

FICTION

Frank Gee Patchin

The Pony Rider Boys in Texas

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

The Pony Rider Boys in Texas

OR

The Veiled Riddle of the Plains

By FRANK GEE PATCHIN

Author of The Pony Rider Boys in The Rockies, Etc.

Illustrated

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Drop That Gun!

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The Pony Rider Boys in Texas

CHAPTER I

IN THE LAND OF THE COWBOY

"What's that?"

"Guns, I reckon."

"Sounds to me as if the town were being attacked. Just like war time, isn't it?"

"Never having been to war, I can't say. But it's a noise all right."

The freckle-faced boy, sitting on his pony with easy confidence, answered his companion's questions absently. After a careless glance up the street, he turned to resume his study of the noisy crowds that were surging back and forth along the main street of San Diego, Texas.

"Yes, it's a noise. But what is it all about?"

"Fourth of July, Ned. Don't you hear?"

"Hear it, Tad? I should say I do hear it. Yet I must confess that it is a different sort of racket from any I've ever heard up North on the Fourth. Is this the way they celebrate it down here?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Why, a fellow might imagine that a band of wild Indians were tearing down on him. Here they come! Look out! Me for a side street!"

The little Texas town was dressed in its finest, in honor of the great national holiday, and the inhabitants for many miles around had ridden in at the first streak of dawn, that they might miss none of the frolic.

A rapid explosion of firearms accompanied by a chorus of wild yells and thrilling whoops, had caused Ned Rector to utter the exclamation of alarm. As he did so, he whirled his pony about, urging the little animal into a side street so that he might be out of the way of the body of men whom he saw rushing down upon them on galloping ponies.

"Hurry, Tad!" he called from the protection of the side street.

That others in the street had heard, and seen as well, was evident from the frantic haste with which they scrambled for the sidewalk, crowding those already there over yard fences, into stores and stairways in an effort to get clear of the roadway. A sudden panic had seized them, for well did they know the meaning of the shooting and the shouting.

A band of wild, uncontrollable cowboys, free for the time from the exacting work of the range, were sweeping down on the town, determined to do their part in the observance of the day.

Yet, Tad Butler, the freckle-faced boy, remained where he was undisturbed by the uproar, finding great interest in the excited throngs that were hurrying to cover. Nor did he appear to be alarmed when, a moment later, he found himself almost the sole occupant of the street at that point, with his pony backed up against the curbing, tossing its head and champing its bit restlessly.

As for the freckle-faced boy and his companion, the reader no doubt has recognized in them our old friends, Tad Butler and Ned Rector, the Pony Rider Boys. After their exciting experiences in the Rockies, and their discovery of the Lost Claim, which gave each of the boys a little fortune of his own, as narrated in the preceding volume, "THE PONY RIDER BOYS IN THE ROCKIES," the Pony Riders had turned toward Texas as the scene of their next journeying. With Walter Perkins and Stacy Brown, the boys, under the guidance of Professor Zeppelin, were to join a cattle outfit at San Diego, whence they were to travel northward with it.

This was to be one of the biggest cattle drives of recent years. A cattle dealer, Mr. Thomas B. Miller, had purchased a large herd of Mexican cattle, which he decided to drive across the state on the old trail, instead of shipping them by rail, to his ranch in Oklahoma.

It had been arranged that the Pony Riders were to become members of the working force of the outfit during what was called the "drive" across the State of Texas. The boys were awaiting the arrival of the herd at San Diego on this Fourth of July morning. Though they did not suspect it, the Pony Rider Boys were destined, on this trip, to pass through adventures more thrilling, and hardships more severe, than anything they had even dreamed of before.

The cattle had arrived late the previous evening, though the boys had not yet been informed of the fact. The animals were to be allowed to graze and rest for the day, while the cowmen, or such of them as could be spared, were given leave to ride into town in small parties. It was the advance guard of the cowboys whose shots and yells had stirred the people in the street to such sudden activity.

On they came, a shouting, yelling mob.

Tad turned to look at them now.

The sight was one calculated to stir the heart and quicken the pulses of any boy. But the face of Tad Butler reflected only mild curiosity as he gazed inquiringly at the dashing horsemen, each one of whom was riding standing in his stirrups waving sombrero and gun on high.

What interested the freckle-faced boy most was their masterful horsemanship.

"Ye-e-e-o-w!" exploded the foremost of the riders.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

As many puffs of white smoke leaped into the air from the revolvers of the skylarking cowmen.

"W-h-o-o-p-e!" they chorused in a mighty yell, letting go at the same time a rattling fire.

"Ye-e-e-o-w!"

As they swept down toward the spot where Tad was sitting on his pony, the cowboys swung into line six abreast, thus filling the street from curb to curb.

This time, however, instead of shooting into the air, they lowered the muzzles of their revolvers, sending volley after volley into the street ahead of them, the leaden missiles viciously kicking up the dirt into miniature clouds, like those from heavy drops of rain in advance of a thunder squall.

Tad's pony began to show signs of nervousness.

"Whoa!" commanded the boy sharply, tightening his rein and pressing his knees firmly against the animal's sides. The prancing pony was quickly mastered by its rider, though it continued to shake its head in emphatic protest.

"Out of the way, you tenderfoot!" yelled a cowman, espying the boy and pony directly in his path.

Tad Butler did not move.

"Ye-e-e-o-w!" shrieked the band in a series of shrill cries.

When they saw that the boy was holding his ground so calmly, their revolvers began to bark spitefully, flicking up a semicircle of dust about the pony's feet, causing the little animal to prance and rear into the air.

At this Tad's jaws set stubbornly, his lips pressing themselves firmly together. The boy brought his quirt down sharply on the pony's flank, at the same time pressing the pointless rowels of his spurs against the sides of the frightened animal.

Though Tad determinedly held his mount in its place, he was no longer able to check its rearing and plunging, for the wiry little animal was wholly unused to such treatment. Besides, a volley of revolver bullets about its feet would disturb the steadiest horse.

Two cowboys on his side of the street had driven their mounts toward the lad with a yell. Tad did not wholly divine their purpose, though he knew that their intent was to frighten him into giving them the street. He felt instinctively that if he should refuse to do so, some sort of violence would be visited upon him.

It followed a moment later.

Observing that the boy had no intention of giving way to them, the two cowboys held their course, their eyes fixed on the offending tenderfoot until finally only a few rods separated them.

Suddenly, both men pulled their mounts sharply to the right, and, digging in the spurs, plunged straight for Tad.

"So that's their game, is it?" thought the boy.

They were going to run him down.

Tad's eyes flashed indignantly, yet still he made no move to pull his pony out of the street.

"Keep off!" he shouted. "Don't you run me down!"

"W-h-o-o-o-p!" howled the pair, at the same time letting go a volley right under the hoofs of his pony. It seemed to the lad that the powder from their weapons had burned his face, so close had the guns been when they pulled the triggers.

Tad had braced himself for the shock that he knew was coming, gathering the reins tightly in his right hand and leaning slightly forward in his saddle.

They were fairly upon him now. Two revolvers exploded into the air, accompanied by the long shrill yell of the plainsmen. But just when it seemed that the lad must go down under the rush of beating hoofs, Tad all but lifted his pony from the ground, turned the little animal and headed him in the direction in which the wild horsemen were going.

The boy's clever horsemanship had saved him. Yet one of the racing cow ponies struck the boy and his horse a glancing blow. For the moment, Tad felt sure his left leg must have been broken. He imagined that he had heard it snap.

As he swept past the boy the cowboy had uttered a jeering yell.

Tad brought down his quirt with all his force on the rump of the kicking cow pony, whose hoofs threatened to wound his own animal.

Then a most unexpected thing happened--that is, unexpected to the cowboy.

Looking back at the boy he had attempted to unhorse, the cowman was leaning over far to the left in his saddle when Tad struck his horse. The pony, under the sting of the unexpected blow, leaped into the air with arching back and a squeal of rage.

The cowboy's weight on the side of the startled animal overbalanced it and the animal plunged sideways to the street. The cowpuncher managed to free his left leg from the stirrup; but, quick as he was, he was not quick enough to save himself wholly from the force of the fall. The fellow ploughed the dirt of the street on his face, while the pony, springing to its feet, was off with a bound.

The other cowpunchers set up a great jeering yell as they saw the unhorsing of their companion by a mere boy, while the villagers and country folks laughed as loudly as they dared.

Yet there was not one of them but feared that the angry cowpuncher would visit his wrath upon the lad who had been the cause of his downfall.

With a roar of rage he scrambled to his feet.

In his fall the fellow's gun had been wrenched from his hand, and lay in the street.

He picked it up as he started for Tad Butler.

Tad, who had sat in his saddle calmly, now realized that he must act quickly if he expected to save himself.

His plan was formed in a flash.

Digging in the spurs, and at the same time slapping the little animal smartly on its side, the lad caused his little pony to leap violently forward.

"Drop that gun!"

As he uttered the stern command, the boy brought his quirt down across the cowman's knuckles with a resounding whack.

The cowman with a yell of rage sprang at him, but the blow aimed at Tad Butler's head never reached him.

CHAPTER II

THE PONY RIDERS JOIN THE OUTFIT

At that instant a man, clad in the dress of a cowboy, leaped from the sidewalk. He caught the angry cowman by the collar. From the way in which the newcomer swung the fellow around it was evident that he was possessed of great strength.

"Stop it!" he thundered.

Tad's assailant turned on the newcomer with an angry snarl, his rage now beyond all control.

"Let me alone! Let me get at the cub!" he cried, making a vicious pass at the man.

The cowboy's blow was neatly parried and a mighty fist was planted squarely between his eyes, sending him to earth in a heap.

"Get up!" commanded the man who had felled him.

The cowboy struggled to his feet, standing sullenly before his conqueror.

"Look at me, Lumpy! Didn't I tell you that I'd 'fire' you if you got into any trouble in town to-day?"

The cowboy nodded.

"Is this the way you obey orders? What sort of recommend do you suppose Boss Miller will give you when I tell him I found you trying to shoot up a kid?"

"I don't care. I ain't askin' any recommends. Besides, he--he got in----"

"Never mind what he did. I saw it all. Get your pony and back to the camp for yours. Let Bert come in your place. You get no more lay-offs till I see fit to let you. Now, git!"

Thoroughly subdued, but with angry muttered protests, the cowboy, walked down the street, jerking his pony's head about and swinging himself into the saddle.

"Don't be rough on the fellow. Let him stay."

The newcomer turned to Tad, glancing up at the boy inquiringly.

"Young fellow, you've got nerve--more nerve than sense."

"Thank you. But I asked you to let the man stay. He won't do it again," urged Tad.

"I'm the best judge of that. And as for you, young fellow, I would advise you to ride your pony away from here. First thing I know you will be mixing it up with some of the rest of the bunch. I may not be around to straighten things out then, and you'll get hurt."

"Thank you, sir. I think I have as much right here as anyone else. If those are your men I should think you might be able to teach them to respect other people's rights."

"What, teach a cowboy?" laughed the other. "You don't know the breed. Take my advice and skip."

Tad's rescuer strode away.

The lad's introduction to cowboy life had not been of an encouraging nature, though it was difficult for him to believe that all cowboys were like the one he had just encountered.

"Well, you made a nice mess of it, didn't you?" chuckled Ned Rector, riding up beside his companion a few minutes later. "I didn't see it, but I heard all about it from Bob Stallings."

"Stallings? Who's he?"

"The foreman of the cowboys with whom we are going."

"And were those the fellows that tried to crowd me off the street?"

"I reckon those were the boys," said Ned Rector quietly.

"Then, I can see a nice time when we join them. They will have no love for me after what has happened this morning. Where is the camp?"

"I don't know. Professor Zepplin says it's about four miles to the west of here."

"When do we join them?"

"Some time to-night. The foreman says they are going to start at daylight. He's over at the hotel talking with the Professor now. He was telling the Professor about your mix-up with Lumpy Bates. That's the name of the cowboy who ran into you. And how he did laugh when I told him you belonged to our crowd," chuckled Ned.

"What did he say?"

"Said he thought you'd do. He says we can't use our ponies on the drive."

"Why not?" asked Tad, looking up quickly.

"Because they are not trained on cattle work."

"Pshaw! I'm sorry. Have we got to leave them here?"

"No. He says we may turn them in with their herd, and use them for anything we care to, except around the cattle. We shall have to ride some of the bronchos when we are on duty."

"I think I see somebody falling off," laughed Tad. "Ever ride one of them, Ned?"

"No."

"Well, you'll know more about them after you have."

"I think I should like to go over and see Mr. Stallings," declared Tad.

"All right, come along, then."

They found the foreman of the outfit discussing the plans for their journey with Professor Zepplin, while Stacy Brown and Walter Perkins were listening with eager attention.

"This is Master Tad Butler, Mr. Stallings," announced the Professor.

"I think I have met the young man before," answered the foreman, with a peculiar smile.

"Tad, I am surprised that you should involve yourself in trouble so soon after getting out of my sight. I----"

"The boy was not to blame, Mr. Professor. My cowpunchers were wholly in the wrong. But you need have no fears of any future trouble. The bunch will be given to understand that the young gentlemen are to be well treated. You will find no luxuries, but lots of hard work on a cattle drive, young men----"

"Do--do we get plenty to eat?" interrupted Stacy Brown apprehensively.

All joined in the laugh at the lad's expense.

"Chunky's appetite is a wonderful thing, Mr. Stallings," said Tad.

"I think we shall be able to satisfy it," laughed the foreman. "Our cook is a Chinaman. His name is Pong, but he knows how to get up a meal. I believe, if he had nothing but sage grass and sand, he could make a palatable dish of them, provided he had the seasoning. Have you boys brought your slickers with, you?"

"What's a slicker?" demanded Chunky.

"A rubber blanket that----"

"Oh yes. We bought an outfit of those at Austin," answered Tad. "Anything else that you wish us to get?"

"The boys don't carry guns, do they?"

Professor Zepplin shook his head emphatically.

"Most certainly not. They can get into enough trouble without them. We have rifles in our kit, but I imagine there will be little use for such weapons on this trip."

"You can't always tell about that," smiled the foreman. "I remember in the old days, when we used to have to fight the rustlers, that a rifle was a pretty good thing to have."

"Who were the rustlers?" asked Walter.

"Fellows who rustled cattle that didn't belong to them. But the old days have passed. Such a drive as we are making now hasn't been done on so large a scale in nearly twenty years."

"Why not?" asked Ned.

"The iron trails have put the old cow trails out of business."

"Iron trails?" wondered Tad.

"Railroads. We men of the plains refer to them as the iron trails. That's what they are in reality. Professor, do you wish the boys to take their turns on the herd to-night?"

"As you wish, Mr. Stallings. I presume they will be anxious to begin their life as cowboys. I understand that's an ambition possessed by most of your American boys."

"All right," laughed the foreman. "I'll send them out as I find I can, with some of the other cowpunchers, until they learn the ropes. There is too great a responsibility on a night man to trust the boys alone with that work now. But they can begin if they wish. I'll see first how the bunch get back from their celebration of the glorious Fourth. You'll come out and have supper with us?"

"No, I think not. We shall ride out just after supper, if you will have some one to show us the way," answered the Professor.

"Sure, I'll send in Big-foot Sanders to pilot you out. You boys need not be afraid of Big-foot. He's not half so savage as he looks, but he's a great hand with cows."

Big-foot Sanders rode up to the hotel shortly after six o'clock. Leading his pony across the sidewalk, he poked his shaggy head just inside the door of the hotel.

"Ki-yi!" he bellowed, causing everybody within hearing of his voice to start up in alarm. "Where's that bunch of tenderfeet?"

"Are you Mr. Sanders, from the Miller outfit?" asked the Professor, stepping toward him.

"Donno about the Mister. I'm Big-foot Sanders. I'm lookin' for a bunch of yearlings that's going on with the outfit."

"The young gentlemen will join you in a moment, Mr. Sanders. They will ride their ponies around from the stable and meet you in front of the house."

"You one of the bunch?"

"I am Professor Zeppelin, a sort of companion, you know, for the young men."

"Huh!" grunted Big-foot. "I reckon you'd better forget the hard boiled hat you're wearin' or the boys'll be for shooting it full of holes. Take my advice--drop it, pardner."

"Oh, you mean this," laughed the Professor, removing his derby hat. "Thank you. I shall profit by your advice, and leave it here when I start."

"All the bunch got hard boiled ones?"

"Oh, no. The boys have their sombreros," answered the Professor.

Big-foot grunted, but whether in disapproval or approval, Professor Zeppelin did not know. The cowpuncher threw himself into his saddle, on which he sat, stolidly awaiting the arrival of the Pony Riders.

In a short time they came galloping from the stable at the rear of the hotel, and pulled up, facing the cowman.

"This, Mr. Sanders, is Tad Butler," announced the Professor.

"Huh!" grunted Big-foot again. "Hello, Pinto!" he said after a sharp glance into the freckled face. "Who's the gopher over there?"

"That's Stacy Brown, otherwise known as 'Chunky,'" laughed Tad. "This is Ned Rector, and the young gentleman at

your left is Walter Perkins, all members of the Pony Rider Boys' party. We are ready to start whenever you are."

For answer, Big-foot touched his pony with a spur, the little animal springing into a gallop without further command. The Pony Riders followed immediately, Tad riding up beside the big, muscular looking cowboy, which position he held for half an hour without having been able to draw a word from him.

Leaving the town due east of them, the party galloped off across the country in a straight line until finally the cowman pointed off across the plain to indicate where their destination lay.

A slow moving mass of red and brown and white met the inquiring gaze of the boys. At first they were unable to make out what it was.

"Cows," growled the guide, observing that they did not understand.

"What are they doing, Mr. Sanders?" asked Tad.

"Don't 'mister' me. I'm Big-foot. Never had a handle to my name. Never expect to. They're grazing. Be rounding them up for bed pretty soon. Ever been on a trail before?"

Tad shook his head.

"We have been up in the Rockies on a hunting trip. This is my first experience on the plains."

"Huh! Got good and plenty coming to you, then."

"And I am ready for it," answered the lad promptly. "The rougher the better."

"There's the bunch waiting for us. All of them got back from town. The foreman don't allow the fellows to hang out nights when they're on a drive like this."

Now, the rest of the Pony Rider Boys, understanding that they were nearing the camp of the cowboys, urged their ponies into a brisk gallop and drew up well into line with Tad and Big-foot. That is, all did save Stacy Brown, who, as was his habit lagged behind a few rods.

The cowboys were standing about watching the approach of the new arrivals curiously, but not with any great enthusiasm, for they did not approve of having a lot of tenderfeet with the outfit on a journey such as they were taking now. They were bent on grim and serious business--man's work--the sort of labor that brings out all that is in him. It was no place for weaklings, and none realized this better than the cowmen themselves.

Yet, they did not know the mettle that was in these four young American boys, though they were to realize it fully before the boundaries of the Lone Star State, had been left behind them.

The Pony Riders dashed up to the waiting cowpunchers with a brave showing of horsemanship, and sprang from their saddles their eyes glowing with excitement and anticipation.

Bob Stallings, the foreman, was the first to greet them.

"Fellows, this is the bunch I've been telling you about," was Bob's introduction. "Where's Lumpy?" he demanded, glancing about him with a scowl.

"Lumpy's over behind the chuck wagon," answered the cowboy of whom the question had been asked.

"Lumpy!" bellowed the foreman.

The fellow with whom Tad Butler had had such an unpleasant meeting, earlier in the day, came forward reluctantly, a sudden scowl on his face.

"Lumpy, this is Tad Butler. Stick out your fist and shake hands with him!"

Lumpy did so.

"Howd'y," he growled, but scarcely loud enough for any save Tad to hear.

The lad smiled up at him good-naturedly.

"You and I bumped ponies this morning, I guess," said Tad. "Maybe I was to blame after all. I'll apologize, anyway, and I hope there will be no hard feelings."

"Lumpy!" warned Stallings when he noticed that the cowpuncher had made no reply to Tad's apology.

"No hard feelings," grunted Lumpy Bates.

He was about to turn away and again seek the seclusion of the chuck wagon, as the cook wagon was called by the cow boys, when Chunky came rolling along. In the excitement of the meeting the boys had forgotten all about him. The Pony Riders swung their sombreros and gave three cheers for Chunky Brown as he dashed up.

Chunky took off his sombrero and waved it at them.

Just then Chunky met with one of those unfortunate accidents that were always occurring to him. His galloping pony put a forefoot into a gopher hole, going down in a heap.

Chunky, however, kept on.

When the accident happened he was almost upon the waiting cowboys, his intention having been to pull his pony up sharply to show off his horsemanship, then drop off and make them a sweeping bow.

Stacy Brown was possessed of the true dramatic instinct, yet few things ever came off exactly as he had planned them.

As he shot over the falling pony's head, his body described a half curve in the air, his own head landing fairly in the pit of Lumpy Bates's stomach.

Cowboy and Pony Rider went over in a struggling heap, with the Pony Rider uppermost.

Stacy had introduced himself to the cowboys in a most unusual manner, and to the utter undoing of one of them, for the boy's head had for the moment, knocked all the breath out of the surly Lumpy Bates.



CHAPTER III

PUTTING THE COWS TO BED

The cowpunchers roared at the funny sight of the fat boy bowling over their companion.

Stallings, however, fearing for the anger of Lumpy, sprang forward and hauled the lad back by the collar, while Lumpy was allowed to get up when he got ready. He did so a few seconds later, sputtering and growling, scarcely able to contain his rage.

"That's a bad way to get off a pony, young man," laughed the foreman. "I hope you won't dismount in that fashion around the cattle at night. If you do, you sure will stampede the herd."

Chunky grinned sheepishly.

"It doesn't take much to start a bunch of cows on the run after dark," continued the foreman, "I've known of such a thing as a herd being stampeded because they were frightened at the rising moon. Haven't you, Big-foot?"

Sanders nodded.

"The gopher'll do it, too; he's a clumsy lout," he answered, referring to Stacy in a withering tone.

"And now, boys, I will tell you how our watches are divided, after which you can go out with the cowboys and see them bed down the cows."

"Bed them down?" spoke up Chunky, his curiosity aroused. "That's funny. I didn't know you had to put cattle to bed."

"You'll see that we do. Boys, the night of the cowman on the march is divided into four tricks. The first guard goes on at half past eight, coming off at half past ten. The second guard is on duty from that time till one o'clock in the morning; the third, from that hour till half past three, while the fourth remains out until relieved in the morning. He usually wakes up the cook, too. And, by the way, you boys haven't made the acquaintance of Pong, have you? I'll call him. Unless you get on the right side of Pong, you will suffer."

"Pong? That's funny. Sounds like ping-pong. I used to play that," interrupted Stacy.

"Pong is as funny as his name, even if he is a Chinaman," laughed Stallings. "Pong, come here."

The Chinaman, having heard his name spoken, was peering inquiringly from the tail of the chuck wagon.

Hopping down, he trotted over to the group, his weazened, yellow face wreathed in smiles.

"Shake hands with these young gentlemen, Pong. They will be with us for the next two weeks," said the foreman.

"Allee same likee this," chuckled Pong, clasping his palms together and gleefully shaking hands with himself.

"That's the Chinaman's idea of shaking hands," laughed Stallings. "He always shakes hands with himself instead of the other fellow."

Stacy Brown suddenly broke into a loud laugh, attracting all eyes to him.

"Funniest thing I ever heard of," he muttered, abashed by the inquiring looks directed at him.

"Now watch the heathen while I ask him what he is going to have for breakfast," said the foreman. "Pong, what are you going to give us out of the chuck wagon in the morning?"

"Allee same likee this," chattered the Chinaman, quickly turning to his questioner, at the same time rapidly running through a series of pantomime gestures.

The Pony Riders looked at each other blankly.

"He says we are going to have fried bacon with hot biscuit and coffee," Stallings informed them with a hearty laugh. "Pong is not much of a talker. That's about as much as you ever will hear him say. He's weak on talk and strong on motions."

The foreman glanced up at the sky.

"It's time to put the cows to bed. You young gentlemen may ride along on your own ponies, but keep well back from

the cattle. Those of you who go out to-night will have to ride our ponies. All ready, now."

The entire outfit mounted and set off over the plain to where the cattle were moving slowly about, but not grazing much. They had had their fill of grass and water and were now ready for the night.

"Where's their beds?" asked Chunky, gazing about him curiously.

"Right ahead of you," answered Stallings.

The foreman's quick eye already had picked out a nice elevation on which the old dry grass of the previous summer's growth lay matted like a carpet for the cattle to bed down on.

"How many of them are there in the herd?" asked Tad.

"About two thousand. That was the first count. Since then we have picked up a few stray cows. We will be cutting those out in a day or so, when you will see some real cow work. Perhaps you will be able to help by that time."

Now the cowmen galloped out on the plain, separating widely until they had practically surrounded the herd. They began circling slowly about the herd, at the same time gradually closing in on them.

The animals appeared to understand fully what was expected of them, for they had been on the road several nights already. Besides, having had their fill they were anxious to turn in for the night.

As they found spots to their liking, the animals began to throw themselves down.

Tad uttered an exclamation of delight as he watched the steers going to their knees in hundreds, then dropping on their sides, contentedly chewing their cuds. It was such a sight as he never before had seen.

"What are those steers on the outside there--those fellows without any horns?" asked Stacy.

"Those are the muleys. Having no horns, they keep well out of the bunch and wait until the others have gone to bed as you see," the foreman informed him. "You will notice after a while that they will lie down outside the circle. If any of the cows get ugly during the night the muleys will spring up and get out of the way."

In half an hour the last one of the great herd had "bedded down," and those of the cowboys who were not on guard, rode leisurely back toward camp.

It had been decided that Tad Butler should go out on the first guard; Walter Perkins on the second; Ned Rector third and Stacy Brown fourth.

Tad was all eagerness to begin. One of the cowmen exchanged ponies with him, riding Tad's horse back to camp.

"You see, our ponies understand what is wanted of them," explained Stallings, who had remained out for a while to give Tad some instruction in the work before him. "Give the ordinary cow pony his head and he will almost tend a herd by himself."

Three men ordinarily constituted the guard. In this case Tad Butler made a fourth. Taking their stations some four rods from the edge of the herd, they began lazily circling it, part going in one direction and part in another. In this position it would have been well-nigh impossible for any animal to escape without being noticed by the riders.

"Now, I guess you will be all right," smiled the foreman. "Make no sudden moves to frighten the cattle."

"Do they ever run?" asked Tad.

"Run? Well, rather! And I tell you, it takes a long-legged Mexican steer to set the pace. Those fellows can run faster than a horse--at least some of them can. A stampede is a thing most dreaded by the cowmen."

"Our ponies stampeded in the Rockies. I know something about that," spoke up Tad.

"Well, compare the stampeding of your four or five ponies with two thousand head of wild steers and you'll get something like the idea of what it means. In that case, unless you know your business you had better get out of the way as fast as hoss-flesh will carry you. Now, Master Tad, I'll bid you good night and leave you to your first night on the plains."

"How shall I know when to come in?"

"When the second guard comes out. You will hear them. If you should not they will let you know as they pass you."

With that the foreman walked his pony away from the herd. After some little time Tad heard him galloping toward camp.

At first Tad took the keenest enjoyment in his surroundings; then the loneliness of the plains came over him. He began to feel a longing for human companionship.

A dense mantle of darkness settled down over the scene.

Remembering the advice of the foreman, the lad gave his pony the rein. The hardy little animal, with nose almost touching the ground, began its monotonous crawling pace about the herd. It seemed more asleep than awake.

In a short time a sheet of bright light appeared on the eastern horizon. Tad looked at it inquiringly, then smiled.

"It's the moon," he decided.

The boy felt a great sense of relief in his lonely vigil. Just ahead of him he saw a pony and rider leisurely approaching.

It proved to be Red Davis, one of the first guard.

Red waved his hand to the boy in passing, but no word was spoken on either side.

