

Baker Willard F.

**The Boy Ranchers at Spur
Creek: or, Fighting the Sheep
Herders**



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Willard F. Baker

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CHAPTER I

SHOTS IN THE NIGHT

With a rattle and a clatter the muddy flivver stopped with a squeak of brakes in front of Diamond X ranch house. From the car leaped three boys, one of them carrying a small leather pouch.

"Here's the mail!" yelled this lad – Bud Merkel by name, and his cousins, Nort and Dick Shannon, added the duet of their voices to his as they cried:

"Mail's in! Lots of letters!"

"Any for me?" asked Nell, reaching out her hand toward Bud. "Don't tell me there isn't!" she pleaded.

"Well, I'm sorry, Sis," began Bud, teasingly, "there was one for you, but driving in we ran over a rattler and –"

"Don't you believe him, Nell!" consoled Nort, who didn't altogether agree with Bud's teasing of his sister. "Your letters are

safe in the pouch."

"Oh, there are *letters*, then, are there – not just *one*?" cried Nell with shining eyes. "Thanks a whole lot."

"Don't thank me – thank the postmaster – or whoever wrote you the letters!" laughed Nort.

Bud had sat down on a bench outside the ranch house and was opening the mail pouch. His mother came to the door of the kitchen, wiping flour from her hands, for though Mrs. Merkel kept a "hired girl," and though Nell assisted, yet the mother of Bud insisted on doing much of the work herself, and very able she was, too.

"Any letters for your father?" she asked.

"Two or three," answered Bud, as he looked over the envelopes. "And one for you, Mother."

"Well, take your father's mail to him when you've finished sorting," suggested Mrs. Merkel. "He said he was expecting something of importance. You'll find him over in the bunk house looking after Mr. Watson."

"Mr. *Watson*!" shouted Bud with a laugh. "Do you mean Yellin' Kid?"

"Oh, I guess that's what you call him," assented Mrs. Merkel as she opened her letter. "But his name's Watson."

"Guess you're the only one who remembers that, Ma," chuckled Dick Shannon, for though Mrs. Merkel was only his aunt, she was almost universally called "Ma" on the ranch of Diamond X.

"Yellin' Kid isn't any worse, is he?" asked Bud.

"Oh, no, but your father wanted to change the bandages and it takes some time. You'll find him pretty nearly finished, I guess, though you'd better take his mail to him there."

There had been a slight accident the week before, in which the horse of Yellin' Kid had crowded him against a post in a corral fence, badly bruising and cutting the leg of the cowboy. A doctor had been called, and after the first dressing of the wound had said Mr. Merkel or some of the men could attend to it as much as was necessary, and the ranch owner was now in performance of this duty.

"I'll take the boys' mail, Bud," offered Old Billee, one of the veteran cow punchers of Diamond X. "Don't reckon you got any for me, have you?" he asked with a sort of wistful hope in his voice.

"Sorry, Billee, but there doesn't seem to be any," answered Bud. "Better luck next time."

"No, I don't reckon there will be," sighed Old Billee. "All my friends is dead an' gone, an' nobody else wants t' write t' an ole timer like me." He took the letters destined for the other cowboys who were engaged in various duties about the ranch, saying he would distribute them, while Bud took those destined for his father to the sleeping quarters of the men, where Yellin' Kid was forced to remain temporarily in his bunk.

Nort and Dick had letters from "home," as they called their residence in the East, though they had been west so long now that

they might almost be said to live on the ranch. And while Bud's cousins were going over their missives, Mr. Merkel was doing the same with those his son handed him.

"How are you, Kid?" asked Bud of the injured cowboy as Mr. Merkel sat at a table tearing open the various envelopes.

"Oh, I'll be up and around again shortly," was the answer. "If you figure on starting off after any more Indians I could get ready in about two quivers of a steer's nose."

"Guess there won't be any more Indians around here for a while," observed Bud. "We taught those Yaquis a lesson."

"Now you're shoutin'!" exclaimed Yellin' Kid, though it was he, rather than Bud, who spoke in a loud voice – hence the Kid's name. He just couldn't seem to speak in ordinary tones, but appeared to take it for granted that every one was deaf, and so shouted at them.

Suddenly the quiet reading and attention that Mr. Merkel had been giving his letters was broken as he jumped up, scattering the papers to the floor of the bunk house. He held in his hand a single sheet that seemed to cause him great surprise, not to say anger, and he exclaimed:

"Well, it's come, just as I feared it would! Now we're in for some hot times!"

"What's the matter, Dad?" asked Bud, looking toward the door in which his cousins now stood, having finished reading their letters.

"Not another Indian uprising, is it?" asked Bud.

"Almost as bad!" his father answered. "We're going to have trouble. I might have known things were too good to last!"

"What sort of trouble?" inquired Nort.

"With sheep herders," answered Mr. Merkel.

"Sheep herders!" cried Bud, and if you know anything about the cattle business you will realize his tone of voice. For, as I will explain later, sheep herders are hated and despised by cattle men and horse breeders alike, and with good reason, in spite of the rights the sheep men have. "What do you mean?" asked Bud, fully alive to the danger implied by his father's words. "There isn't a sheep within a hundred miles of here, thank goodness!"

"No, but there soon will be," said Mr. Merkel grimly.

"What makes you say that?" and Bud clearly showed his fear and interest.

"Here's an official notice," his father said, waving the paper in his hand. "It just came in the mail yon brought. The government announces that it has thrown open to the public the old Indian lands bordering on Spur Creek, and it won't be a month before the place is over-run with Mexicans, Greasers, and worse, with their stinking sheep! Pah! It makes me sick, after all the work we've done at Diamond X to have it spoiled this way! But I'm not going to sit back and stand it! I'm going to fight!"

"That's right, Dad! I'm with you! I'll fight, too! Won't we, fellows?" he appealed to Nort and Dick.

"Sure we will!" was their answer. And it was, in a way, as much their battle as it was that of Mr. Merkel and his son. For

Bud, Nort and Dick had a small ranch of their own in Happy Valley, not far from the main holdings at Diamond X.

"But why do you think we'll be over-run with sheep just because they've opened up the Indian lands?" asked Nort.

