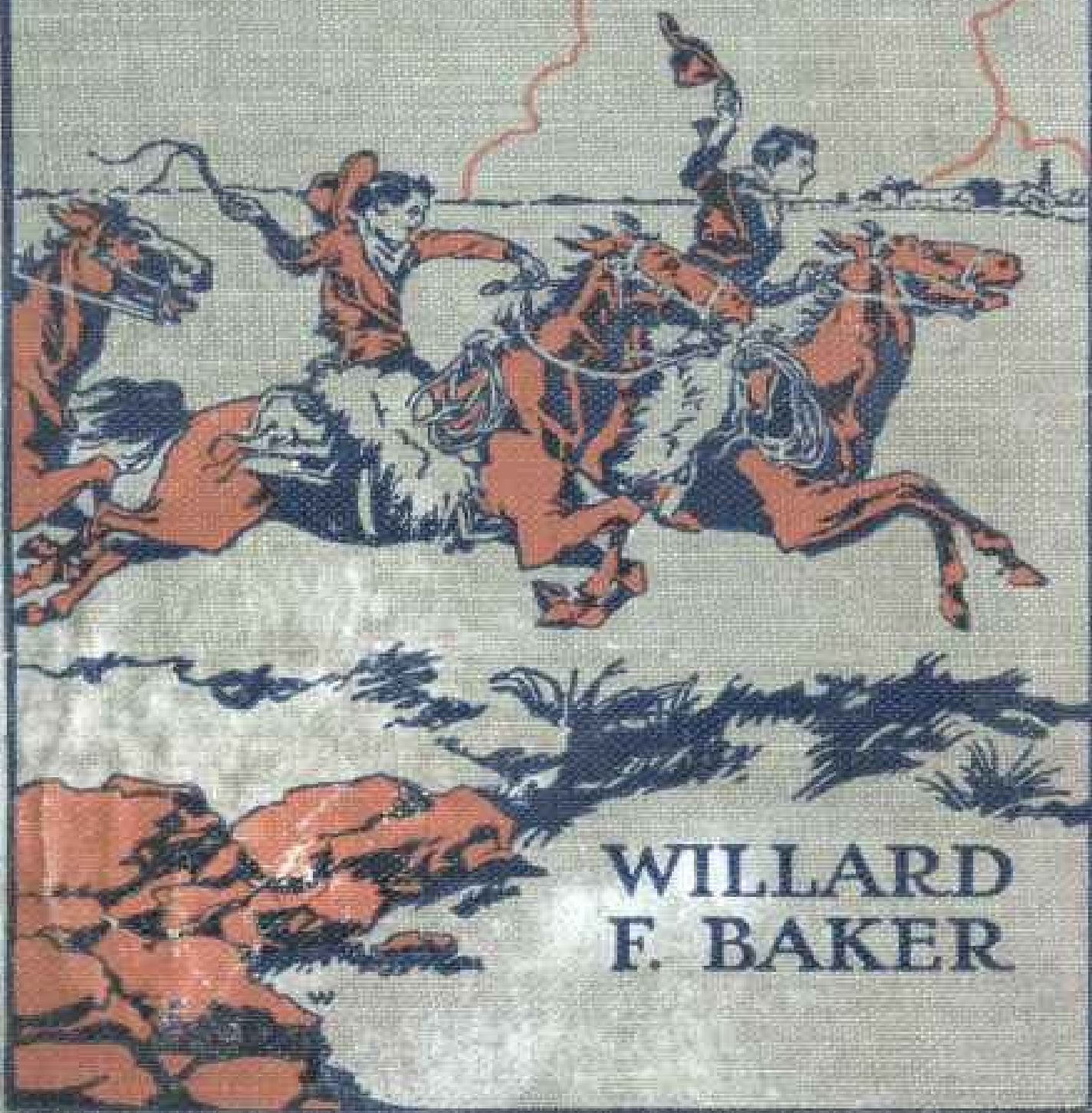


THE BOY RANCHERS ON ROARING RIVER



WILLARD
F. BAKER

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"AND WIN HE DID." _Boy Ranchers on Roaring River._
"AND WIN HE DID." _Boy Ranchers on Roaring River._

**THE
BOY RANCHERS
ON ROARING RIVER**

OR

Diamond X and the Chinese Smugglers

By

WILLARD F. BAKER

Author of

"The Boy Ranchers,"

"The Boy Ranchers in Camp,"

"The Boy Ranchers at Spur Creek,"

"The Boy Ranchers in the Desert," etc.

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By WILLARD F. BAKER**

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Or the Water Fight at Diamond X

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Or Diamond X after Cattle Rustlers

THE BOY RANCHERS AMONG THE INDIANS
Or Diamond X Trailing the Yaquis

THE BOY RANCHERS AT SPUR CREEK
Or Diamond X Fighting the Sheep Herders

THE BOY RANCHERS IN THE DESERT
Or Diamond X and the Lost Mine

THE BOY RANCHERS ON ROARING RIVER
Or Diamond X and the Chinese Smugglers

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THE BOY RANCHERS ON ROARING RIVER

CHAPTER I

A DANGEROUS MISSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's the matter? Rustlers, or disease?" The Kid's face expressed instant

concern as he mentioned these two nightmares of the rancher's life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well now, say, boys, that's right sorrowful—yes, sir, that's what I call right sorrowful! I sure am sorry for you-all! A whole herd of cattle gone to the dogs!

Well, well—that's sad. Say, is there anything I can do to—you know, sort of help out—like, well, maybe——"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As the boys followed Mr. Merkel each one wondered what it was all about.

Dick voiced the thought of all as he whispered:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

Yellin' Kid looked at Bud in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to the saddles and be off.

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

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

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

In the several volumes following was related how the boy ranchers went to camp, and how they took the trail, and the exciting times they had in rounding up a band of Yaqui Indians who had escaped from their reservation and were raising havoc with the neighboring territory. Following this the boys went to Spur Creek, where they had many startling adventures among the sheep herders. The book immediately preceding this present one is called "The Boy Ranchers in the Desert," and tells of the difficulties they had in their search for some lost gold.

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

"Say, Kid," Bud called back, after a while, "what would you do if you saw a

smuggler come along now with a herd of Chinks with him?"

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

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

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

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

"Yep! What do you think of her?"

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

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

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

"Right! Let's go!"

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

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

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

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

"All right. Tell you what—we'll start from here, and the last man there has to

kiss a sheep!"

"Right! All set? Ready—go!"

"Ye-e-e-ow!"

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

"Ride 'em cowboy!"

"Leggo that leather!"

"Gangway—gangway!"

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

"Look at the old boy go!"

"Stay at it, Billee—stay at it!"

"Two bits he wins!"

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

"Attaboy, Billee!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Bang!"

They roared as one.

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

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

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

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

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

The Kid had been gone ten minutes when Bud said:

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

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

The three boys watched Billee ride off in the direction the Kid had taken. It

was a deserted, lonesome place.

Fifteen minutes later Billee rode back—alone.

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

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

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

CHAPTER III

A SUSPICIOUS VISITOR

The three looked at each other in alarm.

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

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

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

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

"Looks as though someone passed here in a hurry," he said as he pointed to a newly beaten path through some heavy brush. "Now if I was just going along

easy like I'd have ridden 'round that bush. The pony that went through there got a few scratches."

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

"Or being chased," Dick added.

"Perhaps he met a smuggler, Dick."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Can't tell, he may have ridden through there and then taken a sudden turn to

the right or left. Or back again, for that matter. Well, let's get started."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dick sat up, now wide awake.

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

"Kid?" Bud called hopefully.

The approaching pony gave a sudden leap forward.

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

"It is the Kid!" Dick cried exultingly.

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

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

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

"What happened?"

"Did you get lost?"

"Are you all right?"

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

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

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

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

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

"You'll what?"

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

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

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

"Cut it out!"

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

"All right, we'll cut the kiddin'. Tell you what really happened. I found the water hole where I thought it would be, and I found something else, too. There was a horse standin' near it, and by the side of the horse was a Chink—on his hands an' knees, crawlin' around on the ground. Thinks I, here's a crazy man. So I rides up slow, and when I got up close I asks he Chink what he's lookin' for. He don't pay no attention to me whatever. I gets off my horse and says it again. Then the crazy Chink looks up at me and says "Chock Gee." That's all. Just "Chock Gee." Me, not knowin' Chinese, I can't tell what he's after. But I see it won't do no good to insist on knowin' so I starts to help him up, thinking maybe he's hurt. Soon as I touched him, what does the crazy Chink do but jump like a cat for his saddle, give my paint a terrible crack with his quirt, and set off like a scared rabbit, my pony after him, leavin' me stranded, high an' dry!"

The Kid looked at his eager listeners and grinned.

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

"And the Chink—what happened to him?"

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

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

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

boys!"

"Hey, you men!"

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

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

CHAPTER IV

THE HIDDEN GUNMAN

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

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

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

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

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

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

continued:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

time."

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

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

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

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

"Yes—do you know him?"

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

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

"Right!" the others chorused.

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

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

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

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

"Hawkins—Joe Hawkins."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure does!"

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

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

"Yep—right in this spot. He was leanin' over here by this little bush, lookin'

for—" the Kid stopped suddenly and picked up something from the ground. It was a folded paper. The Kid looked it over swiftly.

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

"What is it?"

"Let's have a look!"

The deputy walked over to the Kid.

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

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

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

"Bang! Bang!"

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

"Bang!"

Billee's hat went sailing from his head.

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

CHAPTER V

ARRIVAL AT THE RANCH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not a soul was in sight!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Apple, and apple, and—apple."

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

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

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

"You did—why?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VI

THE THREAT

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

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

"Anything I can do for you?"

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

The stranger scowled.

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

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

"It is."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The ranch house, of course!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Afraid so," answered Bud.

The man suddenly stepped to one side.

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

"You just get in?" he asked.

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

"Sit down, boys."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The man seated opposite did not move.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's the trouble, Dick?"

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VII

A SHEEPLESS SHEEP RANCH

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

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

"I believe he contracted with the owner that one thousand heads of woolies were to be sent to him within a month of taking possession. This tenant, whoever he is, will walk his sheep when he goes, of course. I thought it was unusual to hire a ranch to raise sheep on for only one year, but Dad said the sheep get some

sort of a disease if they're not walked frequently, and I guess this fellow sort of figured on trying it out for a year before settling down to a permanent place. The owner of the ranch lives up north somewhere, and Dad simply bought him out. Why Dad wanted to go in for woolies I don't know, but he must have had his reasons."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Probably. So your friend in the house told you he'd give one thousand bucks

if you'd let him stay, did he?"

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

"He did, hey? That sort of puts it up to us, don't it?"

"You know what I think would be a good idee?" Billee Dobb broke in. "We ought to go down and have a talk with Joe Hawkins. Tell him what we found, and ask him if he's got any advice he'd like to dish up. Seemed to me he was a pretty reliable feller."

"Not bad—not bad," said Yellin' Kid approvingly. "He said he'd be glad to help us any time. Not that we're goin' to need any help gettin' this dude off," he added quickly. "But it might be a good idea to have the law on our side."

"We can see him and get him to sign a dispossess notice," Nort suggested. "I don't know whether he knows what that is, but it's just a paper saying we have a right to put out whoever is on the land."

"We'll do that, Nort," agreed Dick. "Then we can start right. Let's get on, fellows. It's getting late, and we want to catch Hawkins before he leaves for home."

Spurring their broncos to a faster pace, the five made their way toward the town. The suggestion that they were to confer with the friendly deputy seemed a wise one, not because they were afraid to tackle the job of removing "J. D." alone, but because they wanted to know just how things stood. Perhaps by inquiry they could gain some clew as to why the tenant refused to vacate. If he sincerely wanted an extension of his lease to legitimately conduct the business of ranching, he was going about it in a queer way.

As the riders reached the town, they stopped a cow puncher and asked where they could find Joe Hawkins.

"Right down the street a ways," they were told. "Can't miss it. Jail, court house and sheriff's office all in one. Some shootin' been goin' on?"

"Not that we know of," Dick laughed.

"Though there might be soon," said Bud impetuously.

"How's that? You figgerin' on pluggin' someone, youngster?" the cowboy inquired with a grin.

"Not hardly," the Kid spoke quickly. "We just want to see Hawkins about some land. Thanks for the info."

Their friend looked back at Bud and grinned again as he rode away.

"Evidently thinks you're an amateur bad man," said Billee Dobb. "You'll have a reputation in this town before you know it, Bud."

By this time they had reached the sheriff's office. All dismounted and went in.

They found Hawkins seated in a chair talking to another man who was leaning against the side wall gazing out of the window. The deputy sprang to his feet as he saw the boys, the light of welcome in his eyes.

"Come in, boys, come in. Jerry, I'd like you to meet some new friends of mine. This here is Bud Merkel. Over here is—er——"

"My cousins, Nort and Dick Shannon," finished Bud. "And Billee Dobb and Yellin' Kid—if he ever had another name I've forgotten it, and I guess he has too."

The deputy's friend laughed and Joe said:

"This is Jerry Adler, boys. Say, I thought you fellers were headed for the Shootin' Star?"

"We were," Bud answered, "but something happened that we want to ask you about."

"Guess I'll be goin'," said Jerry Adler. "I'll drop in to-morrow about that matter, Joe. No hurry, you know."

"All right, Jerry. Glad to see you any time. Now, boys," and he turned to the five standing near him, "what can I do for you? Or is it just a friendly visit? If it is, I'm right glad you stopped in. Now that you're here, you must come over to my place for supper. Got the best cook you ever saw."

"Thanks, Mr. Hawkins," responded Bud. "We may take advantage of that later. But just now we want to ask your advice."

"Go right to it, Bud. If I can help you I'll sure do it!"

"When we went over to the Shooting Star," Bud began, "we expected to find a sheep ranch. Instead we find a place that could be used for sheep, but certainly isn't now. We went in and showed our credentials, and asked the occupant, who was called 'J. D.,' I think, if he could move out by to-morrow, so we could get ready to move in.

"Whoever this 'J. D.' is, he isn't a cow puncher, nor a herder either. He's dressed like a Chicago dude," stated Bud.

The deputy nodded understandingly. Evidently he was not surprised at Bud's description of the Shooting Star and its tenant.

"Well, as I say, we asked him to leave. He not only refused, but threatened trouble if we tried to put him out. Said he had twelve men who'd help him, too. So we thought, if you'd give us a dispossession notice, we could go up there with authority and if he still turned ugly—well—we could do as we thought fit."

"I see. He told you he wouldn't leave?"

"Yes."

"He has no right to stay there, has he?"

"None at all. He rented the ranch from the man who formerly owned it, but his lease was up a month ago. Dad bought the place free and clear. We were to manage it for him, and take charge of the sheep when they came in. I believe they are to be driven over in about two weeks."

"In about two weeks? Well, boys, I can't exactly say I'm surprised at your story. I don't mind sayin' we've been puzzled at the actions of this 'J. D.'—James Delton, I think his name is—for some time now. When he first came he did have some sheep—not many, and he sold them a month after he took the ranch. Since then it's been empty, though, as he says, he's got a number of hands on the place. They keep it in good shape, as you may have noticed. But what his business is nobody seems to know. Of course out here a man doesn't go pryin' into other people's affairs unless he's fairly certain there's something wrong. I'll go to Shooting Star with you!"

Taking his belt and pistol holster from a hanger, the deputy led the way from the office. Mounted once more, the party swung away toward the Shooting Star ranch. Nort looked over at the Kid.

"Why that smile, Kid?" he asked.

"Was I smilin'? I didn't know it. Say, Nort, looks as though we might hand ourselves somethin' of a time before we finish with this 'J. D.' feller."

"And you're kind of hopin' we do, hey Kid? The last time I saw you smile like that was just before we had that fight with the Del Pinzo gang. Hope you don't expect another ruckus out here, as bad as that one."

"And if we did, I suppose you'd run away and hide your head," laughed the Kid derisively. "Yes you would not! You'd be in the thick of it with the rest of us."

"Perhaps," admitted Nort with a grin. "However, I really don't think we'll have any trouble. From Bud's description of Delton he's sort of a weak-kneed type. We'll just have to tell him what's what, and I'm sure he'll back down."

"Can't tell," the Kid averred. "Those Dudes have sometimes got a mean lot of fight in them."

Up ahead Joe Hawkins and Bud were talking in low tones. Finally Bud turned about and called to the rest:

"Close up a minute, fellows. Mr. Hawkins has something to say before we reach the ranch."

"It's just this," began the deputy, when they had gathered around him. "The way I figure, there's no sense of us all going in to see Delton. If we call on him like a delegation, he'll get het up, and be more disagreeable than if we went about this thing quietly. Now Bud and I will go in. You four stay around the corral, and Kid and Billee, while you're waiting, you might take a ride around and size up the place. See if you can discover traces of sheep bein' here in the last six months, and whatever else you can find out. All right, boys, here we are. Remember what I told you, Kid. Let's go, Bud!"

The two dismounted. Turning their horses over to Nort, they walked toward the ranch house. The deputy stepped to the door and knocked.

"He took quite a while to answer when we were here before," Bud suggested. "Better knock again."

The deputy did so.

"Pears like he don't care for no visitors. Wonder if we can see anything by lookin' in the window?"

"I'll have a try," volunteered Bud. Stepping to the side of the house he peered in the casement.

"Too dark," he reported. "Can't see a thing!"

"Must be somebody around," Hawkins declared, as he knocked again, this time more loudly.

Within all was quiet.

"Funny," he commented. Then suddenly he turned the doorknob. The door swung open. After a quick glance the deputy walked in.

"Not a soul in sight!" he called after a minute. "The place is sure deserted. Not only have they got no sheep on this place, but even the men are gone now!"

CHAPTER VIII

CYCLONE

Following the deputy into the house, Bud looked about. The place *felt* vacant. It had an atmosphere of emptiness. The furniture in the rooms had a tossed-about appearance, as though the occupants had made a hurried exit. A cheap vase lay on the floor by the mantel, broken. Rugs were kicked up.

"Well, what do you think of that?" Bud said slowly. "They're gone! Vamoosed! And quick, too. Must have done some tall hustlin' to get out in that short time. Wonder what the idea was? Do you think Delton might be around back, or somewhere outside?"

"Better look, anyway." Hawkins stepped to the doorway and suddenly let out a yell.

"Yo-o-o-o, Kid! Over here!"

"Yo-o!" came the answer. "Right there!" and Yellin' Kid, together with Billee Dobb, rode to the ranch house.

"What'll you have!" the Kid called as he came up.

"Take a ride around the place and see if you can locate someone; will you? The house is empty."

"Right! Billee, you ride to the left and I'll go this way. Back in two shakes."

"Mighty queer where everyone has disappeared to," Hawkins commented. "When you were here before, Bud, did they look as though they were getting ready to light out?"

"Nope—just the opposite. As I told you, Delton insisted that he was going to stay. I can't imagine what scared them off. Unless Delton decided discretion was the better part of valor. It certainly doesn't seem logical that they'd make tracks like this, after what Delton said."

"Here comes the Kid. Got someone with him; hasn't he?" asked Bud.

"He sure has—a Mex, I'd say."

"The lone survivor!" the Kid yelled as he rode toward them. "Bud, recognize him?" and he pushed the Mexican, whom he held by the collar, forward.

"Why, he's the fellow we saw in the restaurant! Remember, Mr. Hawkins? The one you pointed out; isn't he?"

"You mean Pete Alvido? Come 'ere, son—let's have a look at you." The deputy peered closely. "Nope! Sure looks like Pete, but it isn't. 'Nough like him to be his brother, though. Hey, Mex, what's your name? What are you doin' around here?"

The Mexican didn't answer. He simply shrugged his shoulders, and stood silent, his face expressionless.

"Speak up, boy! What's your name?"

Still no reply.

"Lost your tongue, Mex?" the Kid broke in. "Take my advice, and answer when you're spoken to." The Kid touched his gun suggestively. Not that he would have thought of enforcing his half-uttered threat, but he simply wanted to show the Mexican they meant business.

At this the man gesticulated toward his throat, and a guttural sound came from his lips.

"Why the pore cuss means he's dumb!" exclaimed Billee Dobb, who had ridden in. "Can't speak! Hey you! No spik? No *habla*?"

The Mexican shook his head forcibly.

"A dumb Greaser!" cried the Kid. "Well, he's not much of a find. He's the only one left of this outfit, though. Hey, Mex! Where's the boss? Gone?"

With a widespread gesture of his arms the man indicated his lack of knowledge of the subject. At least he seemed to understand a little English.

"Can't get much out of him," Hawkins commented. "Well, boys, seems like

you'll have no more trouble takin' possession of the Shootin' Star. It's yours. Say —" and he turned to their captive. "What's your job? Vaquero? Herder? Cook?" At the last word the Mexican nodded vigorously. "You're in luck, boys. Here's a cook all ready for you. Got any food inside? Eats?" the deputy asked the Mexican. He was answered with another affirmative shake of the head.

"Now you're all fixed up for the night. Might as well call in the other two. What's their name again? Shannon, isn't it? Kid, you give 'em a yell. You seem to be able to do that particularly well."

Nort and Dick came riding over in response to the Kid's summons.

"Who's this you got, Kid?" asked Nort. "Some friend of yours? Why, he's the Mexican we saw in Herb's!"

"No he isn't—that's what I thought too," Bud said. "Mr. Hawkins says it's another—though it sure looks like him. This one's dumb."

"What do you mean—stupid?"

"No—can't talk. At least he says he can't—I mean he wants us to understand that he can't." Bud corrected himself.

"I've got to be getting back," interrupted the deputy. "I suppose you men will settle here, now that you've got a cook and food. That is, if he'll cook for you and you want to take a chance that he won't poison you. Hey, you—cook for *hombres*?"