After having circled the herd twice, Tad suddenly discovered a small bunch of cattle that had just scrambled to their feet and had begun grazing a little way outside the circle. The rest of the herd were contentedly chewing their cud in the moonlight, grunting and blowing over contented stomachs.

The lad was not sure just what he ought to do. His first inclination was to call to some of the other guards. Then, remembering the injunction placed upon him by the foreman, he resisted the impulse.

"I am sure those cattle have no business off there," he decided after watching them for a few moments in silent uncertainty. "I believe I will try to get them back."

Tightening the grip on his reins and clucking to the pony, Tad headed for the steers, that were slowly moving off, taking a step with every mouthful or so.

He steered his pony well outside and headed in toward them.

The pony, with keen intelligence, forced its way up to the leading steer and sought to nose it around. The animal resisted and swung its sharp horns perilously near to the side of the horse, which quickly leaped to one side, almost upsetting its rider.

"Guess I'd better let the pony do it himself. He knows how and I don't," muttered Tad, slackening on the reins.

The straying animal was quickly turned and headed toward the herd, after which the pony whirled and went after one of the others, turning this one, as it did the others. In a short time the truants were all back in the herd.

"That's the way to do it, young fellow. I told the gang back there that the Pinto had the stuff in him."

Tad turned sharply to meet the smiling face of Big-foot Sanders, who, sitting on his pony, had been watching the boy's efforts and nodding an emphatic approval.

"You'll make a cowman all right," said Big-foot.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST NIGHT IN CAMP

The camp-fire was burning brightly when the first guard, having completed its tour of duty, came galloping in.

In a few moments the sound of singing was borne to the ears of the campers.

"What's the noise?" demanded Stacy Brown, sitting up with a half scared look on his face.

"It's the 'Cowboy's Lament,'" laughed Bob Stallings. "Listen."

Off on the plain they heard a rich tenor voice raised in the song of the cowman.

"Little black bull came down the hillside,
Down the hillside, down the hillside,
Little black bull came down the hillside,
Long time ago."

"I don't call that much of a song," sniffed Chunky contemptuously after a moment of silence on the part of the group. "Even if I can't sing, I can beat that."

"Better not try it out on the range," smiled the foreman.

"Not on the range? Why not?" demanded the boy.

"Bob thinks it might stampede the herd," spoke up Big-foot Sanders.

A loud laugh followed at Chunky's expense.

"When you get to be half as good a man on cows as your friend the Pinto, here, you'll be a full grown man," added Big-foot. "The Pinto rounded up a bunch of stray cows to-night as well as I could do it myself, and he didn't go about it with a brass band either."

The foreman nodded, with an approving glance at Tad.

Tad's eyes were sparkling from the experiences of the evening, as well as from the praise bestowed upon him by the big cowpuncher.

"The pony did most of it," admitted the lad. "I just gave him his head, and that's all there was to it."

"More than most tenderfeet would have done," growled Big-foot.

Walter had gone out with the second guard, and the others had gathered around the camp-fire for their nightly story-telling.

"Now, I don't want you fellows sitting up all night," objected the foreman. "None of you will be fit for duty to-morrow. We've got a hard drive before us, and every man must be fit as a fiddle. You can enjoy yourselves sleeping just as well as sitting up."

"Humph!" grunted Curley Adams. "I'll give it as a horseback opinion that the only way to enjoy such a night as this, is to sit up until you fall asleep with your boots on. That's the way I'm going to do it, to-night."

The cowboy did this very thing, but within an hour he found himself alone, the others having turned in one by one.

"Where are your beds?" asked Stacy after the foreman had urged the boys to get to sleep.

"Beds?" grunted Big-foot. "Anywhere--everywhere. Our beds, on the plains, are wherever we happen to pull our boots off."

"You will find your stuff rolled up under the chuck wagon, boys," said Stallings. "I had Pong get out the blankets for you, seeing that you have only your slickers with you."

The lads found that a pair of blankets had been assigned to each of them, with an ordinary wagon sheet doubled for a tarpaulin. These they spread out on the ground, using boots wrapped in coats for pillows.

Stacy Brown proved the only grumbler in the lot, declaring that he could not sleep a wink on such a bed as that.

In floundering about, making up his bunk, the lad had fallen over two cowboys and stepped full on the face of a third.

Instantly there was a chorus of yells and snarls from the disturbed cowpunchers, accompanied by dire threats as to what they would do to the gopher did he ever disturb their rest in that way again.

This effectually quieted the boy for the night, and the camp settled down to silence and to sleep.

The horses of the outfit, save those that were on night duty and two or three others that had developed a habit of straying, had been turned loose early in the evening, for animals on the trail are seldom staked down. For these, a rope had been strung from a rear wheel of the wagon and another from the end of the tongue, back to a stake driven in the ground, thus forming a triangular corral. Besides holding the untrustworthy horses, it afforded a temporary corral for catching a change of mounts.

In spite of their hard couches the Pony Riders slept soundly, even Professor Zeppelin himself never waking the whole night through. Ned Rector had come up smiling when awakened for his trick on the third guard. With Stacy Brown, however, severe measures were necessary when one of the returning guard routed him out at half-past three in the morning.

Stacy grumbled, turned over and went to sleep again.

The guard chanced to be Lumpy Bates, and he administered, what to him, was a gentle kick, to hurry the boy along.

"Ouch!" yelled Chunky, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"Keep still, you baby!" growled the cowman. "Do you want to wake up the whole outfit? There'll be a lively muss about the time you do, I reckon, and you'll wish you hadn't. If you can't keep shut, the boss'll be for making you sleep under the chuck wagon. If you make a racket there, Pong will dump a pot of boiling water over you. You won't be so fast to wake up hard working cowboys after that, I reckon."

"What do you want?" demanded the boy. "What'd you wake me up for?"

"It's your trick. Get a move on you and keep still. There's the pony ready for you. I wouldn't have saddled it but the boss said I must. I don't take no stock in tenderfoot kids," growled the cowpuncher.

"Is breakfast ready?" asked the boy, tightening his belt and jamming his sombrero down over his head.

"Breakfast?" jeered Lumpy. "You're lucky to be alive in this outfit, let alone filling yourself with grub. Get out!"

Stacy ruefully, and still half asleep, made a wide circle around the sleeping cowmen that he might not make the mistake of again stepping on any of them.

Lumpy watched him with disapproving eyes.

The lad caught the pony that stood moping in the corral, not appearing to be aware that his rider was preparing him for the range, Chunky all the time muttering to himself.

Leading the pony out, the boy gathered up the reins on the right side of the animal and prepared to mount.

Lumpy Bates came running toward him, not daring to call out for fear of waking the camp. The cowman was swinging his arms and seeking to attract the lad's attention. Chunky, however, was too sleepy to see anything so small as a cowman swinging his arms a rod away.

Placing his right foot in the stirrup, the boy prepared to swing up into the saddle.

"Hi, there!" hissed Lumpy, filled with indignation that anyone should attempt to mount a pony from the right side.

His warning came too late. Stacy Brown's left leg swung over the saddle. No sooner had the pony felt the leather over him than he raised his back straight up, his head going down almost to the ground.

Stacy shot up into the air as if he had been propelled from a bow gun. He struck the soft sand several feet in advance of the pony, his face and head ploughing a little furrow as he drove along on his nose.

He had no more than struck, however, before the irate cowboy had him by the collar and had jerked the lad to his feet.

"You *tenderfoot!*" he snarled, accenting the words so that they carried a world of meaning with them. "Don't you know any more than to try to get onto a broncho from the off side? Say, don't you?"

He shook the lad violently.

"N-n-n-o," gasped Stacy. "D-d-does it m-m-make any difference w-w-h-i-ch side you get on?"

"Does it make any difference?"

The cowboy jerked his own head up and down as if the words he would utter had wedged fast in his throat.

"Git out of here before I say something. The boss said the first man he heard using language while you tenderfeet were with us, would get fired on the spot."

Without taking the chance of waiting until Stacy had mounted the pony, Lumpy grabbed the boy and tossed him into the saddle, giving the little animal a sharp slap on the flank as he did so.

At first the pony began to buck; then, evidently thinking the effort was not worth while, settled down to a rough trot which soon shook the boy up and thoroughly awakened him.

The rest of the fourth guard had already gone out, Chunky meeting the returning members of the third coming in.

"Better hurry up, kid," they chuckled. "The cows'll sleep themselves out of sight before you get there, if you don't get a move on."

"Where are they?" asked the boy.

"Keep a-going and if you're lucky you'll run plumb into them," was the jeering answer as the sleepy cowmen spurred their ponies on toward camp, muttering their disapproval of taking along a bunch of boys on a cattle drive.

In a few moments they, too, had turned their ponies adrift and had thrown themselves down beside their companions, pulling their blankets well about them, for the night had grown chill.

Out on the plains the fourth guard were drowsily crooning the lullaby about the bull that "came down the hillside, long time ago."

It seemed as if scarcely a minute had passed since the boys turned in before they were awakened by the strident tones of the foreman.

"Roll out! Roll out!" he roared, bringing the sleepy cowpunchers grumbling to their feet.

Almost before the echoes of his voice had died away, a shrill voice piped up from the tail end of the chuck wagon.

"Grub pi-i-i-le! Grub pi-i-i-le!"

It was the Chinaman, Pong, sounding his call for breakfast, in accordance with the usage of the plains.

"Grub pi-i-i-le!" he finished in a lower tone, after which his head quickly disappeared under the cover of the wagon.

By the time the cowmen and Pony Riders had refreshed themselves at the spring near which the outfit had camped, a steaming hot breakfast had been spread on the ground, with a slicker for a table cloth.

Three cowboys fell to with a will, gulping down their breakfast in a hurry that they might ride out and relieve the fourth guard on the herd.

"You boys don't have to swallow your food whole," smiled the foreman, observing that the Pony Riders seemed to think they were expected to hurry through their meal as well. "Those fellows have to go out. Take your time. The fourth guard has to eat yet, so there is plenty of time. How did you all sleep?"

"Fine," chorused the boys.

"And you, Mr. Professor?"

"Surprisingly well. It is astonishing with how little a man can get along when he has to."

"Who is the wrangler this morning?" asked the foreman, glancing about at his men.

"I am," spoke up Shorty Savage promptly.

"Wrangler? What's a wrangler?" demanded Stacy, delaying the progress of a large slice of bacon, which hung suspended from the fork half-way between plate and mouth.

"A wrangler's a wrangler," answered Big-foot stolidly.

"He's a fellow who's all the time making trouble, isn't he?" asked Stacy innocently.

"Oh, no, this kind of a wrangler isn't," laughed the foreman. "The trouble is usually made *for* him, and it's served up hot off the spider. The horse wrangler is the fellow who goes out and rounds up the ponies. Sometimes he does it in the middle of the night when the thunder and lightning are smashing about him like all possessed, and the cattle are on the rampage. He's a trouble-curer, not a troublemaker, except for himself."

"I guess there are some words that aren't in the dictionary," laughed Tad.

"I think you will find them all there, Master Tad, if you will consult the big book," said the Professor.

The meal was soon finished, Pong having stood rubbing his palms, a happy smile on his face, during the time they were eating.

"A very fine breakfast, sir," announced the Professor, looking up at the Chinaman.

"He knows what would happen to him if he didn't serve good meals," smiled Stallings.

"What do you mean?" asked Ned Rector.

"Pong, tell the young gentlemen what would become of you if you were to serve bad meals to this outfit of cowpunchers."

The Chinaman showed two rows of white teeth in his expansive grin.

"Allee same likee this," he explained.

"How?" asked Tad.

Pong, going through the motions of drawing a gun from his belt, and puffing out his cheeks, uttered an explosive "pouf!"

"Oh, you mean they would shoot you?" asked Walter. "I hardly think they would do that, Pong."

"Allee same," grinned the Chinaman.

"I guess we are pretty sure of having real food to eat, then," laughed Tad, as the boys rose from the table ready for the active work of the day.

"We will now get to work on the herd," announced the foreman. "We had better start the drive this morning. When we make camp at noon we will cut out the strays. I trust none of you will be imprudent and get into trouble, for we shall have other things to look after to-day."

However, the Pony Riders were destined not to pass the day without one or more exciting adventures.

CHAPTER V

CUTTING OUT THE HERD

"Getting ready for rain," announced the foreman, glancing up at the gathering clouds. "That will mean water for the stock, anyway."

Already the great herd was up and grazing when the cowboys reached them. But there was no time now for the animals to satisfy their appetites. They were supposed to have eaten amply since daylight.

The trail was to be taken up again and by the time the steers were bedded down at night, they should be all of fifteen miles nearer the Diamond D. Ranch for which they were headed.

The start was a matter of keen interest to the Pony Riders. To set the herd in motion, cowboys galloped along the sides of the line giving vent to their shrill, wolf-keyed yell, while others pressed forward directly in the rear.

As soon as the cattle had gotten under way six men were detailed on each side, and in a short time the herd was strung out over more than a mile of the trail.

Two riders known as "point men" rode well back from the leaders, and by riding forward and closing in occasionally, were able to direct the course of the drive.

Others, known as "swing men," rode well out from the herd, their duty being to see that none of the cattle dropped out or strayed away. Once started, the animals required no driving.

This was a matter of considerable interest to the Pony Riders.

"Don't they ever stop to eat?" asked Tad of the foreman.

"Occasionally. When they do, we have to start them along without their knowing we are doing so. It's a good rule to go by that you never should let your herd know they are under restraint. Yet always keep them going in the proper direction."

The trail wagon, carrying the cooking outfit and supplies, was not forgotten. Drawn by a team of four mules, the party seldom allowed it to get far away from them, and never, under ordinary circumstances, out of their sight. The driver walked beside the mules, while the grinning face of Pong was always to be seen in the front end of the wagon.

He was the only member of the outfit who never seemed to mind the broiling mid-day heat. He was riding there on this hot forenoon, never leaving his seat until the foreman, by a gesture, indicated that the herd was soon to be halted for its noonday meal. While the cattle were grazing, the cowboys would fall to and satisfy their own appetites.

After the cattle had finally been halted, three men were left on guard while the others rode back to the rear of the line. In the meantime Pong had been preparing the dinner, which was ready almost as soon as the men had cast aside their hats.

"When it comes to cooking for an outfit like this, a Chinaman beats anything in the world," laughed Stallings. "At least, this Chinaman does."

Pong was too busy to do more than grin at the compliment, even if he fully grasped the meaning of it.

The meal was nearly half-finished when the cowpunchers were startled by a volley of revolver shots accompanied by a chorus of shrill yells.

"What's up now?" demanded Ned Rector and Tad in one breath.

Every member of the outfit had sprung to his feet.

"Sounds like a stampede," flung back the foreman, making a flying leap for his pony.

The other cowboys were up like a flash and into their saddles, uttering sharp "ki-yis" and driving in the spurs while they laid their quirts mercilessly over the rumps of the ponies.

Tad Butler, Ned Rector and Walter Perkins were not far behind the cowmen in reaching their own ponies and leaping into their saddles.

Not so with Chunky. He only paused in his eating long enough to look his surprise and to direct an inquiring look at

the Chinaman, while the others went dashing across the plain toward the herd.

"Allee same likee this," announced Pong, making a succession of violent gestures that Stacy did not understand.

But the boy nodded his head wisely and went on with his eating.

Out where the grazing herd had been peacefully eating its noonday meal all was now excitement and action.

Revolvers were popping, cowboys were yelling and the herd was surging back and forth, bellowing and dashing in and out, a shifting, confused mass of color and noise.

The boys did not know what to make of it.

"Yes; they are stampeding," decided Ned, riding alongside of Tad Butler.

"I don't believe it," answered Tad. "It looks to me as if something else were the trouble."

"What?"

"I don't know. It's an awful mix-up, whatever they may call it."

"Yes; see! They are fighting."

Surely enough, large numbers of the cattle seemed to be arrayed against each other, sending up great clouds of dust as they ran toward each other, locked horns and engaged in desperate conflict. It was noticed, however, that the muleys kept well out of harm's way, standing aloof from the herd and looking on ready to run at the shake of a horn in their direction.

"Now, look there! What are they doing?" asked Walter.

"They seem to be cutting out a bunch of steers," answered Tad. "That's funny. I can't imagine what it is all about." Neither could Professor Zeppelin, who had ridden up at a more leisurely pace, explain to the boys the meaning of the scene they were viewing.

"If we knew, we might turn in and help," suggested Walter.

"That's right," replied Tad. "Suppose we ride up there where the men are at work. We may find something to do. Anyway, we'll find out what the trouble is."

Starting up their ponies, the boys galloped up the line, keeping a safe distance from the herd as they did so, and halting only when they had reached the trail leaders, as the cattle at the head of the line are called.

"What's the trouble?" shouted Ned as they came within hailing distance of the perspiring foreman.

"Mixed herd," he called back, curtly, driving his pony into the thick of the fight and yelling out his orders to the men.

"I know almost as much about it as I did before," announced Ned, disgustedly. "Got any idea, Tad?"

"Yes; I have."

"For goodness sake, let's have it, then. If I don't find out what's going on here, pretty soon, I shall jump into the fight in sheer desperation."

"Mr. Stagings said it was a mixed herd. Don't you think that must mean that a lot of cattle who don't belong there have mixed up with ours?" asked the freckle-faced boy.

"I guess that's the answer, Tad. But, if so, how can they tell one from the other?" wondered Walter.

"From the brands. I have learned that much about the business. Every one of our herd is branded with a capital D in the center of a diamond. That is the brand of Mr. Miller's ranch--the Diamond D Ranch. Evidently they are cutting out all that haven't that brand on."

"Hello! There's Chunky. Now, what do you suppose he is up to!" exclaimed Ned.

Stacy Brown had finished his meal, mounted his pony and was now riding toward the herd at what was for him a reckless speed.

All at once they saw him pull his mount sharply to the left and drive straight at a bunch of cattle that the cowboys had separated from the herd a few moments before.

The boy was too far away, the racket too loud, for their voices to reach him in a warning shout.

Stacy, having observed the cattle straying away, and having in mind Tad Butler's achievement in driving back a bunch of stray steers, thought he would do something on his own account.

"I'll show them I can drive steers as well as anybody," he told himself, bringing down the quirt about the pony's legs.

The strong-limbed little beast sprang to his work with a will. He understood perfectly what was wanted of him. A few moments more, and he had headed off the rapidly moving bunch, effectually turning the leaders, sending them on a gallop back toward the vast herd fighting and bellowing in the cloud of dust they had stirred up.

The cowboys were so fully occupied with their task that they had failed to observe Stacy Brown's action, nor would they have known anything about it had not Tad, yelling himself hoarse, managed to attract the attention of the foreman.

Tad pointed off to where Chunky was jumping his pony at the fleeing cattle, forcing them on with horse and quirt.

They had almost reached the main herd before Tad succeeded in informing the foreman.

One look was enough for Stallings.

Before he could act, however, the stray herd had once more mingled and merged with his own. The work of the cowboys had gone for naught.

Stallings fired three shots into the air as a signal to his men to stop their cutting out.

"Will you young men do me a favor?" he asked.

"Certainly, Mr. Stallings," answered Tad.

"Then ride around the herd and tell the boys not to try any more cutting out until the herd has quieted down. The dust is so thick that we can't do anything with the cows, anyway. You have some sense, but that's more than I can say for your friend, Brown. Of all the idiotic--oh, what's the use? Tell him to mind his own business and keep half a mile away from this herd for the rest of the afternoon."

"All right, sir. Where did those cattle come from?"

"I don't know, Tad. They have broken away from some nearby ranch. Probably somebody has cut a wire fence and let them out. That's the worst of the wire fence in the modern cow business. They can get through wire without being seen. But they can't get by a cowpuncher without his seeing them."

"How many cattle do you think have got mixed with ours?"

"I should imagine there were all of five hundred of them," answered the foreman.

Tad uttered a long-drawn whistle of astonishment.

"Will--will you ever be able to separate them?" asked Ned.

"We sure will. But it means a hot afternoon's work."

"May we help you, Mr. Stallings?" spoke up Walter.

"Yes; I shall be able to use you boys, some, I guess. It's a wonder to me that those cows didn't stampede our whole herd. Had it been night, our stock would have been spread over a dozen miles of territory by this time. Being day, however, our herd preferred to stay and fight the newcomers. I hope they clean up the bunch for keeps."

Pleased that they had been given a task to perform, the boys rode away, Tad and Walter going in one direction, while Ned Rector galloped off in another, that they might reach the cowmen in the shortest possible time.

The men they found sitting on their horses awaiting orders, though they understood what was in the mind of the foreman almost as well as if he had told them by word of mouth.

They found Big-foot and Lumpy Bates expressing their opinion of the mix-up in voices loud with anger. But, upon discovering the boys, the cowmen quickly checked their flow of language.

"Did you see what that--that----" bellowed Lumpy as Tad rode up to him.

"Yes; I saw it," laughed Tad.

"You think this is some kind of a joke, eh?" roared Lumpy, starting his pony toward Tad.

The boy's smile left his face and clucking to his pony he rode slowly forward toward the angry cowpuncher, meeting the fellow's menacing eyes unflinchingly.

"Is there anything you wish to say to me, Mr. Bates?" asked the lad calmly.

Lumpy's emotions were almost too great for speech. He controlled himself with an effort.

"No--only this. I--I'll forget myself some day, and clean up one of you idiotic tenderfeet."

"Perhaps you would like to begin on me, sir," said Tad steadily. "If you feel that way I should prefer to have you do that rather than to try it on any of my companions. Stacy Brown may be indiscreet, but I'd have you understand he is no idiot."

"What--what----"

"You have determined to get square with us ever since we joined out with you last night, and I knew that you and I would have to have an understanding before long. We might as well have it now, though there's nothing of enough consequence to have a quarrel about----"

"You threaten me?"

"Nothing of the kind, Mr. Bates. I only wish to tell you that my companions are the guests of this outfit, and we propose to act like gentlemen. Every other member of the outfit, not excepting the Chinaman, has given us fine treatment. You have hung back, hoping you would have a chance to get us run off the trail."

The cowpuncher's fingers were opening and closing convulsively.

"You--you run into me. The whole bunch had the laugh on me and----"

"If I remember correctly, it was you who ran me down. But we'll drop that. Will you shake hands and forget your bad temper?" asked the lad, reaching over and offering a hand to the cowboy.

For an instant the fellow glared at him, then with a snarl he jerked his pony about and drove in the rowels of the spurs.

"Lumpy's got on the grouch that won't come off," grinned Big-foot. "Better keep a weather eye on the cayuse. If he gets obstreperous, just you let me know."

"Thank you," smiled Tad. "I thought I had better say something to him before it went too far. I knew he meant mischief to us ever since he ran into me yesterday at San Diego."

Tad then delivered his message and rode on to the next cowpuncher.

For fully an hour the cattle surged and fought, some being killed and trampled under foot, while others were so seriously wounded that they had to be shot later in the day.

After a time the battle dwindled down to individual skirmishes, with two or three animals engaged at a time, until finally the entire herd moved off to the fresher ground that had not been trodden upon, and began grazing together as contentedly as if nothing had occurred to disturb them.

All immediate danger of a stampede having passed, Stallings fired a shot as a signal for the cowmen to join him. This they did on the gallop.

After a conference, during which each man gave his opinion as to whom the stray herd belonged to, none recognizing the brand, Stallings made up his mind what to do.

"You will begin at the lower end and cut out as you go through the herd. Cut the newcomers to the west, which will be starting them back toward where they came from, wherever that may be. At the same time while we cut, we will be moving our cows north, which is the direction in which we want them to go."

In the meantime Stacy Brown had ridden up. He was sitting disconsolately on his pony near where the conference was being held, having been roundly scored by every cowboy in the outfit.

The foreman motioned him to ride over to him.

"Young man, can you carry a message back to camp and get it straight!"

Stacy thought he could.

"Then go back and tell the heathen to pack up his belongings and come on. There will be no more eating done in this outfit till we have cut out that new bunch. Tell the driver to be ready to move when he sees us start. We'll get in a few miles before dark, yet, if we have good luck."

Stacy rode away full of importance to deliver the foreman's order.

Then the cutting out began. Cowboy after cowboy dashed into the herd coming out usually with his pony pressing against the side of an unwilling steer and pushing him along in the right direction by main force.

And here was where the Pony Riders made themselves useful. As an animal was cut out, the boys would ride in behind it and worry the steer along until they had gotten it a safe distance to the west of the main herd.

"There's a Diamond D steer in that bunch," Tad informed one of the cowpunchers as he rushed a big, white steer out.

"Never mind; we'll trim the mixed outfit after we get more of the bunch out," answered the cowboy, riding back into the herd.

While doing the cutting out the men also drove out the few cattle that had strayed into the herd earlier in the journey.

For three hours this grilling work had kept up, the perspiring cowboys yelling, their ponies squealing under the terrific punishment they were getting from both riders and steers.

But in the excitement of their own work, the Pony Riders had had little time in which to observe what the cowmen were doing.

Tad thought of a plan by which he might assist them further. So he galloped his pony over to the edge of the main herd and waited until the foreman dashed out with two red, fighting steers, which he gave a lively start on their way to join the mixed herd.

"Mr. Stallings, may I cut back some of the Diamond D animals in the mixed herd?" he asked.

"Think you can do it, kid?"

"I can try."

"All right. Go ahead. Be careful that you don't turn back any of the other brands, though. Above all, look out for yourself."

Tad galloped back to his companions, his face flushed, the dust standing out on his blue shirt, turning it almost gray.

"Keep this herd up, fellows," he shouted. "I'm going to try my hand at cutting out."

Fortunately, the pony understood what was wanted of it, and, the moment it had located an animal which it was desired to cut out, the pony went at the work with a will. Tad, triumphant and warm, rode out driving a Diamond D steer ahead of him, applying his quirt vigorously to the animal's rump until he had landed it safely in the ranks of the main herd.

Again and again had the boy ridden in among the cattle, seemingly taking no account of the narrow escapes both rider and pony were having from the sharp horns of the long-legged Mexican cattle.

One big, white fellow gave the lad more trouble than all the rest that he had cut out, and when once Tad had run him out into the open the perspiration was dripping from his face.

But his battle was not yet won. The steer, for some reason best known to itself, did not wish to return to its own herd. It fought every inch of the way, wearing down pony and rider until they were almost exhausted.

Tad Butler's blood was up, however. He set his jaw stubbornly and plunged into the work before him.

Bob Stallings, shooting a glance in the boy's direction understood what he had in hand, for the foreman had made the acquaintance of this same steer himself, earlier on the drive.

The lad had worried the animal nearly to its own herd, after half an hour's struggle, when, despite all his efforts, it broke away and dashed back toward the mixed bunch.

"I'll get him if it's the last thing I ever do," vowed the boy.

A rawhide lariat hung from his saddle bow, and though he had practised with the rope on other occasions, he did not consider himself an expert with it. He had watched the cowboys in their use of it and knew how they threw a cow with the rope.

On the spur of the moment Tad decided to use the lariat.

Lifting it in his right hand and swinging the great loop high above his head, he dashed up to the running steer, and when near enough to take a cast, let go of the loop.

It fell over the horns of the white animal as neatly as a cowboy could have placed it there.

The coil ran out in a flash; yet quick as the boy was, he found himself unable to take a hitch around the pommel of his saddle with the free end.

The running steer straightened the rope and Tad shot from his saddle still clinging desperately to the line.



CHAPTER VI

TAD TAKES A DESPERATE CHANCE

When the freckle-faced boy took his unexpected plunge, it chanced that neither cowboys nor Pony Riders were looking his way.

No one knew of his plight.

As he felt the line running through his hand, Tad Butler had given it a quick hitch around his right wrist, so that when the rope drew taut, and the pony braced itself to meet the shock, the lad fairly flew through the air.

