!" was the answer. "You catchum dead man?"

"Not a sign, Buck! Beckon he must have dug a hole and pulled it in after him. But we've got to find out what's the matter with the pipe line. There's only a few days' supply of water in the reservoir. Rustle out some grub, and we'll ride over the mountain."

"Um," grunted the Zuni, and a little later, after a hasty meal of flapjacks, bacon and coffee, the boy ranchers, with the old Zuni Indian, started on a night ride over the mountain trail, in the general direction of the pipe line, the supply of fluid for which had so mysteriously stopped.

But strange events were only just beginning to happen in Flume Valley. There were others in store for the boy ranchers.

CHAPTER III

THE WARNING

"Will it be safe to leave our camp alone, like this?" asked Nort, as he and his companions rode off, leaving behind them the white tents, gleaming in the wondrous light of a full moon.

"Why not?" inquired Bud. "It won't walk away."

"No, but some one might come in and take everything."

"There isn't much worth taking. You brought your old stuff with you, we have our ponies, so all they could snibby would be the camp dishes, and they aren't worth the risk."

"Could they drive off any of your cattle?" asked Dick.

"Why don't you say *our* cattle?" asked Bud with a smile, which was plainly to be seen in the brilliant moonlight. "You fellows are in this venture with me, you know."

"We haven't yet gotten used to thinking of it that way," remarked Nort, as he rode beside Buck Tooth. The old Zuni Indian managed to keep pace beside the boys without ever urging his pony forward, a trick of riding which even Bud envied.

"Well, you'd *better* get used to it," was the laughing retort. "Your dad staked you to part of the expenses of this deal, same as mine did me, and of course you'll share in the profits – if there are any," Bud added rather dubiously. "And if we don't get that water back there won't be enough to make you need a hat to carry 'em off."

"As bad as that?" inquired Nort.

"Oh, I'm not saying it's bad —*yet!*" exclaimed Bud. "There may be just a stoppage in the pipe, which can easily be cleaned out. Or, it may be – something else."

But what else it might be he did not say, and Nort and Dick were not sufficiently familiar with irrigation and flume lines to hazard a guess. But they knew enough about their cousin to tell that he was worried.

"What do you plan to do?" asked Dick, as the four rode on, their ponies occasionally stumbling as they mounted the rocky trail that led over Snake Mountain. "Look for that man – the one you –"

"The one I *didn't* shoot!" interrupted Bud. "I'm as sure I didn't hit him as I am that we four are here this minute. I know I fired too high!"

"Unless the bullet hit a rock and glanced down," suggested Nort.

"Well, yes, that may have happened," admitted Bud. "But if he was badly hurt he couldn't get away, as he did."

"Could he have fallen into any hole or gully?" asked Dick. "We didn't look for that."

"He might have," admitted the western lad. "But what I'm looking for, now, isn't that fellow, who may or may not be shot, but for the break in my flume – that's what I want to locate. Once I get the water so it's running back in my reservoir I'll feel better. For if there's a permanent shut-off we might as well move out of Flume Valley," he went on. "The cattle would just naturally die of thirst!"

"Isn't there any water at all?" asked Nort, as he pulled his pony up sharply when the animal stumbled.

"Not enough to water all the stock I aim to raise," answered Bud. "At the far end of the valley – away from our camp – the grass grows pretty well, for some rain does fall there once in a while. But there isn't a water-hole worth the name, and you know what happens to cattle when they can't get a drink!"

"I should say so!" commented Nort, for he and his brother had seen some of the terrible suffering caused by animals having to be driven long distances without any water being available.

"Then the pipe line is your only hope?"

"That, and the ancient underground watercourse it connects with to bring water from the Pocut River," replied Bud. "You see, there's a sort of natural tunnel under the mountain, and this was once an old river bed. I suppose, or at least Professor Wright has told us, that once this tunnel was full-up with water. But there was a change in the direction of the old stream, and the water tunnel dried up. However, it didn't cave in, except in a few places, and we now use it to bring water to Flume Valley. There is really only a comparatively short length of pipe at either end, one end being where the water from the Pocut River enters, and the other where the pipe delivers the water to our reservoir."

"How are you going to find the break?" asked Dick.

"Or stoppage?" suggested Nort.

"Well, I aim to ride over the mountain tonight," answered Bud, "and see if all is clear at the river intake end of the line. If it is, I'll know there must be a stoppage, or break, somewhere inside the old water tunnel."