Again that vigorous nod.

"Seems agreeable enough. Now if you want anything, you know where to reach me. If it's at night, you'll find me down the street 'bout half a mile from the office, on the same side. Anyone will tell you where Joe Hawkins's place is. So long, boys. Again, good luck."

"Good-bye, Mr. Hawkins. We're much obliged to you for riding over with us."

"Glad to do it, Bud. Any time at all. Git along there, bronc. *Adios!*"

"So-long!"

"Bye!"

"At last we're here," Nort declared. "No trace of anyone around; hey Bud? Wonder what became of them. I wouldn't mind seeing our little friend with the sawed-off shot-gun again."

"Let's not look for trouble," Dick suggested. "I think what happened was that this fellow you call 'J. D.' decided to take the opportunity to get out without trouble. I don't believe we'll see him again."

"Maybe not. We've got enough to worry about without him. Kid, suppose you take charge of getting things ready for the night. Those sheep won't be here for a week or so, and in the meantime we can fix things up a bit. To-morrow I'll go scouting around for a good sheepman. There ought to be plenty in town. All right, Kid, we're under your orders."

"Check! Nort, you take the horses to the corral and see that they get fed. I guess you'll find some feed around somewhere—there's a barn down there a piece—look there. Dick, you go see what sort of sleepin' quarters they got here. It might be well for us to stay here in the house for the night. We can settle on a bunk house later. The rest of you can make yourselves generally useful. I'll go 'tend to the eats. Mex, we need food! Where's the kitchen?"

Apparently understanding, the Mexican led the way toward the rear, followed by the Kid. The lay-out of the place was a great deal like that of the ordinary cattle ranch. Indeed, if one were not wholly familiar with the types of dwellings which dot the Texas border, he would be hard put to show the difference between a cattle and a sheep ranch. The corral of the cattle ranch would be built of stronger boards, and on the sheep ranch, or "farm," there would be huge vats for "dipping" the sheep, to cure them of any disease they might have contracted.

But except for these minor differences the two ranches are much the same. Of course the personnel of the sheep ranch would not be as extensive as that of the cattle ranch—one herder being able to adequately care for two thousand head of sheep. In shearing time the ranch hands are increased, to take care of this added labor.

So it is not strange to find five hands prepared to take over the management

of a whole sheep ranch. Naturally it would be necessary to hire some "sheep man" to handle the technical part of the venture, for sheep are delicate creatures, and a green manager could easily lose his whole herd in short order.

It was now five o'clock. With a fire roaring in the kitchen and the ranchers hurrying here and there about the place, it seemed home-like and cheerful.

"Be all set in half an hour," the Kid called to Bud as he stepped out in the yard for a moment. "Found plenty of bacon and beans, and enough other stuff to make a pretty fair meal. Reckon you-all can eat, if you're anything like me. What do you think of the place, Bud?"

"Pretty fair, Kid, pretty fair. Looks as though we may be able to make something of it. I've been thinking of buying a radio outfit to keep us company on long winter evenings. You know we bring in the sheep then, and we'll have to stick close to home to take care of them."

"A wireless! A sparkin' outfit! What are you goin' to do, Bud, put them woolies to sleep with music?"

"Hardly that," Bud laughed. "You'll be glad we got it when you hear some of the big fights being reported, just as though you were at the ringside. But apart from that, what do you make of this situation, Kid?"

"You mean comin' back here an' not findin' anybody? Gee, I don't know, Bud! Might be any one of several reasons why this 'J. D.' bird skipped out. 'Course I didn't actually see him, but something tells me he couldn't stand a close look-in to his ways and means of business.

"'Course I shouldn't run down a guy that I never saw. But there's been a lot of funny work goin' on in these parts, and if anyone wanted to be crooked, this is the best place in the world for it. You know this ranch property is right on the border line between Mexico and U. S."

"Say, Kid, look how dark it's getting all of a sudden," Bud interrupted as he looked up into the sky and tested with his hand the direction of the slight breeze blowing. "Wind's in the east. Rain, I guess. Getting hotter, too. Why yes, Kid, I guess you're right about this ranch being a good place to pull shady work. But I don't believe we'll have any trouble."

The Kid whirled around. The next moment he was on his way inside.

"Get the others together!" he yelled. "There's a cyclone comin'!"

Bud scarcely heard him. He stood still, fascinated by the tremendous spectacle.

CHAPTER IX

DELTON RETURNS

Cyclones are somewhat rare visitors on the prairies, but when they do come they make up for lost time. Bud, though he had lived the greater part of his life on the range, had never seen one. Now he stood with his face to the east, drinking in the awesome sight.

The eastern sky was covered with a blanket of black, ominous-looking clouds, which quickly expanded and filled the whole heavens with their darkness. The breeze had died away and a deathlike stillness hung in the air. Nature seemed to be hesitating, gathering up her forces for a tremendous onslaught. Suddenly the black clouds in the east were tinted to a coppery color, which slowly turned to a dark green. And still Bud stood, oblivious to all else save the grandeur of the scene before him.

Within the ranch house the men were scurrying about, shutting windows, glancing out now and then to see the progress of the approaching storm.

Billee Dobb ran to where the Kid was struggling with one of the sashes.

"How about the horses!" he yelled. Though there wasn't a sound without, by a curious phenomena the men talked in shouts, as though they were trying to make themselves heard above a roaring.

"Isn't Nort out there?" the Kid answered, also loudly. "Better make certain, Billee! They'll be killed sure if the funnel takes them sideways!"

"If the funnel hits us we won't care whether we ever saw a bronc or not!" answered the veteran rancher. "We'll all be usin' wings then, not ponies. I'll take a look outside."

"Take Dick with you! I'm finished here. We've only got about six minutes before she hits. What a fine welcome this is! We no sooner get settled, after havin' a time doin' that, when we're all set to get blown away."

The Kid was hurrying to the back of the house. He hesitated as he reached the kitchen, and looked in.

"By the ghost of my aunt Lizzie's cat!" he cried as he saw through the doorway. "If that crazy Mex ain't still fryin' bacon just as calm as if he was on Fifth Avenoo! Hey, you locoed Greaser, big wind comin'!" He gesticulated vigorously. "Whosh-whosh! Whee! Zip-zip-bang! All over! Savvy?" He stopped his dramatic explanation of the oncoming cyclone to see if the Mexican understood. To his surprise the cook nodded several times and pointed toward the sky, turning his other arm windmill fashion. His lips gave forth a whistling sound. After this demonstration he motioned to his bacon, rubbed his stomach, shrugged his shoulders, and went on with his cooking. No words could have said plainer:

"Sure! I know. Cyclone coming. What of it? Can't stop it now. Must eat. Might as well stay here and cook. Hey?"

"Well, if you're not a cool customer!" the Kid cried, shoving his hands deep into his pockets and tilting back on his heels. "Cook! Go ahead an' cook! You might just as well say hello to St. Peter with a fryin' pan in your hand as not. How does she look, Nort?" he asked as the boy rancher came in the door.

"Not so good! Where's Bud?"

"Bud? I thought he was with you. Maybe he's helping with the broncoes. I'll take a squint here in back—" as the Kid stepped into the yard he saw Bud—standing silent, widened eyes staring at the sky. The Kid started back in surprise.

"Another guy that's gone locoed! First the cook, and then you! Hey, Nort, take a look at Bud. He's in a trance or something! Wake up, time to get up!"

"Wonderful!" murmured Bud, without turning his head. "Isn't that wonderful,

Kid? See those colors! The most marvelous thing I ever saw. If I could only paint that! It would be a sensation!"

"Sensation ain't all you'll be if you don't start movin' quick!" the Kid declared. "Nort, take Bud with you and see if everything is all O. K. We've got about three minutes before the show starts. I think we'll be able to tell if the funnel is goin' to hit us, and if it does, we've got to let things ride and head for the cellar."

He stopped suddenly. The five leaned forward, tense, still.

A low moaning filled the air. First like the drone of a huge bumble-bee, it gradually increased in intensity. The ranchers strained their eyes toward the east, where the copper tint had merged to a sickly green. A light breeze sprang up, hot, suffocating.

"Here she comes, boys! Heads up! Get ready to make a dive for the cellar!"

All looked around to make sure that the door of the cyclone cellar—a dugout ten feet from the house—was within easy reach. They moved a bit closer.

Then it happened. From out of the greenish clouds tore a huge black funnel, tip down, capped with a wreath of lightning. With a roar it beat its way across the prairie. As it rushed along it took with it all movable things. Lined with brushes, trees and dust, it seemed to head straight for the ranch.

The five waited no longer. With a leap they reached the cyclone cellar. The Kid was the last in, and just before he disappeared below ground he looked again at the roaring funnel of wind. It was almost upon them. In another moment, unless a near-miracle occurred, there would be nothing left of the Shooting Star but a few timbers. The ranch lay directly in the path.

Cyclones are freaks of nature. Even as the Kid watched, hoping that the terrible funnel might be diverted, nature gave a demonstration of one of its most startling feats. The funnel lifted.

Within three hundred yards of the ranch the tip raised above the ground. As though a giant hand had pulled it up into the heavens, the whirling, twisting cyclone merged into the blackness overhead. A tremendous pressure beat against the Kid's body. The air about was tingling with electricity. And there, directly

above the Kid's head, sailed the terrible funnel, Its tip held harmlessly aloft from contact with the ground, thundering and screaming in disappointed rage. For several seconds the "twister" remained suspended. Then two hundred yards past the ranch it dipped to earth again, and went smashing along on its mission of destruction and death.

The ranch was saved.

The Kid silently led the way out of the cellar. As the five stood once more above ground, they looked about at the surroundings. Off in the distance the cyclone could be seen whirling along, gradually growing smaller and smaller as it departed. As they watched the terror disappear, a prayer of thankfulness was in the heart of each. It was indeed a near-miracle that had saved the ranch from complete annihilation.

Bud was the first to speak. His utterance was not exactly fraught with elegancy, but it expressed the feelings of all.

"Whew!" he said with a long, drawn-out sigh.

"And then some!" cried Dick. "What a show that was!"

"Boy!" Billee Dobb breathed. "I'm sure glad we got missed! When I saw that ole baby comin', I says 'raise yore sights, buster, raise yore sights! You got the wrong range!' An' blamed if she didn't raise, too!"

A laugh started—the kind that relieves the soul after a tense and dangerous moment. Bud broke out in a loud guffaw. Then the Kid let loose—and for two minutes the air re-echoed with the shouts of glee of the five ranchers. Nothing really to laugh at; this laughter was not exactly in appreciation of Billee's remark. It was more in the nature of a celebration.

"Whusch!" cried Bud weakly, when he could get his breath. "You crazy coot! So you're the one that lifted the cyclone, hey? Well, you sure did a good job of it!"

The ranchers made their way over to where the horses had been tied.

"O. K.!" Dick yelled as he came up. "They're all there. Not a hair on 'em touched. Bet they thought it was the end of the world, though!"

"Sure!" assented Nort.

"Now, now, old hoss!" Dick said soothingly as he stroked the nose of his pony. "Scared, eh? Well, I don't blame you a bit. Look at this one shake! Take it easy, boy—it's all over. Easy, there! Feel better now? That's the stuff—walk around a bit. Do you good. Steady! Steady!"

The horses were quickly calmed. Assured by the presence of their masters that they were safe, they soon stopped quivering, and breathed easier. A good horse trusts implicitly in his rider.

"I'll take 'em over nearer the house," declared the Kid. "They'll feel better when they get movin'. By the way—wonder what happened to our cook? Last time I saw him he was fryin' bacon. Take a run to the kitchen, Dick, and look, will you?"

"Sure. Say, there's one shack down," Dick said as he pointed to the wreck of a small building.

"Probably was a bunk house. We won't need one of those for a while, anyway. Well, will you look at that roof!" The Kid indicated another out-house. Its roof was turned directly around, so that the back was where the front should be. Not a board on it was broken.

"Looks like a crazy-house down at Coney Island!" laughed Nort. "Dick, I thought you were going to see about eats? I'm starved."

Dick walked toward the kitchen. Before he got there the aroma of cooking bacon told the waiting cowboys that the Mexican was still on the job.

"Must have the whole place full of food by this time," Bud commented. "Think I'll take another look around, Kid. Billee, you want to come along? I just want to make sure we haven't missed anything."

The two set off on a tour of inspection. It was growing dark now, and it would soon be too late to repair that night anything that was damaged.

"Guess we haven't lost much," Bud said to the veteran rancher. "We're pretty lucky, eh, Billee?"

"Sure are! We'll just look around the corner of this building, however, and then go back. I'm sort of hungry myself."

"Me too. Hope that Mex has—" Bud broke off suddenly. He peered hard at the earth in the shadow of the shack. Then he walked swiftly over.

On the ground lay the body of a man, face down. Bud grasped him gently by the arm and turned him over. On his forehead was a long cut, from which blood was flowing. Bud looked sharply at his face, then started back in surprise.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he said slowly. "It's Delton!"

CHAPTER X

BUD FINDS A NOTE

Billee Dobb approached deliberately and gazed long and earnestly into the face of the recumbent man.

"So that's Delton, is it?" he said. "He sure took a funny way to come back. Wonder if he's—" the rancher stooped swiftly and laid his hand on the breast of the man. "Nope! Still living. We'd better get him to the house soon as possible. Grab hold there, Bud."

Lifting him as gently as they could, so they might not cause the blood to flow more strongly, they carried the injured man toward the ranch house. They laid him on the couch in the living-room, which was known as the "parlor," and generally reserved for funerals.

"I'll get some water and bandages—if I can find any," said Bud when he had disposed of his burden.

"That white shirt of the Kid's will do," Billee suggested as Bud made for the door. "He's got it rolled up in his saddle pack."

The man on the couch seemed to be breathing more strongly now. The blood

from the cut had partly clotted, and the flow was greatly diminished. But a glance at his face showed that he was in a very weak condition.

"Must have been lyin' out there quite a spell," Billee commented, as Bud returned with the shirt and a basin of water. The news of the unconscious visitor had traveled fast, for Dick, Nort and the Kid followed Bud into the room.

"Who is he?" asked the Kid as he bent over. "Little feller, ain't he?"

"Recognize him, Dick?" Bud said, kneeling down by the man's side and dipping one end of the shirt in his basin.

"No, can't say that I—yes I do, too! It's the fellow that was here when we came—the one who offered us the thousand! It's 'J. D.!'"

"Right. We found him lying over by a shack, dead to the world. Billee and I carried him in here. Seems to have a nasty cut, but I don't believe it's dangerous. Way he talked to me here awhile ago, he's too ornery to die."

"Must have been caught in the big wind," Nort said. "Hit by a board, probably."

"So that's Delton, hey?" Yellin' Kid drawled. "Well, mister, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. You don't look pertikerly dangerous to me. But you can't tell about these quiet ones. Liable to fly up any minute. Don't wash that blood off, Bud! Leave it lay. Have him bleedin' again if you don't watch out. Nort, mosey out an' see if that dumb Mex has got the coffee ready. Bring in some, will you? Leave the 'Canned cow' out of it. When this boy wakes up he wants something strong."

The man's eyes opened for a minute, then closed again. The dusk outside was settling rapidly now, and the room was growing darker. Dick ran to the kitchen and returned with a lighted candle, which he held close to the head of the recumbent figure. By this time their visitor had regained consciousness, and was staring wide-eyed at the group surrounding the couch—three men leaning expectantly over his body, while a fourth held a lighted candle aloft like a weird statue. Little wonder that a man awaking to such surroundings would be somewhat bewildered.

"How do you feel, mister?" Yellin' Kid asked solicitously when he saw that

Delton was conscious.

"Not so—good," was the jerky answer. "Stomach—sick—head feels—"

"Swally this," urged Billee holding to his lips the steaming coffee Nort had brought from the kitchen. "Sure it's hot! Don't want cold sody, do ya? 'At's-a-boy—drink 'er down! Better now?"

"Yea," the man answered in a weak voice. "What happened? Woolworth tower fall on me? Wow! What a head! Seems to me I remember takin' a subway train at Times Square—or was that last year? Can't just think straight now——"

"New York," whispered Bud to Dick. "Thought he didn't look like a westerner!"

"Just you lay quiet," advised Yellin' Kid. "Won't do you a bit of good to talk now. Got lots of time to do that. You stay here to-night, an'——"

"I remember now! That storm! I was riding over toward the Shootin' Star ranch, when the sky got black, and that dumb-bell horse of mine started to act up. The next minute I got hit by a ton of bricks."

He was silent a moment, thinking.

"Say——" he suddenly propped himself up on one elbow and glanced around. "I know where I am! Yes. And I know you—and you!" pointing at Bud and Dick. "You're the two galoots that—oh!" he finished weakly, and sank back. He closed his eyes again. It was not evident to the watchers whether he had really fainted, or whether he realized he was talking too much.

At all events it was useless to expect him to say more. At Bud's suggestion he was carried upstairs, and after his heavier clothing had been removed he was laid in one of the beds. He seemed to be resting easily, and if his sleepy attitude was simulated at first, it certainly was not now, as his regular breathing and relaxed condition indicated.

"Better let him sleep," Dick said in a low voice. "He'll be all right when he wakes up. The bleeding from his head has stopped, and if he had anything else the matter he would have told us. I think we'd all better eat. Let's get out of here, anyway—we'll disturb him if we talk much."

"Eat!" exclaimed the Kid when they had all left the room wherein Delton lay. "Let's see now—have I heard that word before, or did I dream it? Believe me, when I sit down to this chow nothin' is goin' to drag me away—fire, wind or flood! Seems like that Mex cook of ours is a hoodoo. Every time we start to eat something happens."

"Guess we'll go through with it all right this time," Dick remarked with a laugh. "Here we are, boys. Set! And go to it! Enough bacon here for an army. Kid, go easy on that bread! You want to choke?"

The five were seated around a table in the rear of the house. In the middle of the table was a huge plate of bacon, and next to this was a mess of beans, steaming hot. Bread, butter, coffee and condensed milk or "Canned cow" completed the repast.

"Wonder where the Mex got all this food?" Nort asked as he reached for the bread. "Real good, anyhow. Guess we'd better keep the Greaser, if he'll stay."

"Keep him 'til we get settled," added Dick. "I don't exactly like his looks. He's too much like the Mex that Joe Hawkins pointed out—the one he said to watch out for—remember?—to suit me."

"Don't be tryin' to find trouble, Dick," advised Bud. "That Mex is just as good as the next one. But it is funny why he should be lingering around here when all the rest lit out. And to have this food all ready for us. Well——"

"Got a few suspicions up your own sleeve, eh?" laughed Dick.

"Boys," Billee said slowly, "I want to tell you something. You remember what your Dad said about smugglin', Bud?"

At the word the men at the table gave a slight start.

"Yes, smugglin'. You'd forgot all about it, hadn't ye? Well, I ain't. While we were in Hawkins's office I noticed a bill-head on his desk. I took it. Here it is."

He passed over the paper to the Kid. The others got up and leaned over the Kid's shoulder, reading it.

"Two thousand dollars' reward," said the Kid haltingly, "for the a-rest and

con-viction of—the person whose picture is below, and who is known in New York as Dapper Dan Craven. He is wanted for smuggling Chinese. Escaped custody at——"

He stopped. His eyes sought the picture.

"By the ghost of my aunt Lizzy's cat!" he exclaimed. "If it ain't our friend Delton!"

Bud reached over and slowly took the paper from the Kid's nerveless hand.

"Delton!" he cried, as he saw the picture. "Just as sure as I'm living, that's who it is!"

"But why didn't Hawkins arrest him, then?" Nort asked in a puzzled tone of voice. "He knew where he was. He could have come out any time and put the bracelets on him and he'd have his man."

"Now, boys, if you'll give me a little time, I'll—" started Billee Dobb in a calm voice.

"Go ahead!"

"We're listenin'!"

"Well, in the first place, I don't think Joe Hawkins ever saw this Delton. You know what a hard job we had gettin' to the ranch—I bet if we had had Hawkins with us we would have had to fight our way in. That's what that guard was out for—the one that tried to stop us. He knew we weren't deputies, so he let us go through.

"Also, that bill was just printed and sent to Hawkins. Perhaps he didn't have time to look at it. And say—that accounts for Delton's quick get-away, too. One of his men rode in an' told him that there was a price on him, and he got, fast. He must have made this ranch his headquarters. No wonder he didn't have no sheep around! Boys, we can expect some right excitin' things to happen, in the next few weeks!"

Silence followed Billee's long speech. The veteran rancher had thrown a veritable bombshell into camp. Delton—the man lying asleep upstairs—the head

of the smugglers! Two thousand dollars' reward! Why, all they had to do was to tie him up and carry him to town—over to the deputy's house. Capturing the smuggling king the first night at the Shooting Star! It seemed too good to be true.

"There's a catch in it somewhere," commented Dick. "No man with a reward like that on his head is going to dump himself into our hands."

"Why not? It wasn't his fault. He came sneakin' around the place to spy on us and got caught by the cyclone. Then a board or something hit him on the head and he fell where we found him. Nothing strange about that! We got him and got him good! Wow, what can't we do with two thousand dollars!"

"There's one thing we forgot, boys," the Kid broke in.

"And what's that?"

"We're downstairs, an' Delton is upstairs."

"That's soon fixed!" Bud cried, as he sprang for the steps. "Let's go, boys!"

"Take it easy!" cautioned the Kid quickly. "What's the use of scarin' him? We'll just go up there and truss him up while he's asleep. Won't hurt him. That cut on the head was all that ailed him. Now, take your time!"