The white steer had been headed for the mixed bunch which the Pony Riders were guarding. With the stubbornness of its kind, it wheeled about the instant it felt the tug on the rope and dashed for the main herd, Tad's body ploughing up the dust as he trailed along at a fearful pace behind the wild animal, whirling over and over in his rapid flight.

The lad's eyes were so full of sand dust that he was unable to see where he was going. He had slight realization of the peril that confronted him.

"Look! Look!" cried Walter Perkins.

"What is it?" cried Ned Rector.

"What's that the steer is dragging?"

"I don't know."

"And there's Tad's pony standing out there alone," added Walter. "You--you don't think Tad----"

"As I'm alive, it is Tad! He is being dragged by the steer. He'll be killed! Watch this herd, I am going after him!" shouted Ned, putting spurs to his pony and dashing toward the main herd.

At that moment the white steer, trailing its human burden, rushed in among the other cattle and was soon lost among them.

Ned did not dare to set up a loud shout of warning for fear of frightening the cattle. However, he was waving his hat and excitedly trying to attract the attention of some of the cowmen.

They were too busy to give any heed to him.

Ned drove his pony in among the struggling cattle with no thought of his own danger.

The cowmen were roping and rushing the stock that did not belong to them. As it chanced, however, most of them were working at the upper end, or head of the herd.

The foreman, for some reason, had galloped down the line, casting his eyes keenly over the herd. Instantly he noticed that something was wrong, though just what it was, he was unable to decide. Then his eyes caught the figure of Ned Rector, the center of a sea of moving backs and tossing horns. The boy was standing in his stirrups still swinging his sombrero above his head.

It took the foreman but an instant to decide what to do. Wheeling his pony, he fairly dived into the mass of cattle, lashing to the right and left of him with his ready quirt, the cattle resentfully shaking threatening heads at pony and rider and making efforts to reach them with their sharp-pointed horns.

"What is it?" shouted Stallings after he had ridden in far enough to make his voice reach Ned Rector.

"It's Tad!"

"What about him?"

"He's in there," answered Ned, pointing.

"Where? What do you mean?"

"I don't know. It's the white steer. He dragged him."

Stallings thought he understood. He had seen the lad working with the unruly animal only a few moments before.

"What's the trouble--did the boy rope him?" shouted the foreman.

Ned nodded.

"He'll be trampled to death!" snapped the foreman, rising high in his stirrups and looking over the herd. There were several white steers in the bunch, but the one in question was so much larger than the others that Stallings thought he would have no difficulty in picking out the animal. Not finding him at once, the foreman fired two shots in the air to attract the attention of the cowboys. Three of them soon were seen working their way in.

"Open up the herd!" he shouted.

"Whereabouts?" asked Reddy Davis.

"Anywhere. Look out for the big, white cow. The boy's roped to him!"

They understood at once.

Big-foot Sanders had heard, and began working like an automatic machine. The way the cattle, big and little, fell away before his plunging pony and ready quirt was an object lesson for those of the Pony Riders who were near enough to see his effort.

In the thick of it was Ned Rector, driving his pony here and there, anxiously watching for the white steer.

"There he is!" shouted Ned, suddenly espying the animal still dashing about.

"Where?"

"There, to the right of you!"

Forcing his mount through the crowded ranks, Stallings in a moment found himself within reach of the white beast. However, there were three or four cattle between himself and the one he wanted.

The foreman's rope circled in the air above his head, then the great loop squirmed out over the backs of the cattle, dropping lightly over the horns of the white one.

The steer felt the touch of the rope and knew the meaning of it. As the animal sprang forward, Stallings took a quick turn about the pommel of his saddle and the pony braced its fore feet. When the shock came, the cattle over whose backs the rope lay felt it even more than did the pony itself. Three of them were forced to their knees bawling with sudden fright and pain.

The head of the white steer was jerked to one side. A swing of the rope and the steer was thrown heavily.

"Get in there!" roared Stallings.

Ned at the moment, chanced to be nearer than were any of the others to the animal, and to him fell the perilous work of holding down the kicking beast.

He knew exactly what was expected of him, having seen a cowboy hold a steer down for a quick branding that morning.

Ned spurred in and leaped to the ground.

Without an instant's hesitation he threw himself on the neck of the struggling animal, whose flying hoofs made the attempt doubly dangerous.

This act of Ned enabled Stallings to jump from his pony and run to the lad's assistance, leaving the pony braced to hold the line taut.

The foreman sprang to the rear, where he observed the form of Tad Butler doubled up, lying half under the body of a big, red steer.

Stallings picked him up, quickly cutting the lariat.

"Slip the loops off his horns!" he commanded. "Look out that you don't get pinked by them."

"Is Tad hurt?" called Ned anxiously.

"Lucky if he ain't dead," answered the foreman, hurrying to his pony, which he mounted taking the boy in his arms. By this time Ned had the ropes and had sprung away from the steer's dangerous horns.

Tad's form hung limp and lifeless over the saddle. His face, with the sand and dust ground into it, was scarcely recognizable.

Ned followed the foreman as soon as he could get his pony. By the time Ned reached them, Stallings had laid Tad down and was making a quick examination.

"Get water! Hurry!" he commanded sharply.

"Where?" asked Ned, glancing about him, undecided which way to turn.

"The chuck wagon. Ride, kid! Ride!"

Ned bounced into his saddle without so much as touching his stirrup. With a sharp yell to the animal he sped away over the plain, urging on the little pony with quirt and spur.

The way Ned Rector rode that day made those of the cowmen who saw him open their eyes.

Ned began shouting for water as soon as he came in sight of the wagon, which, by this time, was packed for the start.

Pong, understanding from the boy's tone that the need was urgent, was filling a jug from the tap barrel by the time Ned rode up beside the wagon. He had less than a minute to wait.

Grabbing the jug from the hands of the grinning Chinaman, and unheeding Pong's chuckled "allee same," Ned whirled about and raced for the herd.

The lad struggled to keep back the tears as he realized that, even with all his haste, it might be too late.

That Tad should come out of that melee of flying hoofs and prodding horns without being at least seriously injured was more than he could hope.

Faster and faster ran the pony, behind him a rising cloud of yellow dust. Ned's fingers were stiff and numb from carrying the heavy jug, and the lump in his throat was growing larger, it seemed to him, with every leap of the animal under him.

Now Ned could see the cowmen galloping in and gazing from their ponies. He knew they were looking at Tad. Stallings was bent over him, pouring something down the boy's throat.

Ned's heart gave a great bound. Tad Butler must be alive or there would be no need for the liquid that the foreman was forcing down his throat.



CHAPTER VII

THE HERD FORDS THE RIVER

"Is he--is he----" asked Ned, weakly, after they had taken the jug of water from his hand.

"He's alive, if that's what you mean," answered Stallings. "I'm afraid he's got a slight concussion of the brain. He doesn't come around the way I should like to see him."

"Sure it isn't a fracture!" asked the Professor, who had just arrived on the scene.

"No, I hardly think so."

The foreman washed the unconscious boy's face, soaking Tad's head and neck and searching for the seat of the trouble.

"Huh! Steer kicked him," grunted Stallings. "It was a glancing blow, luckily for the kid."

They worked over the lad for fully half an hour before he began to show signs of returning consciousness. At last his trembling eyelids struggled apart and he smiled up at them weakly.

"Ah! He's all right now, I guess," laughed the foreman, with a world of relief in his tone. "Boys, get busy now and cut out the rest of those cows. If the young man is not able to ride we'll put him in the chuck wagon when it comes up. Feel bad anywhere, now?" he asked.

"My--my head weighs a ton."

"I should think it would. Did the white steer kick you?"

"I--I don't know. Hello, Professor. I roped him all right, didn't I, Mr. Stallings?"

"You did. But you got roped yourself, too, I reckon. Think you'll be able to ride in the trail wagon? If not we'll have to send you back to town."

"That'll be the best place for the tenderfoot," growled Lumpy Bates.

Stallings turned a stern eye upon him.

"Lumpy, when I want your opinion I'll let you know. What are you doing here, anyway? Get into that cut out and be mighty quick about it!"

Lumpy rode away growling.

"I'll ride in no trail wagon," announced Tad Butler, with emphasis.

"I guess you will have to, my boy."

"I'll ride my pony if I have to be tied on," he declared resolutely.

The foreman laughed heartily.

"Well, we'll see about that. You boys all have good stuff in you. I see that Master Walter and the gopher are still out there looking after that bunch of cattle."

"I told them to do so," spoke up Tad.

"And they are obeying orders. That's the first thing to learn in this business."

"May I sit up now?"

"You may try."

Tad's head spun round when he raised himself up. The lad fought his dizziness pluckily, and mastered it. After a little while they helped him to his feet. Finally feeling himself able to walk he started unsteadily away from them.

"Where are you going?" demanded the Professor.

"Pony," answered Tad.

"I protest, Tad. You will come back here at once."

Tad turned obediently.

"Please, Professor. I'm all right."

"Let the boy go. He will be all right in a few moments after he has gotten into the saddle," urged the foreman. "Besides, he's too much of a man to be treated like a weakling. He'll get more bumps than that before he leaves this outfit, if I'm any judge."

The Professor motioned to Tad to go on, which the lad did, petting his pony as he reached him, and then pulling himself into the saddle with considerable effort.

"I'm ready for business now," he smiled, waving a hand to the foreman.

"Better look on and let the rest do the work," advised Stallings, mounting his own tough pony and riding into the thick of the cutting out process.

But Tad Butler could no more sit idly by while the exciting work was going on than could the foreman himself. The first steer that was cut out from the main herd, after Stallings went back, found Tad Butler alongside of it, crowding it toward his own herd farther out. And this work he kept up until all the strangers had been separated from the Diamond D stock.

"There, I'm glad that job is done," exclaimed Stallings, whipping off his hat and drawing a sleeve across his perspiring brow.

"Too bad I had to go and upset things so," said Tad.

"Never mind. It's all in a day's work. On a cattle drive if it isn't one thing it's sure to be another. We have been lucky enough not to have a stampede thus far. That isn't saying we won't, however. If you feel like working you can ride up and join the point men. We'll make five or six miles before it is time to bed down the herd."

To Tad's companions was left the task of driving the strange cattle a couple of miles to the west and leaving them there.

The boys could not well lose the main herd; for, no sooner had they started on the trail than a great cloud of dust slowly floated up into the air. Tad, in his position near the head of the line, and well out to one side of it, was free from this annoyance. The longer the lad was in the saddle, the stronger he seemed to feel, and the only trace that was now left of his recent experience among the hoofs of the Mexican steers was a bump on one side of his head almost as large as a hen's egg.

It was near sundown when the foreman, who had ridden on ahead some time before, came back with the information that a broad stream that was not down on his map lay just ahead of them.

"There's not more than thirty feet of swimming water there, and I believe I'll make a crossing before we go into camp," he announced briefly.

"How deep is the water?" asked Big-foot Sanders.

"In the middle, deep enough to drown, but on the edges it's fordable. The cows will be glad of a drink and a swim after the heat of to-day."

With this in mind the cowmen were instructed to urge the cattle along at a little stronger pace, that they might all get well over before the night came on.

The animals seemed to feel the presence of water ahead of them, for they ceased their grazing by the wayside and swung into a rapid pace, such a pace as always gladdens the heart of the cowboy. The steers held it until the rays of the setting sun were reflected on the surface of the broad sluggish stream.

The Pony Riders dashed forward intent upon reaching the stream first. Tad followed them upon receiving permission from the foreman to do so.

The banks on each side were high and steep, making it far from an ideal fording place. Stallings, however, thought it better to cross there than to take the time to work the herd further down. Joining the boys, he cast his glance up and down the stream to decide whether his judgment had been correct.

"I thought we were going to cross the river," said Stacy Brown.

"That's exactly what we are going to do," replied the foreman.

"But where's the bridge? I don't see any?" objected the lad.

"Right there in front of you."

"Where?"

"Chunky, there is no bridge," Tad informed him. "We have to wade, just as the cattle will."

"And swim, too, part of the way," added Stallings.

"But we'll get wet," wailed Chunky.

"No doubt about that," roared the foreman.

"Swim the river with our horses?" exclaimed Ned. "Hurrah! That will be great!"

"I shall be glad to get some of this dust washed off me," laughed Tad. "Besides, the bump on my head will feel better for it, I think."

"Spread out, boys. The cattle are coming up on the run. They will push you into the river before you are ready if you happen to be in their way," warned Stallings.

The riders clucked to their ponies and all galloped up stream some distance that they might be well out of the way of the oncoming herd.

The thirsty animals plunged into the water with a mighty splash. Some forded until their feet could no longer touch the ground, after which they swam to the other side, while others paused to drink until those behind them forced them out into the stream also.

In a few moments the stream was alive with swimming cattle, the herd being spread out for a full quarter of a mile up and down the stream. To the rear, yelling cowboys were urging on the stragglers and forcing the herd into the cool waters.

It was an inspiring sight for the boys.

Here and there a cowman would ride his pony into the water and turn the leaders, who were straying too far up or down the river.

After half an hour of watering, the men began to force the cattle to the opposite bank. There was a great scramble when the steers started to climb the steep bluff. The first ones to try it went half way up on a run.

Losing their footing they came tumbling to the foot of the bluff, knocking a number of the other cattle back into the water.

There was much bellowing and floundering about, but the relentless forcing from the other side swept the unfortunate ones to the crest of the tide and up the steep bank.

Now that the loose dirt had slipped down the footing grew more secure, and the animals soon fell into trails of their own making, up which they crept three and four abreast.

Once on the other side they started to graze as contentedly as if they had not just passed through a most trying experience.

Two of the cowmen who had forded the stream further down, now appeared opposite the main fording place, to take charge of the cattle.

"Get across, boys," shouted the foreman.

With an answering shout Tad and Ned slid their ponies down the sharp bluff, plunging into the water and heading straight across.

"Slip out of your saddles and hang on!" called the foreman.

Without an instant's hesitation the two boys slid into the water with a splash, but keeping tight hold on the pommels of their saddles.

"Let go the reins," directed Stallings. "The ponies know where to go."

Now the lads were being drawn rapidly through the water, and almost before they knew it their feet rested on the bottom of the shallow stream a short distance from the opposite bank.

"Hooray!" shouted Tad, waving his water-soaked sombrero. "Come in. The water's great!"

"Come on, Chunky," called Ned.

"I'll wait and go over in the wagon," decided Chunky.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," snapped the foreman. "You will swim, if you get over at all."

Professor Zeppelin, not to be outdone by his young charges, bravely rode his animal into the stream.

The boys set up a shout of glee when he, too, finally dropped into the river with a great splash. Instead, however, of allowing the pony to tow him, the Professor propelled himself along with long powerful strokes of his left hand, while with the right he clung to the saddle pommel.

"Three cheers for Professor Zeppelin!" cried Tad as the German, dripping but smiling, emerged from the water and scrambled up the bank, leaving his pony to follow along after him.

The cheers were given with a will.

Stacy Brown, however, was still on the other side with the straggling cattle which were coming along in small bunches.

"Young man, if you expect to get in for supper, you'd better be fording the stream," suggested Big-foot Sanders.

The mention of supper was all that Stacy needed to start him.

"Gid-ap!"

The pony slid down the bank on its haunches, Stacy leaning far back in the saddle that he might not pitch over the animal's head.

"Chunky would make a good side hill rider, wouldn't he?" jeered Ned.

"Depends upon whether he were going up or down," decided Tad.

"Look out! There he goes!" exclaimed Walter.

The boy's mount had mired one foot in a quicksand pocket and had gone down on its knees. But Chunky kept right on going.

He hit the water flat on his stomach, arms and legs outspread, clawing and kicking desperately.

The fat boy opened his mouth to cry out for help.

As a result Stacy swallowed all the water that came his way. Floundering about like a drowning steer, choking and coughing, he disappeared from sight.



CHAPTER VIII

THE APPROACH OF THE STORM

"He's gone down!" cried a voice from the other side of the stream.

Tad sprang down the bank and leaped in, striking out for the spot where Stacy had last been seen.

Cattle were scattered here and there and the boy had to keep his eyes open to prevent being run down. He had almost reached the place where he had made up his mind to dive, should Stacy not rise to the surface, when a great shout from the bluff caused Tad to turn.

"Wha--what is it?" he called.

"Look! Look!" cried Ned Rector.

"I don't see anything. Is it Chunky? Is he all right?"

"Yes. He's driving oxen just now," answered Ned.

By this time the cowpunchers had joined in the shouting. Tad could see, however, that they were shouting with merriment, though for the life of him he could not understand what there was to laugh about.

Several steers were between him and the spot on which the glances of the others were fixed.

"Come on in," called Ned.

The lad swam shoreward with slow, easy strokes. Then he discovered what they were laughing at.

Stacy, grasping desperately as he went down, had caught the tail of a swimming steer. He had been quickly drawn to the surface, and out through an opening between the treading animals, appeared the fat boy's head.

Chunky was not swimming. He was allowing the steer to do that for him, clinging to its tail with all his strength. The lad's eyes were blinded for the moment by the water that was in them. He did not release his hold of the tail when they had reached the shore, but hung on desperately while the steer, dragging him along through the mire, scrambled up the bank.

There was no telling how long Stacy might have hung to the animal's tail, had not Stallings grabbed him by the collar as he rose over the crest of the bank. Stallings shook him until the water-soaked clothes sent out a miniature rain storm and the boy had coughed himself back to his normal condition.

"Well, you are a nice sort of cowboy," laughed the foreman. "When you are unable to do anything else to interest your friends, you try to drown yourself. Go, shake yourself!"

Stacy rubbed the water from his eyes.

"I--I fell in, didn't I?" he grinned.

After having ferried the trail wagon over, everybody was ready for supper. No one seemed to mind the wetting he had gotten. Professor Zeppelin made a joke of his own bedraggled condition, and the boys gave slight heed to theirs.

The cattle were quickly bedded down and guards placed around them almost immediately, for the clouds were threatening. Stallings' watchful eyes told him that a bad night was before them. How bad, perhaps he did not even dream.

Supper was ready a short time after the arrival of the wagon, and, laughing and joking, the boys gathered about the spread with a keen zest for the good things that had been placed before them.

"Do you boys feel like going out on guard to-night?" asked the foreman while they were eating.

"I do for one," answered Tad.

"And I," chorused the rest of the lads.

"I see your recent wetting has not dampened your spirits any," laughed Stallings.

"Conditions make a lot of difference in the lives of all of us," announced the Professor. "Now, were these boys at home

they'd all catch cold after what they have been through this afternoon. Their clothes, as it is, will not be dry much before sunrise."

"And perhaps not even then," added the foreman, with an apprehensive glance at the sky.

"What did you say, Mr. Stallings?"

"I am thinking that it looks like rain."

"What do we do when it rains?" asked Stacy Brown.

"Same as any other time, kid," growled Big-foot Sanders.

"I know; but what do you do?" persisted Chunky.

"Young feller, we usually git wet," snapped Curley Adams, his mouth so full of potatoes that they could scarcely understand him.

"He means where do we sleep?" spoke up Tad.

"Oh, in the usual place," answered the foreman. "The only difference is that the bed is not quite so hard as at other times."

"How's that, Mr. Stallings?" inquired Walter.

"Because there's usually a puddle of water under you. I've woke up many a morning on the plains with only my head out of water. I'd a' been drowned if I hadn't had the saddle under my head for a pillow. However, it doesn't matter a great sight. After it has been raining a little while a fellow can't get any wetter, so what's the odds?"

"That's what I say," added Ned Rector.

Stacy Brown shook his head, disapproval plainly written on his face.

"I don't agree with you. I have never been so wet that I couldn't be wetter."

"How about when you came out of the river at the end of a cow's tail this afternoon? Think you could have been any more wet?" jeered Ned.

"Sure thing. I might have drowned; then I'd been wet on the inside as well as the outside," answered the fat boy, wisely, his reply causing a ripple of merriment all around the party.

"I guess the gopher scored that time, eh?" grinned Big-foot.

That night Stacy was sent out on the second guard from ten-thirty to one o'clock. They had found him asleep under the chuck wagon, whence he was hauled out, feet first, by one of the returning guards.

Tad had turned in early, as he was to be called shortly before one to go out with the third guard and to remain on duty till half-past three.

For reasons of his own the foreman had given orders that all the ponies not on actual duty, that night, were to be staked down instead of being hobbled and turned out to graze.

Tad heard the order given, and noting the foreman's questioning glances at the heavens, imagined that it had something to do with weather conditions.

"Do you think Mr. Stallings is worried about the weather?" asked the lad of Big-foot Sanders, as he rode along beside the big cowman on the way to the bedding place of the herd.

"I reckon he is," was the brief answer.

"Then you think we are going to have a storm?"

"Ever been through a Texas storm?" asked Big-foot by way of answering the boy's question.

"No."

"Well, you won't call it a storm after you have. There ain't no name in the dictionary that exactly fits that kind of a critter. A stampede is a Sunday in a country village as compared with one of them Texas howlers. You'll be wishing you had a place to hide, in about a minute after that kind of a ruction starts."

"Are they so bad as that?"

"Well, almost," answered the cowman. "I've heard tell," he continued, "that they've been known to blow the horns off a Mexican cow. Why, you couldn't check one of them things with a three inch rope and a snubbing post."

Tad laughed at the quaintness of his companion's words. The sky near the horizon was a dull, leaden hue, though above their heads the stars twinkled reassuringly.

"It doesn't look very threatening to me," decided Tad Butler, gazing intently toward the heavens.

"Well, here's where we split," announced the cowboy, riding off to the left of the herd, Tad taking the right. Shortly after the lad heard the big cowman break out in song:

"Two little niggers upstairs in bed,
One turned ober to de oder an' said,
How 'bout dat short'nin' bread,
How 'bout dat short'nin' bread?"

Tad pulled up his pony and listened until the song had been finished. It was the cowpuncher's way of telling the herd that he had arrived and was on hand to guard them against trouble.

"Big-foot seems to have a new song to-night," mused Tad.

Now the lad noticed that there was an oppressiveness about the air that had not been present before.

A deep orange glow showed on the southern horizon for an instant, then settled back into the prairie, leaving the gloom about the young cowboy even more dense than it had been before.

"Feels spooky," was Tad's comment.

Not being able to sing to his own satisfaction, Tad shoved his hands deep into his trousers pockets and began whistling "Old Black Joe." It was the most appropriate tune he could think of.

"Kind of fits the night," he explained to the pony, which was picking its way slowly about the great herd. Then he resumed his whistling.

The guards passed each other without a word, some being too sleepy; others too fully occupied with their own thoughts.

The night, by this time, had grown intensely still, even the insects and night birds having hushed their weird songs.

A flash more brilliant than the first attracted the lad's attention.

"Lightning," he muttered, glancing off to the south. "I guess Mr. Stallings was right about the storm." Yet, directly overhead the stars still sparkled. In the distance Tad saw the comforting flicker of the camp-fire, about which the cowmen were sleeping undisturbed by the oppressiveness of the night.

"I guess the foreman knew what he was talking about when he said we were going to have a storm," repeated Tad. "I wonder how the cattle will behave if things get lively."

As if in answer to his question there came a stir among the animals on the side nearest him.

Tad began whistling at once and the cows quieted down.

"They must like my whistling. It's the first time anything ever did," thought the lad.

Far over on the other side of the herd Big-foot crooned to his charges the song of the "Two little niggers upstairs in bed."

"Sanders' stock must be walking in their sleep, too. I wonder----"

A brilliant flash lighted the entire heaven, causing Tad Butler to cut short the remark he was about to make.

A deep rumble of thunder, that seemed to roll across the plain like some great wave, followed a few seconds later.

The lad shivered slightly.

He was not afraid. Yet he realized that he was lonely, and wished that some of the other guards might come along to keep him company.

Glancing up, Tad made the discovery that the small spot of clear sky had disappeared. By now he was unable to see anything. He made no effort to direct the pony, leaving it to the animal's instinct to keep a proper distance from the herd and follow its formation.

The thunder gradually became louder and the flashes of lightning more frequent. The herd was disturbed. He could hear the cattle scrambling to their feet. Now and then the sound of locking horns reached him as the beasts crowded their neighbors too closely in their efforts to move about.

Tad tried to sing, but gave it up and resumed his whistling.

"I'm glad Chunky is not out on this trick," thought the boy aloud. "I am afraid he would be riding back to camp as fast as his pony could carry him."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a flash, so brilliant that it blinded Tad for the moment, lighted up the prairie. A crash which, as it seemed to him, must have split the earth wide open, followed almost instantly.

Another roar, different from that caused by the thunder, rose on the night air, accompanied by the suggestive rattle of meeting horns and the bellowing of frightened cattle.

By this time Tad had circled around to the west side of the herd. The instant this strange, startling noise reached him he halted his pony and listened.

Off to the north of him he saw the flash of a six-shooter. Another answered it from his rear. Then a succession of shots followed quickly one after the other.

The lad began slowly to understand.

He could hear the rush and thunder of thousands of hoofs.

"The cattle are stampeding!" cried Tad.



CHAPTER IX

CHASED BY A STAMPEDING HERD

"Whoa-oo-ope! Whoa-oo-ope!"

The long soothing cry echoed from guard to guard.

It was the call of the cowman, in an effort to calm the frightened animals. Here and there a gun would flash as the guards shot in front of the stampeding herd, hoping thereby to turn the rush and set the animals going about more in a circle in order to keep them together until they could finally be quieted.

It was all a mad chaos of noise and excitement to the lad who sat in his saddle hesitatingly, not knowing exactly what was expected of him under the circumstances.

Off toward the camp a succession of flashes like fireflies told the cowpunchers on guard that their companions were racing to their assistance as fast as horseflesh could carry them.

The storm had disturbed the herd from the instant of the first flash of lightning, and, as other flashes followed, the excitement of the animals increased until, at last, throwing off all restraint, they dashed blindly for the open prairie.

Desperately as the guards struggled to turn the herd, their efforts had no more effect than if they had been seeking to beat back the waves of the sea.

Tad was recalled to a realization of his position when, in a dazzling flash of lightning, he caught a momentary glimpse of Big-foot Sanders bearing down on him at a tremendous speed. Tad saw something else, too--a surging mass of panic-stricken cattle, heads hanging low, horns glistening and eyes protruding, sweeping toward him.

"Ride! Ride!" shouted Big-foot.

"Wh--where?" asked Tad in as strong a voice as he could command.

"Keep out of their way. Work up to the point as soon as you can and try to point in the leaders. We've got to keep the herd from scattering. I'll stay in the center and lead them till the others get here. Bob will send along some of the fellows to help you as soon as possible."

While delivering his orders Big-foot had turned his pony, and, with Tad, was riding swiftly in advance of the cattle, in the same direction that they were traveling. To have paused where they were would have meant being crushed and trampled beneath the hoofs of the now maddened animals.

"Now, git!"

Tad pulled his pony slightly to the right.

"Use your gun!" shouted Big-foot. "Burn plenty of powder in front of their noses if they press you too closely!"

He had forgotten that the lad did not carry a gun, nor did he realize that he was sending the boy into a situation of the direst peril.

Tad, by this time, had a pretty fair idea of the danger of the task that had been assigned to him. But he was not the boy to flinch in an emergency.

Pressing the rowels of his spurs against the flanks of the reaching pony and urging the little animal on with his voice, Tad swept obliquely along in front of the herd.

Now and then a flash of lightning would show him a solid mass of cattle hurling themselves upon him. At such times the lad would swerve his mount to the left a little and shoot ahead for a few moments, in an attempt to get sufficient lead of them to enable him to reach the right or upper end of the line.

In this way Tad Butler soon gained the outside of the leaders. By dropping back and working up the line, he pointed them in to the best of his ability.

The lightning got into his eyes as he strained them wide open to take account of his surroundings. He would pass a hand over his face instinctively, as if to brush the flash away, groping for an instant for his bearings after he had done so.

He remembered what Bob Stallings had said in speaking of a stampede.

"Keep them straight and hold them together. That's all you can do. You can't stop them," the foreman had said.