"It just naturally follows," his uncle answered. "Every low-down onery sheep man for a hundred miles around has had his eyes on these lands for the last five years, waiting for Uncle Sam to put 'em in the open market. Now the government has finally paid the Indians' claims and those fellows at Washington have decided to make it a free-for-all-race."

"Well, in that case," said Bud, "can't you and the other cattlemen around here jump in and claim the land so there won't be any danger of the sheep men coming in?"

"Well, there's just one hitch," answered Mr. Merkel. "I said it was a free and open race, but it isn't – exactly. Ranchmen who own more than a certain amount of acreage, grazing ground and range, are barred from taking any of this Indian land."

"But there may be enough good cattle men and horse breeders who will take up all the claims and so shut out the sheep," suggested Nort.

"That might happen, but I haven't told you all," said his uncle. "You see boundary lines out here are pretty uncertain. In some places there never has been a survey made. So not only may the sheep men jump in and claim the Indian land that the government has opened, but they'll over-run land that we now use for grazing cattle and horses. And I needn't tell you that once sheep have

been on land it's ruined for my business."

This was very true, and though Nort and Dick had once been in the "tenderfoot" class, they had learned of the deep-seated hatred that existed on the part of a cattle man against a sheep owner.

There is a real reason for this. Horses and cattle in the West just naturally hate sheep. It may be that the cattle and horses recognize that the sheep is such a greedy eater that he practically cleans off the grass down to the very roots, whereas a steer or horse leaves enough of the herbage to grow for the next time.

Then, too, the strong smell of sheep seems to annoy horses and cattle. Often a bunch of steers or a herd of horses will stampede and run for miles, merely after getting a whiff of the odor from a bunch of sheep. They will even do this if, in grazing, they come to a place where sheep have been eating. And if sheep waded through a creek the odor of their oily wool seems to remain for days, and horses and cattle refuse to drink, unless almost dying of thirst. So much for the animals themselves, and because of this there was unending war between the horses and cattle on one side, and sheep on the other. Though it cannot be said that the meek sheep did any fighting. They never stampeded because they had to drink from streams where cows and horses had watered, nor did they refuse to nibble grass left by the larger animals.

Aside from the fact that the horse breeders and cattle men were pioneers on the old open range, and naturally resented the coming of the lowly sheep herders, there is another reason for the

hatred. Sheep, as I have said, nibble the grass to its very roots. And then the small and sharp feet of the sheep cut into the turf and so chop what few roots that are left as to prevent a new crop of grass from growing – the fodder dies off. And as the sheep are kept constantly on the march, as they greedily eat their way, they spread ruin – at least so the ranchmen thought. So it was and had been war.

"This is bad news – bad news!" muttered Mr. Merkel. "We ranchers will have to get together and talk it over. We've got to do something! I want to talk to Tom Ogden." He was the owner of Circle T ranch, and a friend of Mr. Merkel.

"Shall I go for him in the flivver?" asked Bud, for since the advent of the little car he and his cousins often journeyed in it, leaving their horses in the corral. Though there were places where only a horse could be used, and of course for cattle work no cowboy would think of anything but of being in the saddle.

"No, thank you. I'll call him on the wire," said Mr. Merkel. "I'll have him bring some of the other ranchers over. We've got to act quickly."

"When does the land-grabbing start?" asked Dick.

"It's open now – has been for the last two weeks. This notice is late," said Mr. Merkel, looking at the paper in his hand. "Even now some of the sheep men may be coming up from the Mexican border. We've got to do something mighty sudden!"

Seldom had Bud and his cousins seen Mr. Merkel so moved, and the boys realized from this the grave danger.

That evening a number of wealthy and influential ranch owners gathered at Diamond X to talk the situation over. As cattle men in a small way, the Boy Ranchers, as they were called, were allowed to "sit in" on the conference.

"The worst of it for me," said Mr. Merkel, "is that the range where I breed my best steers is near this Spur Creek tract, and the sheep will naturally over-run my feeding ground."

"Can't you fence it in?" asked Mr. Ogden.

"Too late for that now; it would take weeks to get the wire here, and some of those onery sheep men wouldn't mind cutting the strands, anyhow. It only takes one night for a band of sheep to ruin a good many miles of pasture. No, what we've got to do is to fight 'em from the start – not let 'em get there."

"We'll take up the land ourselves!" exclaimed Henry Small.

"Can't, Hen," objected Mr. Merkel. "We all own our full share now, and maybe a little more. Of course, when you look at it from a legal standpoint a sheep man has just as many rights under the government as we have. But not by custom or western ways."

"Not by a long shot!" cried the other ranchmen.

"I hope your papers are all straight," observed Mr. Ogden to Bud's father.

"What papers?"

"Your deeds and documents that give you the right to land on this side of Spur Creek. If there's a legal question the sheep men may try to jump some of your claims."

"Oh, I guess not," said Mr. Merkel easily. "My papers are all

in my safe, and I can prove title by them easily enough. But, gentlemen, what are we going to do? That's the question now. What are we going – "

Mr. Merkel never finished that sentence. For he was interrupted by a fusillade of shots just outside – shots in the night.

An instant later every man in the conference room, and the boy ranchers included, had leaped to his feet, and many hands sought the "guns" that were within easy reach.

"Some of your cowboys disporting themselves?" asked Mr. Ogden of the owner of Diamond X.

Mr. Merkel shook his head.

"Nothing like that," he remarked.

Some one yelled – there were more shots and then the voice of Slim Degnan, foreman of the ranch, was heard shouting:

"Get after 'em, boys! Head 'em off!"

"It's a stampede!" yelled Bud. "Come on, fellows!"

CHAPTER II

MISSING PAPERS

Nort and Dick lost no time following their cowboy cousin, Bud, outside the ranch house, and each of the three lads, as well as Mr. Merkel and his associates, had caught up one of the heavy revolvers that were never far from their hands. For, as has been said of the West, a man doesn't always need a gun out there, but when he does need it, he needs it "mighty bad and mighty sudden."

The boy ranchers were taking no chances.

"What's the matter, Slim?" asked Bud as he rushed outside and saw a group of cowboys near the foreman. They were vaulting to the saddles of their horses which had hurriedly been turned out of the home corral.