The ranchers moved quietly toward the room in which they had left Delton. As he reached the door, Bud opened it slowly and peered in. Not a sound. Then he stuck his head in a bit further. Still no action. In the darkness he could see the outline of the bed but faintly.

Softly he turned the covers down. Farther—farther! Then he let out a yell.

"Hey, come here! Quick!"

"What's the trouble?" The Kid called as he entered the room.

"He's gone! He beat it! Look!"

In the bed, molded into the shape of a man, were two pillows. Delton had escaped, leaving the pillows in such a way as to make it appear that he was still

in the bed.

"Here's a note!" Bud cried. "He left it on one of the pillows. Let's have that candle, Dick."

By the flickering spluttering light of the candle Bud read aloud:

"Sorry I got to go so sudden, but this bed is too hard. I wouldn't sleep well. If you guys want a little advice, you'll move along out of this section. It ain't healthy. A word to the wise. J. D."

CHAPTER XI

JOE HAWKINS'S VISIT

"Can you beat that!" Nort ejaculated when Bud finished reading. "Nerve—that Delton certainly has his share of it!"

The feeling which the note aroused was not just one of disappointment. The Kid seemed highly amused at the turn events had taken. Billee Dobb assumed an "I-told-you-so" expression which sat comically on his grizzled features. The rest looked slightly bewildered.

"Got away, didn't he?" Dick asked in a flat tone of voice. "Through the window, I guess. Yep. Slid down the rain water leader. Well——"

"An' he took with him your wireless and your new bunch of cattle," the Kid remarked sardonically. "Never count the chickens before they scratch. Mr. Delton is a slicker article than we figgered on."

"Let's see the note a minute, Bud," Nort said. "Huh—'bed too hard—couldn't sleep!' Wise sort of a bird; isn't he? Say, he must have written this as soon as we left the room."

"Why?"

"Because if he waited too long he couldn't have seen to write—too dark. That means he's far away by this time. He probably——"

"The horses! Ten to one he grabbed one of them an' beat it!" Yellin' Kid cried.

Without further parley the boys and men filed from the room and made for the corral. The horses had been tied to a pole nearest the house, and they were not long in reaching them. They could be easily seen in the moonlight which now flooded the prairie.

"Mine's there!" Bud yelled as he came within view of the animals. "Guess you're wrong, Kid. Seems like there's—no there isn't, either! Only four! Whose mount is missing?"

"You might know it," the Kid said disgustedly. "The coot took mine—out of all that bunch to pick from, he had to rustle my new bronc! By golly, if ever I set eyes on you again, you old——"

"Take it easy!" laughed Bud. "Could be a lot worse. He might have turned the rest of 'em loose, too."

"No use beefin' about it," said Billee Dobb. "All over now. He's gone—an' so's the Kid's bronc. Talk about it in the morning. Me, I'm tired!"

The night passed uneventfully. At sun-up the Kid appeared at the door of Bud's room and grinned in at him.

"Ready for work?" he cried.

"You mean trailin' your horse, Kid?" Bud asked mischievously.

The grin left Yellin' Kid's face and his eyes flashed.

"No," he said shortly. "I'll leave that for later. When I got some time on my hands that I want to use up in enjoyment. Then I'll go after your friend Delton."

"He's no friend of mine," retorted Bud. "But let's not chop about it until after breakfast, anyway. Think that Mexican cook is on the job?"

"Heard him movin' around a while ago, Bud. Let's go down an' see. Billee is downstairs, and I guess Nort an' Dick are too."

When they reached the dining room they found the others waiting for them.

"Sleep good, boys?" Dick asked.

"Sure did. Felt like I'd never wake up. Say, steak this morning!" Nort cried as he saw the table loaded with food. "We got *some* cook here!"

"Don't it strike you all kind 'a funny that the Mex has got so much stuff on hand?" Billee Dobb wanted to know. "Course it *might* be that this Delton feller had just stocked up before we came. Hey, Mex!" he yelled into the kitchen. "*Aqui! Pronto!*"

The Mexican strolled calmly to where the five sat waiting.

"Where you get all this?" Billee pointed to the plates of meat.

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders and motioned toward the kitchen.

"Boss leave it here?"

Another shrug.

"Now listen, Mex. You know what I mean. You nod or shake your head when I ask you questions." Yellin' Kid walked over and stood before the Mexican.

"First, did you work for this guy Delton?"

A nod.

"Then when he beat it, you stayed here, hey?"

A nod.

"Why?"

"He can't answer that with his head, Kid," Nort broke in.

"I know it, but maybe he can tell us by motions. Hey? Why you no go with

Delton?"

The Mexican pointed toward himself, then to the kitchen. His hands simulated the job of peeling potatoes. Then he flung both arms wide, and moved his head in a semi-circle, eyes opened as though he were looking for something.

"So he went when you were in the kitchen, hey, an' didn't say nothin' about it. Well, that sounds logical."

"Kid, for Pete's sake, let's eat!" Bud interrupted. "You did fine—give you a badge as a special detective. All right, Mex, outside. Gee, you certainly are curious, Kid!"

"I just want to know a few things, that's all," Yellin' Kid protested. "I don't want to get poisoned. Can't tell who that Mex is—for all we know he may be one of Delton's men left here to watch us."

"Say, I was thinking the same thing," Dick put in. "But his graphic explanation as to why he's here seems to be at least plausible. If, as Billee suggested, Delton cut out when he found there was a price on his head it doesn't seem reasonable that he'd bother taking the cook along. How about it, Billee?"

"Ain't makin' no statements," the veteran rancher replied slowly. "Want to think things out a few minutes first."

"Billee's going to solve the great mystery for us!" Nort laughed. "Never you mind, ole horse, you knew your stuff when you grabbed that bill-head from Hawkins's office. The trouble with us was, we were too slow."

The conversation hit on the topics of the night before as the ranchers made a healthy breakfast. When they had satisfied their hunger Bud leaned back in his chair and said:

"Well, what's on the program this morning, Kid? Beckon you better take charge for a while. Then Dick can be head boss, and so on—'til we get the sheep in. O. K.?"

"All right with me, Bud," the Kid agreed. "One of us wants to take a ride into town and see about gettin' hold of a sheep-man. I got to get me a pony, too."

"I'll go," offered Nort. "Think I'll look up Hawkins. He might like to know what happened."

The five walked slowly into the yard. The meal seemed to change their ideas, and set them quietly to thinking. Bud was leaning against the side of the ranch house. The Kid strolled over to the corral and looked longingly at the four horses tethered there. Billee Dobb was seated on the steps smoking his pipe, when he noticed a cloud of dust in the distance.

"Rider," he said, more to himself than to the others. "Got a hunch who it is."

The dust cloud grew quickly nearer, and from it emerged the figure of a man on horseback.

"Someone coming," Dick called.

"Who is it?" Bud asked. From where he stood he was unable to see.

"Don't know yet. Looks familiar, though. Here he comes."

"It's Joe Hawkins!" exclaimed Bud, as the horseman rode into view. "Hi, Joe —Mr. Hawkins, I mean."

"Joe'll do, son," the deputy said with a smile as he dismounted. "Looks like you was havin' a convention here."

"Just thinking things over," the Kid, who had walked up, explained. "Glad you came, Mr. Hawkins."

"Thought that was you," Billee Dobb said, rising to his feet and removing the pipe from his mouth. "Seen you way off, and says to myself, bet that's Joe Hawkins."

"You got good eyes," laughed the deputy.

"Oh, it wasn't exactly my eyes. I had a hunch."

"Billee Dobb is our official detective," Bud said with a grin. "Tell him about the hand-bill you copped, Billee."

Explanations were in order, and with continuous interruptions the deputy finally heard the story of the cyclone and what followed. He questioned the boys as to the appearance and talk of Delton, and at last confessed that he must be the man wanted.

"Though I didn't think they knew just who he was," Hawkins added. "All I knew was that the reward of two thousand was for the head of the smuggling system. So they got him spotted, have they? That means we won't have to work in the dark. It's a wonder the central office wouldn't give a man the whole story when they're about it, instead of lettin' it trickle through. Well, boys, it's time you knew what this smuggling is all about, hey?"

CHAPTER XII

THE STORY OF SMUGGLING

"Between this country and Mexico," began the deputy, "there's a strip of land called the border—on one side U. S., and on the other Greaser-land. You know all about that. Across this border run several roads—passages into and from Mexico. And each of these roads is patrolled by United States officers.

"These men are placed there for a purpose, and one purpose among others is to prevent the illegal sending into the States of Chinamen. You see only so many foreigners from each nation are allowed to settle in the United States each year, and once that quota is reached, no more will be admitted. Naturally there are always men who want to come to the "Land of Plenty" and make their fortunes, but unless these men are within the quota for that year, they are forbidden to enter. All Chinese are forbidden entry and have been for several years.

"But there are ways and means of getting around that situation. Suppose a Chinaman wants to become rich. The first thing he thinks about is America. All he has to do in America, he thinks, is to bend over and pick up the gold pieces that are lying in heaps all over the streets.

"So the Chinaman makes up his mind to come to America. He goes to Foy

Lee, a slick friend of his, to find out about it. Foy Lee says 'Good thing you see me. Sure. I fix you up. Easy. You want go America? All light. Can do. You got fifteen hundred dollah?' Now where would a poor Chink get fifteen hundred dollars? He tells Foy Lee there ain't that much money in the world. So Foy Lee starts thinkin'. He rubs the top of his head, blinks his eyes, and grunts twice. Then he says, 'you still want go America?' 'Sure!' our Chink answers. 'All light,' says Foy Lee. 'You come with me.' The rascal knows all the time what to do, only he wants to make it seem hard, so he can get his little rake off.

"Foy Lee takes his friend to an office over on a side street in some Chinese city. There he meets a man who guarantees him passage to U. S. if the Chink will just sign the paper. That's all—no money nor nuthin'—only sign the paper an' he gets to America. What is the paper? Oh, just a promise that the Chink will pay the company that's sending him all his future wages—less enough for food—until fifteen hundred dollars have been paid. Just a mere matter of slavery, that's what it amounts to.

"But the Chink signs. What's fifteen hundred in the land of 'plenty dollah?' Now our Chink is put on a vessel bound for Mexico. There he is met by an agent of the same company that put him on board in China.

"This agent takes him to a town, near the border—say Presidio, or some such place. Then the real fun begins. The company notifies their man at headquarters that the Chink has arrived and is ready to be shipped across the border. Headquarters looks up the Chink's bond that he signed in China, and which has been received through the mail, and sends back word that everything is O. K., that the Chink, with several others, is to be handed to a smuggler at a certain spot, to be smuggled over the border. And when the Chink is so delivered the company's part ends.

"After this the Chink's fate is in the hands of the smugglers, and if they get caught, and the poor coot is sent back to China again by the emigration authorities, he's still got to pay that fifteen hundred, although all he got for his money was a long ride and hard treatment.

"The border runners take their consignment of Chinese and either pack them in the back of an auto or wagon, or arrange to smuggle them across some other way. If they're lucky, they get through. If not they get hauled up by the border officers, and the runners get jail and the Chinks are sent back to their native land.

And even if they do get through the lines the Chinks' troubles aren't over, for at any time they're liable to be pulled in for not having what they call a 'chock gee,' which is a government paper signifying they are here lawfully and not by smuggling. I told you about that before.

"And that's how the game works. These smugglers get hold of a ranch near the border so they can hide their Chinks when they get them across, until the time is set to turn them loose. 'Course I can't say that's what this place has been used for. But it would be great for it."

The narrator paused and the Boy Ranchers drew long breaths of excitement.

"Well, boys, what do you think about it?"

The tall deputy looked from one to the other. He was prepared for a deluge of questions, and they came.

"Can't the Chinese counterfeit this 'chock gee'?"

"Who gets the fifteen hundred dollars?"

"Has that smuggling been going on here—near the Shooting Star?"

"Cease firing!" the deputy laughed. "I'll answer Bud's question first. Yes, it *has* been going on here—right past Roaring River. That's how our marshal got shot up—tryin' to stop a load of Chinks from gettin' through.

"That fifteen hundred, Dick, is divided between the men who actually do the running, and the company that ships the Chinks to Mexico. The smugglers get about five hundred a head for every man they get in. The 'chock gee' is often counterfeited, but not very successfully. It's printed like a government bank bill, and is just as hard to fake."

For some time the discussion about smuggling went on. The deputy told of the different tricks resorted to by the border runners in getting their human cargo safely into the United States, and to what lengths they will go to prevent capture. Boats are also used to transport the Chinese to the American seacoast, Hawkins said, and if, by chance, the runners were caught with a load of prospective undesirable Americans they got out of the difficulty by the simple expedient of dumping the Chinese into the sea.

Another method of transportation was for the smugglers to put off in a small craft from a Mexican port, with a cargo of barrels and Chinese. When the boat neared the United States coast the Chinese would be nailed in the barrels and thrown overboard, to trust to the mercies of Fate to bring them ashore. Often the wind blows in an offshore direction, which spells death to the floating Chinese; weeks later they are found dead, when the barrels pile up on some distant coast.

This system of sneaking Chinese into this country was well established, said Hawkins, and the smugglers make use of scouts in small cars before they attempt to bring a load of Chinese across the line. These scouts ride swiftly along the route of the proposed entry, and locate, definitely, the position of each border patrol, so that when the run is actually made the driver of the car filled with Chinese knows the spots to avoid.

Of course the Boy Ranchers were chiefly interested in the part their new Shooting Star property might have played in this game of smuggling.

"And the fellow that lived here is the local head of that system!" Bud exclaimed. "Say, we let a rare bird go when he escaped."

"We've still got a chance to get him," Dick declared. "He must be around somewhere. That note—you saw the note we found, didn't you, Mr. Hawkins?—well, that indicated we might look for another visit from the coot. The Kid will be glad to see him, eh, Kid?"

"An' I don't mean maybe!" Yellin' Kid exploded. "Stealin' the best bronc I ever had—just when I was gettin' him broken in proper—an' me away out here in the wilderness with nothin' to ride——"

"I'll get you a pony," the deputy offered. "There's one I know of that's a beaut—fast and strong. Friend of mine wants to sell her."

"I'd be sure grateful if you'd do that, mister. It sort of hits me hard, losin' a good bronc like that."

"It wasn't your fault, Kid," Bud hastened to say. "And Dad will insist on buying you another. So if Mr. Hawkins knows of one that will suit you, take it. You'll fix him up with a horse then, Mr. Hawkins?"

"Depend on it," the tall deputy declared. "Now to business. I've told you boys

all I knew about the way smuggling is being done around here, but I didn't do it just to be interestin'. I want you-all to help me."

"Sure!"

"That's what we're here for!"

"No, we're not, Kid," Bud corrected. "We're here to herd sheep. But we'll certainly help Mr. Hawkins all we can."

"Here's the dope, boys," and the deputy leaned closer. "This Delton may or may not have been doin' business here at the ranch. If he has been, an' I'm goin' to figger that way, his friends still expect him to be here. He left in too much of a hurry to send out word. An' here's where you-all come in.

"I want you to pretend the ranch hasn't changed hands. Just lay low for a while, not travelin' 'round much, an' we'll see what happens. I don't mind tellin' you we got another tip, that some Chinks were goin' to be rushed across within the next few days. Can't say just when, but soon now. It's a big load this time, an' if things work the way I think they will, they'll try to land them at this ranch."

"You mean they'll think Delton is still here?" Nort inquired excitedly.

"Yes. Of course I may be wrong—that may not be the plans at all. But I've got pretty good reasons for thinkin' I'm right. We sort of suspected that the Shootin' Star was bein' used for illegal purposes, but we never had a chance to prove it. The place was too well guarded, and without a warrant you can't go on another's property. I knew we'd not find anything if we did search the place, for the Chinks are only landed at night, and shipped away the next morning; scattered all over the country. They all look so much alike it's hard to tell 'em apart."

"So you never really saw Delton?" asked Nort.

"Nope—never have. He never came to town—whatever stuff he wanted he sent his men in for."

"Told you!" Billee Dobb cried. "I knew he never saw the geezer! Just like I said—nobody was allowed in here with a badge on."

"Right again," the Kid said with a grin. "Billee's the only one of this gang that seems to know his stuff."

"Well, that's the plan, boys," stated Mr. Hawkins. "Are you with me?"

"You bet!"

"Bring on the smugglers!"

"Kid, here's your chance to find out what became of your shirt!"

"Wait!" the deputy held up his hand. "We can't go into this thing like that, boys! It's too dangerous. Enough men have been killed now by the smugglers, and I don't want to add to the list. I thought a long time before I came over this morning, and I finally decided I'd take a chance on you. When I met you first I knew you were dependable men. Remember—this is no joke! We've got to be ready to take what comes!"

The faces of the boys sobered in an instant.

"I guess you'll find you weren't far wrong," Bud said quietly. "We've been in a few tight squeezes before—I suppose you heard of Del Pinzo?"

"Certainly. He was captured and jailed a while ago. Don't know whether he got out since or not."

"Well, we are the ones who put him there," Bud went on in a quiet tone.

"No! Why say,—I remember you now! I saw you bring him in! Well, well! So that's the way of things! Boys, I'm sure glad I met you! Between us we ought to make a go of this. So you captured Del Pinzo! Now here's another job for you. What do you think of this idea?"

The boys leaned close as they prepared to hear the deputy's plan.

CHAPTER XIII

TRAPPED

For some minutes the boys listened to the details of the deputy's scheme. It involved danger, there was no doubt of that, but it also gave a chance for success. If luck held in their favor—and Kid said after the run of misfortune they had met with it was time for a change of weather—they might hope for a rich prize—possibly Delton himself—though this last did not seem likely. The whole success of the plan depended on fooling the smugglers into thinking the ranch was still held by Delton.

"And there we are," finished Hawkins. "Any questions, boys? You-all know what to do?"

"All set!" Yellin' Kid answered. "Now that's over with, guess I'll mosey down to town."

"Rather you stayed around, Kid, if you don't mind," said the deputy. "Anything particular you wanted?"

"Well, just to see about that bronc you mentioned. And we got to get hold of a sheepman soon."

"I'll fix that up for you," Hawkins offered. "Dick, how about you riding back with me?"

"Glad to, Mr. Hawkins. Anybody want anything?"

"Better find out about food," suggested Nort. "And we could all stand a clean shirt or two. Before you go, Dick, we all better take inventory. Didn't bring much, you know. What do you say, boys? Speak up, and Dick can collect your stuff while he's in town."

"Where's that Mex?" the Kid asked. "Wait a minute while I head for the kitchen."

He bounded up the steps and flung open the door. To his surprise a figure stumbled away and ran back. But Yellin' Kid was faster, and in a moment he had

collared the man. It was the Mexican cook.

"Hey, what the mischief you doin' here? Huh? Listening weren't you?"

The Mexican shook his head.

"What, then? If you weren't listenin' what were you doin'?"

The cook pointed toward the kitchen and then to his mouth. He spread both hands, palms upward.

"No more grub? Oh, I see. An' you was comin' to tell us?"

"What's the matter, Kid?" the deputy called. "Who you talking to?"

The Kid dragged the Mexican out into the yard.

"This bird," he said. "Cook. The one we found here. He was hidin' behind the door—wants me to believe he came out to tell us there was no more eats. Why you run, hey? What's the idea of that?" He tightened his grip on the Mexican's collar.

"Oh, let the poor Greaser alone, Kid," Bud objected. "He's all right. Just scared, that's all. The way you jerked open the door was enough to scare anyone."

"Yea? Maybe. Anyway, I don't like this coot's looks. Back you go, Mex. Next time don't be snoopin' around like that. We'll get your stuff for you." He released his grasp, and the Mexican slunk back into the house.

"Funny gink," commented Billee Dobb in a drawling tone of voice, as he stared at the door through which the cook had disappeared. "Queerest Mex I ever saw."

"The old detective still on the job," the Kid laughed and grinned. "Well, Mr. Hawkins wants to get started. Guess you can order a whole stock of food, Dick. The store got a buckboard, deputy?"

"Believe it has."

"Then you can tell 'em what you want and they'll cart it over. Flour, bacon, bakin' powder, canned tomatoes, some yellow clings—don't forget them, Dick—and whatever else you can think of. Shirts can wait. All right, boys. Stay here, Dick, I'll bring your bronc."

"The Kid wants to handle a pony again," Nort said, when the Kid had left. "He hated to lose that one of his."

"Mighty fond of it," declared Bud. "While you're gone, Dick, I think I'll take a look around and see what I can find."

"Wouldn't go too far," Hawkins cautioned. "Here's your bronc, Dick. Let's be on our way. See you fellers later. So long."

The two—Dick and the deputy—rode toward the town. Billee Dobb resumed the smoking of his pipe. The effect of the exciting plan they had just heard seemed to have departed with the deputy, for the minds of those at the ranch turned again to the business of sheep farming. Billee spoke of "washes," and "dips," and of buying a few "hurdles." These terms were Greek to the boys, being experienced as they were only in cattle and not sheep raising, but Billee explained to them some of the peculiarities of the "woolies." He in a varied career had seen most of the life of the range, and it was no surprise to the boys to find he had once herded sheep.

As the morning wore on, the ranchers busied themselves in the doing of many tasks about the place. The Kid made a thorough inspection of the roofs and sides of the several shacks, to check up on the repairing needed. Nort investigated the state of their living quarters—the bunk and cook house. Bud decided to ride a bit through the surrounding country, to observe the extent of their range, and to see to the fences.

Bud was not exactly "fence riding." This means following the fence until a break is seen, repairing it, and going on to the next break. It is difficult and tiresome work, no task to occupy an idle morning with. As Bud rode along, his mind was busy with the thoughts of all that had happened in the short time the boys had been on the Shooting Star. The plan that the deputy had outlined for the capture of the smugglers called for work, and it had only a fair chance of success. Nevertheless there seemed no other way to achieve results, and the advantages of the control of the Shooting Star had to be realized early in the

game.