"How you going to find that?" inquired Nort.

"Why, we'll get lanterns and ride through," replied Bud. "That's easy!"

"Ride through an underground river!" cried Dick. "You can't!"

"No, we couldn't if the old underground river course was *full*," agreed Bud, "but it *isn't*. There's only a comparatively small amount of water flowing through the old course, which is wide enough for two of us to ride or walk abreast, and twice as high as you need. I've ridden through more than once. It's like a long, natural tunnel under the mountain, with water flowing in the center depression, so to speak."

"Must be rather spooky inside there," suggested Nort.

"It is a little; and it's nearly an all-day's ride. But it's the only way to find the trouble. Professor Wright said that some day the water might work through, and go off on a new course, and in that case I'd be dished until I could stop up the break."

"Well, we'll help all we can," offered Nort.

"Sure thing!" echoed his brother.

"We'd better take it a bit easy now," spoke Bud, as the ascent of the mountain became more steep. "We don't want to wind the ponies, and we may have a hard day ahead of us to-morrow."

"It *is* quite a climb," admitted Nort. "Are we going to ride all night?"

"No, we'll turn in about midnight," said Bud. "But this will give us a start so we can get to the Pocut River end of the flume by morning. We can stop any time you fellows want to."

"Oh, we aren't tired!" Dick hastened to say, a sentiment with which his brother agreed. "This is as much fun as riding herd, and driving off the cattle rustlers."

"Glad you like it," commented Bud. "And the rustlers might as well drive off our stock, if we don't soon get this water to running again. Old Billee said I'd have bad luck when that black rabbit crossed my path, and it sure is coming!"

"What black rabbit was that?" asked Nort, curiously.

"One that gave me a tumble when I was riding to meet you," answered Bud. "I never saw one before, and I don't want to again. Not that I'm superstitious, but there sure is something queer about *this!* I don't like it for a cent!"

The boy ranchers and the Zuni Indian rode on, mounting higher and higher along the mountain trail, heading for the summit. And when they reached it, and Bud, by a glance at his watch, announced that it was midnight, he followed with the suggestion that they camp there for the remainder of the night.

"We can make the rest of the trip in a couple of hours, for it's down hill," he said.

"Camp suits me," murmured Nort, and soon, after a bite to eat, they rolled themselves in their blankets, having tied the ponies to scrub bushes, and went to sleep. The riding of the boys, coupled with the pure air they had breathed, brought them slumber almost at once, and even Buck Tooth,

alert as he usually was, neither saw nor heard anything of the sinister visitor who came softly upon the sleeping ones during the night hours.

For there did come a visitor in the night, as evidenced by a scrawled warning, on a dirty piece of paper, fastened to a stubby tree by a long, sharp thorn.

It was this fluttering bit of paper that caught Dick's eye when he awakened, rather lame and stiff, and stretched himself in his blanket as the sun shone in his eyes next morning.

"Hello!" he cried, taking a hasty look around to see if Bud had, perchance, ridden away without awakening his companions, and had left this note to tell them so. "What's the idea?" and then Dick noticed that all three of his companions were stretched out near him, and the four ponies were standing together not far away.

"What idea?" asked Bud, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"That special delivery letter," and Dick pointed to it. "Wasn't here last night," he went on, "for I tied Blackie to that tree before I staked him out. What is it?"

Bud rolled out of his blanket, and took the piece of paper from the tree.

"It's a warning!" he announced.

"A warning?" cried Nort and Dick, while Buck Tooth began making a fire.

"Yes," went on the boy rancher. "Here's what it says:

"Don't take no more watter frum Pocut River if you want to stay healthy!"

"Whew!" whistled Dick. "What does that mean?"

"Just what I'd like to know," said Bud, and then all three boys started, and looked toward the upward slope of the mountain, down which they had partly descended. For there came rolling toward them a mass of dirt and stones, indicating the approach of some one.

CHAPTER IV

A STRANGE REAPPEARANCE

Characteristic it was of Bud Merkel, being a son of the west as he was, that his hand instinctively sought the leather holster whence protruded the grim, black handle of his .45. But he did not draw the weapon, nor did Nort or Dick pull theirs, which they had started to get out when they noted Bud's action.

For Bud smiled when he had a glimpse of the newcomer, and Buck Tooth, who had glanced up from where he was making the fire, gave a grunt of welcome.