"Rustlers!" cried Nort. "Is it rustlers, Slim?"

"Might be, for all I can tell," was the answer. "I saw some men riding along out there, and when I called to know who they were they didn't answer, which was suspicious in itself. Then I told 'em to stop until I could get a look at 'em, but they turned and made off, and that was worse, so I fired a couple of times after 'em."

"Where are they now?" asked Dick.

"That's what we're going to find out; son," was the foreman's grim answer. "You there, Babe?" he called to his fat assistant,

who rejoiced in the diminutive nickname.

"All there is of me," was the sighing answer. "Stand still there, you slab-sided chunk of salt pork!" he called to his horse, which was nervously swerving about. And Babe Milton was too heavy to be a quick mounter. He needed special attention on the part of his steed.

"Let's go, fellows!" cried Bud to his cousins, and, not waiting for the permission of Mr. Merkel, the lads saddled their horses and started after the foreman and his cowboys who had gotten a flying start.

"What do you imagine it is?" asked Nort as he rode between his brother and cousin, while they urged their steeds on to catch up to those ahead of them.

"Haven't any idea," answered Bud, glancing back to note that his father and the visiting ranchmen had gone into the house. Probably Mr. Merkel and the others knew the matter could safely be left to the cowboys.

Bud and his cousins rode fleet ponies, and they were more than at home in their saddles, so it did not take them long to reach the bunch of cowboys riding across the plains ahead of them, on the trail of the mysterious night visitors.

"Any idea who they were, Slim?" asked Bud, guiding his horse alongside that of the foreman.

"Not the least in the world. But they're up to no good or they wouldn't have veered off at the first hail. There's something suspicious in that."

"I should say so," agreed Nort.

"Couldn't be any sheep herders coming so soon, to turn their nibblers on our land; could it?" Dick wanted to know. He spoke of "our land," for he and his brother owned a small ranch in partnership with Bud.

"No, I don't reckon it was the sheep herders themselves," said Slim, "but it might be some of their bunch coming to size things up. The government never made a worse mistake than to throw this Indian land open to everybody. Them fellers at Washington should have barred the sheep men!"

To hear Slim talk you would have imagined that he could go to Washington and regulate matters all by himself. But if you understand the feeling of western cattle men and horse men against sheep herders it will make it easier to comprehend.

"Well, if any of 'em try to come to Happy Valley," said Bud, "they'll wish they'd stayed out."

"That's right!" chimed in Nort and Dick.

Suddenly one of the cowboys on the outer fringe of the riding posse uttered a low cry and exclaimed:

"There they are – off to the left!"

As he spoke the moon came out from behind ragged clouds and disclosed two horsemen riding at full speed across the prairie.

"After 'em, fellows!" cried Slim, and he fired some shots in the air.

The boy ranchers put spurs to their steeds – not cruelly but

with a gentle touch to let the horses know a burst of speed was needed – and the race was quickly taken up.

And while it is on I will beg a moment or so of the time of my new readers to make them acquainted with the heroes of this story. As related in the first book of this series, called "The Boy Ranchers; or Solving the Mystery at Diamond X," Nort and Dick Shannon, eastern cousins of Bud Merkel, went to the ranch of his father, Diamond X, to spend their vacation. While there certain mysterious happenings occurred. Dr. Hendryx Wright, a college scientist, with a party of helpers, was discovered digging not far from Diamond X. At first it was thought he was after a lost gold mine, but later it was disclosed that he was after the bones of a prehistoric monster for the college museum.

The part that Del Pinzo, a rascally half-breed, played in this search and the activities of the boy ranchers, are fully set forth. Nort and Dick liked it so at Diamond X that they took up their home with Bud, and became partners with him, their father buying them a share in a ranch located in "Happy Valley," as the boys called it.

Following the exciting times related in the first volume, the boy ranchers went to camp, they took the trail and also helped pursue a band of Yaqui Indians who escaped from their Mexican reservation, and the details of those activities will be found in the volumes specifically named for each line of activity. The book immediately preceding this is called "The Boy Ranchers Among the Indians; or, On the Trail of the Yaquis."

They had not long returned from helping to defeat these marauders, and rescue Rosemary and her brother Floyd, when the news came about the government lands being thrown open. Then had followed the alarm in the night, and the chase, which was now on.

Forward toward the two lone figures spurred the boy ranchers and their cowboy companions. Several more shots rang out, slivers of flame spitting harmlessly into the air, for until more was known of the character of the fugitives, no one desired to fire directly at them. Though in the West it was the custom to shoot first and inquire afterward, Slim Degnan knew it was not always a wise policy. Innocent men might be injured.

However the two fugitives were either such poor riders, or their steeds were so tired, or, possibly, it was a combination of both causes, that the outfit from Diamond X was not long in overhauling them.

"Look out for shots!" warned Snake Purdee, who was now in the lead with Slim.

But the two figures whose horses were rapidly slowing to a walk, showed no signs of fight. Indeed the larger of the two men cried:

"We surrender, gentlemen!"

In the half light of the moon Bud, Nort and Dick looked at each other on hearing that voice. It brought back to them very vividly a picture of strenuous times.

"Don't let 'em shoot, Professor!" chimed in another voice. "If

I only had my long poker here – "

"Be quiet, Zeb," spoke the one who had offered to surrender.
"You aren't attending the school furnace now."

"I only wish I was," came the rueful comment.

"Did you hear that?" spoke Bud to his cousins.

"It's Professor Wright!" exclaimed Nort and Dick in a sort of surprised duet.

"But what's he doing here, and at night, and why did he run?" asked Bud.

However, these questions could be answered later. Just now Slim and his bunch of cowboys were interested in discovering the object or motive of the strangers of the night – strangers in that the foremen and his helpers had not recognized the identity of the two men. And, in fact, Professor Wright – he of the pre-historic monster fame – was the only one known to the boys, and then only by his voice. Who "Zeb" might be they could only guess.

"Except that I'd say, first shot, he was janitor in some small college where the professor taught," remarked Nort, and this proved to be the case.

"What do you want?" queried Slim of the two former fugitives, though really they were that no longer, being now surrounded by the cowboys.