The lad was doing this now as best he could, yet he wondered that none of the cowmen had come to his assistance.

Again and again did Tad Butler throw his pony against the great unreasoning wave on the right of the line, and again and again was he buffeted back, only to return to the battle with desperate courage.

All at once the lad found himself almost surrounded by the beasts. A lightning flash had shown him this at the right time. Had it been a few seconds later Tad must have gone down under their irresistible rush.

The pony, seeming to realize the danger fully as much as did its rider, bent every muscle in its little body to bear itself and rider to safety.

Yet try as they would, they were unable to get back to the right point to take up the turning work again.

The cattle had closed in about the lad in almost a crescent formation, Tad's position being about the center of it.

"Whoa-oo-ope! Whoa-oo-ope!" shouted Tad, taking up the cry that he had heard the cowboys utter earlier in the stampede.

His voice was lost in the roar of the storm and the thunder of the rushing herd.

Tad realized that there was only one thing left for him to do. That was to keep straight ahead and ride. He would have to ride fast, too, if he were to keep clear of the long-legged Mexican cattle.

They were descending a gradual slope that led down into a broad, sandy arroyo where still stood the rotting stumps of oak and cottonwood trees that once lined the ancient water course.

By this time the main herd lay to the rear nearly two miles, the cattle having separated into several bands. However, the lad was unaware of this.

Suddenly, in the darkness, rider and pony crashed into a dense mesquite thicket.

There was not a second to hesitate, for they were already in. The leading cattle tore in after Tad with a crashing of brush and a rattle of horns--sounds that sent a chill up and down his spine in spite of all the lad's sturdy courage.

The herd was closing in on him, leaving the boy no alternative but to go through the thicket himself, and to go fast at that.

Tad formed his plan instantly. He made up his mind to ride it out and let his pony have its own way. Yet the boy never expected to come through the mesquite thicket without being swept from his pony and trampled under the feet of the savage steers.

He gave the pony a free rein, clutched both cantle and pommel of the saddle and braced himself for the shock that he was sure would come. The cow pony tore through the growth at a fearful pace, while the boy's clothes hung in shreds where they had been raked by the mesquite thorns.

All at once Tad felt himself going through the air with a different motion. He realized that he was falling. The pony had stumbled and with its rider was plunging headlong to the ground. The cattle were thundering down upon them.

CHAPTER X

A MIRACULOUS ESCAPE

"That settles me!" said the lad bitterly.

The next instant he hit the ground with a force that partially stunned him. His pony, whose nose had ploughed the ground, was up like a flash. Realizing its danger, the little animal gave a snort and plunged into the mesquite, leaving its rider lying on the ground with a fair prospect of being crushed to death beneath, the hoofs of the stampeding steers.

Tad recovered himself almost instantly. His first instinct was to run, in the hope of overtaking the fleeing pony.

"That'll be sure death," he told himself.

The cattle were almost upon him. If he were to do anything to save himself he would have to act quickly.

It came to him suddenly that what the pony had fallen over might be made to act as a shield for himself. The boy sprang forward, groping in the dark amid the roaring of the storm and the thunder of the maddened herd. His hands touched a log. He found that it had so rotted away on one side as to make a partial shell. It was not enough to admit a human body, but it served as a sort of screen for him. Tad burrowed into it as far as he could get.

"I hope there are no snakes in here," he thought, snuggling close.

Yet between the two he preferred to take his chances with snakes, at that moment, rather than with the crazy steers.

The leaders of the steers cleared the log, just grazing it with their hind feet as they went over, sending a shower of dust and decayed wood over Tad.

The cattle immediately following the leaders did not fare so well. A number of them, leaping over the log at the same instant, fell headlong as the pony had done before them. However, the steers were less fortunate. Before they were able to scramble to their feet, others following had tumbled over on top of them, and Tad Butler found himself wedged in behind a barricade of bellowing cattle, whose flying hoofs made him hastily burrow deeper into the decayed log.

This obstruction soon caused the main body to swerve. Their solid front had been broken at last, yet they continued on as wildly as before, bellowing and homing one another in their mad flight.

The rain, which had held back during the brilliant electrical display, now came down in drenching torrents, packing down the sand of the plain which the wind, before, had picked up and tossed into the air in dense clouds.

Tad was soaked to the skin almost instantly. But he did not mind this. His thought, now, was to get out of his perilous position and follow the herd.

The cattle that had fallen so near him, were now one by one extricating themselves from their predicament, each one giving vent to a bellow as it did so and dashing after its companions.

The lad was not slow to crawl from his hiding place the moment he considered it safe to do so. As it was, he got away before the snarl of steers had entirely unraveled itself.

What to do Tad did not know. His pony gone, and, with no sense of direction left, he was in sore straits.

"I'll follow the cattle," he decided. "Besides, it's my business to stay with them if I can. I'll do it as long as I've got a leg to stand on," he declared, cautiously working around those of the cattle that were leaping from the heap and running away.

The mesquite was still full of stragglers dashing wildly here and there. In the darkness, the boy was really in great danger. There were no large trees behind which he could dodge to get out of the way of the animals as they rushed toward him, nor was he able to see them when they did get near him. He was obliged to judge of their direction by sound alone. This was made doubly difficult since the rain had begun to fall, for now, young Butler could scarcely distinguish one sound from another.

Once a plunging steer hit the lad a glancing blow with its great side, hurling him into a thicket of bristling mesquite. The thorns gashed his face and body, almost stripping the remnants of his tattered clothes from him.

Still, with indomitable pluck, the lad sprang to his feet, stubbornly working his way through the thicket.

He came out finally on the other side and floundering about for a time, found himself once more on a plain, which he

had observed in the light from a flash of lightning extended away indefinitely. Off to the west, he plainly made out a large body of cattle. Apparently they were now headed to the northwest.

It was almost a hopeless task for one to expect to be able to overhaul them on foot, and even were he to do so he could accomplish nothing after reaching them.

But Tad kept on just the same, with the rain beating him until he was gasping for breath, the lightning playing about him in lingering sheets of yellow flame.

He had run on in this way for fully half an hour when a flash disclosed an object to the right of him. It was moving, but Tad was sure it was not a steer.

The boy changed his course somewhat and trotted along with more caution, shading his eyes with a hand that he might make out what it was when the next flash came.

"It's a pony!" he shouted. "It's my pony!"

The animal was standing with lowered head, gazing straight at the boy.

Tad whistled and called with a long drawn "Whoa-oo-ope!"

The pony made no move to approach, nor did it attempt to run away. But Tad had had experience enough with the cow ponies by this time to know that the animal was not likely to stand still and permit him to come up with it. At any moment it was likely to kick its heels in the air and dash away.

"I've got to make a run for him," decided the lad, stepping cautiously forward, making a slight detour that he might come up from the animal's left instead of approaching him directly from the front.

After having done this, Tad waited, crouching low. He chuckled to himself as he observed that the pony was looking straight ahead, not having discovered his master's new position.

The boy was not more than two rods from him.

Measuring the distance with his eyes, he waited until the lightning flash died out, then ran on his toes straight for where he believed the horse was standing. It was Tad's purpose to grab the animal about the neck.

Instead he ran straight against the pony's side with a resounding bump.

The pony uttered a grunt of fear, springing straight up into the air.

"Whoa, Barney!" coaxed the lad. But Barney had no idea of obeying the command at that moment. It is doubtful if, in the fright of the sudden collision, he even understood what was wanted of him.

Tad's hands had missed the neck. Instead they had grasped the pommel and cantle of the saddle, so that when the pony leaped, Tad's feet were jerked clear of the ground.

As the animal came down on all fours, Tad threw himself into the saddle.

Instantly the pony's back arched, and, with a cough, it went off into a series of bucks, twisting, whirling and making desperate efforts to unseat its rider.

For the first few minutes the lad could do no more than hold on. At the first opportunity, however, he let go of the pommel long enough to reach forward and pick up the reins, which hung well down on the pony's neck.

"Now, buck, Barney, you rascal!" shouted Tad gleefully, giving a gentle pressure with the spurs.

Barney at once decided to stop bucking.

Tad clucked to him and shook out the reins.

Away they went on the trail of the cattle, heading to the northwest, where the lad could plainly see them running.

At the pace the pony was going they were able to overhaul the herd in a short time. Tad had clung to his quirt when he was thrown. Reaching the head of the line of charging beasts, he rode straight at the leaders, bringing the quirt again and again across the noses of those nearest to him. This treatment served to deflect the line a little; yet, try as he would, Tad seemed unable to turn the bunch toward home. Yet he kept steadily at his work, "milling" the steers, as the turning process is called, until pony and rider were well-nigh exhausted.

Tad knew he was a long way from camp and alone with the herd. After a time the animals seemed to him to be

slackening their speed. Discovering this, he untied the slicker or rubber blanket from the saddle cantle, and, riding against the leaders again, flaunted the slicker in their faces, shouting and urging at the same time.

"If I had a gun I believe I could stop them right away," he said. "But I'm going to turn them if it's the last thing I ever do."

The fury of the storm was abating and the lightning flashes were becoming less frequent.

Now that he had succeeded in turning the point of the herd, it proved much easier to keep them under control. Besides, it gave both boy and pony a breathing spell. The hard riding was not now necessary.

Round and round young Butler kept the herd circling for nearly an hour. The steers, moving more and more slowly, Tad concluded wisely that they were growing tired of this and that they would quiet down. His judgment proved correct. The storm passed. He could hear it roaring off to the northwest where the lightning flamed up in intermittent flashes.

"Wonder what time it is," queried Tad aloud, searching about in his clothes for his watch.

"Pshaw, I've lost it," he exclaimed. "Well, it is not so much of a loss after all. I paid only a dollar for it and I've had more than a dollar's worth of fun to-night. I wonder what I look like. I must be a sight."

It now lacked only an hour of dawn, but, of course, the boy did not know this. In the darkness preceding the dawn he had no idea of the size of the bunch of cattle that he had led out over the plain. He knew it must be large, however.

At last daybreak was at hand, the landscape and the herd being faintly outlined in the thin morning light. Tad was surprised to find that he had milled the cattle into a compact bunch. Now the boy began galloping around the herd, speaking words of encouragement to the animals as he went, whistling and trying to sing, until finally he was rewarded by seeing some of them begin to graze.

"I've done it," shouted Tad gleefully. "I've bagged the whole bunch. I wonder what Mr. Stallings will say to that. I don't believe Big-foot Sanders could beat that. The next question is, where am I? I don't know. I guess I'm lost for sure. But I've got lots of company."

To add to his perplexity, a light fog was drifting over the plain from the southeast, shutting out what little view there was in the early morning light.

The cattle were now grazing as contentedly as if they never had known such an experience as a stampede. It was useless, however, to attempt to drive them, for he might be leading them away from camp instead of toward it.

Tad was wet and hungry, and now that he was able to get a look at himself, he discovered that his belt was about the only whole thing left of his equipment. Scarcely a vestige of his trousers remained; his shirt hung in ribbons, his hat was lost and his leggins had been stripped off clean.

Tad laughed heartily as he surveyed himself.

"Well, I am a sight! I guess I shall need a whole new harness before I drive cattle much more."

All he could do now was to wait for the sun to rise. Then, he might be able to determine something about his position.

But the sun was a long time in making its appearance that day.

CHAPTER XI

THE VIGIL ON THE PLAINS

"I wish I had a drink of water," said Tad after some hours had passed. Instead of drifting away, the fog had become more dense. He could see only part of the herd now. However, as they showed no disposition to run, Tad felt no concern in that direction. He was obliged to ride around the herd more frequently than would otherwise have been the case, in order to keep the straying ones well rounded in.

The hours passed slowly, and with their passing Tad's appetite grew. He sat on his pony, enviously watching the cattle filling their stomachs with the wet grass.

"I almost wish I were a steer," declared Tad. "I could at least satisfy my hunger."

Then the lad once more took up his weary round.

Off to the eastward, all was still excitement. The herd had broken up into many parts during the stampede and the cowmen were having a hard time in rounding up the scattered bunches.

A few of them had succeeded in working some of the animals back to the bedding ground of the previous night, where the animals were left in charge of one man.

With the coming of the morning and the fog, which blanketed everything, their work became doubly difficult. The storm had wiped out almost all traces of the trail made by the different herds in their escape, until even an Indian would have been perplexed in an effort to follow them.

"Who is missing?" asked Stallings, riding into camp after a fruitless search for his cattle.

"Tad Butler, for one," answered Walter Perkins.

"Let's see. He was on guard with Big-foot Sanders," mused the foreman. "Big-foot has not shown up, so the young man probably is with him. No need to worry about them. Big-foot knows this country like a book. You can't lose him. Then there's Curley Adams and Lumpy Bates to come in yet. I can see us eating our Thanksgiving dinner on the trail if this thing keeps up much longer."

Yet, despite these discouragements, the foreman kept his temper and his head.

"Is there nothing we can do toward finding the boy?" asked Professor Zeppelin anxiously.

"Does it look like it?" answered Stallings, motioning toward the fog that lay over them like a dull, gray, cheerless blanket.

Late in the afternoon Curley and Lumpy came straggling into camp with the remnants of the herd, with which they had raced out hours before. An hour afterwards, Big-foot Sanders drove in with a bunch of two hundred more.

"Where's the Pinto?" asked Stallings as Big-foot rode up to the trail wagon and reported.

"The Pinto? Why, I haven't seen the kid since the bunch started on the rampage last night. I thought he was with me on the other end of the herd. Hasn't he come in yet?"

"No."

"Then the kid's lost. All the cows back?"

"I don't know. I'll look over the herd and make an estimate. You come along with me."

Together the foreman and the big cowman rode out to the grazing ground, where they circled the great herd, glancing critically over them as they rode.

"What do you think?" asked Big-foot as they completed the circuit of the herd.

"I should say we were close to five hundred head short," decided the foreman. "How does it look to you?"

"I reckon you're about right. Suffering cats, but that was a run! Never saw a bunch scatter so in my life."

"Couldn't be helped. The night was so dark you couldn't tell whether you had a hundred or a thousand with you. Did you strike any cross trails while you were coming in!"

"Nary a one--not in the direction I came from. If I'd kept on last night, at the rate I was going, I'd have rounded up in Wyoming some time to-day I reckon. Sorry the Pinto's strayed away. He'll have a time of it finding his way back. Reckon we won't see the kid again this trip," decided Big-foot.

"We've got to," answered the foreman sharply. "We don't move from this bed till he's been picked up, even if it takes all summer."

"You--you don't reckon he's with that other bunch, do you?"

"I shouldn't be surprised. The boy has pluck and I have an idea that if he got in with a lot of cows he'd stick to them till the pony went down under him."

"More'n likely that's what happened. I'll tell you what we had better do----"

"Get all the boys together who are not needed on guard," interrupted Stallings. "Let them circle out to the west and southwest and shoot. Have each man fire a shot every five minutes by the watch as they move out. That will keep them in touch with each other, and will act as a guide to the kid if he happens to be within hearing."

"How far shall we go?"

"Half an hour out. It's not safe to leave the herd any longer unless the fog clears away. As soon as that goes we'll organize a regular search. I want those cows, and I want to find the boy."

The men quickly mounted their ponies and disappeared in the fog, following the orders given by the foreman. After a time those in camp could faintly hear the distant cracks of the cowpunchers' pistols as they fired their signals into the air.

In the meantime Tad Butler was keeping his lonely vigil on the fogbound plains many miles away.

The fog was still hovering over the herd as the afternoon waned, and the lad's body was dripping wet from it. Occasionally he brushed a hand across his face, wiping away the moisture.

Darkness settled down earlier than usual that night. Yet, to the boy's great relief, the fog lifted shortly afterwards and the stars came out brightly.

With the skill of an old cowman Tad had bedded down the herd and began to ride slowly about them, whistling vigorously. His face ached from the constant puckering of his lips, and his wounds gave him considerable pain. Yet he lost none of his cheerfulness.

At times Tad found himself drooping in his saddle as his sleepiness overcame him. But he fought the temptation to doze by talking to himself and bringing the quirt sharply against his legs.

"Tad Butler, don't you dare to go to sleep!" he warned himself. "It's the first real duty you have had to perform, so you're not going to make a mess of it. My, but I'm hungry!"

From that on the boy never allowed his eyelids to drop, though at times they felt as if weighted down with lead.

After what seemed an eternity, the gray dawn appeared on the eastern horizon. Immediately Tad began routing out the cows that they might have an opportunity to graze before the rising of the sun. It was his intention to point them toward where he believed the camp to be the moment they had grazed to their satisfaction. Until then it would not be wise to start the animals on their course.

About six o'clock, deciding that they had eaten enough, Tad began galloping up and down, shouting and applying his quirt here and there to the backs of the cows. It was slow work for one lone horseman to start five hundred cattle on the trail. Yet, after half an hour of effort, he had the satisfaction of seeing them begin to move.

"Whoop!" shouted the boy. "I'm a real cowboy this time!"

Yet his task was more difficult than he had imagined it could be. While he was urging on one part of the herd, the others would lag by the wayside and begin to graze.

Constant effort and continual moving about at high speed on his part, were necessary to keep up any sort of movement among the cattle.

The lad headed as nearly as possible for the southeast, believing that he had come from that direction.

At the same time a party had set out from the camp in search of young Butler. They had laid their course more toward

the southwest. Holding these directions the two parties would not come within some miles of each other.

Tad's eyes were continually sweeping the plains in hope of discovering a horseman or some signs of the main herd, which he was sure must have been rounded up long before. Not a trace of them could he discover.

Once the boy straightened up in his saddle believing he had heard the report of a gun. After listening for some time he came to the conclusion that he had been in error.

"I guess it's my stomach imagining things," grinned Tad Butler.

He had now been out for two nights, and was now well along on the second day. During all that time he had not had a mouthful to eat. His lips were dry and parched; his throat burned fearfully. Still, he kept resolutely on. About two o'clock in the afternoon the herd came upon a clump of trees. Tad at sight of it, spurred his pony on, attracted by the greenness of the grass about the place, hoping that he might find a spring.

But he was doomed to disappointment. There was no sign of water to be found. With almost a sob in his throat the boy swung himself into his saddle again.

"Barney, you and I ought to be camels. Then we could carry all the water we need," he told the pony. "If we don't find some pretty soon I reckon we'll dry up and blow away. Gid-ap, Barney!"

Once more the lad began his monotonous pounding back and forth along the side of the herd which was now spread out over a full half mile of territory, urging with all his strength in order to get the animals to quicken their pace.

In the camp, Stallings and the others had begun to show their worry. Not a trace had been found of boy or herd. The main hope of the foreman was that Tad might come upon a ranch or a town somewhere, in his course, and in that way get help to direct him back to camp. As for the cattle, he feared that they had become so split up that it would be well-nigh impossible to get them together again.

During the whole afternoon, Bob Stallings had been riding about his own herd, sweeping the plain with a pair of field glasses.

A speck of dust far to the northwest suddenly attracted his attention. Stallings halted his pony, and, sitting in his saddle almost motionless, gazed intently at the tiny point that had come within range of his vision.

"I wonder what that is," mused the foreman. "It can't be any of our party, for they would not be likely to be away off there--that is, unless they have rounded up the bunch."

Stallings, after a while, wheeled his pony and dashed back to camp.

"If any of the men come in, tell them to head northwest and come on as fast as they can."

"Do you see anything?" asked the Professor anxiously.

"I don't know. I hope I do," answered the foreman, leaping into his saddle and putting spurs to his mount. "It may be some other herd crossing the state," he muttered, keeping his eyes fixed on the speck that was slowly developing into a miniature cloud.

The foreman urged his pony to its best pace, and, in the course of half an hour he was able to make out a herd of cattle. That was all he could tell about it. However, it was not long before he discovered a lone horseman working up and down the herd.

Stallings was in too great a hurry to use his glasses now. He was driving his pony straight at the yellow mark off there on the plain, without swerving or appearing to exert any pressure at all on the bridle rein.

"It's the Pinto, as I'm alive!" he breathed.

The horseman with the herd saw him now, and rising in his saddle, waved a hand at the foreman.

In a few moments Stallings came rushing up with a shout of joy.



Good for You, Kid!

Good for You, Kid!

"Good for you, kid! How are you?"

"Baked to a turn," answered Tad hoarsely, but with face lighting up joyously. "I never was so thirsty in my life."

"What? Haven't you had anything to drink?"

"Not a drop in two days."

"Great heavens, boy! You head that pony for camp mighty quick. Ride for it! You will have no difficulty in following my trail back. Don't drink much at a time. Take it in little sips," commanded the foreman in short, jerky sentences.

"Yes, but what about the herd?" asked Tad Butler.

"Never you mind the herd. I'll see to them. You move!"

Stallings noticed that the boy sat in his saddle very straight, and he knew well enough the effort it cost him to do so.

"I think I'll stay," answered the lad after a moment of indecision.

"You'll go!"

Tad shook his head.

"I've pulled them through, even if I have had quite a time of it. Now I'm going to stay with them. I guess I can stand it as well as any of your men could under similar circumstances. They wouldn't desert the herd, would they?"

Stallings glanced at him sharply.

"All right," he said. "If you insist upon it. By good rights I ought to order you in. But I understand just how you feel, kid. Here, take a drink of this brandy. It will brace you up," said the foreman, producing a flask from his pocket. "I keep

it for emergencies, as the men are not allowed to use it while on duty."

"Thank you," answered the boy, with an emphatic shake of the head. "I don't drink."

"I understand. But this is medicine," urged the foreman. "It will set you right up."

"I haven't the least doubt of it," grinned the boy. "But I don't want to be set up that way. You'll excuse me, Mr. Stallings. Don't urge me, please."

The foreman replaced the flask in his pocket, a queer smile flickering about the corners of his mouth.

"You are the right stuff, kid," he muttered. "If you stayed in this business you'd be a foreman before you knew it. You are a heap sight better than a lot of them now. Fall in. I'll ride around on the other side of the herd, and urge them along from the rear. You ride up to the right of the line and keep them pointed. Follow our trail. You will make out the main herd very soon."

With renewed strength, Tad went at his work, though it was with an effort that he kept his saddle. He was afraid he must collapse before reaching the camp, and his straining eyes kept searching for the herd and the white-topped wagon that he knew held what he needed most of all at that moment--drink and food!

Soon Tad and the foreman made out a rising cloud of dust approaching them at a rapid rate. Stallings waved his hand toward the cloud and nodded to Tad, being too far away to call.

The lad shook his head in reply. He understood what the foreman meant. Men were coming to their assistance and the boy was to push on for camp alone.

The cowpunchers began to laugh as they rode up and observed the boy's tattered condition.

"So the Pinto got a dose this time, eh?" jeered Lumpy Bates.

"You shut up!" snarled Big-foot Sanders, turning on him menacingly. "He's brought them cows back, and I'll bet a new saddle it's more'n you could have done. Don't you see the kid's near all in? Here you, Pinto, you hike for camp!" he shouted.

"I'm staying with the cattle," announced Tad, firmly.

"Cattle nothing. It's the camp for yours and mighty quick!"

Without waiting for argument Big-foot grasped the reins of Tad's bridle and whirling his own mount about, galloped away, fairly dragging Tad Butler and his tired pony after him.

With no reins in his hands the boy was powerless to interfere. All he could do was to sit in his saddle and be towed into camp.

"Please don't take me in this way. Let me ride in," he begged as they neared the camp.

"All right," laughed Big-foot, slacking up and tossing the reins back over the pony's neck. "It's a terrible thing to be proud, when a fellow's down and out. But I want to say one thing, kid."

"Yes?"

"There ain't a gamer critter standing on two hoofs than you--bar none. And that goes."

Tad laughed happily.

"I haven't done anything. I----"

"Haven't done anything?" growled Big-foot, riding close and peering down into the boy's scarred and grimy face. "Say, don't pass that out to the bunch. Lumpy'll say you're fishin' for compliments. I don't want to thump him, but, if he passes out any talk as reflects on what you've done for this outfit, I'll thrash him proper."

They were now so near to the camp that the Professor and the boys were able to recognize the horsemen.

They set up a great shout.

"Meet me with a pail of water," yelled Tad. "I'm hot."

Pong heard him and almost immediately emerged from the chuck wagon with a tin pail full of water.

"Throw it on me, quick," commanded the lad, leaping from his pony.

Pong tipped the pail and was about to dash it over the lad when Big-foot suddenly freed a foot from the stirrup. He gave the pail a powerful kick sending it several feet from him, its contents spilling over the ground.

"You idiot! You fool heathen!" roared Big-foot. "The Pinto didn't say he wanted boiling hot water thrown on him. He said he was hot. If you wasn't the cook of this outfit, and we'd all starve to death without you, I'd shoot you plumb full of holes, you blooming idiot of a heathen Chinese!"

"Allee same," chuckled Pong, showing his gleaming teeth.

"What! You climb into that wagon before I forget you're the cook!" fumed Big-foot, jumping his pony threateningly toward the Chinaman. Pong leaped into the protection of his wagon.

"Boys," said the big cowman, "the Pinto has come back with the crazy steers. He's rounded up the whole bunch and never lost a critter. Look at him, if you don't believe me. Ain't he a sight?"

Tad smiled proudly as he sipped the water which one of the boys had brought to him.

"Any man as says he ain't a sight has got a fight on with Big-foot Sanders. And that goes, too!" announced the cowman, glaring about him.

"Three cheers for Tad Butler, champion cowpuncher!" cried Ned Rector.

"Hooray!" bellowed Big-foot. "Ye-e-e-o-w!"

"Hip-hip, hooray!" chorused the boys, hurling their sombreros into the air. Their wild yells and cat calls made the cattle off on the grazing grounds raise their heads in wonder.

"Allee same likee this," chuckled the grinning Chinaman from the front end of the chuck wagon, at the same time making motions as if he, too, were cheering.

The boys roared with laughter.

Big-foot Sanders grunted and turned his back on the grinning face of Pong.

"One of these days I sure will forget that heathen's the cook," he growled.

CHAPTER XII

UNDER A STRANGE INFLUENCE

"We will move to-morrow shortly after daybreak," announced the foreman at supper that night.

"Will you put me on the fourth guard this evening, Mr. Stallings?" asked Tad Butler.

"You take the fourth guard? A cowpuncher who hasn't had a wink in more than two days? Why, I wouldn't ask a steer to do that! No kid, you roll up in your blankets and sleep until the cook routs you out for breakfast."

"I'll take my trick just the same. I can sleep at home when I get back. I don't want to miss a minute of this fun," returned Tad.

"Fun--he calls it fun!" grunted Lumpy.

"It's just the beginning of the fun," answered Big-foot. "I knew things would begin to happen when we got near the Nueces."

"Why?" asked Ned Rector.

"I don't know. There seems to be some queer influence at work round these parts. Last time I was over this part of the trail we had a stampede almost every night for a week. Two months ago I heard of an outfit that lost more'n half its stock."

"How about it, Mr. Stallings?" laughed Tad. "Are you superstitious, too?"

The boys noted that the foreman frowned and would not answer at once.

"Not exactly. Big-foot means the adobe church of San Miguel."

"What's that?" interrupted Chunky.

"An old Mexican church on the plains. Probably hasn't been used for a hundred years or more. You boys will have a chance to explore the place. It's not far from the Ox Bow ranch, where we take in another herd. We shall be there a couple of days or so until the cattle get acquainted. Besides, we shall have to buy some fresh ponies. Four of ours broke their legs in the stampede and had to be shot."

"Oh, that's too bad," answered Tad. "I'm sorry. I don't like to see a horse get hurt."

"No more do I, Master Tad. But in this business it is bound to happen. I think we shall be able to get some green bronchos. They usually have a bunch of them at the Ox Bow ranch. You will see some fun when we break them in," laughed the foreman.

"I think I should like to take a hand in that myself. But I am anxious to hear more about the haunted church."

"Who said anything about a haunted church?" demanded Stacy Brown.