"Babe!" exclaimed Nort, as he recognized the fat assistant foreman of Diamond X ranch. "Babe!"

"Sure! Who'd you think it was?" came the smiling question. "Looks like you had an idea it might be one of them rustlers that made trouble when you fellers was here before! Eh?"

"Glad t' see you two *ex-tenderfeet*," and Babe Milton grinned broadly as he accented the *ex*, and held out a welcoming hand to Nort and Dick. "They said you was comin' back to Diamond X, but I sorter missed you – been out tryin' t' locate a bunch of strays," he confided to Bud, "an' I didn't have no luck! Glad to meet yo' all, though, powerful glad! 'Specially on account of that there coffee!" and he sniffed the air as he caught the aroma of the fragrant pot Buck Tooth was putting on to boil.

"But what are you lads doing so far from Diamond X?" Babe went on, when they had moved over to the camp fire, the blaze of which was genially warm this cool morning on the mountain.

"We aren't stopping there this trip," said Nort.

"We're 'on our own,'" proceeded Bud. "I'm raising cattle in the old Buffalo Wallow Valley – Flume I call it now."

"Oh, yes, I did hear you were going to tackle that," spoke Babe. "Didn't know you'd got stocked up, though. Well, I've been over at Square M for so long I don't hear no real news no more. Gosh! But we did have some excitement the time those professor chaps pulled that *Trombone* out of the ground; didn't we, Bud?" he chuckled.

"Triceratops, Babe! Triceratops!" corrected Bud, laughing at the expression of the fat assistant foreman's face.

"I never could remember the name of them musical pieces, nohow!" sighed Babe. "Fond as I am, too, of singing," and, taking a long breath, he bellowed forth on the unoffensive morning air this portion of a ballad:

"Sing me to sleep with a spur for a rattle,
Fill up the biscuits with lead.
Coil me a rope 'round th' ole weepin' willow,
Curl my feet under my head!"

"Glad you feel that way about it," remarked Bud, rather soberly, as they squatted around the fire for breakfast, which Buck Tooth seemed to have prepared in record time.

"What's bit you?" asked Babe, pausing with a smoking flapjack half way to his mouth, while in his other hand he held a steaming tin cup of coffee. "Git out th' wrong side of th' saddle this mornin'?"

"No, but there's trouble over at the valley," explained Bud. "The water has stopped running and –"

"The *water* stopped running!" interrupted Babe.

"Yes, and when we start out, intending to see what's the trouble, we get this warning," and Bud extended the dirty piece of paper that had been fastened to the tree with the thorn.

"Whew-ee-ee!" whistled Babe, as he read the scrawl of misspelled words. He opened his mouth again, to intone another of the hundred or more verses of his favorite cowboy song, but Bud motioned to him to refrain.

"Don't you like my singin'?" asked Babe, a bit hurt.

"Yes, but I want to ask you some questions," went on Bud. "You say you've been out looking for strays?"

"Yep; prospectin' up and down Snake Mountain all yist'day an' part of th' night. My grub giv' out with supper last night, an' I was hopin' I might even run into a bunch of Greasers, when I saw you folks spreadin' th' banquet table here."

"Glad you joined us," remarked Nort.

"So'm I," mumbled Babe, his mouth full of bacon and flapjacks. "But what's your questions, Bud? Shoot!"

"Did you see anybody who might have written this?" and the boy rancher again read the sinister warning:

"Don't take no more watter frum Pocut River if you want to stay healthy."

"Why, no, I didn't see nobody," spoke Babe, with more force than grammar. "'Tain't a joke; is it?"

"Not when I tell you the water has stopped running," said Bud.

"So you did! Hum, that's mighty queer like!" mused the assistant foreman, who had, early in the spring, been transferred to Mr. Merkel's Square M ranch from Diamond X. "But some of us rather thought there'd be trouble when your paw dammed up the river to shunt some of it through the old water course over to Buffalo Wallow. Hank Fisher claims his water supply has been lessened by what your paw did, Bud."

"That's all bosh!" exclaimed Bud. "There's as much water for Hank Fisher as he ever had at Double Z. Besides, this isn't his way of doing business. He's as mean as they make 'em, but he'll come out in the open and tell you what he thinks of you."

"Yes, Hank is that way — *sometimes*," agreed Babe cautiously. "At th' same time I wouldn't put it past him. Better tell your paw about this, Bud. You got grit — all three of you!" and he included the other boys in his glance. "But you can't fight Hank Fisher, Del Pinzo and that onery gang of Greasers and Mexicans!"