"We were looking for the ranch of Mr. Merkel – Diamond X it is called, I believe," said the taller of the two strange riders.

"Well, you're running away from it," commented Snake Purdee.

"And why did you fire at us?" asked Slim.

"Gentlemen, I didn't fire. I am Professor Hendryx Wright, and this is my helper, Zeb Tauth. He is the janitor at my school, and I have brought him out west with me. I have a small party accompanying me and we are going to make another search for fossil bones as I did once before at Diamond X ranch. I was looking for the place in the darkness, having left my other men and supplies some distance back, when you suddenly set after us. I took you for horse thieves – "

"Just what we sized *you* up as," laughed Slim, who now had recognized the professor, though Zeb was a stranger. "Mighty sorry to have troubled you," went on the foreman, "but we couldn't take any chances."

"Especially with the sheep herders likely to swoop down on us and spoil everything," added Bud.

"Hello, boys! Are you there?" exclaimed Professor Wright as he recognized the voice of the lad. "You say someone had been stealing your sheep?"

"Shades of Zip Foster! Never that!" cried Bud, calling upon a sort of mythical patron saint whose identity he jealously concealed from his cousins. "When we start herding sheep, Professor, the world will turn the other way."

"We'll explain later," suggested Nort. "If you're going to stop with us, Professor, turn around and come back."

"Gladly," answered the scientist. "But I have left my men and the outfit some miles back, awaiting word as to whether or not

I could locate your ranch, and – "

"I'll send a man to bring 'em up," offered the foreman. "Mighty funny, though, about you not firing at me," he added, as the horses were turned back toward Diamond X. "Are you sure your friend didn't?" he asked the professor.

"Zeb doesn't know one end of a gun from the other," said the scientist. "As for me – I have none."

"Mighty queer!" muttered Snake. "Somebody fired all right."

"Must have been another party," suggested Bud. "Maybe you chased the wrong bunch, Slim."

"Maybe I did, Bud," admitted the foreman, "though I didn't think there was two bunches. If there was – "

He did not finish what he intended to say, for his mind was busy with several thoughts engendered by the news that the hated sheep men might come to a land so far held sacred to horses and cattle.

"Yes, it's mighty queer," said Slim musingly, as they turned in toward the corral not far from the ranch house. "Some one fired at me just as the chase began, and if it wasn't the professor – "

Mr. Merkel, followed by some of his ranchmen neighbors, came hurrying from the house. Framed in the lighted doorway stood Ma Merkel and Nell.

"That you, Slim?" asked the owner of Diamond X.

"That's me," was the reply.

"Did you get 'em?"

"Well, in a way, yes," came the slow reply. "They turned out

to be friends of yours."

"*Friends?*" questioned Mr. Merkel sharply.

"It's Professor Wright," explained Bud.

"Then you've got the wrong parties!" cried Mr. Merkel.

"There's been a robbery here!"

"A *robbery!*" chorused the boy ranchers.

"Yes! In the excitement somebody got in the ranch house and ransacked my safe."

"Did they get much?" Dick asked.

Amid a silence Mr. Merkel answered:

"They took the papers that prove my right to lands along Spur Creek!"

"Spur Creek!" fairly shouted Bud. "That's where they're going to open the Indian holdings – where the sheep men will first head for, and if we can't control that opening our range won't be worth a hill of beans! Are you sure the papers are gone, Dad?"

"I'm only too sure, son," was the grim answer.

CHAPTER III

ON THE TRAIL

Leaving Zeb Tauth to look after his own steed and that of Professor Wright, Bud and his cousins ushered the scientist into the living-room of the ranch house, whither Mr. Merkel and his fellow ranchmen returned, followed by his wife and daughter. Slim Degnan also entered, having turned his horse over to Babe, who, with the other cowboys, went to the corral.

"Now let's get the straight of this," suggested the owner of Diamond X ranch, when the party was again sitting down, and Professor Wright had been made welcome. "Slim, you saw what happened outside. Suppose you tell us about that."

"Seems to me that something more important happened in here," spoke Bud. "If your papers were stolen, Dad, why –"

"They sure were, *son*," interrupted Mr. Merkel, "but I have an idea that what went on outside had a very important bearing on what took place in here. That's why I wanted to hear Slim's account first."

"Well, there isn't an awful lot to tell," said the ranch foreman. "I was sitting outside the corral with the boys, sort of planning up the work for to-morrow. We were talking about this new move of the government, opening the Indian lands, and we were sort of guessing how soon the onery sheep men would bust in on us,

when one of the boys – Snake Purdee I reckon it was – said somebody was coming up the trail that leads to Happy Valley.

"First we didn't pay much attention to them, thinking they was some of Bud's boys, but they acted so funny that I hailed 'em, and instead of answering like they should, they fired. Course I fired back – up in the air – and then we boys got busy and took after 'em."

"Yes, I can understand it from there on," said Mr. Merkel. "But you didn't get the ones you went after; did you?"

"Apparently not," admitted the foreman with a grim smile. "It was pretty dark and we must have missed 'em. But finally we did see two horses streaking it over the plains, and we took after 'em, only to find they were the professor here, and his friend."

"Then the other parties, whoever they were, got away," commented Mr. Merkel.

"Must have," said the foreman. "They'd 'a' had time while we was saddlin' up. But what their object was I can't guess."

"And then we come back here to find you've been robbed," commented Bud. "Say, doesn't it look as though those first parties came around just to draw us off, so someone else could sneak in and rifle the safe?" he asked quickly.

There was a moment of silence, to give the idea time to filter through the minds of all present, and then Mr. Merkel said:

"Son, I believe you've struck it! That was a game to draw our fire on the front, while they sneaked up in the rear to frisk my safe! And the professor – "

"I hope you don't think I had anything to do with your unfortunate loss!" exclaimed the scientist.

"Of course not!" said Mr. Merkel quickly. "I was about to remark that you being on the scene was purely a matter of accident, though it may have had the effect of drawing Slim and his bunch farther away from the real thieves than was desirable."

"Shouldn't be a bit surprised," admitted the foreman. "It was so dark, before the moon came out, that we couldn't tell much where we were going. But as soon as we picked up the professor and his friend we took after them. Probably this gave the real rascals the chance they wanted."