"I'd like to run across Delton," thought Bud, feeling unconsciously for his gun. His hand encountered no holster, and he suddenly realized that he had not bothered to arm himself before starting out.

"Just as well that I don't see Delton," he said to himself a trifle ruefully. "Wouldn't do me a lot of good to meet him when I haven't a ghost of a show of bringing him in. Yet I might take a chance on him if I saw him first." The pony he was riding stepped carefully so as to avoid prairie dog holes, which would throw him and his rider if he stepped in one suddenly.

"Might be a good idea to turn around," thought Bud aloud. "Don't want to leave the work of the ranch to Nort and the Kid and Billee, though there isn't an awful lot to do yet. When those sheep come in we'll have our hands full. Oh, well, guess I'll ride a bit farther. See how much more work this fence needs."

He was riding slowly now, looking carefully about him. The country appeared vaguely familiar. Certain bushes looked as though he had seen them before—there was a small tree that he had certainly passed some time before. The cowboy's sight is so trained by years on the prairie that even the shape of a bush will be remembered subconsciously. There is so much land in the west that it is necessary to have some means to guide oneself about, else a rider could very easily get lost along a trail that should be familiar.

"Seems to me I've been here before," Bud said. "Let's see now—that bush. Know I saw that sometime. That little hill there—why—I'll bet that is—" he spurred his mount to a faster gait and made for a small knoll that rose in front of him. As he reached it he gave a yell.

"I know now! This is where we got in that fight with the hidden gunman! And over there ought to be—sure enough! The water hole! I didn't think we were so near it. I must have come further than I thought. Well—might as well take a look around. Right here is where the bird that did all the shooting must have lain. Come here, bronc!"

The boy dismounted and slipped his horse's bridle rein on his wrist. Then he threw himself down on the sand in the position their antagonist might have taken when he fired at them.

"Here I am with a view of the water hole, and in a good place to shoot from without being shot. Now I want to get away quick. What do I do? If I roll to the left, I expose myself to fire. If I roll to the right, I—" there was a little clump of mesquite by his right elbow. Bud pulled himself toward this. "That would afford protection, but once I get in here how can I get out? Now—" The boy was rolling to the center.

With a "Hold it, bronc!" he released the reins and his hand slid off the clump. Suddenly a queer thing happened. Bud felt the ground below him give way, and the next moment he found himself in a hole just large enough to admit his body, and about four feet deep. Above him the bushes had closed again, effectively screening him from the view of anyone above ground. He had accidentally solved the mystery of the gunman's strange disappearance.

For a few seconds Bud lay still, so sudden was the shock of the fall. He was not really stunned, however, and as soon as he recovered from his surprise he struggled to his feet and parted the brush above him. His horse was near by, moving slowly and cropping grass.

Then he saw how easily it would be to escape observation by falling into the small pit. The bush was certainly not large enough to conceal a man, and for this reason no one would imagine it could serve to screen a hole. It afforded a perfect hiding place. On either side was flat prairie, and no one would suspect the presence of a hidden person in that country.

"So that's how it all happened!" Bud gave a low whistle. "No wonder we missed the fellow. Say, this is one bird of a hiding place! All a man has to do is to roll in it, like I did. Anyone who can tell this hole is here without being in it is a better detective than I am.

"But what a crazy spot for a hiding place! Surely whoever dug it didn't know he'd use it to fire on us and then escape. Must have been some other reason for making it, and then it came in handy when whoever shot at us wanted to get away. He must have just lain quiet while we looked around, then, when we left, he just came out and walked away. Clever, all right. Now who'd think of a stunt like that?"

He looked more closely at the hole. It was well walled up, and had evidently been dug some time ago. By parting the bushes and kneeling on a mound of

earth at the bottom, a perfect sight of the surrounding territory could be obtained. A gun could be poked through the bush and all the ground, except a very small part directly in front of the hill, would be covered. The person who dug it evidently had in mind the advantages of firing from a hidden spot.

"Well, no use in staying in here any longer. Hope that fool bronc of mine is still there. Don't want to lose her like the Kid did his. Won't the rest be surprised when I tell them about this! The Kid will want to come right out and see it, and try it out. And Billee Dobb will say 'I thought there was sumpin' like this!' Gosh, this thing is pretty deep." Bud put both hands on the sides and pulled himself toward the top.

He threw one leg over the edge and was just about to spring out when that unconscious something which often warns us of the presence of another caused him to look up. What he saw almost caused him to fall back into the pit again.

Looking down at him was a man. In his hand he held a gun, the muzzle pointed at Bud's head. And as the boy saw the man's face he uttered a cry.

"Delton!"

"The same! I see you decided to visit us. Well, buddy, you're in for a good long visit!" Delton's lips curled in a sardonic smile.

CHAPTER XIV

TO-MORROW NIGHT

Back of Delton Bud saw another man—and after a moment he recognized him as the cowboy with the saw-off shot-gun who had warned them away from the Shooting Star.

"Up out of that!" Delton commanded. "Keep your hands high. Don't try no funny work or you'll be eatin' breakfast with St. Peter."

Discretion was easily the better part of valor, and, realizing this, Bud made no hostile motion. He climbed meekly out of the pit.

"What do you think of our little hide-an'-seek hole, Merkel? Or perhaps you had some experience with it before. Hey?"

"So you're the one who shot at us!" Bud cried hotly. "Well, let me tell you that it was a coward's trick. If you——"

"Say, buddy, I want to tell *you* something. The less you talk the better it will be for you." Delton's eyes held a dangerous glint. "I don't know what you're talking about. No—never mind! Don't answer me. Sam—" this to the puncher who stood behind Delton—"if this bird says another word shut him up—quick!" Sam nodded and stepped a little forward.

"Turn around," Delton ordered shortly. As Bud turned he felt his arms grabbed and forced back until his wrists were held firmly together. A neckerchief was wound around his wrists and tied tightly. Then Delton "frisked" him, or searched him, for weapons. Finding none he forced Bud at the point of his gun to walk ahead some fifteen yards, where the ponies stood—Bud's and the two others.

"Upstairs, Merkel." Delton motioned toward Bud's pony. "You're goin' for a little ride with us. Step on it, now."

With some difficulty Bud succeeded in mounting his bronco. The little pony was trembling, as though it realized something of what was going on.

"Well, sonny, how does it feel to be talked to and not be able to talk back? Something like that Mexican cook of yours, hey?"

"The Mexican cook!" Bud turned swiftly in his saddle.

"So he's one of your men too! I thought—" he began hotly.

"You thought nothin'!" the one called Sam interrupted in a rough voice. "You heard what the boss said. If you want to enjoy good health a while longer, keep your mouth shut!"

There was nothing for it but to obey. It would do no good to persist in

questioning his captors, and not only would he learn nothing, but the questions would only serve to antagonize them more.

The three rode along silently. Now and then Bud would shift in the saddle, for it is no easy thing to ride a long ways on a nervous pony with one's hands tied behind. Finally they seemed to reach their destination—the house Bud had seen in the distance. It was a ramshackle affair, with the roof partly torn away and no vestige of paint. Evidently it had once been used for a farm house, for about it were several other shacks, probably to store grain in.

Delton dismounted and held the bridle of Bud's pony.

"Your new home," he said, with a grin. "Come right in. Sorry we can't fix you up better, but you see all the servants are away."

The lad hesitated a moment.

"Off you come!" Delton seized Bud by the belt and pulled. The boy tumbled off his pony and hit the ground.

"That wasn't—necessary!" the boy panted, as he lay there with most of the breath knocked out of him. Luckily he had fallen on his side, and not on his face, which would have meant a real injury, his hands tied as they were.

"Maybe not, but I figger it'll do you good. Give you an appetite for dinner," and Delton laughed harshly. "Where I come from we treat 'em worse than that."

"Aw, let him alone," Sam growled. "No use hurtin' the kid! That won't help us any. If we get caught it won't be so good havin' a lot of enemies."

"Who said we were goin' to get caught?" Delton walked over to where Sam sat on his pony. "Sam, I haven't liked your actions lately. Now you yell about getting caught. You know what happened to that last bird who arranged for me to meet up with the cops?"

"Yea, I know." Sam moved uneasily in his saddle. He did not meet Delton's eyes. "You don't think I'd tell on you, do ya—an' get twenty years myself? Ain't likely. Anyway——"

"All right! Pipe down. Get this kid inside. I want to see if Slim got back yet."

"Come on, kid. Here, I'll help you up. Hurt yourself?" Sam had dismounted and assisted Bud to his feet.

"No, I didn't. Thanks. What was his idea in pulling me off like that? If ever I get him I'll remember it."

"Oh, he always pulls stunts like that. Wants everybody to know he's a hard guy. Comes from New York, and thinks he can put it all over the West. One thing I will say for him, he sure can shoot. That's enough, now."

Sam's tone changed, and a warning light came into his eyes.

"I ain't paid to talk to you. Let's go," he growled.

He led Bud up the steps and into the house. The shades were pulled down tight, and the gloom made it very difficult for Bud to see much. He noticed some sort of a hat-tree in the hall, and as they walked toward the back he saw the doors of several rooms which opened off the lower hall. Into one of these Sam led his captive.

"Here's where you stay," he said. "No use tryin' to get out, for the windows are barred. And that door is oak. Here—" and Sam struggled with the knot which bound Bud's wrists behind his back. "Make you feel a little comfortable, anyhow. You can't do much without a gun. There's water in that pitcher. I'll try to sneak you in some bread about noon."

Without another word Sam stepped out of the room and closed the door. Bud heard a key grate in the lock, and then a bolt shot home.

"Taking no chances," he thought. "My, it feels good to get my arms free!" He stretched lustily. "Wonder where on earth I am? Let's take a look at those windows. Bars, hey?" He pulled the shade aside. Surely enough on the outside were several iron bars, making the room a veritable jail. "They sure got me penned up here proper! Now why did they go to all this trouble? Just because I found that pit by the water hole?"

"That doesn't seem reasonable. Must want me for something besides that. Guess I'll know soon enough. In the meantime I'll take a look around. Water! That's right—I am thirsty. Funny how you forget that when you're excited." Bud was talking to himself now. There are people who seem to be able to puzzle

things out better if the problem is put into words than if they just revolve it over in their minds. Bud was one of these, and as he investigated his prison he kept talking in a low tone to himself.

With the shades up he was able to get a better view of the room. It was small, and had only that one window in it. The furniture consisted of a chair and a table. The floor was bare. The walls were painted a dull gray. Bud pushed experimentally against one of the sides, but to no purpose. It was as solid as iron.

There was one more thing to be tried, that was the door. Bud was reconciled to spending at least the morning within the room, and it made very little difference to him whether the door was of oak, as "Sam" had said, or some softer wood. However, he thought, he might as well take a crack at it. Try anything once, he reasoned.

He walked over and turned the knob softly. It refused to budge an inch. Then Bud applied more pressure. This time it turned slowly. Hope rang in Bud's heart as he felt the latch click back, then as he remembered hearing the door bolted his heart sank again. Still he turned the knob as far as it would go, and pushed. The door opened about half an inch.

Then it stuck. Bud's hand dropped from the knob, and he ran his fingers along the crack. Half way up they encountered cold metal—a chain which allowed the door to open only a little, then held. Bud seemed as securely fastened as though he had been unable to budge the door at all. Then he thought it was possible the bolt worked on a slide, and if he could reach through the crack and ease it out of the slide, he would be free.

"A knife would do the trick," he thought. "Nothing like that around here. I wonder if my belt buckle would do?" He tried forcing it through the crack. "Nope. Not long enough. Isn't there something about the room I could use? Chair—that's no good. Neither is the table. Water pitcher—can't see what good that is. Porcelain, I guess." He ran his hand over the pitcher.

"Yep. Well, that doesn't seem to help. Unless—" he hesitated. A thought struck him. "If I could break it and use a piece of it like a knife I'll bet I could scrape that bolt over! But how can I break it without making a racket and bringing Delton and his gang rushing in?" Bud thought a moment. Then he snapped his fingers softly, and his eyes lit up. "I've got it!" he whispered.

Taking off his vest and shirt he wrapped the pitcher well in them, after pouring out the water. Then he tapped it gently against the window-sill. It made almost no noise, so he hit it harder. After a few tries he felt it break. As he unwrapped his bundle of shattered porcelain he saw he had, luckily, broken a piece just the size he wanted. He replaced his shirt and vest and with the piece of pitcher in his hand he made once more for the door, this time with a real hope of escaping.

"Just the right length!" Bud exalted as he slid the narrow knife-like porcelain through the crack in the door and against the bolt. Then he started to coax the bolt from its slide. Softly, softly he scraped against the iron, and to his delight felt it move ever so little. He could not open the door to its full extent in his endeavor to slip the bolt, for this would tighten the chain and hold the metal piece more firmly in its slide. He had to work with his left hand holding the door at the proper angle and his right hand using the piece of the water pitcher.

It was tiresome work. Several times Bud halted as he heard footsteps in the hall outside, but they went on their way without stopping. The porcelain was rapidly wearing down. Its edge had already become dulled, and no longer offered the purchase on the iron that it did at first. But finally Bud succeeded—the bolt slid back.

Cautiously he tried the door. It opened! In obedience to Bud's push, the door swung wide. For a moment the lad stood still, listening intently. The low murmur of voices came to his ears.

"Down the hall," he thought. "Must be in that large room I passed coming in."

He stepped gently forward. A board creaked under his foot, and froze him into instant stillness. The murmur of voices droned on, and once more Bud moved forward. Down the hall he tip-toed. Nearer and nearer to the room wherein the men were talking he came. Now he was directly opposite. The door was tightly closed, but he could make out the conversation distinctly.

"A cinch!" he heard someone say. "There's nothing to it! Even if Jake doesn't know about the Shooting Star, he can run the bunch through all right. And the sooner the better."

"You know when the run is planned for?" someone asked.

"Sure! And I think we'll be lucky on the weather. Looks like rain to me."

"Well, I hope so. It's all set for to-morrow night, then?"

"Check! All set. To-morrow night it is."

Outside Bud was listening intently, his heart thumping in his breast.

CHAPTER XV

BILLEE DOBB'S STORY

Back at the Shooting Star ranch the three others, Nort, Billee Dobb and Yellin' Kid, were occupying themselves with the business of the day. The Kid having reported on the condition of the "shacks," Nort decided that a new bunk house would be necessary before the shearing season to accommodate the extra men. He and Yellin' Kid, together with Billee Dobb, then lazed about the place, awaiting the return of Dick and Bud. It was eleven o'clock before Dick came riding into the yard.

"Bring any grub back with you?"

"No. The store said the buckboard would be right over, almost as soon as I got here. Is the kitchen all cleaned out?"

"Pretty near, I guess. That's what the Mex meant when I caught him at the door. Gee, I wish——"

He was interrupted by a rattling and creaking, and the sound of horses beating a fast tattoo on the hard earth. Above this bedlam arose the sound of a voice in loud and vigorous denunciation.

"Here she comes!" Nort cried. "The food! Say, that team must have been stepping right along. Got here almost as soon as you did, Dick."

With a final roar and crash of wooden timbers, and a last invocation to: "Hold

up there, you two wildcats, or I'll bust you wide open," the cart drew up to the ranch house door.

From its swaying side the driver, a grinning youth in a blue shirt and red bandanna 'kerchief about his neck, climbed down.

"Get here in time?" he called. "Sure had these here babies rollin' right along." Then without even a halt for breath he went on: "What do you think of this here team? Best pair of ponies in the state! Lean down, baby, 'til I smooth those ears of yours. Down, I say! Why, you spavin-boned piece of horse meat! Come down here or I'll chew you up! Throw your head back at me, will you? Of all the knock-kneed, wall-eyed chunks of locoed craziness, you're the worst. Pete, you pink-headed, glandered cayuse, drop that neck or I'll skin you alive. That's the stuff! Best little pair of broncoes in the state, boys!"

"You sure got some vocabulary!" laughed Dick. "Think a lot of your team, don't you—sometimes! Yes, you got here in plenty of time."

"Bring them yellow clings?" the Kid asked, anxiously.

"Yep! Two dozen cans of the best yellow cling peaches. An' flour, bacon, an' all the rest. Help me unload, boys."

With five pairs of willing hands on the job, the wagon was quickly relieved of its load. The food was carried into the kitchen, and left there for the cook with an admonition to: "Get busy, Mex. We're starved!"

"Thanks for bringing the stuff over so promptly," Dick said to the youthful driver. "You must have hit only the high spots to get here so quick."

"Should say I did! One time we left the ground and stayed up while a coyote ran under the whole length of the wagon. Can't beat this here team of mine for speed. Well, guess I'll be gettin' back. All set, ponies? Don't strain yourselves, now. Got plenty of time. Just go along nice an' easy. Yes, sir, boys, I love these animals like brothers!

"Get along there, Pete. Get along, I say. Pete, you lop-eared wangdoddle! Quit draggin' that other bronc around! Hear me? Dodgast your hide, I'll blow your fool head right off your worthless carcass if you don't quit that. You will, will you? How do you like the feel of that? Now we're off! At-a-baby, get goin'!

So long, boys! You, Pete! Gosh darn your senseless hide, I'll—" the rest was lost.

"He loves 'em like brothers!" shouted the Kid, holding his sides with laughter. "Oh, boy! 'Take your time, ponies!' Sure, they'll take their time! Bet he's half way to Roarin' River by now. Wow, what a driver! Ho-ho—I haven't had a laugh like this in years! 'Don't strain yourselves!' Oh, baby!"

A cloud of dust marked the disappearance of the grinning youth with the "best pair of ponies in the state." He left behind him an appreciative audience.

"Hope that Mex gets a wiggle on," Nort said when the laughter had quieted down. "He ought to be able to rustle a pretty fair meal with all that junk."

"And in the meantime we might as well sit," Yellin' Kid suggested. "Look over the landscape."

The punchers made their way to the corral. Without explaining, each knew the Kid's suggestion to "sit an' look over the landscape" meant a view from the top rail of the corral, which was several feet high. This is the cowboy's favorite resting place while waiting for "chuck." They will sit there and survey a perfectly familiar scene until called off by the cook's horn or the cry to "come an' git it."

"Bud ought to be back for grub," said Dick as he swung his leg over the top rail.

"Ought to," Nort agreed. "Said he wasn't going far."

"That might mean anything out here," Billee Dobb broke in, "from a two-mile jaunt to a ride of twenty mile or more. Bud's O. K. though. If he don't show up fer his meals he's got a good reason."

"You're probably right," Dick said, "but with all this trouble around here I don't like to see anyone stay away too long. If he doesn't come in before afternoon we'll have to take a ride around and see if we can't spot him."

"No use crossing bridges before we come to them," Nort declared. "After all this talk Bud will probably come riding in with a bear cub he chased. Bud's funny that way. Anything that's a bit out of the ordinary, and Bud will go miles out of his way to see it. Remember how he stared at that cyclone coming until he

forgot where he was?"

"I don't think he's so funny," the Kid declared in a thoughtful tone. "Just doesn't like to miss any of the show, that's all. Me, I'm like that sometimes. A pretty sunset gets me here somehow," and the Kid placed his hand on his stomach in a general way.

"Have you tried eating raw onions?" Nort asked in a solicitous voice. "They say they're awful good."

"Aw, you guys make me sick," said Yellin' Kid disgustedly. "Just as soon as a feller gets—well—poetical like—you hop all over him."

"Ex-cuse me, Kid! I didn't know you were getting poetical. Why, if I had known that I wouldn't have said a word. I thought you were telling us about your indigestion."

"Go ahead—go ahead! I'll get you sometime, Nort. Billee, do you think it's nice to run me around like that?"

"Do you good," Billee said with a grin. "When I was young an' worked out with a bunch from Two-bar Cross—the roughest outfit you'd ever laid eyes on—I wasn't let to open my mouth without someone hoppin' down my throat. That was a gang, let me tell you!"

"They were the old-fashioned punchers, weren't they?" Dick asked, winking at the Kid. "The kind that used a buck-strap and ate his coffee out of a frying-pan."

"Buck-strap! Buck—say, boy, if any man on that there Two-bar Cross outfit ever heard you speak of a buck-strap they wouldn't know what you was talkin' about. No, sir! Those boys were rough customers."

A buck-strap is a leather thong fastened to the saddle in such a way that if the pony suddenly bucks, its rider can hold himself on by inserting his hand within this thong and pulling hard. The user of one of these contraptions is never proud of it, needless to say.

"You used to work a lot in the summer, didn't you, Billee?" the Kid asked with a concealed grin.

"Yes, and in the winter, too. Mostly in the winter. I remember one time——"

"Now he's off," the Kid whispered in an aside to Dick. "This'll be good."

"I remember once when I was ridin' for the Two-bar Cross bunch an' we had four thousand head of cattle on the range. 'Long about December, when the first snow starts, me an' Joe Heldig was sent out to see how the bunch was makin' out, and if they needed anything, one of us was to ride back an' tell the rest while the other watched. Well, we set out about seven o'clock one morning to see if we could spot the herd.

"It was clear an' cold when we started. Not a cloud in the sky. Thinks I, we're pretty lucky, havin' such fine weather; that late in the season, too. Joe Heldig, he don't say nothin'. We took with us our blankets, some sour-dough, coffee an' bacon, an' that fryin'-pan you was talking about, Dick. We rode along easy like, not worryin' nor nothin', an' talkin' about the best way to skin a steer, an' whether it's best to split two pair on the draw to try for a flush. That used to be a trick of Joe's.