"The gopher is right. The church isn't haunted. It just happens that cowmen fall into a run of hard luck in that neighborhood now and then."

"Do you believe in spooks, Mr. Stallings!" asked Walter.

"Never having seen one, I don't know whether I do or not. Were I to see one I might believe in them," laughed the foreman.

"I saw a ghost once," began Stacy Brown.

"Never mind explaining about it," objected Ned. "We'll take your word for it and let it go at that."

Tad Butler had gotten into a fresh change of clothes after having taken a bath in a wash tub behind the trail wagon. His wounds pained him, and he was sleepy, so the lad turned in shortly after his supper, and was soon sound asleep.

Nothing occurred to disturb the camp that night, and when finally Tad was awakened to take his watch, it seemed as if he had been asleep only a few minutes. However, he sprang up wide awake and ready for the work ahead of him. As usual, he went out with Big-foot. A warm friendship had sprung up between the big cowboy and Tad Butler. They were together much of the time when their duties permitted.

"Is there any truth in that spook story?" asked Tad, as the two rode slowly out to where the herd was bedded down.

Big-foot hesitated.

"You can call it whatever you want to. I only know that things happen to most every outfit that gets within a hundred miles of the place. Why, out at the Ox Bow ranch, they have the worst luck of any cattle place in the state. If it wasn't for the fact that they keep their cows fenced in with wire fences, they wouldn't have a critter on the place."

"But, I don't understand," protested Tad. "I don't seem to get it through my head what it is that causes all the trouble you tell me about."

"No more does anybody else. They just know that hard luck is lying around waiting for them when they get near and that's all they know about it."

"When shall we be near there?" asked Tad Butler.

"We are near enough now. Our troubles have begun already. Herd stampeded. Ponies broke their legs and had to be shot. Nobody knows what else will break loose before we get a hundred miles further on."

"I am anxious to see the place," commented Tad.

"You won't be after you've been there. I worked on a cow herd near the place two years ago."

"Yes?"

"Well, I got out after I'd been pitched off my pony and got a broken leg. That was only one of the things that happened to me, but it was enough. I got out. And here I am running my head right into trouble again. Say, kid!"

"Yes."

"You'd better ask the Herr Professor to let you carry a gun. You'll need it."

"What for--to lay ghosts with?" laughed the boy.

"Well, mebbly something of that sort."

"Don't need it. I guess my fists will lay out any kind of a ghost that I run against. If they won't, no gun will do any good. I don't believe in a boy's carrying a pistol in his pocket. It will get him into more trouble than it will get him out of."

"Well, that's some horseback sense," grunted Big-foot. "I never built up against that idee before, but I reckon it's right. We don't need 'em much either, except to frighten the cows with when they start on a stampede, and----"

"It doesn't seem to stop them," retorted Tad, with a little malicious smile. "It strikes me that a boy without a gun can stop a runaway herd about as quickly as can a cowboy with one."

"Right again, my little pardner. Scored a bull's-eye that time. I guess Big-foot Sanders hasn't any call to be arguing with you."

"We were talking about spooks," the boy reminded him. "I am anxious to see that church. I've wanted to see one all my life----"

"What? A church?"

"No; a spook."

"Oh! Can't promise to show you nothing of the sort. But I'll agree to stack you up against a run of hard luck that will make you wobbly on your legs."

"That will be nothing new, Big-foot. I've had that already."

"Sure thing. That's the beginning of the trouble. As I was saying before, we don't need the guns for any other reason unless it's against cattle rustlers. Sometimes they steal cattle these days, but not so much as they did in the early days of the cattle business."

"Think we will meet any rustlers?" asked Tad, with sudden interest.

"Nary a rustler will tackle this herd. First place, we are not yet in the country where they can work profitably----"

"Where's that?"

"Oh, anywhere where there's mountains for them to hide in. I'll show you where the rustlers used to work, when we get further along on the trail. But, as I was saying, there are no rustlers hereabouts."

"Oh," answered Tad Butler, somewhat regretfully.

"You never mind about hunting trouble. Trouble is coming to this outfit good and plenty, and I reckon a kid like you will be in the middle of it, too. You ain't the kind that goes sneaking for cover when things are lively. I saw that the other night. Stallings is going to write to Boss Miller about the way you stuck to the herd when it ran away."

"What for?"

"I dunno. Guess 'cause he knows it'll make the old man smile. We boys will come in for an extra fiver at the end of the trip, for saving the herd, I reckon."

"That's where you have the best of me," laughed Tad. "No fives for me. I get my pay out of the fun I am having. I think I am overpaid at that. Well, so long, Big-foot," announced the lad as they finally reached the herd.

"So long," answered the cowman, turning his pony off to take the opposite side of the sleeping cattle. In a few moments Tad heard his strident voice singing to the herd again.

The hours passed more quickly than had been the case the last time Tad was on guard, for he had much to think of and to wonder over.

Daybreak had arrived almost before he knew it and the call for breakfast sounded across the plain.

As soon as he had been relieved, Tad Butler galloped back to camp, bright-eyed and full of anticipation, both for the meal and for the ride that was before them that day.

Corn cakes were on the bill of fare that morning and the Pony Riders shouted with glee when they discovered what Pong had prepared for them.

"Bring on the black strap," called Stallings.

Stacy Brown glanced at the foreman suspiciously.

"Why do you want a black strap for breakfast?" he demanded.

"To put on the corn cakes of course, boy," laughed Stallings.

"I've heard of using a black strap to hitch horses with----"

"And to correct unruly boys," added Professor Zeppelin.

"But I never did hear of eating it on corn cakes."

Everybody laughed at Chunky's objection.

"You will eat this strap when you see it," answered Stallings, taking a jug from the hands of the Chinaman and pouring some of its contents over the cakes on his plate.

"What is it!" asked Ned Rector.

"Molasses. It's what we call black strap. Help yourselves. Never mind the gopher there. He never eats black straps for breakfast," the foreman jeered.

"Here, I want some of that," demanded Stacy, half-rising and reaching for the jug. "My, but it's good!" he decided with his mouth full.

"That's all right," answered Walter. "But please do not forget that there are some others in this outfit who like cakes and molasses. Please pass that jug this way."

"Yes, the pony won't be able to carry him to-day if he keeps on for ten minutes more, at the rate he's been going," laughed Ned Rector. "I never did have any sort of use for a glutton."

"Neither did I," added Chunky solemnly, at which both Pony Riders and cowboys roared with laughter.

"Going to be another scorcher," decided the foreman, rising and surveying the skies critically. "We shall not be able to

make very good time, I fear."

"When do you expect to reach the Nueces River?" asked the Professor.

"I had hoped to get there by to-morrow. However, it doesn't look as if we should be able to do so if it comes off so hot."

"Is the Nueces a large river?" asked Walter.

"Sometimes. And it is a lively stream when there happens to be a freshet and both forks are pouring a flood down into it. We will try to bed down near the river and you boys can have some sport swimming. Do all of you swim?"

"Yes," they chorused.

"That's good. The cowpunchers will have a time of it, too."

"I can float," Stacy Brown informed him eagerly.

"So could I if I were as fat as you. I could float all day," retorted Ned Rector. "You couldn't sink if you were to fill your pockets with stones. There is some advantage in being fat, anyway."

"He didn't seem to float the day he fell in among the steers," said one of the cowboys.

"That isn't fair," interrupted Stallings. "The steers put the gopher under, that day. Any of you would have gone down with a mob of cows piling on top of you."

"The river is near the church you were telling me about, isn't it?" inquired Tad of Big-foot in a low tone.

Sanders nodded solemnly.

Tad's eyes sparkled eagerly. He finished his breakfast rather hurriedly and rose from the table. As he walked away he met the horse wrangler bringing the day ponies. The lad quickly saddled his own mount after a lively little struggle and much squealing and bucking from the pony.

Tad was eager to reach the river and get sight of the mysterious church beyond. Yet, he did not dream of the thrilling experiences that were awaiting them all at the very doors of the church of San Miguel.



CHAPTER XIII

CHUNKY ROPES A COWBOY

"Wow! Help! Help!"

The herd had been moving on for several hours, grazing comfortably along the trail, when the sudden yell startled the entire outfit.

The cowboys reined in their ponies and grasped their quirts firmly, fully expecting that another stampede was before them.

Instead, they saw Stacy Brown riding away from the herd, urging his pony to its best speed. Right behind him, with lowered head and elevated tail was a white muley, evidently chasing the lad.

What the boy had done to thus enrage the animal no one seemed to know. However, it was as pretty a race as they had seen thus far on the drive.

"Point him back! He can't hurt you!" shouted the foreman.

Instead of obeying the command, Stacy brought down his quirt on the pony, causing the little animal to leap away across the plain in a straight line.

The cowboys were shouting with laughter at the funny spectacle.

"Somebody get after that steer!" roared the foreman. "The boy never will stop as long as the critter keeps following him, and we'll have the herd following them before we know it."

"I'll go, if you wish," said Tad Butler.

"Then go ahead. Got your rope?"

"Yes."

"It'll be good practice for you."

Tad was off like a shot, leaving a cloud of dust behind him.

"That boy's got the making of a great cowpuncher in him," said the foreman, nodding his head approvingly.

Tad's pony was the swifter of the two, and besides, he was riding on an oblique line toward the runaway outfit.

It was the first opportunity the lad had had to show off his skill as a cowman, for none had seen his pointing of the herd on the night of the stampede. He was burning with impatience to get within roping distance of the steer before they got so far away that the cowmen would be unable to see the performance.

"Pull up and turn him, Chunky," called Tad.

"I can't."

"Why not? Turn in a half circle, then I shall be able to catch up with you sooner."

"Can't. The muley won't stop long enough for me to turn around."

Tad laughed aloud. He now saw that it was to be a race between the steer and his own pony. The odds, however, were in favor of the steer, for Stacy Brown was pacing him at a lively gait, and Tad was still some distance behind.

The latter's pony was straining every muscle to overhaul the muley. Tad finally slipped the lariat from the saddle bow. Swinging the great loop above his head, he sent it squirming through the air. At that instant the muley changed its course a little and the rope missed its mark by several feet. Now it was dragging behind the running pony.

By this time Tad had fallen considerably behind. He took up the race again with stubborn determination.

Coiling the rope as he rode on, he made another throw.

The noose fell fairly over the head of the muley steer, this time. Profiting by a previous experience, the lad took a quick turn about the pommel of the saddle. The pony braced itself, ploughing up the ground with its little hoofs as it did so.

A jolt followed that nearly threw Tad from his saddle. The muley steer's head was suddenly jerked to one side and the next instant the animal lay flat on its back, its heels wildly beating the air.

"Whoop!" shouted Tad in high glee, waving his hat triumphantly to the watching cowpunchers.

The steer was up in a moment, with Tad Butler watching him narrowly.

"Cast your rope over his head, Chunky."

Chunky made a throw and missed.

The angry steer rose to its feet and charged him.

Stacy Brown held the muleys in wholesome awe, though, having no horns, they were the least dangerous of the herd.

"Yeow!" shrieked Chunky, putting spurs to his pony and getting quickly out of harm's way.

The steer was after him at a lively gallop, with Tad Butler and his pony in tow. Tad had prudently shaken out the reins when he saw the animal preparing to take up the chase again.

Waiting until the steer had gotten under full headway, the lad watched his chance, then pulled his pony up sharply.

This time the muley's head was jerked down with such violence that it turned a partial somersault, landing on its back with a force that must have knocked the breath out of it.

Again and again did Tad repeat these tactics, the pony seemingly enjoying the sport fully as much as did the boy himself. After a time he succeeded in getting the unruly beast headed toward the herd.

Once he had done that he let the animal have its head and they sailed back over the trail at a speed that made the cowboys laugh. Tad seemed to be driving the steer, with Stacy Brown riding well up to the animal's flanks, laying on his quirt to hasten its speed, every time he got a chance.

As they neared the herd, Tad in attempting to release the rope from the pommel let it slip through his hands.

The lad was chagrined beyond words.

"Rope him quick, Chunky!" he cried.

Lumpy Bates, observing the mishap, had spurred toward the running steer, intending to cast a lariat over one of the animal's feet and throw it so they could remove the lariat from its neck.

Just as the cowboy wheeled his mount in order to reach one of the steer's hind feet, Chunky clumsily cast his own rope.

Instead of reaching the muley steer, the loop caught the left hind foot of the cowpuncher's galloping pony.

"Cinch it!" called Tad as the loop followed an undulating course through the air.

Chunky did cinch it gleefully about his saddle pommel. At the same time he cinched something else.

The cowpuncher's mount went down, its nose burrowing into the turf. Lumpy was so taken by surprise that he had no time to save himself. He shot over the pony's neck, landing flat on his back several feet in advance of the pony's nose.

The watching cowboys set up a jeering yell.

Lumpy scrambled to his feet, his face purple with rage.

"You tenderfoot!" shrieked Curley Adams. "To let the gopher rope you like a yearling steer!"

Chunky sat on his mount with blanched face, now realizing the enormity of his act.

"I--I didn't mean to do it," he stammered.

At first Lumpy did not know what had caused his pony to fall. But no sooner had he gotten to his feet than he comprehended. With a savage roar he sprang for the fat boy with quirt raised above his head, prepared to bring it down on Stacy Brown the instant he reached him.

The blow would have been bad enough had it been delivered in the ordinary way. The cowboy, however, had gasped the quirt by the small end and was preparing to use the loaded butt on the head of the boy who had been the cause of his fall.

Tad had halted upon observing the accident, laughing uproariously at the spectacle of Lumpy Bates being roped by Stacy Brown.

When he saw the quirt in the hands of the cowpuncher, however, and realized what his purpose was, the laughter died on the lips of Tad Butler.

"Drop that quirt, Lumpy!" he commanded sternly.

Lumpy gave no heed to the command, but broke into a run for Stacy.

Tad, who was a few rods away, put spurs to his pony, at the same time slipping off the lariat from the other side of his saddle.

"The Pinto's going to rope him," gasped the cowboys. All were too far away to be of any assistance. Stallings was with another part of the herd, else he would have jumped in and interfered before Tad's action had become necessary.

Tad's pony leaped forward under the pressure of the spurs. The boy began spinning the noose of the lariat above his head.

The cowboys were watching in breathless suspense.

Tad sent the loop squirming through the air, turning his pony so as to run parallel with the one on which Stacy was sitting, half paralyzed with fear, as he gazed into the rage-contorted face of Lumpy Bates.

As the quirt was descending, Tad's rope slipped over the cowboy's head and under one arm. This time, however, the lad did not cinch the rope over his saddle pommel. He held it firmly in his hand, with a view to letting go after it had served its purpose, having no desire to injure his victim.

Lumpy Bates went over as if he had been bowled over with a club, and before he had realized the meaning of it he had been dragged several feet.

Tad jerked his pony up sharply and slowly rode back to where his victim was desperately struggling to free himself.

"Ye-e-e-ow!" screamed the cowboys, circling about the scene, their ponies on a dead run, discharging their six-shooters into the air, giving cat calls and wild war-whoops in the excess of their joy.

Big-foot Sanders, however, had not joined in their merriment. Instead, he had ridden up within a couple of rods of where Lumpy Bates was lying. Big-foot sat quietly on his pony, awaiting the outcome.

At last Lumpy tore off the lariat's grip and scrambled to his feet. He glared about him to see whence had come this last indignity.

"I did it, Lumpy," announced Tad Butler quietly.

"You----"

"Wait a minute before you tell me what you are going to do," commanded Tad. "Chunky did not mean to throw you. He was trying to rope the steer. He'll tell you he is sorry. But you were going to hit him because you were mad. If you'd struck him with the butt of that quirt you might have killed him. I had to rope you to prevent that. Is there anything you want to say to me now?"

"I'll show you what I've got to say," snarled the cowboy, starting for Tad.

"Stop! Lumpy Bates, if you come another foot nearer to me I'll ride you down!" warned Tad, directing a level gaze at the eyes of his adversary.

The cowboy gazed defiantly at the slender lad for a full moment.

"I'll fix you for that!" he growled, turning away.

At that moment Big-foot Sanders rode in front of him and pulled up his pony.

"What's that ye say?"

"Nothing--I said I'd be even with that cub."

"I reckon ye'd better not try it, Lumpy. The kid's all right. Big-foot Sanders is his friend. And that's the truth. Don't let it get away from you!"

CHAPTER XIV

ON A WILD NIGHT RIDE

"Your fat friend, over there, is making queer noises, Master Tad. Must be having a bad dream."

Big-foot had reached a ponderous hand from his blankets and shaken Tad roughly.

"Mebby the gopher's having a fit. Better find out what ails him."

The rain was falling in torrents. The men were soaked to the skin, but it did not seem to disturb them in the least, judging by the quality of their snores.

Tad listened. Stacy Brown surely was having trouble of some sort. The lad threw off his blankets and ran over to where his companion was lying.

"Chunky's drowning," he exclaimed in a voice full of suppressed excitement.

Big-foot leaped to his feet, hurrying to the spot.

Stacy was lying in a little depression in the ground, a sort of puddle having formed about him, and when Tad reached him the lad had turned over on his face, only the back part of his head showing above the water. He appeared to be struggling, but unable to free himself from his unpleasant position.

They jerked him up choking and coughing, shaking him vigorously to get the water out of him.

"Wha--what's the matter!" stammered the boy.

"Matter enough. Trying to drown yourself?" growled the cowboy.

"Di--did I fall in?"

"Did you fall in? Where do you think you are?"

"I--I thought I fell in the river and I was trying to swim out," answered the boy, with a sheepish grin that caused his rescuers to shake with merriment.

"Guess we'll have to get a life preserver for you," chuckled Big-foot. "You ain't safe to leave around when the dew is falling."

"Dew? Call this dew? This is a flood."

"Go find a high piece of ground, and go to bed. We haven't got time to lie awake watching you. Be careful that you don't step on any of the bunch. They ain't likely to wake up in very good humor a night like this, and besides, Lumpy Bates is sleeping not more'n a rope's length from you. You can imagine what would happen if you stepped on his face to-night."

Chunky shivered slightly. He had had one experience with the ill-natured cowpuncher that day and did not care for another.

"I'll go to bed," he chattered.

"You'd better. What's that?" exclaimed the cowpuncher sharply, pausing in a listening attitude.

"Some one coming," answered Tad. "They seem to be in a hurry."

"Yes, I should say they were. I reckon the trouble is coming, kid."

A horseman dashed up to the camp that lay enshrouded in darkness, save for the lantern that hung at the tail board of the chuck wagon.

"Roll out! Roll out!"

It was the voice of Curley Adams.

The cowpunchers scrambled to their feet with growls of disapproval, demanding to know what the row was about.

"What is it, a stampede?" called Big-foot, hastily rolling his blankets and dumping them in the wagon.

"No; but it may be. The boss wants the whole gang to turn out and help the guard."

"For what?"

"The cows are restless. They're knocking about ready to make a break at any minute."

"What? Haven't they bedded down yet?" asked Big-foot.

"No, nary one of them. And they ain't going to to-night."

"I knew it," announced the cowman, with emphasis.

"Knew what?" asked Tad.

"That we were in for trouble. And it's coming a-running."

By this time the horse wrangler had rounded up the ponies, and the cowboys, grumbling and surly, were hurriedly cinching on saddles. A few moments later the whole party was riding at full gallop toward the herd.

"Where's the gopher?" inquired Big-foot, after they had ridden some distance. "Did we leave him behind?"

"I guess Chunky is asleep," laughed Tad.

"Best place for him. He'd have the herd on the run in no time if he was to come out to-night. Never knew a human being who could stir up so much trouble out of nothing as he can. We're coming up with the herd now. Be careful where you are riding, too."

All was excitement. The cattle were moving restlessly about, prodding each other with their horns, while guards were galloping here and there, talking to them soothingly and whipping into line those that had strayed from the main herd.

Bunches of fifteen or twenty were continually breaking through the lines and starting to run. Quirts and ropes were brought into use to check these individual rushes, the cowmen fearing to use their weapons lest they alarm the herd and bring on a stampede.

"What's the trouble!" demanded Big-foot as they came up with the foreman.

"I don't know. Bad weather, I guess. The evil one seems to have gotten into the critters to-night. Lead your men up to the north end of the line. We will take care of these fellows down here as best we can."

The men galloped quickly to their stations. Then in the driving rain that soaked and chilled them the cowmen began their monotonous songs, interrupted now and then by a shout of command from some one in charge of a squad.

There was no thunder or lightning this time. The men were thankful for that; it needed only some sudden disturbance to start the animals going.

The disturbance came after an hour's work. The cowmen had brought some sort of order out of the chaos and were beginning to breathe easier. Stallings rode up to the head of the herd giving orders that the cattle be pointed in and kept in a circle if possible. To do this he called away all the men at the right save Tad Butler and Big-foot Sanders. As it chanced, they were at the danger spot when the trouble came.

Chunky had been awakened by the disturbance in camp, not having fully aroused himself until after the departure of the men, however. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, grumbling about the weather and expressing his opinion of a cowpuncher's life in no uncertain terms.

Finding that all had left him, the lad decided to get his pony and follow.

"What's the matter, Pong?" he called, observing the Chinaman up and fixing the curtains about his wagon.

"Allee same likee this," answered Pong hopping about in imitation of an animal running away.

"He's crazy," muttered Chunky, going to his pony and swinging himself into the saddle.

Chunky urged the animal along faster and faster. He could hear the cowboys on beyond him though he was able to see only a few yards ahead of him. However, the boy was becoming used to riding in the dark and did not feel the same uncertainty that he had earlier.

"I'll bet they are getting ready to run away," he decided.

In that, Stacy was right. Before he realized where he was he had driven his pony full into the rear ranks of the restless

cattle.

Chunky uttered a yell as he found himself bumping against the sides of the cows and sought to turn his pony about.

The startled steers nearest to him fought desperately to get away from the object that had so suddenly hurled itself against them. Instantly there was a mix-up, with bellowing, plunging steers all about him.

"Help! Help!" shouted the boy.

Now his pony was biting and kicking in an effort to free itself from the animals that were prodding it with horns and buffeting it from side to side.

Only a moment or so of this was necessary to fill the cattle with blind, unreasoning fear. With one common impulse they lunged forward. Those ahead of them felt the impetus of the thrust just as do the cars of a freight train under the sudden jolt of a starting engine.

"What's up?" roared the foreman.

"They're off!" yelled a cowman.

"Head them!"

"Can't. They're started in the center of the herd."

With heads down, the entire herd was now charging straight ahead. Big-foot Sanders and Tad Butler, nearly half a mile ahead, felt the impetus, too.

"Keep your head, boy," warned the cowpuncher. "We are in for a run for our money, now."

It came even as he spoke. With a bellow the cattle started forward at a lively gallop.

"Whoa-oo-ope!" cried Big-foot, riding in front of the plunging leaders.

He might as well have sought to stay the progress of the wind. The leaders swept man and boy aside and dashed on.

"Better keep them straight and not try to stop them, hadn't we?" shouted Tad, with rare generalship.

"That's the trick! Can you hold your side?" roared Big-foot in reply.

"I'll try," answered the boy, riding so close to the leaders that they rubbed sides with his pony. The latter, understanding what was wanted of him, pushed sturdily on holding the cattle with his side, leaning toward them to give the effort the benefit of his entire weight.

One end of Tad's neckerchief had come loose and was streaming straight out behind him, while the broad brim of his sombrero was tipped up by the rushing breeze.

It was a wild and perilous ride. Yet the lad thought nothing of this. His whole thought was centered on the work in hand, that of keeping the cattle headed northward. Tad was unable to tell whether they were going in a straight line or not, but this time he had the big cowman to rely upon.

"Give way a little!" warned Big-foot.

"Right!" answered the lad, pulling his pony to one side, then straightening him again.

"We'll hit the Injun Territory by daylight if we keep on at this gait! You all right?"

"Yes. But I think the herd is spreading out behind me," answered Tad.

"Never mind that. They'll likely follow the leaders."

Off to the rear they could hear the sharp reports of the cowboys' revolvers as they sought to stay the mad rush. Big-foot, however, had thought it best not to resort to shooting tactics. They were making altogether too good headway. If only they were able to keep the cattle headed the way they were going the herd would be none the worse off for the rush and the outfit would be that much further along on the journey. The thundering hoof-beats behind them as the living tide swept down upon them, was not a pleasant sound to hear. Yet Big-foot and Tad were altogether too busy to be greatly disturbed by it.

They had gone on for fully half an hour, after that, with no apparent decrease in the speed of the stampede. The ponies were beginning to show their fatigue. Tad slowed down a little, patting his faithful little animal to encourage it and quiet

its nerves.

As he did so, the boy's attention was again called to the fact that a solid wall of cattle had apparently closed in behind him.

"Big-foot!" he shouted.

"Yes?" answered the cowboy, in a far away voice, for some distance now separated the two.

"It looks to me as if they were closing in on us. What do you think?"

"Wait! I'll see."

The cowboy pulled up a little and listened.

"Right you are. They have spread out in a solid wall."

"What shall we do?"

"Ride! Ride for your life!" came the excited reply.

"Where?"

"To your right. Don't let them catch you or you'll be trampled under their feet. They'll never stop, now, till they get to the river."

"Is it near here?"

"Only a few miles ahead. I can hear it roar now. A flood is coming down it. Hurry!"

Tad had barely heard the last word. Already he had swung his pony about and was galloping with all speed to the right in an effort to get free of the herd before they crowded him and his pony into the turbulent, swollen river.



CHAPTER XV

FORDING A SWOLLEN RIVER

The first light of the morning revealed to Tad Butler the narrow escape he had had. He had barely passed the outer point of the stampeding herd when the cattle rushed by him.

On beyond, less than half a mile away, he made out the river in the faint light. His companion was nowhere to be seen. However, that was not surprising, as the cattle now covered a large area; so large that Tad was unable to see to the other side of the herd.

As the day dawned the cattle began to slacken their speed, and, by the time the leaders reached the river bank, the rush was at an end. Some of the stock plunged into the edge of the stream where they began drinking, while others set to grazing contentedly.

As the light became stronger, the lad made out the figure of Big-foot Sanders approaching him at an easy gallop.

"We did it, didn't we, Big-foot?" exulted Tad Butler.

"That we did, Pinto. And there comes the rest of the bunch now," Big-foot added, pointing to the rear, where others of the cowboys were to be seen riding up.

Stallings was the first to reach them.

"Good job," he grinned. "We are at the river several hours ahead of schedule time. Doesn't look very promising, does it?"

"River's pretty high. Are you thinking of fording it this morning?" asked Big-foot, looking over the swollen stream.

"We might as well. The water will be higher later in the day. We may not be able to get across in several days if we wait too long."

"What do you think started the cattle this time?" asked Tad.

"I don't think. I know what did it."

"Yes?"

"It was that clumsy friend of yours."

"The gopher?" asked Big-foot.

"Allee same, as Pong would say. That boy is the limit. Is he always falling into trouble that way?"

"Yes, or falling off a pony," laughed Tad.

"There he comes, now."

Stacy rode up to them, his face serious and thoughtful.

"Well, young man, what have you to say for yourself?" asked the foreman.

"I was going to ask you, sir, where we are going to get our breakfast?"

Stallings glanced at Tad and Big-foot, with a hopeless expression in his eyes.

"Go ask the Chinaman," he answered rather brusquely.

"I can't. He isn't here."

"Well, that's the answer," laughed the foreman, riding to the river bank and surveying the stream critically.

Tad and Big-foot Sanders joined him almost immediately.

"Think we can make it, chief?"

"I think so, Sanders. One of us had better ride over and back to test the current."

"I'll try it for you," said Tad.

"Go ahead. Sanders, you ride back and tell Lumpy to return to camp and bring on the outfit. They can't reach us until late in the afternoon, as it is. I presume that slant-eyed cook is sitting in his wagon waiting for us to come back. Hurry them along, for we shall be hungry by the time we have finished this job."