"Perhaps I had better explain how I happened to be in this neighborhood," said Dr. Wright. "Our discoveries of the prehistoric fossils, at which you helped us so much," he added, nodding toward the boy ranchers, "our discoveries gained us such scientific honors that I have been asked to come back and search for more bones. I had no time to write and tell you I was coming, and that I hoped you would allow my party to make some location on your ranch our headquarters," he said to Mr. Merkel.

"You will be very welcome," the ranchman remarked.

"I am glad to know that," resumed Dr. Wright. "Well, I hurriedly got a party together, taking as my personal helper Zeb Tauth, the janitor of part of the college building where I am stationed. I know Zeb's ways, and he knows mine.

"We rather lost our way in the darkness," continued the scientist, "and, leaving the main party, Zeb and I journeyed on to

look for the ranch. We heard shots and saw a party of horsemen riding after us, and Zeb at once concluded we were going to be held up and made the victims of horse thieves. So we did our best to get away."

"You rode mighty well, Professor! Yon rode mighty well!" complimented Slim Degnan.

"But what's the next thing to be done?" asked Bud, as there came a pause in the conversation. "Did they take everything out of the safe, Dad?"

"Well, I didn't have much money in it, luckily, but they did get some valuable papers – documents that prove my claim to land along Spur Creek – land that is the key to the situation in this new tract the government is opening, or, as a matter of fact, has already opened."

"It means the sheep herders can come in then; does it?" asked Nort.

"Practically that, unless I can get back those papers and prove that I am the real owner of the land, and that I owned it before this government opening took place," answered Mr. Merkel.

"It must have been someone interested in sheep herding who knew about the papers, who knew you had them here and who wanted them," commented Dick.

"Yes, that's probably true," assented the ranchman.

"Well, there's only one thing to do," declared Bud.

"Get after 'em!" cried Nort and Dick.

"That's it!" exclaimed their cousin. "We must take the trail

after these sheep-herding thieves and get back Dad's papers!"

Bud started from the room.

"You aren't going to take the trail to-night, are you?" asked his father.

"Why not?" demanded Bud. "The longer we wait the better lead they'll have on us."

"I know, but you can't do anything in the dark."

"Yes, we can!" cried Bud. "Come on, boys!" he called to his cousins. "It won't be the first time we've ridden a trail at night. Please pack us up a little grub," he called to his mother and sister.

"Oh, Bud, I hate to have you go," said Ma Merkel.

"Can't be helped!" he laughingly assured her. "We'll be back in a little while, unless we get on the trail of these chaps and run 'em down. While the grub is being packed, Dad, tell us just how they got in and frisked your safe."

"Well, they just naturally got in the back door while we were all out in front watching you boys ride off after those who put up a game to draw us out," was the answer. "When we went back in the house, after you'd gone, I saw my safe open and a lot of papers scattered about. The combination is very simple. What little money was in it – not much – was taken, and the Spur Creek deeds."

"Well, we'll get 'em back!" cried Bud. "On the trail, fellows!"

And catching up bundles of hastily prepared "snacks," the boy ranchers started on the trail after the thieves, for much depended on their success and an early start was essential.

Bud and his cousins had not ridden far beyond the corral when they heard behind them shouts of:

"Wait a minute! Wait! Come back!"

"What's up now?" questioned Bud, drawing rein.

CHAPTER IV

AROUND THE CAMPFIRE

Naturally impatient, the boy ranchers did not want to return once they had started on the trail of the robbers. They thought they should be allowed to rush off, and perhaps they had an idea they could soon "meet up" with the suspects and bring them back. But Mr. Merkel and the other ranchmen, as well as the veteran cowboys, had no such delusions. However, this was no time to discourage impetuous youth.

"What's the matter, Dad?" asked Bud, as he recognized his father's voice among those bidding him and his cousins to return. "Has someone telephoned in that they've rounded up the thieves?"

No surprise need be occasioned when I speak of telephones in connection with ranching in the far west. Times have changed since the early days of the buffalo and Indians. Both are almost extinct, though the Indians have lasted longer than the bison.

But the West has progressed with other parts of the country, and the advent of the cheap automobile and the spread of telephone wires, and even wireless now, has brought far distant ranches close together. So Bud knew it could easily have been the case that some distant ranchman might have telephoned to Diamond X that he had made a capture of suspicious persons.

He may not have known of the theft of Mr. Merkel's Spur Creek papers, for this robbery had not yet been broadcast.

"No telephones, son," said Mr. Merkel easily, as he strode out to where the horses of the boys were pawing the ground, almost as impatient to be gone as were their masters. "But I want you to take one of the men with you."

"Oh, Dad! I don't want to do that!" protested Bud.

"We've hit the trail alone before," added Nort.

"It isn't a question of your ability," went on Mr. Merkel. "But you may have to split – very likely you will, and for this purpose four are better than three. Then you can pair it off."

"That's right," slowly admitted Bud. "Two of us might have to follow one trail, and it would be lonesome for just one to take the other. How about Old Billee?"

"You couldn't pick a better companion," agreed Mr. Merkel.

Billee Dobb was only too glad to get away from the routine work of the ranch – riding herd and helping in the round up and shipping – and quickly saddled to accompany the boys on their ride through the night, in an endeavor to pick up the trail of those who had committed the robbery at Spur Creek.

"Well, I guess we're off this time," remarked Dick, as once more they turned their horses' heads in the general direction supposed to have been taken by the robbers.

It was, as you may surmise, pretty much guess work, and yet there were some clues on which to work, and the boys hoped to pick up others as they went along, by stopping at different ranch

houses and making inquiries. Then, too, cowboys would be met with here and there, and they might have seen some trace of the fugitives.

In the olden days, before the West was as much traveled as it is now, it might have been possible for pioneers, such as those featured in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, to have followed and picked up the trail by the mere physical evidences left on the ground – a footprint here, a hoofmark there, the pressed down grass and so on.

But this was out of the question now, though some slight marks might be discovered in the daytime by the sharp eyes of Billee Dobb, who was a veteran cowboy and plainsman. In this Bud and his companions would have to rely on Billee, as the boys themselves had not had much experience in this line.