"Around about noon it started to get warmer, an' off in the east a few white clouds showed up. Me, I don't worry none, but I see Joe lookin' kind of anxious now an' then.

"We found the bunch at three o'clock, not as far out as we figgered they'd be. Seemed pretty contented an' easy. Had a good grazin' spot, too. An' just as we was about to call it a day I felt something wet drop on my nose. Then another. Joe looked at me an' I looked at him. Snow! Know what that means on the range?

"Well, there was nothin' for it but to stick around an' see how bad it was goin' to be. By five o'clock we knew. The flakes was comin' down so thick you couldn't see, and a wind had sprung up. An' Joe an' me had a bunch of cattle on our hands. I told Joe one of us better try to make the ranch and bring back enough men to get the cattle to a sheltered spot, so they wouldn't die. I knew we couldn't move them alone, and where they were grazin' it was all open. So Joe started. He knew the general direction, an' what would be sure suicide for anyone else was just a chance for Joe, havin' lived for twenty years right in that section.

"I could easy keep track of the cows by their moanin'. It was real cold now,

an' the poor bunch of beeves stood in the snow with their heads held low, with icicles hanging from their eyes, groanin' something pitiful. They never moved. Just stood there while the snow drifted up around their haunches. What I was afraid of was a drift. Not a drift of snow, but a drift of cattle.

"I knew those steers would only stay still a certain length of time, then one of them would start movin' leaward, with the whole bunch followin'. And they'd march that way into the snow, until every blessed one of them dropped, and died where it fell. First the little calves. Then the mothers, who'd stick by their babies until they died, too. Then the cows of the herd who weren't so strong. An' last, some big, proud long-horn would drop in his tracks an' die. An' there wouldn't be nothin' left of the herd except dots in the snow along the path. That's what we call a drift.

"I knew if they ever started driftin' I couldn't save them. I could try to turn them by rushin' my bronc into them, but it wouldn't do no good. It needs at least six men to do that job. An' even then, if they once get well started, I don't think they'd turn aside fer *nothin'*. So I just sat on my pony an' waited. The snow kept gettin' higher, and the wind colder an' colder. The cows were moanin' heavy now. I saw 'em shift once or twice, an' my heart went in my throat, but they settled down once more to just breathin' hard. How I did hope that Joe made the ranch. I sort of felt that if help didn't come soon the drift would start. It takes so long for a cow to get the idea she wants to move, and when she gets the notion into her head, her legs start goin' themselves, an' keep goin' until something bigger and stronger than she is stops her. I knew that the only thing would stop this bunch, once they started, would be death.

"All of a sudden the moanin' of the cattle grew louder. I rode up close to them an' saw what the reason was, and it made me catch my breath. A big cow was steppin' slowly out, head low, right into the gale. The drift had started.

"I rode hard at the brute that was leadin'. She never paid no attention to me whatever. Then I drew my gun and shot her, but the cow behind kept right on goin'. An' back of her the rest started movin'. Unless something happened quick the show was over.

"Then I heard what I'd been hopin' an' prayin' for—a yell! Through the screamin' of the wind I could hear Joe's voice whoopin' it up, an' believe me, it was the most welcome sound I'd ever heard. The next minute the whole gang

from the ranch, in a flyin' wedge, rode right into that bunch of long-horns, and split them wide open!

"That saved them. They was scared out of the drift, an' we soon drove them down behind a hill, where the wind wouldn't get at them, and they could reach the grass through the snow. Joe had made it just in time, though how he found the ranch in that storm is still a mystery, even to him."

The boys on the rail sat silent for a moment. Then out from the kitchen of the ranch house there came the blast of a horn.

"Grub!" Yellin' Kid shouted. "Let's eat, boys!"

CHAPTER XVI

BUD'S ESCAPE

Bud stood listening, with bated breath, to the conversation on the other side of the closed door. He heard the words "to-morrow night" and "all set" repeated several times. With his ears strained he leaned forward until his shoulder was almost touching the door. If they would only talk just a little bit louder——

Suddenly Bud lost his balance. He had been so tense that he had not realized how precarious his position was, the smallest noise being sure to alarm the occupants of the room. Now his foot slipped, and, with a crash, he went headlong against the door!

There was a quick scraping of chairs within, and voices raised in excited outcry. Bud recoiled from the fall as fast as he might, and, springing down the hall, he made for the front door. By this time the plotters had emerged from the room and had seen Bud in his wild sprint for safety.

"Grab him!" someone shouted. "Get him, Jack! He's been listening! Jump on his neck!"

"Jump on him yourself! What's the matter, are you tied to the floor?"

"Never mind those wise-cracks!" came Delton's voice. "Out that door quick, and nab him!"

Bud had reached the porch, and looked desperately about him. Where were the horses? A sudden neigh answered his thought, and he dashed around to the side of the house. The ponies were tethered to a rail not one hundred yards away. Luckily Bud's horse was among them.

"All you've got, bronc! We're holding our own, anyway. Gee!" A report sounded behind him and he heard the whine of a bullet. "They mean business, all right! On your way, pony!"

The feet of his mount scarcely seemed to touch the ground, so fast did he travel. On and on they flew, keeping their distance and even gaining.

"Stick to it, old boy!" Bud exhorted his bronco. "We're as good as they are, any day! Can't last forever! Wow!" Another bullet sang through the air. "That was a close one. If I had a gun you wouldn't be so free with your lead. All I've got to depend on is what's under me. But you'll do, old boy, you'll do! Step on it!"

Across the open prairie flew the chase, Bud in the lead about five hundred yards. His pony was tiring now, the breath was coming in short gasps. Bud consoled himself with the thought that his followers' mounts were probably in worse case.

"Just a little more, bronc!" he coaxed. "Soon be home! At-a-baby—yo-yo-yo!" He kept in cadence with his pony's gallop, and it seemed to him that she responded with a further burst of speed. He looked back again. Certainly he was increasing the distance between himself and his pursuers! They appeared a greater distance from him than when they had started. Now the country they were passing through assumed a familiar aspect, but Bud was too excited to notice it until he reached the water hole.

"Luck!" he exulted. "I headed in the right direction. Don't think I'll be followed much beyond this. Let's see—" He turned in his saddle. To his surprise there was no one in sight.

"Made it! Bronc, old boy, I offer you my sincere thanks! No, don't slow down just yet. A little more—" He kept up his fast pace until he was well beyond the water hole, then, with a final look behind him, he pulled down to a walk.

"Guess we're O.K. now. What a chase! Say, bronc, it's too bad we didn't have a movie camera somewhere around. Hero being chased by the villains. Bang—bang—another Indian bit the dust! Anyway, I'm glad we're out of *that* mess. What was the idea of the whole thing, anyhow?

"Don't see what they wanted with me. And 'to-morrow night'! Evidently they figure on some sort of dirty work. Now that they know I've heard part of their plans they may not pull anything."

Off in the distance Bud could now see the buildings of Shooting Star. As he rode up, the Kid was nailing a board to the lower part of the ranch house, and had his back to Bud. He turned swiftly as he heard the hoof-beats of Bud's horse.

"Come in—come in!" he called. "Have a good trip? How are all the babies—and Aunt Sarah? You must be plumb worn out, ridin' all the way from Arken-saw on a hot day like this."

"Quit your kidding," Bud answered with a smile. "When I tell you what did happen you'll think I have a good right to be worn out. First, though, is there any chuck left?"

"What—they didn't even feed you? Well now, I thought you'd had a chicken dinner. Sure, Bud, come on in, an' we'll get Mex on the job."

The best they could do in the culinary line on short notice was beans, but Bud filled up mightily on them. When the edge had been taken off his hunger he asked the Kid:

"Where's the rest of the bunch?"

"Town, most of 'em. Billee Dobb is at the back fixin' his saddle. Nort and Dick went on into town again after a load of grub came, to see if they could pick up that sheep-man Hawkins told us about, and to grab me off a pony. Where were you, Bud?"

"Therein lies a tale," answered Bud, "and I don't mean maybe. Listen, Kid,

and try to control your well-known faculties for humor 'til I get this off my chest."

In as few sentences as possible, Bud related to Yellin' Kid the events of the morning. Contrary to his expectations, his story was taken as it was told, seriously.

"Delton, hey? Didn't see my missin' bronc around, I suppose?"

"No, I didn't, Kid. Saw enough besides that. Well, what's the dope? What do you think about it all?"

"I think you were pretty lucky, for one thing," declared the Kid. "Another thing I think is that the plan they set for to-morrow night—whatever it is, will be carried out."

"What makes you think that?"

"Didn't you say you heard someone talk about 'even if Jake doesn't know about the Shooting Star'?"

"Yes—I did hear that."

"Well, that means they're going to take a chance on going through with their plan, because they can't get word to the other side that this place has changed hands. An' they won't stop because they caught you listenin'."

"Say, you might be right at that, Kid. That's going some, though, to push things like that, when they know their plan has been overheard. Of course I didn't actually hear it all, but I heard enough to know it has something to do with this ranch. And the time is to-morrow night."

"That will hurry up the deputy's idea, won't it? If things break right, we might have a chance to collect that reward."

"Let's not think about that now. What we have to do is to get hold of the rest and tell them what happened, and ask Mr. Hawkins if this will change his plan. He's in town, isn't he?"

"Should be. Dick'll know—he rode in with him."

"Say, Kid, before I forget it—I heard something that didn't sound so good about that Mexican cook of ours. Delton let slip the hint that he was one of his men—didn't exactly say that, but he led me to believe he was."

"Did, hey? Well, I've been kind of suspicious of that Greaser ever since we found him here alone, when the rest had beat it. Don't seem reasonable that one man would stay at a ranch that has been cleaned out, unless he had some business there. Delton's idea may have been to let him stay and spy on us. Think we ought to kick him out?"

"That means we've got to find another cook. No, I think it will be all right to let him stay if we watch him carefully. He sure is one peach of a cook—I'll say that for him—and I don't think he'd deliberately try to poison us."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that. Of course we could make him taste each dish he cooks for us, like they do in stories, but he'd sure suspect something then. I believe in keeping a secret to yourself."

"You mean not letting him know we suspect him?"

"Yep! That's it. We can watch him if he doesn't know he's bein' watched, but as soon as he knows we got something on him, we're through."

"You're right about that, Kid. Say, where did you say the others were?"

"In town. Ought to be back soon, though. Billee Dobb is around some place in back. Want to see him?"

"No, I'll wait till Nort and Dick get here and spill it all at once. Let's go out."

The two arose and walked toward the yard. As they passed through the door the Kid looked sharply about him, but the Mexican cook was nowhere in sight. His lesson had been learned when the Kid had caught him listening before.

They hadn't long to wait before they heard the approach of two riders. Dick and Nort had returned.

"Something happened," Nort exclaimed after he had dismounted.

"How do you know?" Bud asked with wide-open eyes.

"I mean to us. Why, did something happen to you, too?"

"I'll tell you about it in a minute. Let's hear your story first."

"Not much of a story," Dick said. "We saw Delton."

"You did! Where?"

"You remember that water hole the Kid found the Chinaman at?"

"Yes—go ahead!"

"Well, Nort and I decided to take another look at it on our second trip back from town, so we rode over. It isn't so far from here. And as we reached it—only about an hour ago—we saw a group of men talking. We rode up easy, but they heard us and beat it. We saw one of them, though. It was Delton."

"And do you know what he was doing there?" Bud asked with a quizzical smile.

"What?"

"Chasing me! I found the water hole, too, and something else and this Delton dragged me for miles and locked me in a room. Then I got out and his gang followed me to the water hole, where I lost them."

"Hey, take it easy! Start from the beginning. Let's hear it, Bud."

Nort and Dick listened eagerly as Bud once again told the tale of his capture.

CHAPTER XVII

A NIGHT OF WAITING

"The old rascal!" Nort exclaimed after Bud had finished. "So that's what they were doing at the water hole? If we had known that we would have taken a

chance and rushed them."

"Just as well you didn't," Bud declared. "Wouldn't have gained anything by it. And anyway, we don't want to upset their plans for to-morrow night. The Kid, here, thinks they'll go through with the idea."

"Don't be too sure," warned Dick. "It may never come off, since they know Bud overheard them planning."

"Yes, but don't you see they can't get word to the others in time?" the Kid insisted. "They can't call it off. The other end of the smuggling line has already made plans that they can't break, so this end has to go through with their scheme. At least that's the way I look at it."

"Seems reasonable," Dick agreed. "But just the same I think it's better to be prepared."

"Naturally. What did you find out about the sheep-man, Dick?"

The latter spoke of one tentatively engaged and told the Kid his new horse would be sent over in a day or so.

The remainder of the day went quickly. When evening came the boys were excitedly making plans for the following night. After "chuck" they gathered around the table in the sitting room and discussed ways and means. The Kid was in favor of drastic action.

"No, we've got to go slowly," Dick cautioned. "This isn't strictly our affair, you know. The government is interested in it. And it's anything but a joking matter. The other adventures we had—at Spur Creek and in the desert—were our own concern entirely. This is different. Hawkins hasn't said so, but I think it means a lot to him if we aid in capturing the smugglers."

"Thought you were out here to herd sheep?" Billee Dobb put in.

"We were—at first. But there's no use trying to dodge the issue—from now on until this business is finished, we have one job on hand—to help stop Chink smuggling. The sheep can wait."

"That's the stuff!" Yellin' Kid burst out. "I was waitin' to hear you say that,

Dick. Might as well look things in the face! We've gotten too deep into this to drag freight now!"

"You're right, Kid," approved Bud. "And truth to tell, I'm not a bit sorry. I don't care for Delton a-tall. We'll go through with this, and finish it up right."

"And get my ole bronc back," the Kid said loudly.

"We might do that, too," Dick laughed. "Well, let's hit the hay. Plenty to do to-morrow."

The night passed quietly. The punchers were up with the sun, all eager for the task on hand. Directly breakfast was over, Dick and Bud rode to town in order to see Hawkins. All thought it best that the deputy should learn, as soon as possible, of the new development, for he might want to change his plans in accordance. The boys found him in his office.

"Come in, boys!" he invited when Dick and Bud stood in the doorway. "How's everything? Any more cyclones?"

"Not yet," answered Bud with a laugh. "The weather is quiet, but that's the only thing that is."

"What do you mean?" the deputy asked quickly.

Without any preliminaries Bud told the story of his capture and escape. The deputy listened carefully, now and then asking a question. When Bud had finished he sat silent for a moment, drumming his desk with his fingers. Suddenly he brought his fist down with a bang and looked up.

"That settles it!" he cried in a decided tone of voice. "Delton is finished! From now on we go after him tooth and nail! And I want you boys to know something. I can rely on you, of course, to keep it a secret." Strangely the deputy's western accent seemed to leave him, and he assumed a more cultured tone of voice. He held a shiny piece of metal out toward Bud. "I'm from Washington—Secret Service—here's my badge."

Bud took it silently. It was, indeed, the badge of a federal official.

"I took this job as an ordinary deputy to disarm suspicion," Hawkins went on.

"I knew if I came to Roaring River as a stranger I'd be investigated, and perhaps have to give myself away. So I just got myself appointed a deputy, and then I could work openly. No one would suspect a western deputy of being a federal man—there's too many of them. Now you know why I'm so interested in this smuggling. We've simply *got* to stop it—somehow! Even the Chinese who are in this country legitimately don't like to see their countrymen come in by the back door. And what good are immigration laws if we can't enforce them? I'm just telling you this to impress upon you the seriousness of the project."

"It is certainly no joking matter," Bud agreed, handing back the badge. "So you're a federal man! I should think if you wanted to trace the smugglers secretly you'd take another position than deputy."

"You'll see how it will work out," Hawkins said. "It's sometimes best to seem almost what you are, to avoid seeming what you really are. Figure that one out. What I mean is, if I openly assume the aspect of a man of the law, no one will look further than that. Understand?"

"I do," responded Dick. "And now let's decide on our plan of action. Do you think what happened to Bud will change any of the details, Mr. Hawkins?"

"Don't see why it should. In fact I think it makes our scheme all the more advisable. Personally, I believe the run will go through to-night. There's no doubt but that's what you heard referred to, Bud, for I had a tip concerning the same thing. They will depend on the element of surprise and the superiority in number to succeed. We'll have our hands full, at any rate."

"Somehow this doesn't seem real," mused Bud. "Here we are planning to capture a gang of smugglers who *know* we're after them, yet they go right ahead and play into our hands."

"My dear boy," said Hawkins grimly, "you don't quite understand. Delton is far from playing into our hands. In fact, if truth be told, our chances are rather slim that we'll ever see Delton. He's no baby. But I think we've got him beaten in one way—the gang across the border doesn't know what we know. Now here's the situation." Dick and Bud came closer. "A shipload of Chinks have just landed in Mexico. Never mind how I know, but I do. These Chinese have got to be smuggled over the border within three days, to make room for another bunch. All right. This gang in Mexico corresponded with Delton last week, telling him

that he was to receive the Chinks on a certain night.

"There's one thing we want to make sure of—and that is to avoid frightening them off. Has there been much action around your ranch?"

"None at all. We've kept things pretty quiet."

"That's good. Tell you—I think it would be best if you fellows would stay as close to the ranch house as possible, until this thing is over. You see the smugglers might send out a one man auto patrol, some time to-day or this evening, to look over the lay of the land, and if he sees anything suspicious the chances are that he'll choose another route to ship the Chinks over the border by. But I don't think they'll go far from Roaring River. They got away with it so easy last time, that they'll probably try it again. Well—" Hawkins tightened his lips grimly—"they won't work it twice."

"Any more instructions?" Dick asked.

"No—I'll be over to the Shooting Star sometime this afternoon. May bring a friend with me—Larry O'Connor—one sweet shot with a revolver. That is if I think we need him."

"Well, we've got five men all told," Dick declared. "And all of us are fairly used to handling guns. Target practice at tin cans keeps your eye in, and we do lots of that."

"Good idea, if you can afford the money for ammunition. Never know when you'll need to rely on a well-placed shot."

"Are you just going to ride over to the ranch openly?" Bud asked. "Won't someone see you?"

"Even if they do, they won't suspect anything. But to make sure I'll wait until after dark. Guess that would be best. No attempt will be made until well on into the night, and we'll have plenty of time to get set for them."

"Then we'll see you to-night?" inquired Dick as he arose.

"Sure thing! Oh, by the way—keep an eye on that Mex cook of yours, will you? I want him where I can grab him quick if I need him."

"We will. Good-bye until to-night, Mr. Hawkins."

"So-long, boys."

Bud and Dick rode back to the Shooting Star. As soon as possible they told the others of their talk with Hawkins, and of his being a secret service official. Billee Dobb said he "opined as much long ago."

The day dragged on. The boys were all slightly nervous, though they wouldn't admit it. Several times one would catch the other fingering his gun unconsciously. But evening finally came, and while they were eating supper Joe Hawkins arrived. He was alone.

"Thought you were going to bring someone with you?" Bud said when the greetings were over.

"Decided it wasn't necessary. We've got plenty here. Now, boys, are you all set?"

"All set!" the Kid said loudly. "Bring 'em on!"

"They'll come without us bringing them," Hawkins declared a trifle grimly. "Turn that lamp low, Dick, and let's get out of here."

"What about the Mex?" inquired the Kid.

"Bring him along," the agent declared. "Want him where I can keep an eye on him."

In spite of his wordless protests, the cook was dragged out of the kitchen and made to accompany the punchers to a place near the side of the house. And there the six men watched, each with his hand on his gun and with ears strained for the sound of a car. There was a road which ran past the ranch and into the town. It was over this road that the watching men expected the smugglers to come.

And now all settled down to a night of waiting.

CHAPTER XVIII

SMUGGLING OPERATIONS

Hardly a breath of wind stirred. The sky had become partly clouded, blotting out the moon. Now and then a horse whinnied, softly, as though frightened. The waiting men moved about uneasily, talking in whispers. Nine o'clock passed. Then ten came. The air grew chill and damp, and the clouds overhead gathered more thickly.

"Gonna rain," said the Kid in a low voice. "We sure are favorites with the weather man."

"May hold off," Bud observed softly. He moved over to where Hawkins was standing, eyes peering down the road. "What do you think of it?" he asked the agent.

"Not much," was the quiet answer. "Looks like rain. That means we'll have a hard job to see them when they do come."

"Hey, the Mex wants to go back," the Kid said, lowering his voice. "He's cold, I guess."

"You tell him to stay where he is, or he'll be colder yet," Hawkins said in a grim voice. "We can't afford to take any chances now. Bring that Mex over here. I want to talk to him."

"What's that?" Dick suddenly asked.

They all listened tensely. In the distance they could hear a low rumble.

"Thunder," Nort said. "First night storm we've had in a long while."

"Where's that Mexican?" inquired Hawkins again. "Bring him here, Kid."

Yellin' Kid led the cook to where Hawkins was intently watching the road. The agent turned to the Mexican and stared hard at him.

"You know Jose Salvo?" he asked suddenly.

The Mexican nodded vigorously. Then he pointed to himself and held up two fingers.

"His brother? Well, what do you know about that!" plainly the secret service agent was surprised. "No wonder you look like him! Bud, you remember that Mexican we saw in the restaurant the first day you hit town? The one I told you to watch out for? Well, this bird is his brother!"

"I thought it was the same one, when we first saw him! His brother, eh? And what's he doin' at this ranch?"

The Mexican apparently heard the question, and endeavored to answer it. In the gloom they could see his arms and hands motioning forcibly, but none of them were able to understand the message.

"Better wait," suggested Billee Dobb. "The poor critter is almost scared out of his wits. He may have a bad brother, but I think he's O. K. himself. I'll watch him for you. Over here, Mex!" he ordered sharply.

