

Tucholsky Wagner Zola Scott  
Turgenev Wallace Fonatne Sydon Freud Schlegel  
Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen  
Weber Freiligrath Frey  
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel  
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas  
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach  
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil  
Goethe Elisabeth von Österreich London  
Mendelssohn Balzac Shakespeare Rathenau Dostojewski Ganghofer  
Trackl Stevenson Lichtenberg Doyle Gjellerup  
Mommssen Thoma Tolstoi Lenz Hambruch Droste-Hülshoff  
Dach Thoma von Arnim Hägele Hanrieder Hauptmann Humboldt  
Karrillon Reuter Verne Rousseau Hagen Hauff Baudelaire Gautier  
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Bronner Campe Horváth Aristoteles Voltaire Federer Herodot  
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Storm Casanova Lessing Tersteegen Gilm Gryphius  
Chamberlain Langbein Lafontaine Iffland Sokrates  
Brentano Claudius Schiller Bellamy Schilling Kralik Raabe Gibbon Tschchow  
Katharina II. von Rußland Gerstäcker Raabe Gleim Vulpius  
Löns Hesse Hoffmann Gogol Morgenstern Goedicke  
Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Kleist  
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Navarra Aurel Musset Lamprecht Kind Kirchhoff Hugo Moltke  
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# **The Boy Ranchers or Solving the Mystery at Diamond X**

Willard F. Baker

# Imprint

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# THE BOY RANCHERS

## CHAPTER I

### "SOME RIDIN'!"

Two riders slumped comfortably in their saddles as the ponies slowly ambled along. The sun was hot, and the dust stifling, a cloud of it forming a floating screen about the horsemen and progressing with them down the trail.

One of the riders, a tall, lanky and weather-beaten cowboy, taking a long breath, raised his voice in what he doubtless intended to be a song.

It was, however, more a cry of anguish as he bellowed forth:

"Leave me alone with a rope an' a saddle,  
Fold my spurs under my haid!  
Give me a can of them sweet, yaller peaches,  
'Cause why? My true-love is daid!"

"Bad as all that; is it, Slim?" asked the other, who, now that he had partly emerged from the cloud of dust, could be seen as a lad of about sixteen. He, like the other, older rider, was attired cowboy fashion.

"Eh? What's that, Bud?" inquired the lanky one, seeming to arouse as if from a day dream. "See suthin'?"

"Nope. I was just sort of remarking about that sad song, and — —"

"Oh, shucks! *That* wa'n't sad!" declared Slim Degnan, foreman of the Diamond X ranch. "Guess I wa'n't really payin' much attention to what

I was singin', but if you want a real sad lament— —"

"No, I don't!" laughed Bud Merkel, whose father was the owner of Diamond X ranch. "Not that I blame you for feeling sort of down and out," he added.

"Oh, I don't feel *bad*, Bud!" came the hasty rejoinder. "We did have more'n a ride than I figgered on, but I don't aim to put up no kick. It's all in the day's work. You don't seem to mind it."

"I should say not! We had a bully time. I'd spend another night out in the open if we had to. I like it!"

"Yes, you seem to take to it like a duck does to water," added Slim. "But it's a shame to mention ducks in the same chapter with this atmosphere! Zow hippy! But it's hot an' dusty an' thirsty! Come along there, you old hunk of jerked beef!" he added to his pony, giving a gentle reminder with the spurs and pulling on the reins. The pony made a feeble attempt to increase its gait, but it was no more than an attempt.

The animal that was ridden by Bud—a pinto—started to follow the example of the other.

"Regular mud-turtle gallop," commented the foreman.

"They'll go faster when they top the rise, and see the corral," commented Bud.

"An' smell water! That's what I want, a long, sizzling, sozzling drink of water!" cried Slim, whose name fitted him better than did his clothes. Then he broke forth again with:

"Oh, leave me alone with a rope an' a saddle— —"

Slowly the riders plodded along. The sun seemed to grow more hot and the dust more thick. As they approached a hill, beyond which lay the corral and ranch buildings of Diamond X, Bud drew rein, thus halting his pony.

"Let's give 'em a breather before we hit the hill," he suggested to the foreman.

"I'm agreeable, son," was the foreman's easy comment as he slung one leg over the saddle and sat sideways.

Slim Degnan and Bud had ridden off to look for a break in one of the many long lines of wire fences that kept the stock of Diamond X somewhat within bounds, and it had taken longer to locate and repair the break than they had counted on.