"There!" cried Nort, clapping his hand down on his outstretched leg. "That's who that man was — Del Pinzo!"

"What man?" asked Babe.

"The one Bud shot."

"What's that?" cried Babe, half starting to his feet. "Did you shoot somebody?"

"Well, I may have *creased* him," admitted the boy, using a word to denote a grazing bullet wound, hardly more than a scratch.

"Whew-ee-ee!" whistled Babe again. "This sounds like old times! Let's have the hull yarn, Buddy!" he appealed.

Whereupon Bud related how he had ridden from his new ranch — Diamond X Second — to meet his cousins whom he expected. He told of finding the stream of water shut off, of the appearance of the man, the shot, his sudden vanishing, and the subsequent night ride of the boys.

"That was Del Pinzo, I'm sure of it!" declared Nort. "I was trying to think where I'd seen him before, and now I remember!"

"You couldn't very well forget Del Pinzo," declared Bud. "But this wasn't he. That isn't saying that it might not have been, of course," he added, "for I understand he broke jail, after they caught him and sent him up for rustling our cattle. No, this wasn't that slick Mexican, Nort."

"Who was it?" asked Babe, helping himself to another of the flapjacks which Buck was making in a skillet over the greasewood fire.

"That's what we don't know," said Bud. "He just naturally vanished, the way my water did. What are you going to do, Babe?"

"Well, I ought t' keep on lookin' for them strays your paw's so anxious about," was the answer. "But I reckon I got time t' mosey along with you. You say you're goin' down to the river?"

"Yes, to see if there's anything wrong at the intake pipe," Bud answered.

"Then I'll go with you," offered Babe. "And before you try that ride through the old water course, under the mountain, you'd better call up your paw."

"What for?" Bud wanted to know.

"Well, he mightn't altogether like it. There's a risk, an' he may want t' send some of us with you. It's easy t' get him on the 'phone from the dam."

"Yes," agreed Bud, "I s'pose I had better do that." He remembered that where Pocut River had been dammed to enable water to flow into the pipe line, and then through the old river course to his reservoir, there was a general store, which boasted of a telephone.

A little later, breakfast having been finished, the party, now including Babe, reached the Pocut River. There an inspection showed the water from the river above the dam running freely into the pipe that carried it to Flume Valley.

"Nothing wrong here," remarked Bud as he looked into the dark tunnel which received one end of the pipe. And it was through this natural tunnel, extending under the mountain, being the course of an old stream, that the boy ranchers proposed riding.

"No, th' trouble must be somewhere inside," agreed Babe. "But call up your paw, Bud."

Which Bud did, learning from his father at Diamond X, that Old Billee had departed, early that morning, to take up his abode at the camp in the valley.

"Better wait until Old Billee reaches your place, and then call him up," suggested Mr. Merkel to his son over the wire, for there was a 'phone in Bud's camp. It seemed rather an incongruity, but it was a great convenience, since it connected directly with Diamond X, Triangle B and Square M ranches, as well as with the regular lines.

There was nothing to do but wait until Old Billee might be expected to have reached the camp in Flume Valley, and after several hours Bud called up his own new ranch headquarters.

"They don't answer," Central reported.

"He's taking his time," commented Babe.

But an hour or so later, after several other trials, the voice of Old Billee came back over the wire from miles distant.

"Hello! Hello there! Wassa matter? Wassa matter?" demanded the voice of the old cowpuncher. "Where's everybody, anyhow? Nobody here but me!"

"We're over at the dam – Pocut River," called Bud into the instrument. "Say, Billee, something happened at my place last night. The water stopped, and we came over here to see where the stoppage was. But it's all right here. How about you there?"

"All serene here, Bud, all serene! Wait a minute and I'll take a look at your reservoir. I can see it from the tent where you got this talkin' contraption strung. You say the water stopped last night?"

"Stopped complete, Billee," Bud answered back over the wire.

"Well then, if there's any comin' over the spillway, now, it's a sign she's runnin' here ag'in, I take it!"

"Sure thing. But is she running?" asked Bud, anxiously.

"Wait a minute, an' I'll take a look. Hold on to that there wire!"

"I'll hold it!" promised Bud, smiling at his cousins.

There was a moment of anxious waiting and, in fancy, the boy ranchers could see Old Billee going to the tent flap and looking toward the reservoir.