The cook walked slowly over to Billee, and squatted down beside him. He looked up at the old rancher as a calf might look for protection to a cow.

"I'll depend on you to see that he doesn't pull any funny work," Hawkins said to Billee. "When the show starts we'll have our hands full, and we don't want any slip-ups."

Yet they could not afford to give up now. If things worked out as the agent had hoped, they might succeed in arresting Delton and his gang.

"And that reward will come in right handy," Billee Dobb said.

"Will we really get a reward if we capture these smugglers?" Nort asked Hawkins.

"You certainly will! And the government will be glad to pay it, too."

"I don't care so much about the reward as I do about getting Delton," declared Bud, as he remembered how he was mistreated at the hands of the smuggler.

"An' I'd like to get my bronc back," Yellin' Kid asserted, as he moved his

arms briskly about to warm himself.

The night wore on, minutes seeming like hours. Billee Dobb stood motionless, leaning against the side of the ranch house, and at his feet sat the Mexican, seemingly oblivious of the cold. Hawkins moved slowly about, glancing every now and then down the road. The others stood about, talking in low tones. The storm seemed to have been blown aside, as the rumble of thunder no longer reached the ears of the waiting men. Still the moon was covered with clouds, making the night almost pitch-black. A soft glow from the low-turned lamp within the ranch house was the only illumination.

"Say, I'm goin' to take a walk around to the corral," exclaimed the Kid suddenly. "This waitin' is gettin' me woozy. Just want to see if the ponies are all right."

"Watch your step," Bud cautioned. "It's pretty dark. And don't make too much noise."

"I ain't goin' on any picnic," Yellin' Kid answered. "Be back soon."

He left the protection of the house and in a moment was lost sight of in the darkness. It wasn't far to the corral, and as he approached the horses stirred uneasily.

"All right there, ponies," the Kid called softly. At the sound of a familiar voice the restless moving stopped, and the animals suffered the Kid to walk in among them.

"Lonesome, hey?" he said in a low tone. "So am I. Don't like this hangin' around nohow! Wish we'd have some action." He stroked the nose of one of the steeds. The horse whinnied softly in response. "Wish I had my own cayuse here," the Kid mused. "Hated to lose her. Best bronc I ever had. Golly, it's dark!"

As though to dispute him the moon suddenly slid from behind the clouds. The Kid looked about him—at the ranch house, standing gaunt and silent, and at the little group of men waiting motionless—and at the moonlit road, stretching far out over the prairie. There'd be no smugglers to-night. Why, you could see for miles down that road, now. Not a thing in—what was that? The Kid stared harder. There, about a mile away, lurching from side to side? It must be—a car! Coming fast, too!

For a moment the Kid stood quietly. Then with a leap he made for the ranch house. As he reached the men the moon disappeared again, and the scene was blotted out.

"Hey!" he called in a repressed yell. "They're comin'!"

"What!" The group turned like a flash, as one man. "Who's coming? Where?"

"Down the road! An automobile!"

Excitement spread like a wave.

"Easy!" Hawkins cautioned. "Not so much noise! What did you see, Kid?"

"Saw an auto comin' down the road like a locoed steer! Just when the moon came out then, I happened to be lookin' that way, and I saw——"

"Listen!" Bud held up his hand, forgetting that they couldn't see him in the darkness that had now settled down again. "Don't you hear something?"

Through the air came the sounds of a car—the throttle wide open.

"Can't see it, but I can hear it!" Hawkins exclaimed. "Must be driving without lights. They sure are coming! All set, you men?"

"One of us better get the ponies ready, in case we miss them!" the Kid declared. "Billee, will you do that?"

"Suppose so," the rancher grumbled. "I allers seem t' miss the fightin'!"

"You'll get plenty of that," asserted Hawkins. "But let's not waste time talking. They'll be here in two minutes. Listen, you fellows, and listen good! Billee, you get the horses ready for a quick start. Nort, you and the Kid get around to the other side of the house, fast. Dick, Bud and I will stay here.

"Now here's what's going to happen—the car will pull up right here, and the Chinks will be unloaded. We take them—don't forget, we're Delton's men. As soon as they hand the Chinks over to us we cover the men in the car, and get them. Then when Delton comes we get him, too—if we can. He should be here now—must have been a slip-up in the time. All the better for us. Quick—do you

understand?"

The roar of the approaching car could be heard plainly now. There was not much time left.

"You want Nort an' me to watch the road in the other direction?" asked the Kid.

"Yes—and we'll be here when they unload the Chinks. All right now?"

"All set! Let's go, Nort!"

Yellin' Kid and Nort ran swiftly to the other side of the ranch house, in which position they would be hidden from sight of the road until they chose to show themselves. Billee Dobb went around to the corral.

The oncoming car was plunging along the road, and would reach the Shooting Star ranch in another minute. It couldn't be seen, due to the blackness of the night—the clouds seemed to have thickened in the last few minutes—but the noise was sufficient indication of its approach. The six men awaited its arrival with breathless excitement. If the plan only worked! Delton would surely show up sooner or later, he couldn't risk too long a delay—and the capture would be complete. The boys felt their hearts beating fast as the moment approached. Guns were out now, and ready for action.

Suddenly another sound came to the ears of the waiting ones—the sound of rapid hoof-beats. Those on the farther side of the house from where the car was coming peered down the road in the direction of town. They held their breaths.

"Hear it?" the Kid asked excitedly of Nort.

"Horses! and coming this way! It must be Delton—he timed it perfectly—he'll arrive just as the car does! Kid, we've got more than our hands full this time!"

"Shall we tell the others?"

"No time—we've got to try and head them off, until Hawkins stops the car, gets the Chinks and covers the smugglers! Come on, Kid!"

The two, with guns drawn, ran down the road in the direction of the approaching horsemen. It was a foolhardy thing to do, for they had no means of telling how many of Delton's gang were coming. Louder and louder sounded the gallop of the ponies, and nearer came the smugglers' car. The night was still pitch-black. The moon was as if it had never shone. In the distance thunder muttered, but the boys were too excited to notice it. Overhead the clouds were growing heavier.

"Here they come, Kid! Stop them!"

Nort threw himself in front of one of the ponies just as the group of horsemen were about to dash through. Yellin' Kid jumped to Nort's side, gun drawn.

"Hold up there!" he yelled. "Stick 'em up! High!"

There was a vivid flash of lightning. In the glare the two challengers saw that Delton was directly in front of them, and behind him were four others. Delton reached for his gun. Then the heavens opened with a crash of thunder and the rain poured down in a deluge.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CHASE

Through the darkness came many and varied sounds. The thunder rolled long and continuously. The angry voices of men rose loud and hoarse. Along the drenched road came the smugglers' car, its exhaust roaring. And over all the rain came down in torrents.

"Out of the way there, you!" came a voice. "We ain't got no time for foolin'!"

"Stick to it, Nort!" the Kid yelled. "Don't let them through!"

The two boys were standing in the middle of the road, guns out, determined to prevent Delton and his men from closing in on Hawkins, who was grimly awaiting the smuggling car. If they could be held off until the auto pulled in and stopped, the party at the other side of the ranch house might succeed in capturing the Chink runners.

There was a sudden shot.

"Hurt, Nort?" the Kid called anxiously.

"Nope! Missed! Put those guns up, you! We've got you covered! Climb down off those horses quick, or we'll fill you full of holes!"

There was a desperate ring in the boy rancher's voice, and Delton must have recognized this, for he yelled something to the men back of him and they all halted. The thunder was less frequent now, although the rain had not let up. The boys standing in the road were soaked to the skin. Still they remained firmly in their place, listening to the roar of the approaching car, and hoping they could hold Delton until it reached the ranch. By the sound it was almost to the Shooting Star ranch now. In another moment——

"Hey, you guys, what's the idea?" through the night came a questioning voice. "Don't you know it's rainin' here? How about lettin' us in the ranch to get dry?"

"You stay where you are!" the Kid yelled. "You'll have plenty o' time to get dry all right!"

"Kid—here's the car! Watch out now!" Nort was at the Kid's side, but facing the other way. "Can you see anything—any of Delton's bunch?"

"Nope—only hear that guy that was talking! Can you?"

"No but—what's that?"

From the other side of the house came three shots in rapid succession. Then someone yelled. The next moment Dick came splashing around to where the Kid and Nort were waiting.

"They—they fooled us!" Dick panted. "Delton and three others got to the car before we did and warned the smugglers! They all got away!"

"Delton!" the Kid exclaimed. "Why, we had him here——"

"Yes you did!" came a mocking voice. "You big cheese—all you had was a good talk! So long!" There was the splashing noise of a horse rapidly departing for parts unknown.

"Can—you—beat—that!" Nort ejaculated. "Fooled! Taken in like suckers! While we stood here talking——"

"Yes, and while we're standing here talking now, the smugglers are getting farther and farther away! Come on! We've got to chase them!" Dick turned and made for the corral.

"Chase an auto on a horse?" the Kid yelled. "What's the sense of that?"

"They can't go fast in this wet—and we can spot them by the noise. Hurry up!"

"But I ain't got no pony!" wailed the Kid. "Wish I had my bronc! What am I supposed to do; stay here?"

"No—one of Delton's bunch lost his seat and we've got his animal—use that. He got away in the auto. But for the love of Pete, hurry up!"

The rain had abated a little when the boys reached the corral. Billee Dobb was waiting with the ponies untied and ready. It was but the work of a moment

to mount and lead the other horses over to where Hawkins and Bud were standing.

"Where's my new bronc?" the Kid asked as he came up.

"Here—this do you?" Bud was holding a little black pony.

"Sure—as long as it's got legs!" The Kid swung himself upon the horse's back. "Right! Let's go!"

"We've no time to lose, men!" Hawkins called out. "We messed that up proper! This Delton is more clever than I thought he was."

All were mounted now and ready to take up the chase. The Kid was letting his pony walk about, and the rest were awaiting Hawkins's word to start.

The six riders set out into the night. Hawkins said the car had taken a route at right angles and to the left of the road, and all went in that direction. They pushed their ponies as fast as they dared over the soaked prairie, hoping to catch sight of the car before they had ridden too far. It was obvious that no auto could make great speed over the rough surface of the plains, and to add to this rain must certainly slow them up still more. So the punchers had a fairly good chance of overtaking them. Delton would probably be acting as convoy to the car, and if they were able to take that, they would capture him also. With these thoughts in mind the ranchers beat along through the rain, which was not now so heavy.

"What happened?" asked Billee Dobb.

"Just this," Bud answered. "Mr. Hawkins and I were waiting for the car to reach us. We couldn't hear what was happening on the other side of the house, and Mr. Hawkins and I were all set to grab the gang in it, when four men came riding by like mad and reached the car before we did. They yelled something, and in a second the car was off the road and away, the horsemen after it. But one of the riders fell, and didn't wait to get on his horse again—just hopped on the running board of the car."

"What were those cracks we heard?"

"I took a couple of pot-shots at the tires, but I don't think I hit anything. Too dark. And it was raining cats and dogs, you know."

"Don't I know it! Nort an' me sure had our hands full. Five men to stop! We figured if we could hold them until you had the fellows in the car covered, we could capture them too. Say, see any Chinks in the car?"

"Didn't see anything! The car turned off before we could get close enough to see in it."

"Too bad we couldn't work it, boys," Hawkins ruefully said. "We've still got a chance to nab them, though. They can't get far over this ground with a car."

"They can lead us a merry chase," Dick asserted. "Wonder what time it is?"

"One o'clock," Bud suggested. "Not much more, anyway. Think they came over this way, Mr. Hawkins?"

"Yes—I do. Know where we are?"

"Comin' to the water hole, I think," answered Yellin' Kid.

"Say, maybe they're going to try and make for the place where they held me!" Bud exclaimed. "That's over this way somewhere."

"Can you find it again?" the agent asked, an anxious note in his voice.

"Think so."

"Then if we don't make out to-night we can have a try at that in the morning."

"How far do you want to go?" Bud asked Hawkins.

"Let's see now. I have an idea, and I want to see what you fellows think about it. First, though, are you sure that you can find that ranch where they held you, Bud?"

"Can in daylight. Maybe not at night."

"If you started from the water hole do you think you could spot it at night?"

"Might. I could try it, anyway."

"Hold up a minute, then."

The six riders drew rein, and waited for the agent's next words.

"It's not much use trailing them much farther. What I think they did, is to make for that ranch house where Bud was, and stay there. Now here's the point. Even if we did come upon them now, we'd have a hard job taking them. I think this is a better plan. Listen, now."

The boys drew closer around Hawkins.

"This idea I have calls for two men to stay up all night. Who'll do it?"

"Me!"

"Let me in on that!"

"What is it—keeping guard?"

"Yes, Nort, that's exactly what it is—keeping guard. Now here's the dope. We followed that bunch pretty far. There's no doubt but that they headed for that house, and intend to unload their Chinks there. Now if we can only keep them in that house until morning, we can get the whole gang—including the Chinks—like rats in a trap. Now do you see what I mean?"

"You mean you want some of us to watch the place and do a little shootin' so that they won't come out?"

"That's it exactly, Kid! If two men can get close to the house, and keep firing at intervals, they'll think that we've got them cold, and will stay there long enough to allow us to get them by morning."

"What's the matter with all of us going up there now?"

"Wouldn't do any good, and besides, someone has got to be at your ranch. And some of us have got to get a little sleep. We may have to do some more riding to-morrow."

"Well, if you think that's best, I'll do it, for one," spoke Dick.

"And I'll go with you!" Bud exclaimed. "I owe Delton quite a good deal for the way he hauled me off my horse!"

"All set for this new plan then?" asked Billee.

"Yes, I think that would be best," Hawkins said slowly. "Bud, you know something about the lay-out of the place. We'll ride part of the way with you, in case anything happens. Then when we get near it, you'll have to go on alone. You and Dick can decide on a plan of action. We will ride back, and return before dawn. This time we won't fail!"

"You'll ride with us to the place now, you mean?"

"Almost to it. Then I'll know the way to find it again. Come on, let's get started!"

The moon was now struggling to shine through the clouds as the six took up the ride again. Bud was in the lead. They had ridden for ten minutes when, suddenly, Bud uttered an exclamation, and pulled up his horse.

"Look there!" he cried, pointing.

Ahead loomed a dark mass. The boys rode up to it. As they approached slowly the moon finally came out fully, and before them they, saw the wreck of an automobile.

CHAPTER XX

DOWN AND OUT

"It's a car!" Dick cried. "Must be the smugglers' machine, and they wrecked it and got away! Now we know they're at that ranch!"

"Wonder what happened to the Chinks?" the Kid said as he examined the wreck more closely. The mass of twisted metal lay still in the moonlight like some once-living thing that had met its sudden doom.

"Probably dragged them along too," Hawkins suggested. "Yep, I think this is the smugglers' car, all right. Looks like the one we had a short glimpse of, just

before it turned off. And, if that's the case, our plan may succeed. Having a harbor close at hand, it's natural for them to make for it. Now it's up to us to see that they stay there until we capture them."

"That's our job, and we'll do it too," Bud said in a determined tone of voice. "Might as well get going. The longer we stay here, the more time we give Delton."

"True enough," commented Dick. "I wonder if anyone was hurt when this car crashed?"

"Doubt it," Hawkins said. "Those boys are too lucky! If they weren't they never would have gotten away with the stunt they pulled to-night. Imagine riding right into our hands and getting away from us! Every time I think of it I feel like kicking myself around the block."

"It wasn't any more your fault than the fault of the rest of us," Nort declared. "They were too many, and too clever. Let's forget it and go after them again, and this time we'll win. What do you say, boys?"

"Sure will!"

"No more foolin' around for us!"

"Well, on our way," Bud called. He took one more look at the auto lying on its side in a small depression, and spurred his horse onward. The rest followed quickly. The night was well spent, now, and but little time remained to reach the ranch and post the guard. However, it was not far now, and by dint of hard riding, following directions from Bud, they reached the vicinity of the ranch house in half an hour. They halted well away from the house itself.

"Take it easy now," Hawkins cautioned. "We don't want to make too much noise. Bud, have you and Dick decided what you're to do?"

"Practically—he is going to take one side, and I'm to take the other, and if we see anyone come out we'll fire over their heads. That'll keep 'em in all right, for they can't see us in the dark. No one likes to be fired on by someone he can't see—as we all found out. Now it's time to give them some of their own medicine."

"Yes sir!" exclaimed the Kid. "I wish I could stay with you, Dick, and have a

crack at them myself."

"You come along with us, Kid. We'll be back before dawn, and you'll see plenty of action then. Now is there anything you boys want before we leave?" asked the secret service man.

"Might bring back a snack for us," Bud suggested. "It's cold and hungry work waiting in the dark. Not that we mind it," he added quickly, "as long as it helps capture Delton. And if you can make it, Mr. Hawkins, please get back as soon as you can. They may try to make a rush for it."

"We will—we'll be back as soon as we get things right at the ranch and maybe snatch an hour's rest. Depends on how much time we have. But we'll surely be back before it's light."

This conversation was being carried on near a small group of trees, just out of sight of the old farm or ranch house. Now Hawkins and the rest turned their ponies toward home. Dick and Bud, of course, were due to remain and watch Delton's retreat.

"Now we're on our own," Bud said as he listened to the hoof-beats of the horses gradually dying away. "Let's get up to where we can see the house."

"What about the broncs? Think we better leave them?"

"Well, what do you think? We want them near us so we can get going quick if we have to. Suppose we tie them as close to the house as we can without being seen?"

"That's a good idea. Well, there's the place. Somebody's sure in it. All lit up!"

The boys stood and looked at the old farm house which loomed in the moonlight before them. It was certainly inhabited, for several lights were glowing on the ground floor, and every now and then a figure would pass in front of the lamps, casting a shadow plainly visible from the outside.

"Got a lot of nerve, walking around like that in front of lamps," Bud commented. "Easy to take a pot-shot at them."

"Guess they don't figure us as the kind for that sort of thing," Dick responded.

"And we're not, either—though it would serve them right if someone did let ride at the window."

The two boys now took up their positions agreed upon—Dick around to the left, and Bud to the right. They were thus separated from each other by about three hundred yards.

"Mustn't start thinking foolish things!" Dick exclaimed to himself. "Got enough on my mind now." He shook his head as though to rid it of fancies which hung around it. The boy was certainly not of a morbid type, and it was the most natural thing in the world for him to be a bit uneasy, considering his situation. Yet he would not even admit to himself that he was anything but wholly composed.

"Wonder how Bud is making out?" he thought. "Perhaps I'd better sneak over and see. But no, there's no sense in that." Thus did he dismiss the craving for company. "Besides, I've got my job cut out for me here."

He looked more intently at the house, seeking to concentrate his attention on the everyday affairs of life. Smuggling. The reward if they caught Delton. What they could do with it. A new herd of cows. The Kid's bronc—whether he would see it again. How Delton timed the arrival at the Shooting Star ranch just when the smuggling car got there. The getaway. How it did rain!

Still, in spite of himself, that uneasy feeling was stealing over the boy. Surely there was no one around but Bud, away over on the other side. Of course it was night, but there was plenty of moonlight, and there was not much chance of Delton's men prowling about. Perhaps it was because there were trees back of him that Dick felt restless. Might be better to move more out in the open.

The boy arose, then suddenly froze into stillness. That peculiar feeling that there was someone behind him became stronger.

It seemed as though a pair of eyes were boring into his back. He listened intently. Suddenly he heard a voice.

"Hey, Dick!"

The boy turned swiftly, hand on his every nerve a quiver!

"It's me, Dick! Billee Dobb!"

What a relief! The boy now recognized the old rancher's voice, and the next moment Billee appeared, walking as noiselessly as possible.

"What on earth are you doing here, Billee?"

"I decided to come back. Didn't want to miss all the fun."

"Yes, but you weren't supposed to, were you?"

"I told Hawkins, an' he said go ahead. So here I am."

"So I see." Dick could now afford to laugh at his foolish fears. "But let me tell you, you gave me a thrill for a moment. Now that you're here, what are you going to do?"

"Watch with you. That's what I came back for."

"Nice of you to do it, Billee. What time is it, do you know?"

"'Bout two. Lots of time yet."

The rancher was observing the activity within the old house. Nothing could be seen but the passing and re-passing of the figures in front of the windows, but for some reason it appeared that more persons were moving about.

"Looks as though something was goin' to happen," Billee commented in a low voice.

"Think so? Well, we've just got to wait, that's all."

The time passed slowly. Billee and Dick were observing the situation within the house as best they might, without necessarily exposing themselves.

"Say, Dick," said the veteran rancher after an hour that seemed like a year, "I'm goin' to investigate."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a-goin' up and have a look inside an' see what's happenin'."

"I don't know, Billee—they might spot you and let ride with some lead."

"Don't worry about that, Dick. They'll never know I'm there. Now you wait here an' I'll be right back."

"Well, for the love of Pete, be careful! We don't want anything to go wrong."

"Nothin's goin' wrong. Now you wait."

Billee Dobb moved softly in the direction of the ranch house, walking so easily it seemed as though he were stepping on wool. Unlike most other punchers, who spend most of their time on horseback, Billee was exceptionally surefooted. Much tramping about the country did that for him, and there were some who said he had been active in Indian warfare, long ago. He would be the first to deny this, however, as it would add too much to his age.

So while Dick waited impatiently, the rancher went toward the house, shoulders low, making himself as inconspicuous as possible. The distance between the house and where Dick was waiting was not far, but it was all open, and with the moon lighting up the scene almost like day, a person crossing might be easily seen.

Nearer and nearer Billee crept. Dick could see him picking his way like a dancer, so that he might step on no branch or twig which would break and give him away. Now he was almost at the side of the house. Dick saw him lean forward and cautiously peer in the window.