Tad promptly spurred his pony into the stream. After wading out a little way he slipped off into the water, hanging by the pommel, swimming with one hand to relieve the pony as much as possible.

The boy made the crossing without mishap, Stallings observing the performance to note how far down the stream the pony would drift. Tad landed some five rods lower down. On the return, the drift was not quite so noticeable.

"We'll make it," announced the foreman. "If you want to dry out, ride back and tell the bunch to crowd the cattle in as rapidly as possible. The faster we can force them in the less they will drift down stream."

"Very well, sir," replied the boy, galloping off to deliver his message.

With a great shouting and much yelling the cowboys began their task of urging the cattle into the river. Not being over-thirsty, it was no easy task to induce the animals to enter the water, but when the leaders finally plunged in the rest followed, fairly piling on top of one another in their efforts to follow the pilots of the herd. Above and below, the cowboys who were not otherwise engaged were swimming the river endeavoring to keep the animals from straying one way or another.

Tad Butler and his companions were aiding in this work, shouting from the pure joy of their experience, and, in an hour's time, the last steer had swum the stream and clambered up the sloping bank on the other side.

"There!" announced the foreman. "That's a bad job well done. I wish the trail wagon were here. A cup of hot coffee wouldn't go bad after an hour in the water."

"After several of them, you mean," added Tad. "You know we have been out in the rain all night."

"Yes, and you did a bang-up piece of work, you and Big-foot. How did you happen to lead the cattle straight ahead, instead of turning the leaders?"

"It was the kid's suggestion," answered Big-foot Sanders. "He's got a man's head on his shoulders that more'n makes up for what the gopher hasn't got."

"It does, indeed," agreed Stallings.

"How are we going to get that trail wagon over when it comes up!" asked one of the men.

"That's what's bothering me," answered the foreman. "Perhaps our young friend here can give us a suggestion. His head is pretty full of ideas," added the foreman, more with an intent to compliment Tad than in the expectation of getting valuable suggestions from him.

"What is your usual method?" asked the boy.

"Well, to tell the truth, I've never had quite such a proposition as this on my hands."

"I guess you will have to float it over."

"It won't float. It'll sink."

"You can protect it from that."

"How?" asked the foreman, now keenly interested.

"First take all the stuff out of it. That will save your equipment if anything happens to the wagon. Ferry the equipment over on the backs of the ponies. If it's too heavy, take over what you can."

"Well, what next?" asked Stallings.

"Get some timbers and construct a float under the wagon."

"Where you going to get timber around these parts?" demanded Big-foot.

"I see plenty of trees near the river. Cut down a few and make a raft of them."

"By George, the kid's hit it!" exclaimed Stallings, clapping his thigh vigorously. "That's exactly what we'll do. But we'll have to wait till the wagon gets here. The axes are all in the wagon."

"Mebby I'm particularly thick to-day, but I'd like to inquire how you expect to get the outfit over, after you have the raft under it?" demanded Shorty Savage. "Answer that, if you can?"

"I think that is up to the foreman," smiled Tad. "Were I doing it I think I should hitch ropes to the tongue and have the ponies on the other side draw the wagon across. Of course, you are liable to have an accident. The ropes may break or the current may tip your wagon over. That's your lookout."

"Now will you be good?" grinned the foreman. "You know all about it, and it would be a good idea to let the thought simmer in your thick head for a while. It may come in handy, some day, when you want to get across a river."

Shorty walked away, none too well pleased.

About three o'clock in the afternoon the wagon hove in sight, and the boys rode out to meet it.

It was decided to camp on the river bank until after they had eaten their evening meal, after which there would still be time to ferry over. While the meal was being cooked Stallings sent some of the men out to cut down four small trees and haul them in.

They grumbled considerably at this, but obeyed orders. Tad went along, at the suggestion of the foreman, to pick out such trees as he thought would best serve their purpose.

The trail wagon's teams were used to haul the logs in and by the time the work was finished a steaming hot supper had been spread by the smiling Chinaman.

Professor Zeppelin had come along with the wagon. He said he was a little stiff from the wetting he had received, but otherwise was all right.

"Now, young man, I'll let you boss the job," announced Stallings as Tad rose from the table. "I give you a free hand."

With a pleased smile, Tad set about constructing his raft. Ned Rector swam the river with the ropes, and fastened them to trees so they would not be carried away by the current. The wagon was then run down into the water by hand, the ropes made fast, and all was ready for the start.

"What are you going to do about the drift?" asked the foreman, who had been interestedly watching the preparations.

"We are going to tie ropes to the two wheels on the upper side. One is to be held on this side of the river, the other from the opposite side. I think the kitchen will ford the river as straight as you could draw a chalk line," announced Tad.

"I guess it will," answered the foreman, with a suggestive glance at Professor Zeppelin.

"All right when you get ready over there," called Tad to the waiting cowboys on the other side.

They had taken firm hold of the ropes with their right hands, their left hands holding to the pommels of their saddles.

"Ready!" came the warning cry from the other side.

"Haul away!" shouted Tad.

The ropes secured to the tongue of the trail wagon straightened, and the wagon began to move out into the stream.

"Be careful. Don't pay out that rope too fast," directed Tad to the man on his side of the stream.

The trail wagon floated out easily on the swiftly moving current. It was greeted by a cheer from the Pony Rider Boys. Those of the cowboys who were not otherwise engaged joined with a will.

"There's that fool Chinaman," growled Stallings, observing the grinning face of Pong peering from the tail of the wagon. "Look out, the dragon will get you, sure, if you fall out!" he warned. "I don't care anything about you, but we can't afford to be without a cook."

"There goes the fool!" cried Big-foot. "Now we sure will starve to death."



As the Wagon Lurched Pong Plunged Overboard.

As the Wagon Lurched Pong Plunged Overboard.

As the wagon lurched in the current, the Chinaman had plunged overboard and disappeared beneath the surface.

CHAPTER XVI

A BRAVE RESCUE

"Save him, somebody! The fool's fallen overboard!" roared the foreman. "I can't let go this rope!"

Tad had not seen the cook take his plunge, so, for the moment, he did not realize what had occurred.

"Who's overboard," young Butler demanded sharply.

"The cook," answered Stallings excitedly. "Can't any of you slow pokes get busy and fish him out?"

"Pong!" cried Tad as the head of the Chinaman appeared on the surface.

Without an instant's hesitation the lad leaped into his saddle.

"Yip!" he shouted to the pony, accentuating his command by a sharp blow with the quirt.

The pony leaped forward.

"Here, he's not up there; he's in the river I tell you!" shouted the foreman.

Tad had driven his mount straight up the bank behind them. He paid no attention to the warning of the foreman, having already mapped out his own plan of action.

Reaching the top of the sloping bank, Tad pulled his pony to the right and dashed along the bluff, headed down the river.

"Watch your lines or you'll have the wagon overboard, too," he called back. "I'll get Pong out."

Big-foot Sanders scratched his head reflectively.

"Ain't the Pinto the original whirlwind, though?" he grinned. "I never did see the like of him, now. He'll get that heathen out while we are standing here trying to make up our minds what to do."

"Yes, but I'm afraid the Chinaman will drown before Tad gets to him," said the foreman, with a shake of his head. "Here, don't let go of this rope while you are staring at the kid. I can't hold it alone."

Tad drove his pony to its utmost speed until he had reached a point some little distance below where the head of the Chinaman had last been seen.

All at once the lad turned sharply, the supple-limbed pony taking the bank in a cat-like leap, landing in the water with a splash.

Tad kept his saddle until the pony's feet no longer touched the bottom. Then he dropped off, clinging to the mane with one hand. The cook was nowhere to be seen, but Tad was sure he had headed him off and was watching the water above him with keen eyes.

"There he is below you!" shouted a voice on shore. "Look out, you'll lose him."

Tad turned at the same instant, giving the pony's neck a sharp slap to indicate that he wanted the animal to turn with him.

The lad saw the Chinaman's head above the water. Evidently the latter was now making a desperate effort to keep it there, for his hands were beating the water frantically.

"Keep your hands and feet going, and hold your breath!" roared Tad. "I'll be----"

Before he could add "there," the lad suddenly discovered that there was something wrong with his pony. It was the latter which was now beating the water and squealing with fear.

One of the animal's hind hoofs raked Tad's leg, pounding it painfully. Tad released his hold of the mane and grasped the rein.

Throwing up its head, uttering a snort, the pony sank out of sight, carrying its master under. Tad quickly let go the reins and kicked himself to the surface.

The pony was gone. What had caused its sudden sinking the lad could not imagine. There was no time to speculate--

not an instant to lose if he were to rescue the drowning cook.

Throwing himself forward, headed downstream, Tad struck out with long, overhand strokes for the Chinaman. Going so much faster than the current, the boy rapidly gained on the victim.

Yet, just as he was almost within reach of Pong, the latter threw up his hands and went down.

Tad dived instantly. The swollen stream was so muddy that he could see nothing below the surface. His groping hands grasped nothing except the muddy water. The lad propelled himself to the surface, shaking the water from his eyes.

There before him he saw the long, yellow arms of the Chinaman protruding above the surface of the river. This time, Tad was determined that the cook should not escape him. Tad made a long, curving dive not unlike that of a porpoise.

This time the lad's hands reached the drowning man. The long, yellow arms twined themselves about the boy, and Tad felt himself going down.

With rare presence of mind the boy held his breath, making no effort to wrench himself free from the Chinaman's grip. He knew it would be effort wasted, and, besides, he preferred to save his strength until they reached the surface once more.

Half a dozen cowpunchers had plunged their ponies into the river, and were swimming toward the spot where Tad had been seen to go down, while the foreman was shouting frantic orders at them. The wagon had been ferried to the other side, and Stallings had run to his pony, on which he was now dashing madly along the river bank.

"Look out that you don't run them down!" he roared. "Keep your wits about you!"

"They're both down, already!" shouted a cowboy in reply.

"We'll lose the whole outfit at this rate," growled another. Yet, not a man was there, unless perhaps it may have been Lumpy Bates, who would not have risked his own life freely to save that of the plucky lad.

After going down a few feet, Tad began treading water with all his might. This checked their downward course and in a second or so he had the satisfaction of realizing that they were slowly rising. The current, however, was forcing them up at an angle.

This, to a certain extent, worked to the boy's advantage, for the Chinaman was underneath him, thus giving Tad more freedom than had their positions been reversed.

"There they are!" cried Big-foot Sanders as the Chinaman and his would-be rescuer popped into sight.

"Go after them!" commanded Stallings.

Urging their ponies forward by beating them with their quirts, the cowboys made desperate efforts to reach the two.

Tad managed to free one arm which he held above his head.

"The rope! He wants the rope! Rope him, you idiots!" bellowed the foreman.

Big-foot made a cast. However, from his position in the water, he could not make an accurate throw and the rope fell short.

Tad saw it. He was struggling furiously now, ducking and parrying the sweep of that long, yellow arm, with which Pong sought to grasp him.

A quick eddy caught the pair and swept them out into the center of the stream, around a bend where they were caught by the full force of the current. This left their pursuers yards and yards to the rear.

Tad saw that they would both drown, if he did not resort to desperate measures. Drawing back his arm, the lad drove a blow straight at Pong's head, but a swirl of the current destroyed the boy's aim and his fist barely grazed the cheek of the Chinaman.

Quick as a flash, Tad Butler launched another blow. This time the Chinaman's head was jolted backwards, Tad's fist having landed squarely on the point of the fellow's jaw.

But Pong was still struggling, and the lad completed his work by delivering another blow in the same place.

"I hope I haven't hurt him," gasped the boy.

Tad threw himself over on his back, breathing heavily and well-nigh exhausted. He kept a firm grip on the cook,

however, supporting and keeping the latter's head above water by resting the Chinaman's neck on his arm as they floated with the current.

In the meantime, Stallings was dashing along the bank roaring out his orders to the cowboys, calling them ashore and driving them in further down. Yet, each time it seemed as though the floating pair drifted farther and farther away.

But Tad Butler was still cool. Now that he was getting his strength back, he began slowly to kick himself in toward shore, aiding in the process by long windmill strokes of his free arm.

He did not make the mistake of heading directly for the shore, but sought to make it by a long tack, moving half with the current and half against it. The lad had made up his mind that the cowboys would never reach them and that what was to be done must be done by himself.

"Can you make it?" called Stallings.

"Yes. But have some one--on the other side--toss me a rope--as soon as possible. I don't know--whether Pong--is done for--or not," answered the boy in short breaths.

Stallings plunged his pony into the current and swam for the other side. Reaching there, he galloped at full speed toward the point for which Tad seemed to be aiming.

The foreman rode into the water until it was up to his saddle and where the pony was obliged to hold its head high to avoid drowning.

There the foreman waited until the lad had gotten within roping distance.

"Turn in a little," directed Stallings. "You'll hit that eddy and land out in the middle, if you don't."

A moment more and the foreman's lariat slipped away from the circle it had formed above his head.

Tad held an arm aloft, and the loop dropped neatly over it. Stallings pulled it and Tad grasped the rope after the loop had tightened about his arm.

"Haul away," he directed.

The foreman turned his pony about and slowly towed cook and boy ashore.

The cowboys, observing that Tad was being hauled in, headed for the shore. Reaching it, they put spurs to their ponies and came down to the scene at a smashing gait.

Leaping off, they sprang into the water, picking up Tad and the Chinaman and staggering ashore with them.

The lad was pale and shivering. They laid him down on the bank. But Tad quickly pulled himself to his feet.

"I must look after Pong," he said.

"You let the heathen alone," growled Big-foot Sanders. "Us tenderfeet'll look after him. That's what we are, a bunch of rank tenderfeet. You're the only seasoned, all around, dyed-in-the-wool, genuine cowpuncher in the whole outfit. That's the truth."

Tad smiled as he hurried to where the foreman was working over the unconscious cook.

"Is he dead?" asked the lad, apprehensively.

"Dead? Huh!" grunted Curley Adams. "Heathen Chinese don't die as easy as that."

After a few minutes the cook went off into a paroxysm of choking and coughing. Then he opened his eyes.

Chunky Brown was standing near, blinking down wisely into the yellow face of Pong.

"You fell in, didn't you?" he asked solemnly.

"Allee samee," grinned the yellow man, weakly.



CHAPTER XVII

MAKING NEW FRIENDS

Professor Zeppelin, fully as wet as the others, met the returning outfit. Everybody was wet. It seemed to have become their normal condition.

"Did you get the wagon over?" asked Tad.

"You bet," replied the foreman. "As soon as we get all the water shook out of that heathen we'll set him to making coffee for the outfit. It's too near dark now to do any more work; and, besides, I guess the cattle are bedded down for the night. I think they're ready for a night's rest along with ourselves. What happened to that pony?"

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Tad. "That was too bad, wasn't it?"

"Cramps I guess," suggested Big-foot. "They have been known to have 'em in the water. That water must have had an iceberg in it somewhere up the state. Never saw such all-fired cold water in my life. Whew!"

"That's one pony more we've got to buy, that's all. But I don't care. I'd rather lose the whole bunch of them than have anything happen to the Pinto," announced the foreman.

"Or the cook," added Tad, with a smile.

"Yes; it's a very serious matter for an outfit of this kind to lose its cook. We could get along without a foreman very well, but not without a cook."

"Especially when you have a bunch of hungry boys with you. What about the new ponies?"

"I'll ride over to Colonel McClure's ranch in the morning and see what we can do. You may go with me if you wish."

"I should like to very much. Is that where you expect to get the other herd of cattle as well?"

"Yes. Better take an earlier trick on guard to-night, for we shall start right after breakfast in the morning."

"Very well," replied Tad. "Guess I'll get my coffee now."

Big-foot Sanders was already helping himself to the steaming beverage, when Tad reached the chuck wagon.

"Well, kid, what about it?" greeted the big cowman.

"What about what?"

"Trouble."

Tad smiled broadly.

"There does seem to be plenty of it."

"And plenty more coming. You'll see more fun before we are clear of this part of the country."

"I don't very well see how we can have much more of it. I should imagine we have had our share."

"Wait. We'll be here three or four days yet and mebbly more," warned the cowboy.

Tad went out with the second guard that night. Contrary to the expectations of Big-foot Sanders and some others, the night passed without incident, the next morning dawning bright and beautiful.

For some reason the foreman decided, at the last moment, that he would not go to the Ox Bow ranch. Instead, he instructed Big-foot Sanders to take three of the men with him and pick out what ponies they needed from Colonel McClure's stock. They were to bring the animals out to camp where the boys would break them in.

Tad set out with them, after a hurried breakfast, leaving his young companions to amuse themselves as best they could.

"How far do we have to ride, Big-foot?" asked the lad after they were in their saddles.

"Mile or two, I guess. It's been a long time since I was through these parts. There's that church I've been telling you about."

"Where?"

"There, near the bedding-down ground. Seems as though the boss might have put the cows further away from the place."

Tad surveyed the structure with keen interest. The white walls of the old adobe church reflected back the morning light in a whitish glare. About the place he observed a rank growth of weeds and evil cacti, the only touch of life to be seen being the birds that were perched on its crumbling ridges, gayly piping their morning songs.

"It looks deserted."

"I reckon it is," answered Big-foot. "Anyway, it ought to be. Ain't fit for human beings to roost in."

"Humph! I don't believe there is anything spooky about that building. I'm going to investigate, the first time I get the chance. Have we time to stop this morning?"

"No; we'll have to be getting along. The ponies we are after will have to be hobbled and got back to camp somehow. I expect we'll have a merry circus with them. If we get back in time for supper we'll be lucky."

"That will be fun," exulted Tad. "Mr. Stallings promised me I might break one of them. My pony having been drowned, I should like to break a fresh one for myself."

"And break your neck at the same time. I know you've got the sand, but you let that job out, kid. You don't know them bronchos."

"I thought you said I was no longer a tenderfoot," laughed Tad.

"Sure thing, but this is different."

"I'll chance it. You show me the pony I cannot ride, and I will confess that I am a tenderfoot."

Their arrival at the Ox Bow ranch was the signal for all the dogs on the place to try out their lungs, whereat a dozen cowboys appeared to learn the cause of the uproar. The McClure house stood a little back, nestling under a bluff covered with scant verdure, but well screened from the biting northers of the Texas winter. Further to the south were the ranch buildings, corrals, the cook house and a log cabin, outside of which hung any number of bridles and saddles, some of which the ranchers were mending and polishing when Stalling's men arrived on the scene.

Big-foot introduced himself and was received with many a shout and handshake. Bill Blake, the foreman of the ranch after greeting the new arrival, turned inquiringly to Tad Butler, who had dismounted.

"I didn't know you used kids in your business, Big-foot," he grinned.

Big-foot flushed under the imputation.

"Mebby you call him a kid, but if you'd see the lad work you'd change your mind mighty quick," answered the big cowman, with a trace of irritation in his voice. He explained to Blake what the boy was doing with the outfit, at the same time relating some of the things that the slender, freckle-faced boy from the East had accomplished.

"Shake, Pinto," exclaimed Bill Blake cordially. "I reckon Mr. McClure would like to talk with you. Big-foot and I have got some business over in the ranch house, you see," smiled the foreman.

"I see," replied Tad, though not wholly sure whether he did or not.

"He's over there talking with his boss wrangler now. Come along and I'll give you a first-class knock-down to him."

Tad found the ranch owner to be a man of refinement and kindly nature, yet whose keen, quizzical eyes seemed to take the lad in from head to foot in one comprehensive glance.

"So you are learning the business, eh? That's right, my lad. That's the way to go about it, and there's no place like a drive to learn it, for that's where a man meets about every experience that comes in the life of a cowman."

Tad explained about the Pony Riders, and that their trip was in the nature of a pleasure jaunt, they being accompanied by Walter Perkins's instructor and that they were with the outfit for a brief trip only.

Mr. McClure became interested at once.

"I should like to hear more about your experiences," he said. "Won't you come up to the house with me, while your man talks horse with my foreman?"

Tad flushed slightly as he glanced down over his own rough, dust-covered clothes.

"I--I am afraid I am not fit, sir."

"Tut, tut. We ranchers learn to take a man for what he is worth, not for what he has on. You have been riding. Naturally you would not be expected to appear in broadcloth. No more do we expect you to. Had I a son, I should feel far better satisfied to see him as you stand before me now, than in the finest of clothes. Come, I want you to meet my family."

Tad, somewhat reluctantly, followed the rancher to his house. Much to the lad's discomfiture, he was ushered into the drawing-room of the first southern home he had ever entered.

"Be seated, sir. I will call my daughters. We have so few guests here that the girls seldom see anyone during the time they are home from school."

Mr. McClure left the room, and Tad, after choosing a chair that he considered least liable to be soiled by his dusty clothes, sat down, gazing about him curiously. He found himself in a room that was by far the handsomest he had ever seen, while from the walls a long line of family ancestors looked down at him from their gilt frames.

Tad had found time for only a brief glance about him, when the sound of voices attracted his attention. At first he was unable to decide whence the voices came. They seemed to be in the room with him, yet there was no one there save himself.

Turning about he discovered that a curtained doorway led directly into another room, and that it was from the adjoining room that the sound had come.

"You say Ruth is bad again to-day, Margaret?"

"No, mother, I would not say that exactly. Yet she does not seem to be quite herself, and I thought it best to tell you. I feared that perhaps she was going to have one of her old attacks."

"Say nothing to her of your suspicions. The last one passed over, I think largely because we appeared to treat her mood lightly. Poor child, she has never ceased to grieve for the man whom her parents refused to permit her to marry. I think your Aunt Jane made a grievous mistake. I told her so plainly when she brought Ruth here to us, hoping she might forget her youthful love affair."

Tad Butler's cheeks burned.

That he had unwittingly played eavesdropper troubled him not a little. The boy rose and walking to a window on the further side of the room, stood with hat crumpled in both hands behind him, gazing out.

The voices ceased. Yet a moment later Tad started and turned sharply.

"Well, young man, what are you doing here?"

Before him he saw a woman just short of middle age. He inferred at once that she was the elder of the two women whom he had heard speaking behind the curtain.

"I am waiting for Mr. McClure," answered Tad, bowing politely, his face flushing under its tan.

"Does he know that you are here?" she asked in a milder tone.

"Oh, yes. He asked me to wait here until he returned."

"Pardon me, I---"

"Ah, here you are, my dear. I have been looking for you. I wish you to meet Master Thaddeus Butler, who, with three companions and a tutor, is crossing the state with the Miller herd. It is the most unique vacation in these days. Master Butler, this is Mrs. McClure. My daughters will join us in a moment."

Mrs. McClure shook hands cordially with their young guest.

"Welcome to Ox Bow," she smiled. "At first, as your back was turned to me, I took you for one of the men. Instantly you faced me I saw the mistake I had made. Won't you be seated?"

Under her cordial manner Tad Butler was soon at his ease. Almost before he was aware of the fact Mrs. McClure had drawn from him the main facts relating to the journeyings of the Pony Riders.

Mrs. McClure's two daughters, Sadie and Margaret, entered the room soon afterwards, Tad being presented to them.

Margaret, the elder of the two, was a fair-haired girl of perhaps nineteen years, while her sister Sadie, who was darker, Tad judged to be about his own age.

Both girls shook hands smilingly with their guest.

"I hope you will pardon me for appearing in such a disreputable condition," begged the lad. "I really am not fit to be seen."

His quaint way of putting it brought forth a general laugh.

"You need make no apology. We are all ranchers here. Even my daughters and my niece ride, and sometimes accompany the foreman on drives from one part of the ranch to another. As for my niece, though brought up in the East, she is a born cattle woman. There is hardly a cowman on the place who can ride better than she."

"Your man tells us that you are the best horseman in your outfit," said Mr. McClure.

"I don't think I quite deserve that compliment, sir," answered Tad. "But I am very fond of horses. I find, by kind treatment, one can do almost anything with them."

"My idea exactly," nodded Mr. McClure approvingly. "The cowpuncher doesn't look at it that way, however. He wouldn't feel at home on a horse that didn't break the monotony by bucking now and then. Did you ever ride a buckler?"

"Once. I expect to break one of the animals I understand we are to get from you."

His host whistled softly.

"You have a large contract on hand, young man. The ponies I am turning off are the worst specimens we ever had on the ranch. Some of them never had a bridle on, for the very good reason that no one ever has been able to get close enough to them to put bridles on. I hope you will not be foolish enough to try to break any of that stock."

"Oh, we'll rope them and get a headstall on, anyway. The rest will come along all right, I think," smiled Tad.

"Ah, my niece, Miss Brayton!" exclaimed the rancher, introducing a young woman who had just entered the room.

"With the Miller outfit?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Tad.

"Who is your foreman?"

"Stallings--Bob Stallings."

Tad thought Miss Brayton one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Yet there was something about her that affected him strangely. Perhaps it was her abrupt manner of speaking. At any rate the lad experienced a sense of uneasiness the moment she entered the room. He did not stop to ask himself why. Tad merely knew that this was true. Miss Brayton had little to say, but her quietness was more than atoned for by the vivacity of Sadie and Margaret.

As Tad was taking his leave the entire family accompanied him out into the yard.

"If your duties will permit we should like to have you and your companions dine with us to-morrow evening," said Colonel McClure.

"Yes; by all means," added Mrs. McClure.

"Yes, Mr. Butler, we should love to have you," added Sadie.

"Besides, we want to meet your friends," said Margaret.

"And I am sure we should enjoy coming. It seems almost an imposition for four of us boys to camp out in your dining room at the same time," laughed Tad.

"I assure you it will be doing us a favor," protested the rancher. "You will bring your Professor, also. We'll have a real family party."

Tad somewhat reluctantly agreed to bring his companions, though he disliked the idea of going to so fine a place for dinner in their rough, weather-beaten clothing.

The boy bade them all good-bye and strode off toward the corral, where the ponies were being roped preparatory to

being taken over to the Miller herd.

"Oh, Mr. Butler!"

Tad wheeled sharply. Ruth Brayton was hurrying toward him.

The lad lifted his hat courteously and awaited the young woman's approach.

"Yes, Miss Brayton."

"Tell me again who your foreman is."

"Bob Stallings."

"Stallings--Stallings. Where have I heard that name before?" mused the girl, staring at Tad with vacant eyes.

"Are you sure it isn't Hamilton--Robert Hamilton?"

"Quite sure," smiled the lad.

"Do you know a cowboy or foreman by that name?"

"No, I never heard the name before."

Miss Brayton turned abruptly and hurried away. Tad heard her repeating the name of his foreman as she walked swiftly toward the ranch house.



CHAPTER XVIII

BREAKING IN THE BRONCHOS

"My, but that was a job," laughed Tad, after they had reached camp again, with three wild bronchos in tow. They had staked the new ponies down on the plain to think matters over while the cowboys sat down to their noon meal.

"They sure are a bad lot," agreed Big-foot Sanders. "Never seen worse ones. See that fellow, over there, don't even mind the pinch of that hackmore bridle. He's the ugliest brute in the bunch."

"That's the one I'm going to break," decided Tad Butler, his eyes glowing as he observed the wild pitching and snorting of the staked animal.

The pony was running the length of his rope at full speed, coming to a sudden halt when he reached its end, with heels high in the air and head doubled up under him on the ground.

It seemed to the lad like unnecessarily harsh treatment, yet he knew full well the quality of the temper of these animals of the plains.

"I'm afraid he'll break his neck," objected Tad.

"Let him," snapped the foreman. "There's more where he came from."

"By the way," said Tad, speaking to the Pony Riders. "I have an invitation for you fellows. I had forgotten it in the excitement of getting the new ponies to camp."

"Where to!" asked Ned Rector indifferently.

"To take dinner at the home of Colonel McClure."

"That will be fine," glowed Walter.

"But the question is, what are we going to wear?" laughed Tad. "We don't look very beautiful for a drawing room."

"Drawing room?" inquired Ned Rector, with interest. "Did I hear you say drawing room?"

"Yes."

"Huh! There isn't one within a thousand miles of us."