"Well, Billee, what do you think of it all?" asked Bud as he rode beside the old man, while Nort and Dick loped along in the rear.

"You mean what happened to-night, Bud?"

"Yep." Bud was clipping his words short to save time.

"Well," said the old man slowly, "I don't know just what to think. It's all mighty queer, but one thing I'll say – this didn't all happen just to-night."

"You mean it was planned in advance?" asked Dick.

"Sartin sure, son! It was a put-up job if ever there was one. Why, just look back over it. Here we all were in peace and quiet, and Mr. Merkel was entertainin' his friends, when up rides a

bunch of onery Greasers, if I'm any judge."

"What makes you think they were Greasers?" asked Bud.

"'Cause no decent white men would act like they did. Up they rides, pretending to be sneakin' in on us, maybe to lift a few horses or else stampede a bunch of our cows. But that wasn't their intention at all."

"If it was, Slim and the rest of 'em spoiled their plans," observed Nort.

"Don't worry, they had no notion of takin' anything," declared Old Billee. "They just wanted to take our attention while some of their confederates sneaked in and got Mr. Merkel's papers; and they done that same."

"I'll say they did!" exclaimed Bud in disgust. "It was all too easy for them. But how did they know Dad's papers were in the safe?"

"Well, it's common knowledge that your paw claims the land around Spur Creek," observed Billee. "That's common knowledge. And it wouldn't take a Kansas City lawyer long to figger out that he had papers to prove his claim, an' that he kept these papers in his safe; it bein' equally well known that we haven't much time to fool with banks around here, 'specially in the busy season."

"So all the rascal had to do was to get the house clear, by creatin' some excitement away from it, and then he walked in an' skinned the safe. It didn't help matters any that th' perfesser happened along at the same time, either, and I don't care who

knows it!" declared Billee Dobb emphatically.

"You don't mean to say you believe Dr. Wright had any hand in this?" cried Bud.

"Well, maybe *he* didn't 'zactly have a hand in it," grudgingly admitted the old cowpuncher, "but he played right into the hands of th' scoundrels."

"On purpose, do you mean?" asked Nort.

"Well, that's to be found out," remarked Billee musingly.

"Billee, you're 'way off there!" cried Bud. "Professor Wright is as right as his name – we proved that before when he was here after the prehistoric Triceratops bones."

"He may have changed since then," declared Billee. "What did he want to come in and lead us off on a false trail for, when we was hot after the robbers?"

"He didn't do it purposely," asserted Nort, who, with his brother, shared Bud's views as to the integrity of Professor Wright. "It was because he got lost."

"Yes, to hear him tell it," sneered Billee.

"Why, look here!" cried Bud. "What good would it do Professor Wright to get hold of Dad's papers proving ownership to the Spur Creek lands? Why would he want the land? If anybody wants it they must be those who are coming in under the new government ruling – sheep herders maybe, and it's to them we have to look."

"That Wright is just the kind of a chap who'd go in for sheep herding, and spoiling a cattle country," complained Billee, as

he pulled up the head of his horse, when the animal showed a tendency to stumble over a prairie dog's hole.

"You're away off!" laughed Bud. "It may have been sheep herders who got Dad's papers, hoping thus to be able to claim a lot of land for their woolly feeders, but Professor Wright had no hand in it."

Billee's only answer was a sniff.

However, as the boy ranchers rode along in the darkness they realized that they could have had no better companion than Old Billee Dobb, for his very vindictiveness, though it might be wrongly directed, made him eager to keep after the robbers. That Professor Wright was other than he claimed to be, none of the boys doubted for a moment.

But who was behind the plot which had just succeeded so well? That was a question which needed answering.

The ranch buildings of Diamond X were soon left behind in the darkness, their pleasant glow fading as the four horsemen of the prairies rode along in silence, looking, as best they could under the faint glow of the moon for the outlines of other horsemen to be shown on the horizon as they topped some rise in the undulating ground.

In general the boy ranchers and Billee were following the trail on which Slim and the cowboys had started after the shots were fired – the trail that was crossed by Professor Wright, causing the pursuers to turn back.

"It would have been better if some of us had kept on when

we had the start," commented Nort when, after an hour's ride nothing had been seen.

"Yes, it would," agreed Billee.

"But we didn't know, then, that there had been a robbery," went on Nort.

"That's right," assented Bud. "We just thought it was an ordinary bunch of cattle or horse thieves, and if they had been there would have been nothing else to worry about, as we drove them off."

"Well, we may get 'em yet, but 't isn't very likely," said Billee.

And as the night wore on and they kept their slow pace over the plains, this prediction seemed about to be borne out.

The boys and Billee had stopped at ranch houses here and there to make inquiries about some fleeing band of horsemen, but no one had seen them. The proprietors of most of the ranches were over at Diamond X and had not yet returned. Some of them had telephoned to their foremen or other members of the ranch households, telling about the robbers and saying that Bud and his companions might call.

But beyond this no trace was found of the robbers.

It was long past midnight when Old Billee pulled his horse to a stop, and "slumped" from the saddle.

"What's the matter?" asked Bud. "See some sign?" By this he intended to ask if the old plainsman saw any indications that they were hotter on the trail of those they sought.

"Nope!" answered Old Billee. "But we're going to camp and

make coffee and frizzle a bit of bacon. No use keepin' on any longer. We can't do anything more till mornin'."

"Camp it is!" exclaimed Bud, "and I'm not sorry, either."

Shortly a fire was going, made from twigs and branches picked up under a few trees near where the party had stopped, and soon the appetizing aroma of coffee and bacon spread through the night air.

"Um! But this is jolly!" cried Nort.

The horses were picketed out and after the midnight supper the wayfarers rolled themselves in their blankets and prepared to pass what remained of the night in the glow of the campfire, and beneath the fitful light of the cloud-obscured moon.

CHAPTER V

AT SPUR CREEK

Dick was dreaming that he was at a football game, and that his brother Nort had hold of him and was trying to pull him through the line of opposing players to make a touchdown. Then the dream seemed to become confused with reality, and Dick felt some one tugging at the blanket in which he had rolled himself so snugly.

Half awake and half asleep Dick's brain struggled to clear itself and get the right impression of what really was going on. Then he became aware that his blanket was actually being pulled – this was no dream.