Then it happened. Dick saw a flash of fire from within the room, and the roar of a gun awakened the stillness of the night. Billee staggered back. He fell to the ground, but was up in a moment, and ran swaying toward Dick. The door of the house flew open, and a man with a gun in his hand burst out on the porch. Like a flash Dick had his gun out and fired. The man ducked back as the bullet struck the side of the house with a resounding "ping!"

With a supreme effort Billee reached the shelter of the trees. Dick ran to him. The old man's face was twisted with pain, and he sank to the earth.

"Dick—Dick—" he gasped, "they got me! They got me! I'm down—and—out!"

CHAPTER XXI

CLOSING IN

Nort, Mr. Hawkins and Yellin' Kid rode as fast as they might toward the Shooting Star. It was their intention to reach the ranch and return as soon as possible, after having taken a bite to eat. The idea of resting was given up as the hours flew by. It seemed no time at all before the stars grew dull, and the gray fingers of dawn spread out in the east.

"Have to hurry," Hawkins commented as he fumbled around in the dark kitchen of the ranch. "Where in thunder is that lamp? Haven't you got one out here?"

"Sure—I think so," Nort answered. "Have to hunt for it, though. I'm not so certain of my ground here. It's all new to me, you know.

"Well, it's not in the corner, that's sure. Let's have another match, Kid. Ah, here we are!" The soft illumination of an oil lamp flooded the room. "Got any non-exploding sand in this machine, Nort?"

"What's that?"

"It's something the gold-brick artists used to sell to farmer's wives to keep lamps from exploding. Nothing hut plain, ordinary sand, but the directions that came with it said to always keep the lamp clean, not to put too much oil in it, trim the wick, and so forth. Then put the sand in and the lamp would never explode. Of course it wouldn't, if the directions were followed. But the sand didn't help any. It was the cleaning that did the trick. Yet the buyer bought peace of mind and security for ten cents, so the game wasn't so bad as it sounds."

"Pretty good!" the Kid laughed. "Never heard of that trick before, but a feller was out here last year sellin' an electric belt, guaranteed to take off ten pounds. All you had to do was to live on bread an' water for five days an' run two miles every morning, wearin' the electric belt. Didn't do no business here, though,

'cause most of the boys wanted to put on weight, not lose it."

"Some graft," Hawkins declared. "Well, that's neither here nor there. Find that bread and meat, Nort?"

"Yep. Got it all fixed up. Say, by the way, I wonder where that Mex cook of ours went?"

"That's so too!" exclaimed Hawkins, as they hurriedly ate a lunch. "Forgot all about him in the excitement. No use looking for him now, I suppose. He may turn up."

"Then again he may not," the Kid spoke grimly. "We're well rid of him, I think. Don't like them Greasers nohow, and this one was no prize beauty. Didn't Bud say he was one of Delton's men?"

"Said he might be. He's not so bad, Kid. He may be dumb, but I don't think he'd pull anything really raw."

"You seem right interested in him, Nort."

"No, it isn't that, but I just don't like to see you get him wrong. Well, never mind. Let it ride. How about starting back, Mr. Hawkins?"

"Right. Blow out that lamp, Kid, and let's be on our way."

The three made their way toward the door, moving by sense of touch. As they reached their ponies, tied up near the house, the moon was a pale disc hanging on the edge of the horizon. The chill wind of dawn stirred restlessly, and the men shivered slightly. Though their wet clothes had nearly dried, they were still a bit damp, and not conducive to comfort on the open prairie.

"Just about make it if we step along," Nort said, looking up at the dimming stars.

"Takes a long while to get light out here," Yellin' Kid asserted. "We'll get there before dawn. But let's go. I'm frozen."

The three threw their mounts into a gallop and set out once more for Delton's ranch.

"I had an idea that Billee Dobb wanted to stay with Bud," Nort said as they sped along. "The old boy hates to miss any action."

"Well, I thought as long as he really wanted to go back, he might as well go," Hawkins declared. "He might be of some help, after all. Never can tell what will happen when you're trailing a gang like Delton's."

"You mean pretty rough, hey?"

"Sure! They have to be, to get along in their business. It's no child's play, smuggling Chinese. And it's no picnic capturing them, either."

Over the darkened range the three rode, like avenging angels. No time now for hesitating, and seeking a sure footing for the horses. They must take their chance. And if one spilled—well—it was all in the game. They must reach Bud and Dick before dawn. To Nort, sticking tight to his galloping pony, it seemed to have been a waste of time to ride all the way back to the Shooting Star. But on second thought he realized that it was necessary for them to have food, for they might be gone some time. A man can neither fight nor ride well on an empty stomach.

"Nearly there!" commented the Kid. No one was wasting words now. Breath was too precious. The only sounds heard were the even beats of the ponies' feet on the earth, and the creaking of the saddles. Hawkins was riding well, the Kid saw, even though he did come from the east. To the cowboy all places not west are "east," and so it was that the Kid looked upon Washington.

"Make it?" Nort called to the Kid.

"Sure! Coming to the water hole now."

The Kid's thoughts were racing along, keeping pace with the horses' flying feet. As is the case when one is engaged in work of a monotonous nature, such as riding, one's thoughts seem to whirl about in a circle, the same subjects recurring with regularity. The Kid was thinking about his lost bronco. Then Delton. Then the reward. Then back to the bronco again. And all the while the miles were disappearing behind him.

Suddenly the Kid pulled his mount to a stop.

"Wait!" he cautioned. "Isn't that where we left Bud, just ahead?"

A group of trees rose in front. They had a familiar aspect.

"Sure looks like it!" Hawkins agreed.

"Let's take it easy. Kid, you lead, and go slow."

The three walked their horses toward the trees. As they came nearer, they made certain that they had reached their destination. And just in time. The sky was graying rapidly.

"You two wait here, and hold my new bronc," Yellin' Kid directed softly, "an' I'll go around on foot. See how the land lays. All right, Mr. Hawkins?"

"All right, Kid. Go ahead. Then come back and tell us."

The Kid dismounted and handed his bridle rein to Nort. Then he walked carefully into the trees, and disappeared from view.

"See some action soon," Hawkins declared. He and Nort were waiting on their horses about three hundred yards from where the Kid had disappeared into the trees. "The old ranch house is right back there. And this time I want to make sure of getting the whole gang."

"Don't you think they figured we followed them, and are all set for us?"

"Maybe. Can't help that. But I'm not so sure, Nort—you know they had to get those Chinks to a place of safety. Couldn't let them wander around loose. And this was the only place they could go to. They had no choice. And whether they figured we'd follow or not, they had to dig in here."

"They sure got away neat before," Nort said, as he thought of the escape. "And if they hadn't wrecked their auto we'd probably never have seen them again. Now we've got a chance."

"Yes, and a little more than a chance. Wonder what's keeping the Kid. Told him to come right back."

"And here he comes—runnin'!" exclaimed Nort suddenly, as a figure burst

into sight. "Something must be the matter!"

They spurred their horses toward the Kid, and met him half way.

"What is it?" Hawkins asked sharply.

"Billee Dobb!" Yellin' Kid panted. "He's—" It was an ominous pause.

"Not so loud! Easy!"

"It's Billee!" the Kid exclaimed in a lower voice. "They shot him!"

"Shot him! Is he dead?"

"Not yet. Looks pretty bad. Bleedin' hard. By golly, let's go after those yellow sneaks, an' get 'em!"

"Shot Billee Dobb," Nort said slowly, as though he couldn't believe it. "Poor old Billee! Well—" he looked up sharply. "Let's go!"

The boy's lips were closed grimly. In his eyes shone a wild light. Whatever quarter would have been extended to the smugglers before, they could expect none now. The chase had turned—had changed into a personal venture. They had been seeking the capture of the smugglers because it had been their duty. Now——

"Men," Hawkins spoke in a low voice, clipping his words, "let's get started. We got work to do!"

There was not another word spoken. Belts were tightened, and guns loosened in their holsters. Dawn was just breaking. The three men closed in on the ranch house in silence.

CHAPTER XXII

FLYING BULLETS

Finally Nort spoke.

"What about Billee?" he asked.

"Dick's taking care of him as best he can. Poor old geezer—" the Kid bit his lip sharply. "He told me—he was sorry it happened, 'cause now he'll miss the fun."

"How did he look, Kid? I mean——"

"Can't tell, Nort. He's hit pretty bad. Course we don't know for sure—he's pretty old, you know——"

"But tough as a board," Hawkins broke in. "I know his kind. Don't worry boys. I'm sure he'll pull through O. K. Kid, is Bud coming with us?"

"Said he'd be right here. Want to wait he comes, before going closer?"

There was a halt in the determined march toward the ranch house. There seemed to be but little formal plan in the boys' attack; simply to "get those guys an' get 'em good," as the Kid expressed it. But now that the first shock of learning of Billee's wound had passed, all realized how hopeless it would be to simply go up and take Delton. Some sort of a scheme of attack was necessary if anything was to be accomplished.

"Here's Bud now," Hawkins said as the boy rancher rode toward them. There was a sober look on his face.

"How goes it?" the Kid asked, anxiously.

"Pretty fair. He's got a chance, I think. Bleeding's stopped. Dick's got him covered up with a saddle blanket over there a ways. If I get a crack at Delton _____"

"How'd it happen, Bud?" asked Hawkins quickly. It was evident that he wanted the boys to control themselves. It was dangerous work they were about to start, and thought must be clear and quick, unimpeded by external circumstance.

"From what I gather from Dick, Billee sneaked up to take a look in one of the

windows, and someone snipped him. He just made the shelter of the trees and fell unconscious."

"Well, men, that means we have an additional reason for taking Delton." Mr. Hawkins looked about him to be sure all were listening. In the east the red rim of the morning sun was bulging over the horizon. The time for action had come.

"Nort, come over here a minute, will you? Hold my bridle rein while I see if I've got that paper with me."

The boy, wondering a little, seized the rein while Hawkins went through his pockets. The agent's eyes were riveted on Nort's hand. It was as steady as a rock.

"Never mind—guess I won't need it. All right." Hawkins took the reins from the boy, satisfied by his little ruse that Nort was not affected by his lack of sleep. The business before them called for a firm hand and nerve.

Hawkins was speaking in a low voice.

"Can you men all hear what I'm saying? If not, get closer. Now listen. We've got to figure this thing out, or fail again. And if we don't take Delton this time, I'm afraid we never will. At least that's the way it seems to me. Here's what I thought. We'll ask him to surrender and come with us peaceably. We are bound to do that. They know by this time that we are on their heels, and can cause trouble for them if they attempt an escape now. I believe they'll bide their time, and make a rush for it. That's what we have to be ready for. I'm going up there with a flag of truce, and demand that they give in to the law."

The agent dismounted and, drawing his gun, he tied to the barrel of it a white handkerchief.

"You mean to say you're goin' to walk right up there in broad daylight, after what they did to Billee?" Yellin' Kid asked in a tone of surprise.

"I am. It's my duty. Besides, it's safe enough. No one but a fool would shoot a man bearing a white flag, when they're in Delton's position. It'll go hard enough with them as it is. I have an idea they might agree to come peaceably.

"Well I haven't," the Kid said grimly. "The only way we'll get those skunks out of their hole is to pull them out!"

Hawkins shrugged his shoulders and prepared to set out. They all walked to the edge of the trees, and just as the sun burst forth in all its glory Hawkins started across the open space toward the ranch house.

The boys watched him with anxious eyes. Would he cross safely, or would he be shot down like a dog? There was no sign from the ranch house. All activity had ceased as though the occupants had been frozen into stillness. Nearer and nearer walked the agent, head up, the gun with the handkerchief tied on it held in front of him. Still there was no sign of life inside the house. When the agent reached within ten feet of the place, the boys saw him stop and look closely at the quiet house.

"Hey, you!" he yelled.

"Nervy guy," the Kid commented, "He might easily get creased, standin' there yellin'. Me, I wouldn't put it past that bunch!"

Suddenly a window flew up and a head poked out. It was a stranger, none of the boys ever having seen the fellow before.

"What do you want?" the man demanded in a truculent tone.

"I call upon you to surrender, in the name of the law!" said Hawkins.

"You what?" Without waiting for an answer, the head drew in but the window remained open. In a moment the head reappeared.

"What are you talking about? Why should we surrender?"

"You're under arrest for smuggling, and for assault and battery with intent to kill!"

"You don't say!" The head popped in. Then in a moment——

"Who are you—John Law?"

"I happen to be a federal agent. But I'm not here to give you my history. Do you surrender?" The boys could hear the sting in the agent's words.

"Wait a minute." Once more the head disappeared. This time it stayed back

for some minutes. The watching boys were moving uneasily. Finally another came to the window—it was Delton. The agent gave no sign that he knew him.

"Want to speak to me?" asked Delton, an imperious note in his voice.

"Makes no difference who I speak to. I want to know if you'll surrender, and give yourselves over to the law."

"What for?"

"You know well enough! Smuggling, and shooting!"

"It was that bird's own fault that he got shot. What's he want to come sneaking around for? Serves him right! As for smuggling, who said we were smugglers?"

"Never mind about that." The agent was speaking quickly now. "I ask you once more, do you surrender?"

Unwittingly Hawkins lowered his gun on which was the flag of truce. There was a sudden report, and a spurt of dust arose at the agent's feet.

"There's our answer!" Delton yelled, and slammed down the window.

Hawkins wasted no time in returning to the waiting boys.

"That's that," he said grimly, and he removed the handkerchief from his gun. "We got to go after them. Kid, where's Billee Dobb resting?"

"Over there behind that bend. Want me to go over and see how he's makin' out?"

"Yes. In the meantime, where's that meat and bread you brought, Nort? Everybody grab some. Got water over there for Billee, Kid?"

"Yep; Dick's got a canteen full, and he's got Billee's shoulder tied up with his shirt. We can't do anything more for him 'til we get home."

"I hate to think of Billee lying out there hurt," Bud said a trifle sadly. "Think we all better go over and see him?"

"No, I don't," Hawkins said decidedly. "The Kid knows what he's talking about, and if he says we can't do anything more for Billee, there's no use tracking over there and getting him excited. Here, now, everybody get some of the food Nort brought."

"Not so hungry," Bud said, looking longingly toward the window where they had last seen Delton.

"Eat anyway, Bud. You'll need it. And stop worrying about Billee. I'm sure he'll make out all right."

On his way to the injured man the Kid brought some of the bread and meat for Dick. The others, though they protested they weren't hungry, ate as much as Nort carried. All felt better after this refreshment.

Within five minutes the Kid was back.

"Better!" he called as he came up. "Dick says he's getting along O. K. Took some of the food and wanted to know if he could be shifted to where he could see the fireworks. He's quiet now, though. Dick's afraid he'll start a hemorrhage if he moves around much."

"He might, too," Bud agreed. "It's best to keep him as quiet as possible. Well—when do we start?"

Hawkins had been standing by the side of his pony. Now he mounted and faced the house.

"We start now!" he said. "First we have to decide how to close in. I think Nort and I had better come in from the left. Kid, you and Bud get around to the extreme right. In that way we can cover the whole ground. Nort and I will start first, and try to make the door.

"When I shoot, you start, Kid. If we can get into the house, the rest is easy. I know that bunch. Fine when they're on top, but as soon as anyone gets under their guard, they welch. That's the reason I think we can make it. But listen—" and the agent's voice dropped. "This is a mighty risky business. I don't want anyone to get in this against his will. No telling what may happen. Are you boys willing to take a chance?"

Bud was the first to speak.

"Mr. Hawkins," he said, "I think I know the others well enough to speak for them. When we started this thing, we did so because it was our duty, and, I might as well admit it, because of the excitement. Since then something has happened. Billee Dobb was shot. Are you answered?"

"I am," said the agent, with an understanding look. "All set then, boys. Around that way, Bud. Wait for three shots, then close in—fast. Let's go!"

Bud and Yellin' Kid started for the right of the house. The moment had come. Before many more minutes passed, the plan would have either succeeded, or there would be fewer men able to walk around the ranch house. Hawkins and Nort drew their guns, and headed their ponies to the left, throwing them into a gallop. They crouched low in the saddles. What was in their minds as they made ready for that desperate charge? Fear? Hardly that. A turmoil of excitement, probably.

As they dashed out into the open Nort gave a quick glance toward the window. He could see nothing save darkness within. It took but a few seconds for them to reach the side of the house. Hawkins looked over at Nort. The boy nodded. Now!

They raced madly toward the house. Bang! A shot rang out, and a puff of smoke came from one of the windows. Nort's hat went sailing away as though it were on a string. Bang! Nort saw the agent's pony falter, then recover and go dashing on. Now they were almost to the house. It had seemed as though one of them surely would be hit, for they were speeding across perfectly open territory and the occupants of the house were firing rapidly.

But, somehow, luck was with them. They reached the porch safely. And just as Hawkins was about to give the signal for Bud and the Kid to attack, he saw something that stayed his hand.

From the rear of the house a volume of black smoke was pouring.

CHAPTER XXIII

A RING OF FIRE

"Wait, Nort!" Hawkins yelled. "Stick close to the house! Get in close! Not the front—this way! This way!"

He pulled his horse over to one side and held him as near the side wall of the ranch house as he could get. Nort followed him, also hugging the wall. In that way they were protected from the bullets of Delton's men.

"See what happened?" the agent exclaimed. "The place is on fire! Now they've got to get out, and they'll run right into our hands. How I hope the Kid has sense enough to stay away and nab them when they come out!"

The smoke was billowing out in huge clouds, now. It was a frame house, and a firetrap if there ever was one. Now the flames licked through, and the boards started to burn as though they had been soaked with gasoline.

"Can you sneak around the corner and signal to Bud?" suggested Hawkins. "Tell him to stay back. Wonder how in thunder this fire ever got going?"

Nort walked his mount toward the front, still keeping as close to the side of the house as possible. All gun-fire from within the burning place had now ceased, but the boy was taking no chances. There were but two windows on that side of the house, and their rooms were not occupied, so that as long as the ranchers kept hugging the wall they could not be shot at. The firing as they approached had evidently been done from an angle.

Hawkins's horse was prancing wildly about. His eyes were focused upon the tongues of flame that spurted out of the rear of the building.

"They can't stay in there much longer!" Hawkins yelled. "How about their ponies? Know where they keep them?"

"Easy to find out. Let's do it—quick. We ought to get around to where the Kid and Bud are and join forces. Ready?"

Hawkins nodded, and once more the two flashed across the open ground, this time away from the danger zone. But there was no need for such haste, for not a

shot followed them.

"The horses!" Nort yelled as he rode up. "Get them, Bud, and Delton won't have a dog's chance!"

"Got 'em!" Bud answered. "Soon as we saw the fire I went to where they had them tethered and led 'em over here. There they are, by that tree. Say, I wonder who started this thing?"

"What makes you think someone started it?" Hawkins asked, looking at him closely.

"Well, I figure it couldn't set itself—and it's not likely an accident would happen."

"Can't tell—like as not a lamp turned over. Wow, look at that roof go! Where can those birds be keeping themselves? What chance have they got now?"

"Probably trying to put it out from inside. Foolish thing to do, but they know as soon as they come out they're finished. I wouldn't deliberately set the place on fire, but it sure solved our problem for us."

As the fire raged more fiercely, the ranchers looked at each other. What had happened to Delton? Could it be that he determined to stick it out until the last moment, and risk a horrible death? Surely he must realize that in peaceful surrender lay his only hope.

Suddenly Bud uttered a cry.

"Here comes someone! Out of the cellar! Look!" Running toward them was a bedraggled figure. Clothes torn, face blackened with smoke, it presented a truly pitiful picture. As it ran it waved its arms wildly. Something in the appearance, or possibly its gesture, caused Bud to exclaim:

"Say, he looks familiar! Kid, Nort—know who that is?"

The boys looked curiously at the wretched man. Now he was almost upon them, and they could see his eyes glaring wildly. He reached them and fell to the ground, exhausted. Bud dismounted quickly and bent over him.

"Get up!" he commanded. "Let's have a look at you!" The man dragged himself to his feet. At a sight of his face, blackened as it was by the smoke, all started back.

"Well, what do you know about that!" the Kid cried. "It's our Mexican cook!"

"What are you doing here?" Nort asked sharply. "You with Delton? Hey? Tell the truth now or I'll hit you!"

"He can't talk!" Bud protested. "Give him a chance. He's all in. Come here, Mex." The boy held out his arm and the Mexican seized it and steadied himself. "Were you with Delton?" Bud asked.

The Mexican shook his head negatively. Then he pointed to the burning building and waved his arms wildly.

"Steady up!" Bud commanded. "Take it easy!"

The man took a deep breath and regained control of himself. But his gestures were still inexplicable. After a minute of vain gesticulating the Kid suddenly exclaimed:

"I think I get it! Mex, listen here: Did you set that fire?"

A vigorous nod of the head. The boys looked at each other in surprise.

"What for?"

The Mexican pointed to himself, then held up two fingers. Then he pointed to the house, and shook his fist.

"Be means his brother!" the Kid said. "What about him, Mex? Did Delton get hold of him?"

Another nod, and more furious gestures.

"I see!" cried the Kid. "He means Delton put his brother up to some dirty work. That right, Mex?"

Eagerly the man signified yes.

"And he did this to get back at him. But where is Delton, Mex? Why doesn't he come out? He'll be burned to death in there!"

The fire had eaten its way through to the front of the house and now the whole upper story was ablaze. It seemed impossible that any living creature could withstand those flames.

"Where's Delton, Mex?" the Kid persisted.

The cook pointed to the house then to the ground.

"The cellar!" Bud cried. "He means they're hiding in the cellar! That's the reason they can stay in there so long. We should have thought of that before."