"Hello, Bud!" presently came the call over the wire.

"Hello, Billee. What about it?"

"Water's there all right! Must 'a' come back in th' night! She's runnin' fine now!"

CHAPTER V

ANOTHER WARNING

Bud Merkel was about to hang up the receiver, with a blank and uncomprehending look on his face, when Babe caught the black rubber earpiece from him.

"Wait a minute, Billee!" called Babe into the transmitter. "See anything of anybody around there? Anything suspicious?"

The others could not hear what the old cowboy's answer was, but Babe soon enlightened them.

"He says it's all serene," Babe declared as he now hung up the receiver. "Nobody in sight, an' the water is runnin' through the pipe as natural as can be."

"I can't understand it!" declared Bud. "It was almost as dry as a bone when we left last night."

"But it's running in here from the river dam," said Nort.

"Then there must have been a break somewhere in the tunnel natural water course," declared Bud. "Well, if it mended itself so much the better. But that doesn't explain this," and he held out the scrawled warning. "And if the water stopped once it may stop again."

"Yes," agreed Babe, "but if anybody wanted to stop it they'd have to do it either at this end, where the pipe takes water from the river, or at your end, Bud, where it delivers water to your reservoir."

"Unless somebody stopped the stream inside the tunnel," suggested Dick.

"Then it would back up here at the river end," said Nort, quickly, "and it hasn't done that."

"No, it hasn't," agreed Bud. "It sure is queer. I'm beginning to think there may be more in that black rabbit than I believed first."

"What rabbit is that?" asked Babe.

"The one Old Billee said would bring me bad luck," Bud answered. "Well," he went on to his cousins, "we might as well go back to camp. We can't do anything here."

"If you've got water that's all you want in Flume Valley," declared Babe. "There isn't a finer place t' raise cattle in all th' world than there – if you have *water*!"

"And if you haven't – you might as well quit!" spoke Bud.

"You eliminated an earful that time," the assistant foreman stated. "But I reckon it was just a little break, inside th' tunnel, an' it filled itself up natural like. You won't have any more trouble."

"I hope not," spoke the boy rancher. "Are you going on back to Diamond X, Babe?"

"Not until I find that bunch of strays from Square M. They're too valuable t' let slip."

"Especially to let Hank Fisher, or Del Pinzo, slip them away," exclaimed Bud as he and his chums left the store where they had been telephoning.

"Not so loud! Not so loud!" cautioned Babe.

"Why not?" Bud wanted to know, when they were outside.

"Cause one of Hank's men was in there! He'll be sure t' tell what you said, Bud."

"Let him! I'm not afraid of Hank, or his tool Del Pinzo, and I'd just as soon either one would know what I think of 'em!"

"Don't be too brash; don't be too brash!" counseled Babe. "But they sure are both bad actors – Del an' Hank!"

There was nothing more that needed to, or could, be done at the Pocut River end of the flume, part natural, part artificial, which supplied Bud's new ranch with such a vital necessity as water. The stream had been dammed just above the intake pipe – not completely dammed, but enough to provide the necessary head of water.

As Nort had said, had the stream been stopped purposely or by accident inside the tunnel, the water would have backed up and run out around the pipe, flowing into the river below the dam. But this had not occurred.

"If it doesn't happen again we'll be all right," spoke Bud, as he rode back with his cousins, making an easy pace along the trail that led over Snake Mountain and down into Flume Valley. "But if the water stops running again – "

"Let's go through the tunnel; it's the only way to be sure!" interrupted Nort.

"I'm with you!" exclaimed Dick.

"It would seem to be the only way," agreed Bud. "Well, we'll hope this is the end of my black-rabbit bad luck, and look for success, now that you fellows are here. Cracky! But we'll have some good times, and there'll be plenty of work, too!"

"How many cattle you got?" asked Nort.

"About five hundred," Bud answered. "Course you have a share with me, that your dad bought, but we don't own 'em outright yet. My dad still has a mortgage on 'em."

"But if we have luck we can clear that off; can't we?" asked Dick.

"Sure, this year, maybe," assented Bud. "I never saw steers fatten so fast as ours have since I brought 'em to Flume Valley. I reckon the land, being without water so long, raises a specially fine kind of grass. Of course, there's always some at the far end of the valley, good grass, too, but when there wasn't any water for the cattle to drink there wasn't any use trying to raise stock there. But now it's different."