"Here! Who's that? What you doing?" he cried, and instinctively he began groping for his gun, which was in its holster in the belt he had taken off for the night.

Something cold and clammy touched Dick on the cheek, causing a shudder to run through him.

"Snakes!" he yelled. "Rattlers! Look out!"

His frantic cries roused the others, and Nort and Bud struggled to free themselves of their enveloping blankets as they sat up near the smouldering blaze of the camp fire.

"What is it?" cried Bud, who had only half heard what his cousin shouted.

"Snakes!" again yelled Dick.

"Snakes nothing!" disgustedly grumbled Billee Dobb, who did not relish having his slumbers broken. "It's too cold for snakes to be out to-night." Then the plainsman tossed on the fire a bit of wood which, when it blazed up, revealed the cause of the disturbance.

"It's your horse!" cried Nort with a laugh. And it was Dick's faithful pony who, having slipped his tether, had wandered over near human companionship, and had been pulling at Dick's blanket with his teeth. Then the animal rubbed his cold and clammy muzzle on Dick's face, giving the lad the impression that a scaly rattlesnake had tried to crawl over him.

"Well, I'll be jiggered! Blackie!" gasped Dick, when he saw that it was his horse. "Whew, but you gave me a fright!"

"You oughter look fust an' yell afterward," commented Billee as he turned over to go to sleep again.

The boys laughed and again wrapped up in their blankets, after Dick had secured his horse with the others. A dim light was now showing in the east, indicating that morning was not far off. But it was cold and cheerless, even with the fire, for it was not a very large blaze, and Dick was glad to follow the example of his brother and cousin and roll up for a final doze before daylight.

"Well, now we'll see what happens," commented Nort, as they were preparing a simple breakfast, over the replenished campfire. "Think we might catch 'em to-day, Billee?"

"It all depends," was the old cow puncher's answer. "We can't

spend too much time chasin' these scamps. There's work to be done at the ranch. Hang that perfesser, anyhow!"

"Why?" asked Bud.

"Well, if he hadn't crossed the trail last night when we fust started out, we'd a' had them as we was after by now!" declared Billee.

"Maybe and maybe not," remarked Bud. "It wasn't the professor's fault, anyhow. He just got lost."

"Well, he picked a mighty inconvenient time to do it in," snapped Old Billee, who was always a bit raspy before breakfast.

The sun soon shone warm and glorious, a little too glorious in fact, for it was very hot after 9 o'clock when the trail was again taken up. Daylight did not make the "signs" any more plain – in fact, there was absolutely no trail to follow. All they could do was to keep on, making inquiries here and there at different ranches about suspicious characters.

"We haven't seen any signs of the professor's party," remarked Nort, when they stopped at noon for a "snack."

"No, I fancy they're off in the other direction," remarked Bud. "They will probably be at the ranch when we get back."

"Speaking of getting back, I don't see much use in keeping on," commented Billee. "Those rascals have given us the slip."

"Guess we might as well hit the back trail," agreed Bud. "Dad will have to tell Hank Fowler about this, and Hank can rustle up a posse and see what he can do."

Hank Fowler was the local sheriff and on him, and such men

as he might swear in as deputies, devolved the duty of looking after law and order in that part of the west where Diamond X was located, not far from the Mexican border.

The boy ranchers and Billee kept on for another mile, to top a certain high piece of land, over which they could have a good view, as they thought from this vantage point they might see some signs to guide them. But from the eminence they only viewed an endless rolling prairie with here and there a clump of trees. They saw bands of roving cattle and a few horses – their own stock or that of some neighbor, and Billee decided that nothing could be gained by going any farther along the cold trail.

Turning their horses' heads, the members of the little party swung back toward Diamond X. On the way they stopped at the ranch of Bud and his boy partners in Happy Valley, learning that everything was in good shape there, being in the efficient hands of a capable foreman and some cowboys. News of the robbery of Mr. Merkel's safe had already been telephoned to Happy Valley, but though the cowboys had ridden out for several miles in a number of directions, they had seen nothing and no one suspicious they reported.

"No luck, boys?" asked Mr. Merkel as his son and nephews turned their weary horses into the corral and entered the house.

"No luck, Dad," answered Bud. "What's new here?"

"Nothing much. Professor Wright's party came up and he has taken them into camp over near the place where they dug up the monster fossil bones some time ago."

"You didn't hear anything about the fellows who took your papers then? What are you going to do, Dad?"

"Well, I don't know what I can do. It isn't as if this was the east, where such things are a matter of record, and where you have the courts and judges right at hand to put a stop to anything unlawful. It's almost as if an unregistered government bond was stolen. I've got to prove my property against those that have it, and I can't do it very easily, because the men I bought it of originally are all dead or moved away. It's just as if the Spur Creek land was owned by no one, and the first comer has a chance to take it, now that the government has thrown open the tract."

"But you aren't going to sit down and let 'em frisk you that way, are you, Dad?" cried Bud, surprised at what he thought was the supine and non-combative attitude of his parent.

"I should say not, son!" was the vigorous answer. "I'm going to fight!"

"That's more like it!" cried Bud.

"Hurrray! We're with you!" exclaimed Nort.

"When does the fighting begin!" Dick wanted to know, and almost unconsciously he looked at his "gun."

"We're going to start a camp at Spur Creek right away, and keep some one on guard there constantly," declared Mr. Merkel. "If signs and past performances go for anything, some Mexicans, a few Greasers and a bunch of sheep herders will pour in through the pass and pre-empt everything along Spur Creek any time now. Certain land along Spur Creek did belong to the Indians

and as such the government can throw it open to those whose other holdings don't bar them – as I am barred.

"But I don't intend any Greasers or sheep herders shall take the land I bought and paid for, even if they have managed to steal my title deeds and other papers, without which I can't prove my claim. I'm going to fight!" said the ranch owner vigorously.

"And we're with you!" cried Nort, as he tapped his gun.