"You will think differently when you see the one at the ranch house."

"Did--did the colonel say what we were going to have to eat?" asked Stacy Brown, in all seriousness.

His question provoked a loud laugh from cowboys and Pony Riders.

"No. Naturally, I didn't ask him. There are some very nice girls at the ranch, too."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Ned. "Will wonders never cease? I'll believe I am not dreaming when I see all this with my own two eyes."

"Yes, Colonel McClure has two daughters, and besides these, there is a niece from the East visiting them. She is considerably older than the daughters, but a very beautiful woman." Tad paused thoughtfully for a moment. "Professor, I presume you will have no objection to our accepting Colonel McClure's invitation? You are invited to join us."

"Not at all, young gentlemen. But perhaps I had better not intrude----"

"Please go," urged Tad.

"Sure. He'll go. You will, won't you, Professor?" demanded Ned.

"Of course, if you really wish me to----" smiled Professor Zeppelin good-naturedly.

"Of course we do," chorused the boys.

"Very well, I will think it over. I'm afraid, however, that I do not look altogether presentable."

"No more do we," answered Walter Perkins. "Tad probably told them we did not."

Tad nodded.

"They refused to accept that excuse. So I told them we would come."

The boys were full of anticipation for this promised break in the monotony of their living; and, besides, they looked forward keenly to meeting the young women about whom their companion had told them.

After the meal had been finished Tad asked when they were to begin breaking the new stock.

Stallings looked over the ponies critically.

"I guess we'll let them stay where they are, for an hour or so yet. It will help to break their spirit. Still think you can break one of them in?"

"I am sure of it," answered Tad Butler confidently.

"You shall have the chance. However, I shall not permit you to saddle him. Some of the cowpunchers, who are used to that, had better do it for you the first time. Unless one knows these little brutes he is liable to be kicked to death."

"I am not afraid."

"No, that is the danger of it. Neither is the pony afraid--that is, not until he is blindfolded."

About the middle of the afternoon the foreman announced that they would begin the breaking. The cowmen uttered a shout, for the process promised them much boisterous fun.

"Is the gopher going to break one of the bronchos?" asked Lumpy Bates.

"No, but the Pinto is," replied Curley Adams.

"He'll want to go home right away if he tries it, I reckon," jeered Lumpy.

"Don't you be too sure about that," retorted Curley. "That kid's got the stuff in him. I've been watching him right along. None of them lads is tenderfeet, unless it's the gopher, and he isn't half as bad as he looks."

By this time the foreman had taken hold of the rope that held the most violent of the ponies, and was slowly shortening upon it. As he neared the pony's head a cowboy began whipping a blanket over its back.

While the animal was plunging and kicking, Stallings gripped him by the bridle, after which there was a lively struggle, and in a moment more a broad handkerchief had been tied over the pony's eyes.

"What's that for! Is he going to play blind man's buff?" demanded Chunky.

"Huh! Get out!" growled Big-foot.

"If he does, you'll be it," jeered Ned Rector.

At last the animal crouched down trembling. He had never passed through an experience like that before and could not understand it.

Tad Butler standing near, was observing the operation with keenly inquiring eyes.

All at once the little animal leaped clear of the foreman's grip, its blinder came off and it launched into a series of wild bucks and grunts. The air seemed full of flying hoofs, and for the moment there was a lively scattering of cowpunchers and Pony Riders.

Once more, and with great patience, the foreman went all over the proceeding again. This time the foreman got one hand on the animal's nose and the other in his mane.

All at once something happened. A forty-pound saddle was thrown, not dropped, on the back of the unsuspecting pony.

The broncho's back arched like a bow, and the saddle went skyward. Stacy Brown happened to be in the way of it as it descended, so that boy and saddle went down together in a yelling heap.

The cowpunchers howled with delight as Chunky, covered with dust, wiping the sand from his eyes, staggered angrily to his feet.

"Did he kick me?" he demanded.

"With his back, yes," chuckled Shorty Savage.

Again and again the saddle was shot into the air the instant it touched the pony's back. It was back in place in no time, however. After a time the broncho paused, as if to devise some new method of getting rid of the hated thing.

As he did so, Big-foot Sanders cautiously poked a stick under the animal, pulling the girth toward him. A moment more and he had slipped it through a large buckle, and, with a jerk, made the girth fast.

Again the bucking began, but more violently than before.

The saddle held, though it slipped to one side a little.

"I've got him now," cried Stallings. "The instant he lets up, catch that flank girth and make fast."

"Right," answered Big-foot.

It was accomplished almost before the boys realized it.

Walter and his companions set up a shout.

The pony stood panting, head down, legs braced apart. The blinder had been torn from his eyes. He was waiting for the next move.

"Are you ready for me now?" asked Tad Butler quietly.

The foreman turned his head, glancing at Tad questioningly.

"Think you can stand it?"

"I can't any more than fall off."

Stallings nodded.

Tad slipped to the pony's side. Cautiously placing his left foot in the stirrups, he suddenly flung himself into the saddle.

The next instant Tad Butler was flying through the air over the pony's head.

CHAPTER XIX

GRIT WINS THE BATTLE

The lad appeared to strike the ground head-on. Fortunately, the spot where he landed was covered with soft sand.

"Are you hurt?" asked Big-foot, running to the boy and reaching out to assist him.

"I guess not," answered Tad, rubbing the sand from his eyes and blinking vigorously.

The skin had been scraped from his face in spots where the coarse sand had ground its way through. His hair was filled with the dirt of the plain, and his clothes were torn.

But Tad Butler, nothing daunted, smiled as he pulled himself to his feet.

"You better let that job out. You can't ride that critter!"

"I'll ride him--if he kills me!" answered the boy, his jaws setting stubbornly.

Tad hitched his belt tighter before making any move to approach the pony, which Stallings was now holding by main force. While doing so, the lad watched the animal's buckings observantly.

"What--what happened?" demanded Stallings.

"Foot slipped out of the stirrup."

"Think you can make it?"

"I'll try it, if you have the time to spare."

"It takes time to break a bronch. Don't you worry about that. I don't want you to be breaking your neck, however."

"My advice is that you keep off that animal," declared Professor Zepplin. "You cannot manage him; that is plain."

"Please do not say that, Professor. I must ride him now. You wouldn't have me be a coward, would you?"

Stallings, realizing the boy's position, nodded slightly to the Professor.

"Very well, if Mr. Stallings thinks it is safe," agreed Professor Zepplin reluctantly.

Tad's face lighted up with a satisfied smile.

"Whoa, boy," he soothed, patting the animal gently on the neck.

The pony's back arched and its heels shot up into the air again. Once more Tad petted him.

"No use," said the foreman. "The iron hand is the only thing that will break this cayuse. Don't know enough to know when he's well off. Got your spurs on?"

"Yes."

"Then drive them in when you get well seated."

Tad shook his head.

"I do not think that will be necessary. Guess he'll go fast enough without urging him with the rowels," answered the boy, backing away to wait until the pony had bounced itself into a position where another effort to mount him would be possible.

"Will you please coil up the stake rope and fasten it to the horn, Mr. Stallings?" asked Tad. "I don't want to get tangled up with that thing."

"Yes, if you are sure you can stick on him."

"Leave that to me. I know his tricks now."

Cautiously the rope was coiled and made fast to the saddle horn.

"I'm coming," said Tad in a quiet, tense voice.

"Ready," answered the foreman, with equal quietness.

The lad darted forward, running on his toes, his eyes fixed on the saddle.

Tad gave no heed to the pony. It was that heavy bobbing saddle that he must safely make before the pony itself would enter into his considerations.

Lightly touching the saddle, he bounded into it, at the same time shoving both feet forward. Fortunately his shoes slipped into the big, boxed stirrups, and the rein which lay over the pommel ready for him was quickly gathered up.

Stallings leaped from the animal's head and the cowpunchers made a quick sprint to remove themselves from the danger zone.

They were none too soon.

The broncho at last realized that his head was free. His sides, however, were being gripped by a muscular pair of legs, and his head was suddenly jerked up by a sharp tug at the rein.

"Ye-e-e-o-w!" greeted the cowboys in their long-drawn, piercing cry.

"Yip!" answered Tad, though more to the pony than in answer to them.

Down went the pony's head between his forward legs, his hind hoofs beating a tattoo in the air.

The feet came down as suddenly as they had gone up. Instantly the little animal began a series of stiff-legged leaps into the air, his curving back making it a very uncomfortable place to sit on.

Tad's head was jerked back and forth until it seemed as though his neck would be broken.

"Look out for the side jump!" warned the foreman.

It came almost instantly, and with a quickness that nearly unhorsed the plucky lad.

As it was, the swift leap to the right threw Tad half way over on the beast's left side. Fortunately, the lad gripped the pommel with his right hand as he felt himself going, and little by little he pulled himself once more to an upright posture.

All at once the animal took a leap into the air, coming down headed in the opposite direction.

Tad's head swam. He no longer heard the shouts of encouragement from the cowpunchers. He was clinging desperately to his insecure seat, with legs pressed tightly against the pony's sides. As yet he had not seen fit to use the rowels.

There came a pause which was almost as disconcerting as had been the previous rapid movements.

"He's going to throw himself! Don't get caught under him!" bellowed Big-foot.

Tad was thankful for the suggestion, for he was not looking for that move at the moment.

The pony struck the ground on its left side with a bump that made the animal grunt. Tad, however, forewarned, had freed his left foot from the stirrup and was standing easily over his fallen mount, eyes fixed on the beast's ears, ready to resume his position at the first sign of a quiver of those ears.

Like a flash the animal was on its feet again, but with Tad riding in the saddle, a satisfied smile on his face. Once more the awful, nerve-racking bucking began. It did not seem as if a human being could survive that series of violent antics, and least of all a mere boy.

All at once the animal came up on its hind legs.

Tad knew instinctively what it meant. He did not need the warning cry of the cowpunchers to tell him what the pony was about to do. Over went the broncho on its back, rolling to its side quickly.

Tad was on the ground beside it, standing in a half-crouching position, with one foot on the saddle horn.

He had jerked the broncho's head clear of the ground with a strong tug on the reins, making the animal helpless to rise until the lad was ready for him to do so.

The cowboys uttered a yell of triumph.

"Great! Great!" approved Bob Stallings.

"Tenderfoot, eh?" jeered Big-foot Sanders. "Hooray for the Pinto!"

Tad's companions gave a shrill cheer.

"Wait. He ain't out of the woods yet," growled Lumpy Bates.

"Think you could do it better, hey?" snapped Curley Adams. "Why, that cayuse would shake the blooming neck off you if you were in that saddle. I never did see such a whirlwind."

"Got springs in his feet, I reckon," grinned Big-foot.

"Don't let his head down till you're ready for the get-away," cautioned the foreman.

Tad suddenly allowed the head to touch the ground, after the pony had lain pinned at his feet, breathing hard for a full minute.

Boy and mount were in the air in a twinkling. As they went up, Ted brought down his quirt with all his strength. It was time the ugly animal was taught that its enemy could strike a blow for himself.

With a quick pause, as if in surprise, the beast shot its head back to fasten its teeth in the leg of the rider. Tad had jerked his leg away as he saw the movement, with the result that only part of his leggin came away between the teeth of the savage animal.

Crack!

Down came the quirt again.

The broncho's head straightened out before him with amazing quickness. He was beginning to fear as well as hate the human being who so persistently sat his back and tortured him.

The pony sprang into the air.

"They're off!" shouted the cowboys.

With amazing quickness the animal lunged ahead, paused suddenly, then shot across the plain in a series of leaps and twists.

Tad shook out the rein, at the same time giving a gentle pressure to the rowels of his spurs.

Maddened almost beyond endurance, the pony started at a furious pace, not pausing until more than a mile had been covered. When he did bring up it was with disconcerting suddenness.

"Whoa, boy!" soothed Tad, patting the little animal on the neck. Again the wide-open mouth reached for the lad's left leg. But this time Tad pressed in the spurs on the right side. The pony tried to bite that way, whereat its rider spurred it on the left side.

This was continued until, at least, in sheer desperation, the animal started again to run. He found that he was not interfered with in this effort. However, when he sought to unseat his rider by brushing against the trunk of a large tree, he again felt the sting of the quirt on his flank.

Gradually Tad now began to work the animal around. After a time he succeeded in doing this, and was soon headed for camp. They bore down, at great speed, to where the cowboys were swinging their hats and setting up a shout that carried far over the plain.

Tad's face was flushed with pride. Yet he did not allow himself for an instant to forget his work. The lad's whole attention was centered on the pony under him. He was determined to make a grand finish that, while exhibiting his horsemanship, would at the same time give the pony a lesson not soon to be forgotten.

"You've got him!" cried Ned Rector as Tad approached, now at a gallop, the animal's ears lying back angrily.

"Don't be too sure," answered Big-foot. "See them ears? That means more trouble."

It came almost before the words were out of the cowpuncher's mouth.

The broncho stiffened, its hoofs ploughing little trails in the soft dirt of the plain as it skidded to a stop. The jolt might have unhorsed Tad Butler had he not been expecting it from some indications that he read in the animal's actions.

Suddenly settling back on its haunches, the broncho rolled over on its side. Tad, with a grin, stepped off a few paces, taking with him, however, the coil of rope, one end of which was still fastened around the beast's neck.

With a snort and a bound, realizing that it was free at last, the little animal leaped to its feet and darted away.

Tad moved swiftly to the right, so as not to get a tug on the rope over the back of the pony.

The coil was running out over his hands like a thing of life. Grasping the end firmly, the lad shook out the rest of the rope, leaning back until it was almost taut.

By this time the animal was running almost at right angles to him.

Tad gave the rope a quick rolling motion just as it was being drawn taut. The result was as surprising as it was sudden. The animal's four feet were snipped from under it neatly, sending the broncho to earth with a disheartening bump.



Tad Gave the Rope a Quick, Rolling Motion.

Tad Gave the Rope a Quick, Rolling Motion.

Without giving it a chance to rise, Tad sprang upon it, and, when the pony rose, Tad Butler was sitting proudly in the saddle.

The little beast's head went down. Its proud spirit had been broken by a boy who knew the ways of the stubborn animal.

A great shout of approval went up from cowpunchers and Pony Riders. They had never seen a breaking done more skillfully.

Tad's gloved hand patted the neck of the subdued animal affectionately.

"I'm sorry I had to be rough with you, old boy, but you shall have a lump of sugar. We're going to be great friends, now, I know."



CHAPTER XX

DINNER AT THE OX BOW

"Welcome to the Ox Bow, young gentlemen," greeted Colonel McClure.

The rancher and his wife were waiting at the lower end of the lawn as the Pony Rider Boys, accompanied by Professor Zepplin, rode up on the following afternoon.

The lads wore their regulation plainsman's clothes, but for this occasion coats had been put on and hair combed, each desiring to look his best, as they were to meet the young ladies of the ranch.

"We owe you an apology, sir, for appearing in this condition," announced the Professor.

"Master Butler and myself have already settled that question," answered the rancher. "As Henry Ward Beecher once said, 'Clothes don't make the man, but when he is made he looks very well dressed up.' I must say, however, that these young men are about as likely a lot of lads as I have ever seen."

Clear-eyed, their faces tanned almost to a copper color, figures erect and shoulders well back, the Pony Rider Boys were indeed wholesome to look upon. Perhaps Sadie and Margaret McClure were not blind to this, for they blushed very prettily, the boys thought, upon being presented to their guests. Ruth Brayton was in a sunny mood, laughing gayly as she chatted with the boys.

Tad glanced at her inquiringly. She was not the same girl that he had met the day before. There was a difference in the eyes, too. Tad could not understand the change. It perplexed him.

Colonel McClure took the Professor off to his study, the boys being left with Mrs. McClure and the young ladies to wander through the grounds and chat. Each of the young women was an accomplished horsewoman, and therefore evinced a keen interest in the experiences of the boys since they had been in saddle.

"I had so often wanted to take a trip through the Rockies on horseback," announced Miss Margaret.

"I am afraid you would find it rather rough going," said Ned Rector.

"No worse than the plains," replied Walter. "We have had more hardships in Texas during the short time we have been here than we ever experienced in the mountains."

"Yes; but you were driving cattle," objected Mrs. McClure. "There probably is no harder work in the world. We, down here, know something about that."

"I--I killed a bobcat up in the mountains," Stacy Brown informed them, with enthusiasm.

"Indeed," smiled Mrs. McClure indulgently.

"He did. And I fell off a mountain," laughed Walter Perkins. "You see we have had quite a series of experiences."

"Indeed you have. How long do you expect to remain with the herd? Are you going through with them?"

"I believe not," answered Tad Butler. "I think we shall be leaving very soon now. We have a lot of traveling to do yet, as it has been planned that we shall see a good deal of the country before it is time to return to school this fall."

"And you are to remain out in the open--in the saddle all summer?" asked Miss Brayton, her eyes sparkling almost enviously.

"Yes; I believe so."

"I should love it."

"We are getting to love it ourselves. It will be hard to have to sleep indoors again."

Shortly afterwards all were summoned in to supper. Stacy Brown's eyes sparkled with anticipation as he surveyed the table resplendent with silver and cut glass--loaded, too, with good things to eat.

Ned Rector observed the look in his companion's eyes.

"Now, don't forget that we are not eating off the tail board of the chuck wagon, Chunky," he whispered in passing. "Be as near human as you can and satisfy your appetite."

Chunky's face flushed.

"Take your advice to yourself," he muttered.

Colonel McClure proved an entertaining host, and the boys were led on to talk about themselves during most of the meal. Especially were their hosts interested in the story of the discovery of the Lost Claim, which the boys had found on their trip in the Rockies.

"I have wanted to ask you about the old church between here and camp, Mr. McClure," said Tad at the first opportunity.

"Very interesting old ruin, sir," answered the host. "Built by the Mexicans more than a hundred years ago."

"Yes, so I understand."

"Is it true that there's spooks in that place?" interrupted Stacy.

Everybody laughed. Tad glanced sharply at Ruth Brayton. He noticed a curious flush on her face, and the strained look that he had observed in her eyes on the previous day was again there. Almost the instant he caught it it was gone.

"I'm afraid you have been misinformed, Master Stacy," answered Colonel McClure.

"How about the trouble that the cattle men experience when near the place?" spoke up Ned Rector. "The cowmen are sure there is something in the story."

"Nothing at all--nothing at all. Just a mere coincidence. We live here and we have no more than the usual run of ill luck with our stock."

"Stampedes?" asked Tad.

"Seldom anything of that sort. You see our stock is held by wire fences. If they want to stampede we let them--let them run until they are tired of it."

"I should like to explore the old church," said Tad, again referring to the subject uppermost in his mind.

"Nothing to hinder. Ruth, why can't you and the girls take the young men over there to-morrow if the day is fine? You know the place and its history. I am sure they would enjoy having you do so."

"We should be delighted," answered Ned Rector promptly.

"We might make it a picnic," suggested Margaret McClure.

"And have things to eat?" asked Stacy, evincing a keen interest in the proposal.

"Of course," smiled Mrs. McClure. "A picnic would not be a picnic without a spread on the ground. I will send some of the servants over to serve the picnic lunch."

"Thank you," smiled Tad gratefully. "It will be a happy afternoon for all of us if Miss Brayton can find the time to take us."

"Of course Ruth will go," nodded Mrs. McClure.

"Yes," answered the young woman. "What time shall we arrange to start, auntie?"

"Say eleven o'clock, if that will suit the young men."

"Perfectly," answered Tad.

"You might first take a gallop to the Springs. That will give you all an appetite."

"Where are the Springs?" asked Ned.

"About seven miles to the eastward of the ranch. A most picturesque place," answered Colonel McClure. "Professor, while the young people are enjoying themselves, suppose you ride over here and spend the afternoon with me? We can ride about the ranch if it would please you."

"I should be delighted."

"I was going to suggest, too, that it might be a pleasant relief for all of you to accept the hospitality of the Ox Bow ranch and remain here while you are in the vicinity. We have room to spare and would be glad to have you."

"I am afraid the young men would prefer to remain in camp, thank you. They will get enough of sleeping in beds upon their return home, discourteous as the statement may seem," answered Professor Zeppelin.

"Not at all--not at all. I understand you perfectly. I shall not press the point. But spend all the time you can with us. The place is yours. Make yourselves at home."

"No; Mr. Stallings would not like it if we were to remain away over night. You see, he expects us to do our share of night guard duty," explained Tad. "We are earning our keep as it were."

The boys laughed.

"That is, some of us are," corrected Ned, with a sly glance at Stacy, who was eating industriously. "Others are eating for their keep."

The Pony Rider Boys caught the hidden meaning in his words, but they tried not to let their hosts observe that it was a joke at the expense of one of them.

"Stallings," murmured Miss Brayton, her eyes staring vacantly at Tad Butler.

Tad flushed at the memory of what he had heard on his first visit to the ranch.

Miss Brayton excused herself rather abruptly and left the room. They did not see her again that evening.

"My niece has been ailing of late," explained Mrs. McClure.

"Perhaps she had better not try to accompany us to-morrow, then," suggested Tad.

"Oh, yes, I wish her to. It will do her good--it will take her mind from herself."

Tad Butler noted the last half of the sentence particularly. For him it held a deeper meaning than it did for his companions.

"I wonder if she knows Mr. Stallings," mused Tad. "I'm going to find out. No, I won't. It's none of my business. Still, it will do no harm to ask him, or to mention the name to him. That surely would not be wrong."

Under the charm of the evening his mind soon drifted into other channels. After supper games were brought out and a happy evening followed.

Ten o'clock came, and Professor Zeppelin, glancing at his watch, was about to propose a return to camp, when one of Colonel McClure's cowboys appeared in the doorway, hat in hand.

"Beg pardon; may I speak with you a moment?" asked the man.

"Certainly," replied the colonel, with the same gracious manner, Tad observed, that he used toward his guests. "Excuse me a moment."

After a little their host returned, but rather hurriedly, it seemed, and Tad's keen eyes noticed that he seemed disturbed.

Mr. McClure caught the lad's inquiring gaze fixed upon him. He nodded.

"Is anything wrong?" asked the rancher's wife.

"Yes; I am afraid there is," he answered quietly.

"What is it?"

"I am not sure. Perhaps I should not alarm you young gentlemen, but I think you should know."

"At the camp, you mean?" asked Tad.

"Yes."

"What's that?" demanded Professor Zeppelin sharply. "Something wrong at the camp?"

"My men think so. They say they hear shooting off in that direction, and want to know if they shall ride out."

"You think it is a--a----" began Tad.

"A stampede? Yes; I should not be surprised."

"We must go," announced the lad, rising promptly.

"Why go?" asked Margaret.

"We may be needed."

"But my men have started already," replied the rancher. "They surely will be help enough."

"Mr. Stallings will expect us. We may be able to be of some assistance."

"Well, if you must. Yes; you are right. Business is business, even when one is out on a pleasure trip. It's a good sign in a young man. Tell your foreman that he may call upon us to any extent."

"Thank you, I will," replied Tad.

Bidding their hosts a hasty good night, and promising to be on hand at the appointed hour on the following day if the condition of the herd permitted, the Pony Rider Boys ran for their ponies. In a few moments they were racing toward camp. They, too, were now able to hear the short, spiteful bark of the six-shooters.

It was a significant sound. They had heard it too many times before not to understand it. In their minds they could see the hardy cowboys riding in front of the unreasoning animals, shooting into the ground in front of them, seeking to check the rush.

"What do you think about this business?" asked Tad Butler, drawing up beside Ned Rector.

"I think there is more in this spook story than Colonel McClure knows of, or, at least, will admit."

"So do I," answered Tad.

"We'll know when we hear how it happened."

Tad remembered, at that moment, the hasty departure of Ruth Brayton.

"I wonder--I wonder," muttered the boy to himself.

CHAPTER XXI

A CALL FOR HELP

"I told you so."

"You have told me so many things, Big-foot, that I can't remember them all," laughed Tad. "What is it this time?"

"Trouble."

"Oh, you mean the stampede last night?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it. You know I was not here when it started."

After a hard night's work, in which the Pony Rider Boys had toiled heroically, the cattle once more had been rounded up and Big-foot and Tad Butler were riding into camp for breakfast. It was the first opportunity they had found to talk over the incident.

"Not much to tell. It happened so quick----"

"What time?" interrupted Tad.

"'Bout half-past nine, I reckon."

"Half-past nine," muttered the lad thoughtfully. "Yes; go on."

"We were sitting by the camp fire, and Curley Adams was telling about the time he was mixed up with the rustlers on the Colorado."

"Yes."

"Well, them ponies came down on us a-whooping."

"The ponies? Did they get away, too?" asked the lad in surprise.

"Did they? You ought to have seen the varmints. Nearly run over us when they smashed through the camp. One jumped clean over the fire."

"Yes, I understand; but did you have any idea why the cattle stampeded?"

"Sure. The ponies put them on the run."

"The ponies started it?"

"Yes. No telling how it happened. The cows come a-running after the ponies had broke through them, and the whole outfit piled over the camp."

"Do any damage?"

"I reckon. Knocked over the chuck wagon, and near killed the heathen Chinee. The men on guard roped the runaway ponies, and, by the time you got on the job, we had just about got straightened around ready to go after the cows."

"I suppose you lay it to----"

"Adobe church," answered the cowman conclusively.

"I am going over there to-day, Big-foot. I am going to try to find out if there is anything in all this. Candidly, I don't believe it. Even Colonel McClure says it's all foolishness. That is, I do not believe it is anything that cannot be explained."

The foreman was looking worried that morning. It had been a succession of disasters ever since they had neared the locality. This time it had been the ponies which were hobbled some little distance from the herd, but which had become so frightened at what they saw that they bolted, hobbles and all.

"I want those cows from the McClure ranch brought over to-day," Stallings directed. "At least, bring over half of them. Get them over right after breakfast. If we are going to have any more disturbances let's try to have them in the daytime."

"Do you need us?" asked Tad.

"No. Go on and enjoy yourselves. You all have earned a holiday."

The lads were in their saddles early. Professor Zeppelin went with them, intending to spend the day at the ranch as arranged on the previous evening.

The young ladies of the household were waiting, dressed in short skirts and wearing broad-brimmed straw hats. To the boys they were most attractive. Their fresh young faces lighted with anticipation of the day's pleasure as, assisted by the Pony Riders, they swung into their saddles. It fell to Tad Butler to ride beside Miss Brayton.

"We had a stampede at the camp last night," he told her after they had headed off to the east for the Springs, which was to be their first objective point.

"Yes; so uncle told me. I'm sorry. Did you lose any stock?"

"I believe not, unless it was some of the new ponies. I did not think to ask."

"At what time did the trouble occur?" she asked absently.

"I think it was shortly after you left us at dinner, last night," answered Tad, in a matter-of-fact tone. "It was, perhaps, half an hour after that when your uncle told us."

Miss Brayton flushed painfully, and quickly changed the subject. Tad noticed her confusion and marveled at it.

Arriving at the Springs, which proved to be a group of rocks rising out of the plain, and from which several springs of pure sparkling water bubbled, all dismounted and drank of the refreshing fluid. After a few moments spent in chatting, they remounted their ponies and set off for the adobe church, the real object of the day's journey.

Reaching the historic place, they tethered their ponies among the mesquite bushes in the rear of it, after which all entered through a crumbling doorway. The interior, they found, was in an excellent state of preservation.

Many surprising little alcoves and odd, cell-like rooms were distributed all through the church. It was dark and cool in there. Chunky shivered, and said he didn't wonder people said there were spooks there.

"Is there any cellar beneath the church?" asked Tad.

"It has been said that there were once underground passages," answered Miss Brayton. "No one in our time has ever discovered them."

"That sounds interesting. I think I should like to find the way into them."

"So should I," added Stacy Brown.

"Look out that you don't fall in," cautioned Ned. "Remember that's your failing."

"Not much chance of that," laughed Margaret. "These stone floors are too thick for anyone to fall through."