"They'll soon be out," spoke Hawkins a trifle grimly. "The fire is reaching the lower story. We may expect a rush any minute now."

The men were standing in a group at the edge of the trees. With the house directly in front of them, and the country about perfectly flat, there was no chance of anyone escaping unseen. The flames mounted higher. There was a certain amount of awe in the faces of all as they thought of the tortures a person would endure if he were trapped in that furnace. And for all they knew, men might be burning to death in front of them! It was a harrowing situation. Even though they had shot Billee Dobb, it was an inhuman thing to wish, or even think, of them being caught in a burning building.

If they would only come out, even though they came shooting! Bud saw a huge tongue of flame shoot out of the roof.

"I can't stand this any longer!" he shouted. "Those men must be burning to death! I can't stay here and watch that. I'm going to——"

"But what can you do?" Nort asked. "They want to stay there until they're good and ready to leave. I don't see how we can help them. Certainly I don't want to see anyone burned to death, but I don't think we can do anything, except go in and get them, which we can't do; and if they won't come out, they won't."

"Perhaps they're trapped!"

"You'd know it if they were. They'd yell or something. No matter how much

they want to escape, they won't risk getting burned. No man would."

"Then why don't they come out?" Bud persisted.

"Ask me something easier! Maybe the Mex can tell us something about it. Hey, Mex! Why they no come out?"

But this time the cook shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands wide in a gesture expressing ignorance. They could get no information there.

"I'm going to ride over and see!" Bud exclaimed, a ring of determination in his voice.

"Well, if you want to—then I'll go with you. Kind of wonder where they are myself." This from Nort.

They had to force their horses to head toward the fire. The sparks were flying high, and the heat could be plainly felt even at the distance the boys stood. But finally Bud and Nort got the ponies started.

The animals approached the fire with mincing steps. The boys had to force them continually onward, for no beast will go toward fire willingly. A few more steps and Nort said:

"Say, Bud, there's not much point in this. The broncs will never go near enough for us to see anything. What say we get off and walk? I don't think there's much chance of Delton shooting at us. If we really want to find out anything we better get off these horses."

"Guess that's right," agreed Bud as his mount reared high. "Fast, though—snap to it, Nort!"

The boys turned their ponies away from the fire and rode swiftly back. They dismounted and without hesitation, ran again to the burning house. They made for the side, from where the Mexican cook had staggered out.

"There ought to be an entrance to the cellar about here," Bud panted as he ran on. "The Mex said they were down there!"

As they neared the building they saw that this was so. A small door indicated

the way to the cellar. The heat was tremendous, and Nort wondered if their errand hadn't been in vain. It didn't seem possible that there living creatures were voluntarily remaining within.

Just as Nort was about to tell Bud his thought, a figure emerged and staggered toward them. It was the man who had protested at Delton's treatment of Bud when the boy had been taken, bound, to this very house. The man was in sad case. His breath was coming in sobs, and he maintained an upright position only by a supreme effort. One side of his face was badly burned.

"Help—" he gasped. "Help—men in there——"

"What is it? Speak quick!" Bud commanded. "Can't they get out? Are they in danger?"

"Trapped! Delton—in there—can't move—hit on the head——"

The next moment the man collapsed at their feet, unconscious.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RATTLING BUCKBOARD

"Quick, Nort! Pull him back out of the heat and call the others! We've got to save those men!"

"What's the matter?" Dick cried as he came up. "Aren't they out of that furnace yet?"

"No—they're trapped inside! We've got to get them out! Billee Dobb—is—is he dead?"

"No—he's better! He insisted on my coming over when he saw the smoke. Thought I might be needed. No time for talk now—we've got to get busy!"

"It's sure death to enter that!" Hawkins cried as another huge tongue of flame

shot heavenward, sending the boys reeling back. "You'll only throw your lives away!"

"I can't help it—we must do something! We can't see them burned to death!"

At that moment Bud felt a tug at his sleeve. He jerked around. At his elbow was the Mexican cook. He motioned to himself, then toward the cellar. Then he leaped forward.

"Follow him!" Bud cried. "He knows how to get in safely!"

With a rush the others were on the heels of the Mexican.

"Someone has got to stay here—help them out if we do get them!" exclaimed Hawkins. "Nort—you and Dick wait!"

Bud was directly behind the Mexican. He saw the man disappear down into the smoke, and taking a full breath, the boy followed. He found himself below ground, and for a moment hesitated to get his bearings. The air was choking, but the heat was not intolerable. The fire had not quite reached the lower floor.

There was no time to be lost, for any minute the building might collapse and bury them. Bud plunged on. He could see faintly now, and he caught a glimpse of a figure in front of him, beckoning.

"Go—ahead!" the boy gasped. "Coming!"

A few steps further and he stumbled against a door. At his side was the Mexican, pointing. Bud pushed frantically, but the door refused to budge. Then he found the reason. It was bolted.

"You—you locked them in! You inhuman——"

He saw the Mexican shrug his shoulders. Even in the burning building the Latin's philosophical mind did not desert him.

Bud struggled with the bolt. It stuck. He strove with all his strength—and the door flew open. The boy stumbled in. His foot struck a body stretched upon the floor.

He reached down and lifted the unconscious man to his shoulder. Behind him he heard a voice. It was that of Yellin' Kid.

"Give him here!" The Kid seized the limp form and passed it to someone at his side. "We'll get 'em out like a bucket-brigade! Pass 'em to me, Bud!"

Through the smoke Bud groped his way. His hand encountered another body. In a moment he lifted the man and passed him to the Kid. His head felt as if it were bursting, but on he struggled, seeking, hands outstretched. He passed another body out to the Kid. Another. Then he heard a moan and turned toward it. A man lay against the wall. His hands moved feebly, and even in the smoke and gloom Bud, could see blood streaming from a cut on his head. The boy bent over and grasped the man's arm. His face was within an inch of the other's.

"Delton!"

The boy's cry was involuntary. Here, under his very hands, was the man who was the cause of their misfortunes—who had committed crimes, no telling how many, and who had perhaps shot one of their comrades. And yet Bud was risking his life to save this creature. Was it fair to ask——?

A low moan came from the wretched figure. Bud looked for a long moment at the blood-stained face. Then with a sudden heave he lifted him and staggered to the door.

"I'll take him!" he gasped to the Kid, who had reached for the burden. "See if there are any more!"

He heard Yellin' Kid smashing against the walls in an effort to locate other senseless figures. Then he followed Bud.

"Can't find any more. Ask the Mex how many——"

The cook heard the inquiry and flung his arms wide, indicating that the rest had made their escape. The Kid, gasping, plunged out into the open.

As he gulped in great mouthfuls of the welcome fresh air the Kid heard a sudden crash. He turned quickly. A shower of sparks and flames shot into the air, like the eruption of a volcano. There was another roar, and the next moment the building was in ruins. The walls had collapsed, and nothing remained of the

structure but a pile of embers. With horror written on his face, the Kid looked wildly about him.

"Bud!" he almost screamed. "Bud—is he in there? Get him out—get him _____"

"All right, Kid—all right—" said a voice by his side. It was Bud. The Kid stared at him for a long minute, with a suspicious moisture in his eyes. Then he laid his hand on Bud's shoulder.

"Thought—you were—" he said in a husky voice. And he did a strange yet a boyish thing. He withdrew his hand from Bud's shoulder and planted it hard under the other's ribs.

"Baby!" he exclaimed. "We sure did clean up that place! Threw them out like bags of corn. Anybody hurt bad?"

The two, their faces blackened and with clothes torn, walked toward the group of men gathered about the injured. They saw the forms stretched on the ground, and for a moment feared that their rescue work had been in vain.

The boy ranchers looked at the figure upon the ground. The man groaned and opened his eyes. He stared straight into the eyes of Bud. For a moment hostility glared out at the boy, then Delton half closed his eyes as though he were trying to think. The men gathered about were quiet, watching their prisoner. He wet his lips with his tongue.

"Thanks," he murmured, and held out his hand with a feeble gesture. Bud reached down and grasped it with a smile.

"Don't mention it," the boy said quickly. Then he straightened up and looked over to Mr. Hawkins. "Say, are you thinking the same thing I am?" he asked the agent.

"You mean, where are the Chinks? You bet I'm wondering that! Wait, I believe I can find out. Hey, Mex!" The agent called to the cook who was standing on the edge of the group. "Come here! You know him?"

He pointed to a man seated on the ground, leaning against a tree, with one of his sleeves burned entirely away. The arm was scorched. But with his other hand

the man was calmly holding a cigarette.

The Mexican cook looked at him and then nodded briefly.

"He's your brother, isn't he?"

Another careless nod.

"Then you ask him what became of the Chinks!"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" Dick wanted to know.

"Tried it—won't answer. I think his brother can make him talk."

This proved to be correct. The cook bent over his brother and made a few rapid motions with his fingers. The seated man muttered something. Again the cook's fingers moved. This time his brother answered more at length, and the cook walked in the direction of a small shed, motioning to the others to follow. Nort and Mr. Hawkins trailed along behind. When they reached the shack the cook pointed to it.

"In there?" the agent asked doubtfully. It didn't seem large enough to hold more than two men. It had probably been used to shelter a calf when the place had been run by a farmer.

The Mexican nodded. Hawkins stepped to the small door and jerked it open. A bundled-up mass of humanity almost tumbled into his arms, and when they untangled themselves, there were not two Chinese, but five!

"How in thunderation did you all ever get in there?" Nort inquired wonderingly. "Hey, you! Quiet down! We're not going to hurt you. What do you think this is, a circus? Gee! They were like sardines!"

The Chinese were as excited as rabbits, and chattered away in evident fear. None of them spoke English, and it was some time before they could be made to understand that no harm was intended them.

As the agent returned to the little group of wounded and others, he saw them centered about something and all talking at once. He quickened his pace and in a moment saw the cause of the commotion.

"Billee Dobb!" he exclaimed. "Golly, I'm glad to see you moving again! How did you get over here?"

"Dick and Yellin' Kid carried me," the veteran rancher answered with a smile. "Like a silly baby! They jest lifted me up an' brung me along. Said I had to see the last act, anyway."

"How are you feeling?" Hawkins asked anxiously. "I wanted to go to you soon as I heard about it, but I couldn't, Billee."

"Sure, I know you couldn't. I was all right. Dick stayed by me until I had to threaten him with a six-gun to get him to help you people. Why, I'm feelin' O. K. now. Jest got me in the shoulder. Laid me out for a spell—I ain't as young as I was—why, I remember the time when I got an arrow full in the side—didn't phase me none—went right on and got the guy that shot it—I was a man in them days—I remember——"

"Now, Billee, take it easy," Bud said gently. "Tell us all about it later. You got lots of time. Thirsty?"

"A leettle," the rancher replied with a sigh. Bud leaned over and held his canteen to the other's lips. Billee took a long drink and sighed again. "Tired," he said weakly. "Want to sleep."

He lay back on the blanket. Bud drew the edges over him and motioned the others away. "Let him sleep. Best thing in the world for him. We'll take him back later. I don't want to move him until that wound gets good and quiet."

"What about these others?" Nort inquired. "We want to get them out of the way. There are five men who can't walk. Then there's two more who managed to get out without being burned. They're here too. We've got to get them all back some way. Can't walk them, and we haven't enough horses. What do you think, Mr. Hawkins?"

"Let me see," the agent said. "It is a problem, Nort. Bud, have you a suggestion? The sooner we can get the bunch to town the quicker we'll get something hot to eat. And a little sleep wouldn't harm us any. Think of anything, Bud?"

"Well, if—" The boy stopped and listened intently. In the distance he heard

the sounds of horses. Then as they approached nearer the creaking noise of a wagon traveling fast came to him. The next moment all heard a voice yelling:

"Get along there, boys! Watch it—watch it! Pete, you spavin-back cayuse, come out of that! Quit side-steppin'! At a baby—now yore goin'! Out of that hole! Out of it! Pete! Pete! You dog-eared knock-kneed bleary-eyed paint, if you don't swing wide I'll skin you alive! You, Pete!"

A rattling buckboard popped into view like the presiding genius of a jack-in-the-box.

"It's our friend from town—from the store!" Nort exclaimed.

"Yes, and look who's with him!" Bud yelled. "It's Dad! Yea, Dad! Golly, I'm glad you came! You're just in time!"

CHAPTER XXV

YELLIN' KID FINDS HIS BRONC

The wagon came to a sudden stop, and Mr. Merkel jumped out.

"Hello, son! Howdy, boys! Say—what happened here? Bud—how did you get burned? You hurt?" There was a note of anxiety in the father's voice.

"Not a bit, Dad! Just blackened up a little. Had a fire, and we had to pull some men out. Look at that!"

The boy pointed to the mass of embers that was once a house. The fire had died down until now there was only glowing bits of wood left. It had started quickly and ended as suddenly.

"Anybody seriously burned?" Mr. Merkel looked at his son keenly, as though to satisfy himself that he was uninjured. The father's glance evidently convinced him that Bud was all right, for he turned quickly and said to the others:

"Where's Billee Dobb? I don't see him."

"Billee is the one who is really hurt, Uncle," Nort answered. "He's got a piece of lead in his shoulder. He's asleep now—be all right later, I think."

"Shot! The rascals! They'll suffer for that! You want to get Billee to a doctor as soon as possible, before infection sets in. We'll bring him back in the wagon."

"How did you happen to come here, Dad?" Bud asked curiously. "I didn't think you knew where we were."

"I didn't, exactly. I have a confession to make, Bud. You weren't sent out here to herd sheep. You were sent to do just what you did—to capture the smugglers."

"But—but why didn't you tell us?"

"I couldn't, Bud. I gave my word to the government that I'd not let on the reason I was sending you out here. You see, no one could tell just what would happen. If you knew that you were sent to go after smugglers, and you went after the wrong gang, things would be in a pretty mess. So they concluded that it was best to leave you in the dark. I'll admit I favored telling you, boys, but as it turned out, the other way may have been best. Even as it was, I let slip something about it. And when you weren't at the ranch I figured you might be in this direction. I sort of suspected this place. Well, all's well that ends well. Now what, boys?"

"If we can get that wild buckboard man to drive slowly, we have a load of passengers to take back. Oh, say, Dad, do you know Mr. Hawkins? I don't know whether you—" Bud paused suggestively.

"Yes, indeed," Mr. Merkel said with a smile. "We're old friends. He came to me long ago and arranged most of this scheme. Sorry we had to do it, boys—but the government seems to know its business!"

"I'm glad you look at it in that light, Mr. Merkel," the agent said as he shook hands. "We have to be very, very careful—and a slip that may seem trivial to others may mean success or failure to us. But let me say that these boys have more than come up to expectations. I have never seen a better——"

"Hey, hey, take it easy!" the Kid laughed. "It might go to our heads. But one

thing, Mr. Hawkins. It's about——"

"I know—the reward! And you get it, too, boys. As soon as we get to town I'll give you a check that's in my office safe. You have certainly earned it."

"Now we can get a new bunch of longhorns!" shouted Dick gleefully. "Great stuff! That's worth going without a night's sleep for!"

"And the radio," Nort broke in. "We get that, too!"

"You and your sparkin' outfit," Yellin' Kid scoffed. "You want music with your grub, I guess!"

"Say, Mr. Hawkins, what's the penalty for smuggling in this state?" Bud inquired. "I just wondered——"

"Ten years," the agent answered briefly. "Delton's due for quite a long stretch. He'll have time to think over his errors."

"Ten years," Bud said musingly. "Ten years in jail! Mr. Hawkins, if we testified that Delton wasn't so bad as he's supposed to be, and that——"

The boy stopped. Hawkins looked at him long and hard. Then he walked over and held out his hand.

"Son," he said simply, "that's the whitest thing I've ever seen a man do. I'll try to fix it up for you. We'll do what we can to lighten his sentence."

"Thanks," Bud said gratefully.

"Well, when do we start?" Mr. Merkel asked. "If you men are hungry, we'd better get going. Did I understand you to say we'd have a load going back, Bud?"

"And then some! Now let's see how we can arrange this. Billee Dobb goes back in the buckboard. And so do the others who are badly hurt. How many do you think can ride, Kid? You know we've got their horses at the back, and some can come along on them."

"Figure Delton and two of those other guys should go in the wagon. The rest can fork the broncs. They're able. Well, let's get those fellers that are going along with this wild man in the wagon. Think you can take it easy a short spell?" Yellin' Kid asked the grinning driver.

"Sure! Like an am-bu-lance. They'll never know they're ridin'."

"All right. Now about these Chinks. Guess they'll have to get along on the ponies."

"But maybe they can't ride," Nort suggested.

"Maybe they can't—but they're gonna take a lesson right now! Their first an' last. Let's get hold of Billee an' lift him in the wagon. Still asleep?"

"Yep. Easy now. That does it——"

As they raised the form of the old rancher he stirred uneasily. Then he opened his eyes.

"Boss!" he exclaimed. "What do you think of me bein' carried around this way. Wait a minute, boys, I can walk. I want to——"

"You're to lay right still," admonished Yellin' Kid. "Think we want you bleedin' all over the landscape? Now go slow, an' Mr. Merkel will shake hands with you when we get you in the wagon."

"How are you, Billee?" the cattle owner asked warmly. "Heard you had an accident! Well, we'll feed you up good for a couple of days and you'll soon be on horseback again."

"Sure will! Can't say I like this lyin' down idea. But the boys won't let me get up."

The buckboard carrying Billee and the other injured men went first, and the rest of the procession followed, with Mr. Hawkins and Dick in the extreme rear, to see that everything went well. And thus they started for town.

They had scarcely gotten under way when all heard the sound of a horse

behind them. They turned and saw a riderless pony galloping toward them.

"What the mischief—" Bud cried out as he saw the horse nearing them. "He wants to visit! Look—his halter has been broken. Must be a runaway. I wonder ——"

"Runaway nothin'!" yelled the Kid. "He's comin' home! That's my bronc!"

The horse made straight for Yellin' Kid.

"Look at that—knows me! Well! Well! Well! Come home to papa! My bronc, sure as you're a foot high! See that spot above his eye? I'd know it in a million! Come here, baby—where you been? Huh? I been lookin' all over for you."

There was a sudden exclamation from one of the smugglers who was riding in front of the Kid.

"Got away!" the man muttered. "Thought I tied her——"

"So-o-o you're the coot that had her, hey? An' you tied her up tight, hey? So she couldn't get loose? Well, let me tell you that this little paint can bust *any* halter, if she wants to. Can't you, baby? By golly, I——"

"Sing it, Kid, sing it!" Dick laughed. "Do you tuck her in bed at night, too?"

"Well, she's the best bronc I ever had!" the Kid said definitely. "An' I'm goin' to ride her in. Dick, hang on to this pony, will you? Lead her in for me. Well!" As he got into the saddle of his own mount. "Here we are again, baby! Now I won't need that other horse that you were goin' to get me, Mr. Hawkins. 'Scuse me a minute, boys——"

He threw the bronc into a gallop and tore across the plain. Then he wheeled and came rushing back.

"He's happy," Nort said with a grin. "Never expected to see his bronc again, and she runs right into his hands. Hey, you—where did you keep her?"

"Around the side," the man who had spoken before answered with a scowl. "Thought I might need her in a hurry. His horse, was it? Well, he was ridin' mine. A fair exchange is no robbery. Now he's got her back he's got no kick comin'."

"Hasn't, hey? Don't know about that. If he finds any marks on her——"

"She wasn't touched," the man said quickly. "Fast enough without that."

"Lucky for you," Nort commented, meaningly.

After his mad dash the Kid returned in easier fashion. And so the strange procession wended its way back to Roaring River. It took them rather a long time to get there, as the buckboard had to be driven slowly on account of the injured. True to his promise, the young "wild man" held his verbally much-abused horses down to a walk.

The smugglers were removed to jail, with the assurance from the warden that those who were injured would be treated by a local doctor. The Chinese were also jailed, to be held for the federal officers. Deportment, first back to Mexico, and, eventually, back to China was their portion. They seemed to realize it, for they were a sad and silent bunch.

Billee Dobb was given a room to himself in the ranch house where he could rest and get well, and then the others washed up and "filled up," as Nort expressed it.

"Now comes the reward," said Mr. Hawkins, and he arranged to have it paid to the Boy Ranchers, with Yellin' Kid and Billee Dobb sharing in it. There was an additional reward for capturing the smuggled Chinese as well as the smugglers, so there was a fund large enough for all to share.

"Let's go up and see Billee now," proposed Bud, when they had eaten and quieted down.

They found the old rancher restlessly picking at the coverlet of his bed, his weather-tanned face in strange contrast to the white pillow cases. As the boys and Mr. Merkel entered, Billee grinned.

"Fust time I ever been t' bed by daylight in seventeen years," he said. "Don't know what to do with myself. Now if Snake Purdee was only here, he could ——"

"An' here I am!" exclaimed a voice outside the door. "Hello, Billee! Heard you was receivin' callers an' I came right over. What'll you have—a song? All

right, boys—come on in! Billee wants us to sing for him!"

Into the room shuffled Billee's companions of Diamond X: Slim Degnan, Fat Milton, and the rest.

"Hello, Billee!"

"Howdy, you old de-teck-a-tive you!"

"How's it feel to be a hero?"

"Now boys—are you ready? Ta da—let's go!"

They all joined in the song. And as Billee Dobb "smiled a smile" that reached to the corners of the room, the notes of "Bury Me Not On the Lone Prairie, With Variations," filled the house and flowed over into the outer air. And Billee Dobb just lay there, smiling and smiling.

As for the Boy Ranchers—they were happy, too. They had done a good job. They had covered themselves with glory.

"And maybe there are other jobs ahead," remarked Bud.

THE END

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