"And all we want is for the water to stay," added Dick.

"That's all," chimed in his brother.

With Buck Tooth trailing behind, the three boys took the mountain trail and reached their camp near the reservoir that evening. They found Old Billee and Yellin' Kid waiting for them, these two cowboys having been assigned by Mr. Merkel to help his son in the lad's new venture.

"Well, yo' got back, I see," remarked Old Billee as he greeted the lads, the Indian going off by himself, for he was rather taciturn in his manner.

"Yes, we're here," admitted Bud. "But I can't understand that water coming back so unexpectedly."

"Are you sure it stopped running?" asked Yellin' Kid in his usual loud voice.

"Sure!" declared Bud. "Didn't Buck see it – or, rather, he didn't see it, for there wasn't any water to see coming through the pipe – only a few drops."

"I wouldn't take his word," declared Old Billee. "Not that Buck would actually lie, but those Indians are queer."

"Oh, we all saw that the water wasn't running," declared Nort.

"Well, it was when I got here," stated the old cowboy. "And there wasn't a sign of anything wrong. But if there had been I'd expected it, 'count of – "

"That black rabbit, I reckon!" broke in Bud.

"Perzactly!" declared Old Billee. "A black jack shore is bad luck, at any stage of the game!"

But for a time there seemed to be no truth in this western omen. Following the first mysterious disappearance of the water, and its equally strange reappearance, peace seemed to settle down over Flume Valley.

The steers and yearlings, with which Bud's father had entrusted him and the boy ranchers, thrived and fattened on the succulent grass. Old Billee, Yellin' Kid, with Buck Tooth's help, aided the boys in such minor duties as were necessary to perform about the camp. The main duty was looking after the safety of the cattle, to see that none of them strayed beyond the wire fence at the far end of the valley. Should any stray from the other egress, nearest Diamond X ranch, no great harm would result, as they would still be on their owner's land.

But the farther, or north end, adjoined land owned by Hank Fisher, the Double Z representative. And there were ugly stories current concerning Mr. Fisher.

But as the days passed, and as the water still flowed through the pipes and underground tunnel into the reservoir, Bud and his companions began to think they had imagined more troubles than were really to occur.

"Guess that warning was only a bluff," said Bud, one day.

"And the black rabbit doesn't seem to have given you the jinx," added Nort.

"But we didn't find that man you shot," put in Dick.

"I don't believe I shot him," declared Bud. "There was blood, sure enough, but he may have stumbled, as, in fact, we saw him, and scratched himself."

"But where did he disappear to?" asked Nort.

"Give up," answered Bud. "We'll have to take another look after we get our first shipment out of the way."

For the first bunch of steers from the Flume Valley camp were to be disposed of shortly.

It was the day when this shipment was to be made that Bud, awakening early in the tent where he slept with his cousins, uttered an exclamation of surprise as he caught sight of something on the blanket that covered him.

"What's the matter?" asked Dick, sitting up.

"Did you leave this here?" asked Bud, as he held up a piece of board, evidently part of a packing case.

"Me? No!" answered Dick. "What is it?"

"Either it's a joke, or it's the black rabbit getting in his work," answered Bud. "It's from an unknown enemy – another warning!"

And, as Bud held up the board, Nort and Dick could read, scrawled on it, evidently with a fire-blackened stick, the words:

"Warning No. 2. When will you quit?"

CHAPTER VI

TROUBLE AT SQUARE M

"Guess that must be a joke," decided Nort, as he stepped gingerly from his cot, for it was cold in the mornings, though hot enough at midday. "Likely Old Billee or Yellin' Kid stuck it there," added the eastern lad, as he looked at the scrawled warning.

"Old Billee wouldn't do it," declared Bud. "He's gotten over his joking days. But it might have been Yellin' Kid."

"Sure!" agreed Dick. "Probably he did it to make what Billee said about the black rabbit come true – to sort of scare you, Bud."

"Well, of course that *might* have happened," admitted the western lad, but from the tone of his voice, as he made a hasty toilet, his cousins could tell he was far from being convinced.

"You don't reckon it could be Buck Tooth, do you?" asked Dick, following his cousin's example in attiring himself for the day's work.

"What? That Zuni Indian? I should say not! His idea of a joke would make your hair stand on end – or it would in his wild and younger days. Now all he cares about, after he gets through riding herd, is to sit in the sun and smoke his Mexican cigarettes. Buck Tooth doesn't joke."

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