I do not wish you to understand that the boy ranchers were a blood thirsty trio of "gun-men." As I have explained, you don't always need a gun in the West, but when you do require it the need is generally urgent. Nor are the "guns" (by which term are meant revolvers of large caliber) used in desperate fights against human beings. In the main the guns are used with blank cartridges to direct a bunch of cattle in the way it is desired they should go. Frequently a fusilade of shots, harmless enough in themselves, will serve to turn a stampede which stampede, if not stopped, would result in the death of hundreds of animals who would blindly hurl themselves over a cliff.

Of course there are bad men in the west now, as there used to be, though perhaps not so many, and near the Mexican border roving bands of Indians or half-breeds often try to run off bunches of cattle. In such cases guns with bullets instead of blank cartridges are urgently needed.

Then, too, enemies other than human are occasionally met with. In winter wolves may prowl about, driven desperate by hunger. There is an occasional rattlesnake to be shot up, and so,

all in all, a cowboy without a gun would not fit in the picture at all. Though I don't want you to get the idea that the boy ranchers were desperate characters, willing to "pull a gun" on the slightest provocation. The guns were for service, not for bravado.

"Are you going to start a regular camp at Spur Creek, Dad?" asked Bud.

"That's my intention," his father answered. "We've got to be ready to fight these sheep herders who, I feel sure, will pour in here. They have been waiting to get possession of some range near the water, and this is their chance. But they shan't ruin my feeding ground. I've got too much money invested in it to lose it."

"And though we're farther off, in Happy Valley, we might be harmed by sheep, too," said Nort. "So we've got to fight also!"

"That's right!" chimed in his brother.

I have indicated to you, briefly, why the cattle men so hated the sheep herders. Sheep are innocent enough in themselves, and are much needed. Without them a large part of the world would go hungry and only partly clothed.

"But let the sheep herders stick to their own pastures!" was the cry of the cattle men and the horse breeders. "Don't let them foul our streams and cut up our grass."

As I told you, no western horse or cow, unless under dire need, will drink from a stream where sheep have drunk, or through which sheep have passed. And there is no grass left, once a herd of sheep have fed over a tract, while for years afterward there is only a stunted growth of green, if, indeed, any.

So it is no wonder that those at Diamond X prepared to fight the sheep herders, and Spur Creek was the natural place at which to make a stand.

Situated as it was near the Mexican border, the ranch of Diamond X was near the head of a great valley – a natural pass between the two countries. Through this pass flowed Spur Creek, branching out into one or more streams in different places.

You probably know that to successfully raise cattle, horses or sheep two things are needed – food and water. Food is supplied by the various rich grasses that grow naturally on the western plains. Water is not so plentiful in that sometimes arid region, and for that reason is jealously guarded. A ranch with a natural water supply is worth ten times what one is without fluid for the cattle to drink. Driving herds long distances to quench their thirst runs off their fat, and as cattle are now sold by the pound, instead of by the piece, as formerly was the case, the heavier a steer is the more money he brings.

Spur Creek, then, was a valuable asset to Mr. Merkel, and he determined to fight for it to the "last ditch," so to speak. This water was only a part of the courses that were valuable to his ranch. As for the boys, they had a water supply of their own in Happy Valley, though they had had to fight to secure that, as related in the book named "The Boy Ranchers in Camp."

"Well, if there's to be a fight, the sooner the better," commented Bud as he and his cousins washed up at home after their night in the open. They told of their experiences, which

really amounted to nothing as far as getting a trace of the fugitives was concerned, and then. Mr. Merkel sent word to Sheriff Fowler of the theft.

"And now we'll build a fort at Spur Creek," said the ranchman.

"A *fort*!" cried Bud.

"Well, it will be a sort of fort," his father went on. "There is one place there just right for defensive operations and we'll put up a shack there and mount guard until the danger is over. Once the sheep men see that we mean business they may throw up their hands and go back where they belong – in Mexico."

There were soon busy times at Diamond X. The flivver was called into requisition, and on it and on wagons was transported to Spur Creek lumber to make a rough shack as a shelter for those who would be kept on guard against the advance of the sheep herders.

"And we're going to form part of that guard!" declared Bud.

"Our ranch can run itself for a while. We've got to stick by Dad!"

"That's right!" agreed Nort and Dick. Secretly they rejoiced at the chance of a coming conflict, even though they had so recently had a hard time campaigning against the Yaqui Indians.

It did not take long to throw up a rough shelter at Spur Creek. This could be improved upon as time passed, but it was necessary to make a stand there at once. So, two nights after the alarm and robbery at Diamond X, behold the boy ranchers, with some of their cowboy friends, on guard at the edge of the stream which marked one of the boundaries of the land Mr. Merkel claimed

– but land to which he could not now show a legal title because of the theft of his papers.

"Well, all serene so far," observed Bud, as night settled down on them in their new environment.

"Yes, I don't reckon we'll be disturbed," observed Billee, who was there with them.

"It'll give me a chance to pick up, an' get back in th' saddle again," observed Yellin' Kid in his usual loud voice. He had been allowed to form part of the "fort" guard, as it was thought the duties there would not be strenuous for a while, at least, and he could make a better recovery than at Diamond X.

"Well, it's a good place for a fight, if one comes," said Nort, as he looked about the place. It readily lent itself well to fortification, and advantage had been taken of this by Mr. Merkel. The rough shack was an outpost fort in the land that was destined to be battled for by the sheep men on one side and the cattle men on the other.

Quiet evening was settling down, "grub" had been served and the ponies were rubbing noses in the improvised corral when Yellin' Kid, who was venturing to walk around a little to "exercise his game leg," as he expressed it, came to a halt and gazed earnestly across Spur Creek in the direction of Mexico distant several miles.

"What is it, Kid?" asked Billee, who was smoking his pipe.

"Somebody's comin'," was the answer, "an' he's sweatin' leather," which meant that he was riding fast.

The boy ranchers looked in the direction indicated. A lone horseman was approaching from the side of the creek where the enemy might be expected first to appear.

CHAPTER VI

THE ALARM

Gathered in front of their "fort," as it laughingly had been christened, the boy ranchers and their cow puncher comrades watched the approach of the lone horseman. He had come up through the valley – the pass that, like the neck of a bag tied about the middle with a string, connected two great lands – Mexico and the United States. But one land represented law and order to a degree, while the other was woefully lacking in these essentials to progress.

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