"Does anyone ever come here?" asked Tad.

"Not that I know of," answered Miss Brayton.

"But I saw a path when I came in. Somebody has been hitching a pony out there in the bushes, too," said the boy.

"Perhaps some of the cowmen may come in here out of the heat, now and then," replied the young woman carelessly.

"Why Ruth, you could not induce one of papa's men to enter the door of the old place. You know they are half scared to death of it," said Margaret.

Chunky's eyes were growing large.

"Wow!" he said. "Let's go out doors and eat."

"The lunch has not yet arrived. It will be here soon," Miss Brayton informed him. "We will spread it in the main room here, if you have no objections. It will be cool and pleasant; and, besides, there are no flies in here."

"For goodness' sake, forget your appetite," growled Ned in Stacy's ear.

"Can't a fellow talk about his appetite without being found fault with?" Chunky sulkily retorted.

"Not the kind of an appetite you have. It's a positive disgrace to the outfit."

"Huh!" grunted Chunky, walking away.

The lad wandered off by himself, and the rest forgot all about him in their investigation of the old church. Miss Brayton told them as much of its history as she knew.

"Some of the former priests are said to have been buried somewhere in the edifice," she said.

"I don't see any signs of it," said Tad.

"No. No one ever has in our time. And it has even been hinted that treasure has been buried here, too, or secreted in some of the mysterious recesses of the church."

"Where are they" asked Walter. "I am beginning to get curious."

"I am sure I do not know," laughed the young woman. "There is a sort of garret, if you can get to it, above the gallery there. Maybe you might find something there. I have an idea that it is inhabited by bats."

"I guess we will leave them undisturbed," decided Tad. "I don't like bats."

"There come the servants," announced Miss Brayton. "Now your friend will be able to satisfy his appetite."

At her direction the servants brought in the baskets of food. A cloth was spread over a stone table that they found at the far end of the church in the balcony. What its use had been, in those other days, they did not know, but it served their purpose very well now.

"I am afraid we shall have to eat standing," said Miss Sadie. "We have no chairs."

"That will suit Chunky," replied Ned Rector. "He always likes to eat standing."

"Why?" asked Margaret, glancing up at him inquiringly.

"For some reasons of his own," answered Ned mischievously.

As the good things were spread before them the eyes of the lads lighted appreciatively, and all helped themselves gratefully.

It was a jolly party, untouched by the air of mystery that was supposed to surround the place.

"Why, where is Master Stacy?" asked Ruth Brayton in surprise, after they had been eating a few moments.

"Chunky? That's so, where is he?" demanded Walter, glancing over the railing into the auditorium below.

No one seemed to know.

"He's prowling around the place somewhere," said Ned. "But what surprises me is that he doesn't scent the food and come running. It's not like him to hang back when there is anything good to eat."

"Call him," suggested Margaret.

"I will. O-h-h Chunky!"

There was no reply.

"I will go after him," said Walter, running lightly to the other end of the balcony and down the stone steps.

The lad returned in a few moments, a perplexed frown on his face.

"Find him?" asked Ned.

"No."

"Maybe he's gone back to camp. He's a queer chap."

"I think not. I saw his pony there with the others."

"Oh, well, never mind. He'll get so hungry that he will have to come out, wherever he is," decided Tad. "I imagine he is hiding somewhere to make us think he has gone away. Hark! What was that?"

A far away call for help echoed faintly through the church.

They looked at each other with growing uneasiness on their faces.

"It's Chunky," breathed Walter.

"Wh--where is he?" stammered Margaret.

"I don't know. Excuse me; I must go," exclaimed Tad. "The boy is in trouble again. I knew it--I knew he couldn't keep out of it," he added, hurrying away from them.

Ned sprang down the steps after Tad and together they disappeared through a rear door in the auditorium.



CHAPTER XXII

LOST IN THE ADOBE CHURCH

Those up in the gallery could hear the two boys calling to their companion. There was no answer to their hails, and one by one the little party left the gallery.

"I tell you he is playing tricks on us," said Ned, after they had searched all over the place without finding any trace of Stacy.

"No; I don't agree with you," answered Tad. "Something has happened to him."

"What shall we do?" asked Walter.

"Keep on looking. That is all we can do just now."

Once more they began their search, but with no better results than before.

"Have you looked outside?" asked Miss Brayton.

"Yes; we looked out. No use in hunting there, for we can see all around the place from the side door here," answered Tad. "He has gotten into some place that we know nothing about. We've got to find it, that's all."

"I would suggest that one of us ride to camp and get some of the men to come out and help us," advised Walter.

"I'll ride home, and have father send some of his own men," suggested Margaret.

"Yes; that would be best," agreed Miss Brayton.

"I wish you wouldn't," replied Tad. "It would alarm them, and Professor Zeppelin would be frightened. Ned, suppose you hustle for camp and tell Mr. Stallings the fix we are in. We shall need some help, that's sure."

"All right. I'm off."

Big-foot Sanders and Curley Adams responded to the call on the run, the foreman being out with the herd at the time.

"I knew it," was Big-foot's first words as he rode up and threw himself from his pony where Tad was standing. "Now tell me all about it."

Tad did so, the cowman nodding his head vigorously as Tad told him all he knew about Chunky's mysterious disappearance.

"Which way did he go?" asked Curley.

"That we do not know," answered Miss Brayton.

"His cry seemed to come from the back of the church somewhere," spoke up Ned.

"We'll go in and look around, then," decided Big-foot, striding into the church. "Whew! smells pretty musty in here. What's that up there?"

"That's where we were eating our lunch when we heard Chunky call," Walter informed him.

"How long since you had seen him--was he up there with you?"

"No; he had left us twenty minutes before we began eating lunch," answered Ned.

"Humph!" grunted the cowman, gazing about him in perplexity. "Sure it isn't a trick?"

Tad shook his head.

"No. He was in trouble. I knew that from his tone."

"Then he must have fallen in some place," announced Big-foot. "He couldn't fall up, so there's no use looking anywhere but on the ground floor here," he decided, wisely. "Anybody know of any holes that he might drop into?"

"Not that I have seen," answered Ned. "The floor is as solid as stone."

"Well, that beats all. You boys scout around outside, while Curley and I are looking things over in here. Besides, I want

to be alone and think this thing over."

"What do you make of it, Big-foot?" asked Curley Adams, after the others had gone outside.

"I ain't making. When it comes to putting my wits against a spook place, I'm beyond roping distance. We'll look into these holes in the wall around here, first," he said, referring to the niches and cell-like rooms that they saw leading off from the auditorium. "You make it your business to sound the floor. We may find some kind of trap door."

Curley went about bringing down the heels of his heavy boots on the hard floor, but it all sounded solid enough. There was no belief in the mind of either that the lad could have disappeared in any of the places they had examined--that is, that he could have done so through any ordinary accident.

Like most cowboys, both Curley and Big-foot possessed a strong vein of superstition in their natures. To them there was something uncanny in Stacy Brown's mysterious and sudden disappearance.

"Here's a door, but it's closed," called Curley.

"That's so," agreed Big-foot, hurrying over to him. "The thing is sealed up with mortar. Hasn't been used in fifty cats' lives. Wonder what's behind it."

"Not the boy; that's certain."

"Nope. He didn't fall through there."

"Find any other doors open or closed?"

"Nary a one."

"Well, that seems to settle this part of the ranch; we've got to look somewhere else. What bothers me is that we don't hear him call. If he was anywhere near, and had his voice, he'd be yelling for help," decided the big cowboy.

"Don't think he's dead, do you?"

"I don't think at all. I don't know," answered Big-foot.

"It's my idea that the gopher isn't in here at all," announced Curley, with emphasis.

His companion eyed him thoughtfully.

"You're almost human at times, Curley. I reckon you've said the only true words that's been spoke by us this afternoon. We look for the gopher and don't find him. You say he ain't here, and he isn't. Great head! But that don't find him. The question is, where is he?"

"We'll have to look outside," answered Curley.

"Right you are. Come on."

But their search outside was as fruitless as had been their quest within the old adobe church. Not a trace of Stacy Brown did they find.

"Ned, I think you had better take the young ladies home," said Tad finally.

"Want me to tell Professor Zeppelin?"

"Not right away. You can tell him on the way out here. He will not have quite so long to worry, but I think he should know about it. The matter is serious. Where did you say Mr. Stallings was, Big-foot?"

"Out with the new herd. The cattle are pretty restless."

"Walt, you go in and tell the foreman the difficulty we are in. I'll wait here and go on with the search. If he can get away I wish he would come."

"I'll tell him," answered Walter, hurrying away.

"I am sorry we have spoiled your afternoon, Miss Brayton," said Tad. "It's too bad. But I'm afraid something serious has happened to our friend."

"Shall we see you again, Mr. Butler?"

"Of course. I don't know when the herd will start on. We certainly shall not do so until we have found Stacy. Anyway,

we will ride over some time to-morrow and bid you all good-bye."

Assisting the young women into their saddles, Tad bade their friends good afternoon and turned sadly back to the church, while Ned Rector rode back to the OxBow ranch with the young women.

"Well, what do you think?" demanded the lad, as he faced the big cowboy.

"I don't think. My thinker's all twisted out of shape," answered Big-foot. "I can't tell you what to do. Wait till the boss gets here."

"I guess that will be best," replied Tad. "We have done all we know how to do."

The two men and the boy wandered about the church aimlessly, saying little, but thinking a great deal, impatiently awaiting the arrival of Bob Stallings, to whom they now looked to show them the way out of their difficulty.

The foreman arrived, in the course of half an hour, with his pony on a sharp run. They had heard him approach, and were outside waiting for him.

"Well, this is a nice kettle of fish!" exclaimed Stallings, leaping to the ground, tossing his reins to Curley Adams. "Tell me about it."

Once more Tad Butler related all the facts in his possession regarding Stacy Brown's mysterious disappearance.

"Big-foot thinks it's spooks," added Tad.

"That's all bosh," exploded the foreman. "It's getting late in the afternoon, and I've no time to waste. I'll find him for you. What ails you, Big-foot? Getting weak in the knees?"

"Not as I know of. This funny business is kinder getting on my nerves, though."

"Humph!" grunted the foreman, starting for the church in long strides. "Nerves in a cowboy! Humph!"

They watched the tall figure of Stallings charging through the adobe house, peering here and there, asking questions in short, snappy sentences, going down on his knees in search of footprints. Finally he rose from his task with a puzzled look in his eyes.

"Tell me that story again," he demanded.

Tad did so.

The foreman went outside and surveyed the building from all sides.

"There's some secret room or passage in there somewhere. The gopher has stumbled into it. We are going to discover the mystery of the church of San Miguel before we have done here--that is, we are if we're lucky," he added.

Bob Stallings' words were prophetic, though he did not know it. The discovery was to be one that would give the big foreman the surprise of his life, and that would affect all his after life as well.



CHAPTER XXIII

SOLVING THE MYSTERY

"We can't do much of anything more until daylight," announced the foreman finally. "You see, it's getting dark now."

"You--you are going to leave him here?" asked Tad hesitatingly.

"That's all we can do, so far as I see. But we'll put one of the men on guard to watch the place. To-morrow morning we'll take it upon ourselves to tear down that door that's sealed up. It may lead into the place where the boy fell in. Yes; we'll bring down the whole miserable shack if necessary."

"You--you think he is here, then?"

"Of course. Where else could he be? He walked away and disappeared right before your eyes. He could not get away if he had gone outside. So where is he? In the church, of course."

"Then I will remain here and watch the place," decided Tad firmly.

Stallings glanced at him hesitatingly.

"All right. I guess you have got the nerve to do it. I can't say as much for the rest of the bunch. You come along with me, now, and get your supper. After that you may return if you want to. Big-foot, you and Curley stay here until the Pinto gets back. Better keep busy. You may stumble upon something before you know it."

The two cowboys did not appear to be any too well pleased with the task assigned to them, but they obeyed orders without protest.

The evening had grown quite dark by the time the cowmen had finished their supper. All had been discussing the strange disappearance of Stacy Brown. It did not seem to surprise them. They had expected trouble when they reached the vicinity of the adobe church. They had had little else during the time they had been in the camp.

"Send Curley and Big-foot in," directed the foreman after Tad had announced his readiness to return to the church.

"We'll all go," spoke up Ned Rector.

"It's not at all necessary," answered Tad.

"No; I have decided to let Big-foot go back after he has eaten. He can remain with you until ten-thirty, when he takes his trick on guard. Then the rest of you may go out if you wish. It isn't fair to leave the Pinto there alone all night. If I change my plans I'll send out Master Ned or Walter. Run along now, Tad."

The lad mounted his pony and galloped slowly out for his long vigil. He was greatly disturbed over the loss of Chunky. Yet he could not bring himself to believe that great harm had come to the boy.

"Anything new?" he called as he rode up.

"Nary a thing. Plenty of funny noises inside the shack. Kinder gives a fellow the creeps; that's all."

"You are to come back and remain with me until your watch, I believe, Big-foot."

"Nice job you've cut out for me," answered the cowman.

"I had nothing to do with it. It's the foreman's order," answered Tad.

"Better bring a lantern with you. We may need it before the night is over."

"All right," answered Big-foot, swinging into his saddle. After the cowmen had left, Tad walked out a little way from the church and sat down in the sand. He was within easy hearing of the place in case anyone should call out.

It was a lonely spot. Tad had not sat there long before the noises that the cowmen had spoken of began again.

The lad listened intently for a moment.

"Bats," he said. "I can hear them flying about me. I hope none of them hit me in the face. I've heard they do that sometimes."

The pony, which had been staked down well out on the plain, was now moving about restlessly.

"I wonder if the noises are getting on the broncho's nerves, too? There's nothing here to be afraid of. I'm not afraid," declared Tad firmly, rising and pacing back and forth.

He was relieved, just the same, when the big cowman rode back, an hour later, and took up the vigil with him. The two talked in subdued tones as they walked back and forth, the lad expressing the opinion that they would find Stacy unharmed when they once discovered the mysterious place into which he had unwittingly stumbled.

"You see, those walls are so thick that we couldn't hear him even if he did call out. He may even have gotten in where they buried those monks we've heard about. I hope not, though."

"He wouldn't know it," said Big-foot.

"No, probably not in the darkness. Did you bring that lantern?"

"Pshaw! I forgot it. Mebby I'd better go back and get it."

"No; never mind, Big-foot. The moon will be up after a time. Then we shall not need it. You are going in for the ten-thirty trick, are you not?"

"That's what the boss said," replied Big-foot.

The right section of the herd was now bedded within a short distance of the church. They could hear the singing of the cowboys as they circled slowly around the sleeping cattle.

"Guess we are not going to have any more trouble with them," said Tad, nodding toward the herd.

"Don't be too sure. I feel it coming. I have a feeling that trouble ain't more'n a million miles away at this very minute."

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way. You'll get me feeling creepy, first thing you know. I've got to stay here all night," said Tad.

Big-foot laughed. They passed the time as best they could until the hour for the departure of the cowboy arrived. Then Tad was left alone once more. He circled about the church, listening. Once he thought he heard the hoof-beats of a pony. But the sound died away instantly, and he believed he must have been wrong.

After half an hour Big-foot returned. The foreman had decided, so long as the cattle were quiet, to have him remain with Tad. If the cowboy should be needed in a hurry the foreman was to fire a shot in the air as a signal.

Tad was intensely pleased at this arrangement. After chatting a while they lay down on the ground, speaking only occasionally, and then in low tones. The mystery of the night seemed to have awed them into silent thought. They had lain there for some time, when Tad suddenly rose on one elbow.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"Yes," breathed the cowman.

"What--what do you think it was?"

"Sounded as if some one had jumped to the ground. We'd better crawl up there. It was by the church. I told you it was coming."

"Do you suppose it was Chunky?"

"No. He'd be afraid of the dark. You'd hear him yelling for help."

Tad had his doubts of that; but, just the same, he, too, felt that the noise they had heard had not been made by Stacy Brown. A silence of several minutes followed. The two had crawled only a few feet toward the church, when, with one common impulse, they flattened themselves on the ground and listened.

Now they could distinctly hear some one cautiously moving about in front of the church. It seemed to Tad as if the mysterious intruder were standing on the broad stone flagging at the top of the steps leading into the adobe church.

Tad slowly rose to his feet.

"Who's there?" he cried in a voice that trembled a little.

A sudden commotion followed the question, and the listeners distinctly caught the sound of footsteps on the flagging.

A flash lighted the scene momentarily.

Big-foot had fired a shot toward the church. A slight scream followed almost instantly.

"I winged it!" shouted the cowman, lifting his weapon for another shot.

Tad struck the gun up. The lad was excited now.

"Stop!" he commanded. "Don't do that again. Do you want to kill somebody?"

With that Tad ran, his feet fairly flying over the ground, in the direction of the church steps. In the flash of the gun he had caught a glimpse of a figure standing there. The sight thrilled him through and through.

As the plucky lad reached the steps some one started to run down them. Tripping, the unknown plunged headlong to the ground.

The boy was beside the figure in an instant.

"Big-foot!" he shouted.

The cowman came tearing up to him.

"What is it?" he bellowed in his excitement.

"It's a woman, Big-foot! It's a woman! Oh, I hope you did not hit her!"

"It's no woman; it's a spook. I know it's a spook!" fairly shouted the cowboy.

"I tell you it's a woman!" cried Tad.

He was down on his knees by her side now, raising her head.

"Get help--*quick!*"

Sanders took the shortest way of doing this. He, too, was alarmed now. Raising his gun above his head, he pulled the trigger three times in quick succession. As many sharp flashes leaped into the air, and as many quick reports followed.

"Sure she ain't a spirit?" demanded the cowman, peering down suspiciously, fearfully. He could make out the form on the ground but dimly.

"Don't be foolish. Run out there and meet them. I hear the ponies coming. Don't let any of them use their guns, in the excitement, or some one may get hurt," warned Tad Butler, with rare judgment.

Big-foot hurried out into the open. In the meantime Tad stroked the face and head of the woman. She was unconscious, but her flesh seemed warm to his touch.

"I wonder what it means," the perplexed boy asked himself. Tad could feel his own pulses beating against his temples. It seemed to him as if all the blood in his body were hurling itself against them.

Cowboys on their ponies came thundering up from different directions. In the lead was Bob Stallings, the foreman of the outfit.

"You idiots!" he shouted. "Do you want to stampede the herd again? What do you mean?"

"I've winged a spook!" yelled Big-foot Sanders. "She's over there by the steps now. The kid's got her."

"Spook--nonsense!" snapped the foreman, leaping from his pony and rushing to the spot indicated by Big-foot.

"What----" chorused the cowboys.

"Is it the boy--have they found him?"

"If you all don't insist on talking at once, mebby we can find out what the row's about," snarled Curley Adams.

The foreman stopped suddenly as he observed Tad sitting at the foot of the church steps. He saw, too, another form there, but it was so dimly outlined in the deep shadows that he was unable to make it out.

"What does this mean?" he demanded sternly.

"I don't know. It's a woman. I'm afraid Big-foot's bullet hit her. We must have a light."

"Bring matches!" roared the foreman.

No one had any.

"Rustle for the camp, and fetch a lantern--and be quick about it! I've had enough of this fooling. What was she doing--how did it happen?"

Tad explained as clearly as he could how they had been disturbed by the strange noises, resulting finally in a shot from Big-foot's gun.

"The idiot! It'll be a sorry day for him if he's done any damage," growled the foreman. He stooped over and ran his hand over the unconscious woman's face. Then he applied his ear to the region of the heart.

"Huh!" he snapped, rising.

"Find anything!" asked Tad in a half whisper.

"She's alive. Heart weak, but I don't think she's seriously hurt. I don't understand it at all."

"No more do I. I'm getting dizzy over all this rapid-fire business," added the lad. "There they come with a light."

Stallings strode to the cowman who had brought the lantern. Jerking it from the man's hand the foreman ran back.

"We'll straighten her up against the steps, and try to find out how badly she is hurt," he said, placing the lantern on the ground.

Tad had partially raised her, when he let the girl drop with a sudden, startled exclamation.

"What is it?" demanded Stallings incisively.

"It's Miss Ruth!"

"Who?"

"Miss Ruth----"

By the dim lantern light the foreman saw her face outlined against the dark background of green. His eyes were fixed upon her, and Bob Stallings seemed scarcely to breathe.

"Ruth Brayton!" he gasped.

"Yes," answered Tad in a low voice, not fully comprehending the meaning of the scene that was being enacted before him.

"Ruth Brayton," repeated Stallings, slowly passing a hand across his forehead. "Ruth!" he cried, throwing himself to his knees beside her.

"I tell ye I winged a spook," insisted Big-foot Sanders to a companion as they came up.

Tad raised a warning hand for silence.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

"Get back to that herd!" commanded the foreman sharply. "All of you! Tad, you stay with me. The girl has fallen and struck her head on the flagging. I don't think she is seriously hurt."

Not understanding the meaning of it all, the cowmen drew back and slouched to their ponies. Most of them were off duty at the time, so they took their way back to camp to be ready for whatever emergency might arise.

Not a man of them spoke until they had staked their ponies and seated themselves around the camp-fire. Such a silence was unusual among the cowboys. Ned and Walter, who had followed them in, were standing aside, equally silent and thoughtful.

Shorty Savage was the first to speak.

"What's it all about? That's what I'd like to know," he asked.

"You won't find out from me," answered Curley.

"Big-foot thinks he winged a spook," said a voice.

"Allee samee," chuckled Pong, who had been taking in the scene with mouth and eyes agape.

Big-foot fixed him with a baneful eye.

"I said I'd forget you were the cook some day," said he. "I'm forgetting it, now, faster'n a broncho can run!"

Pong's pigtail bobbed up and down like the streaming neckkerchief of a cowboy in saddle as he dived for the protection of the trail wagon.

"I reckon he can understand king's English when he wants to," laughed Shorty. "Now how about that spook, Big-foot?"

Sanders stood up, hitched his trousers and tightened his belt a notch.

"Reckon we've all gone plumb daffy, fellows. I'm the champeen dummy of the bunch."

The cowpunchers laughed heartily.

"But was she a spook?" persisted Shorty.

"She were not. She were a woman--a friend of the boss."

Shorty whistled.

"Lucky for me I missed her. I was rattled, or I'd never taken that shot."

"Who is she?" asked Curley.

"One of the young women from the Ox Bow. It gets me what she was doing in that spook place alone at night. I----"

"W-o-w!"

The exclamation was uttered by a familiar voice, at the sound of which the cowmen sprang to their feet.

"It's the gopher!" they cried.

"Chunky!" shouted Ned and Walter, running forward with a yell.

"I fell in," wailed the fat boy.

At sight of him the cowboys yelled with merriment. Chunky's clothes were torn. He was covered with dirt from head to foot, and his face was so grimy as to be scarcely recognizable.

Big-foot was staring at him in amazement. Striding forward, he grasped the lad roughly by the shoulder, jerking him into the full light of the camp-fire.

"Where you been, gopher?" he demanded sternly.

"I fell in," stammered the boy.

"Where?"

"Some kind of a well. It was in the bushes just outside the back door. I went there to hide. I fell down to the bottom and went to sleep."

"Just like him. Have anything to eat down there?" jeered Ned Rector.

"When I woke up it was dark. Then I found another hole--a passage. It went both ways. Guess one end went under the church. I followed it the other way, and came out near where the steers are bedded down."

"Hold on a minute. Let's get this straight," interrupted Curley. "You mean you found an underground passage at the bottom of the old well? Is that it?"

Chunky nodded.

"And the opening was near the spring at the point of rocks just above the herd?"

"Yes. But I had to dig out through a brush heap."

"Huh! Not such a terrible mystery, after all," sniffed Curley contemptuously.

"How came that underground passage there? What's it for?" asked Big-foot.

"Probably dug out in Indian times. I'll bet it has saved the scalp of more than one old fellow. There's an opening into it from the church somewhere, you can depend upon that. I'm thinking, too, that the well was a bluff--that it wasn't intended for water at all. We'll smash the mystery of the adobe church before we pull out of here to-morrow, see if we don't."

"I come mighty near doing for one of them," added Big-foot Sanders ruefully.

"Got anything to eat?" interrupted Stacy Brown.

"For goodness' sake, boys, take your fat friend over to the chuck wagon and fill him up. He's like a Mexican steer--he'll bed down safer when he's full of supper."

In the meantime, another scene was being enacted off at the Ox Bow ranch--a scene that was to add still another chapter to the romance of the trail.

Tad Butler was sitting alone in the darkness on the steps of the McClure mansion. The boy, chin in hands, was lost in thought. Stallings had carried Ruth Brayton in his arms all the way to the ranch where she had soon revived.

After leaving her, the foreman and Colonel McClure had locked themselves in the library, where they remained in consultation for more than an hour.

"How is Miss Ruth?" asked the boy eagerly, when Stallings finally came out.

"Better than in many months," answered the foreman. There was a new note in his voice.

"I'm so glad," breathed Tad.

"Old man," began Stallings, slapping Tad on the shoulder, "come along with me. We'll lead our ponies back to camp and talk. I presume you are aching to know what all this mystery means?" laughed the foreman.

"Naturally, I am a bit curious," admitted Tad.

"It means, Pinto, that not only have you rendered a great service to Mr. Miller and his herd, but you have done other things as well."

"I've mixed things up pretty well, I guess."

"No. You have solved a riddle, and made me the happiest man in the Lone Star State. Miss Brayton and I have known each other almost since childhood. When I was in Yale----"

"You a college man!" exclaimed Tad in surprise.

"Yes. We were engaged. My people were quite wealthy; but, in a panic, some years ago, father lost everything, dying soon after. Miss Brayton's family then refused their consent to our marriage. I determined to seek my fortune in the growing West. My full name is Robert Stallings Hamilton, though I never had used the middle name until I adopted it when I became a cowboy. But to return to Miss Brayton. Ruth was taken to Europe, and then sent to her uncle here. Her trouble preyed on her mind to such an extent that she grew 'queer.' She had heard that I was a cattle man, somewhere in the West. Strangely enough, when in her moods, she developed a strong antipathy to herds of cattle. Whenever a herd was near, Ruth would slip from the house and steal away to them in the night. A stampede usually followed. It's a wonder she wasn't shot. Whether or not she caused these intentionally, Ruth does not know----"

"And that is the mystery?" asked Tad.

"Yes."

"It is the strangest story I ever heard," said the boy quietly.

"What I was about to say, is that the herd will go on without me. Colonel McClure is sending his own foreman through with it instead. Ruth and I are to be married at once, and we shall go to my little ranch in Montana."

In view of the fact that Stallings was severing his connection with the herd, Professor Zepplin decided to do likewise.

Next morning, at sunrise, Bob Stallings, with Miss Ruth, by his side, both radiantly happy, rode out to the camp. The Pony Rider Boys had packed their kits and loaded their belongings on their ponies. Regretfully they bade good-bye to the cowmen.

Tad's parting with Big-foot was most trying. In the short time they had been together, a strong affection had grown up between the two. The plainsman had been quick to perceive Tad's manly qualities, and the boy, in his turn, had been won by the big, generous nature of the man. They parted, each vowing that they must see each other again.

As the great herd moved slowly northward, three cheers were proposed for Bob Stallings and Miss Brayton. This the cowboys gave with a will, adding a tiger for the Pony Rider Boys.

The trail wagon, pulling out at the same time, held a grinning Chinaman, huddled in the rear.

"Good-bye, Pong!" shouted the lads.

"Allee samee," chuckled the cook, shaking hands with himself enthusiastically.

And here for a time we will take leave of the Pony Rider Boys, whose further exciting experiences will be chronicled in the next volume, entitled: "THE PONY RIDER BOYS IN MONTANA; Or, the Mystery of the Old Custer Trail." This will be a story of adventure, full of absorbing interest and thrilling incidents. The reader will then go over the same trails that General Custer rode in the wilder days.

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