They had been obliged to remain out all night—not that this was unusual, only they had not exactly prepared for it—and, in consequence, did not have all the ordinary comforts. But, as Bud had said, he had not minded it. However, the ponies were rather used up, and the riders in the same condition, and it was with equal feelings of relief that they came within sight of the last hill that lay between them and the ranch.

"Well, might as well mosey along," spoke Slim, at length. "Sooner we get some water inside us, an' th' ponies, th' better we'll all be."

"I reckon," agreed Bud. "But I don't believe Zip Foster could have done the job any quicker than we did."

"Who?" queried Slim, with a quizzical look at his companion.

"Zip Foster," answered Bud.

"Never heard of him. What outfit does he ride for?" asked the foreman, but he saved Bud the embarrassment of answer by suddenly rising in his saddle and looking off in the distance.

Bud had his own reasons for not answering that seemingly natural question, and he was glad of the diversion, though he was not at once aware of what had caused it. But he followed the direction of the foreman's gaze, and, like him, saw arising in the still air, about two miles away, a thin thread of smoke—a mere wisp, as though it had dangled down from some fleecy cloud. But the smoke was ascending and was not the beginning of a fog descending.

"Can't be any of our boys," murmured Slim. "They aren't out on round-up yet. An' it's too early for grub."

"Indians?" questioned Bud. Sometimes the bucks from a neighboring reservation felt the call of the wild, and slipped out to have a forbidden feast on some cattleman's stock, only to be brought up with a round turn by the government soldiers.

"Don't think so," remarked Slim. "They don't have much chance t' practice their wiles, but, with all that, they know enough not t' make

a fire that smokes. Must be some strangers. If it's any of them ornery sheep men," he exclaimed, "I'd feel like — —"

"They wouldn't dare!" exclaimed Bud, for being the son of a cattle-ranchman he had come to dislike and despise the sheep herders, whose flocks ate so closely as to ruin the feeding range for steers. The sheep would crop grass down to the very roots, setting back its growth for many months.

"No, I don't reckon it would be sheepers," murmured Slim. "Wa'al, mebby they know at the ranch. We'll be headin' home now, I guess. Come on there, you old tumble-bug!" he called to his horse, and then he raised his voice and roared:

"Leave me alone with a rope an' a saddle,  
Fold my spurs under my haid!  
Give me a can of them sweet, yaller peaches,  
'Cause why? My true-love is daid!"

Slim's horse started off on a lope, freshened by the rest, and Bud's followed. They topped the rise, and, then as the animals came within sight and smell of their stables, and caught the whiff of ever-welcome water, they dashed down the slope toward the green valley in which nestled the corral and buildings of Diamond X ranch.

"If I wasn't so doggoned tired," said Slim to Bud as they prepared to pull up on reaching the corral, "I'd ride over after supper, and see what that smoke was. I don't perzactly like it."

"Maybe I'll go," offered Bud. "If it *should* happen to be sheepers, dad'll want to know it."

"He shore will, son. But—Zow hippy! What's going on here?" cried Slim. He pointed toward the corral of the ranch—a fenced-off field where the cowboys kept their string of ponies when the animals were not in use. Here, too, spare animals were held against the time of need.

Just now a crowd of cowboys surrounded this corral. Some were perched on the rails of the fence, and others leaned over. Some were swinging their hats as though in encouragement, and one was rap-

idly emptying his gun on the defenseless air, which was further torn and shattered by wild yells.

As the two wayfarers neared the corral, there dashed from among the cattle punchers surrounding it an exceedingly fat cowboy, whose face, wreathed in smiles, was also wet with perspiration. He swung his hat around in a circle and yelled shrilly:

"Some ridin', boys! Some ridin'! Go to it!"

"What's the matter, Babe?" asked Slim, of his assistant who had thus given vent to his feelings.

"Go look! It's so good I don't want to spoil it!" laughed the fat one. "Two tenderfoots—Oh, my—Hole me up, somebody!" he begged. "Some ridin'!"

Bud had a glimpse, in the corral, of a youth about his own age, flying rapidly around the enclosure on the back of a bucking bronco. The lad was holding on with both arms around the horn of the saddle.

"Get him off!" cried Bud in a high pitched voice, as he recognized the pony to which the strange lad was clinging. "Tartar will kill him! Get him off!"



## CHAPTER II

### A CALL FOR HELP

Without waiting for his pony to come to a stop, Bud fairly flung himself out of the saddle, and with his rope, or lariat, coiled on his arm he ran toward the corral.

"What's matter?" demanded Babe Milton, the assistant foreman, pausing in his repeated exclamations of:

"Some ridin'! Some ridin'!"

"Don't you fellows know any better than to let a tenderfoot ride Tartar?" cried Bud. "That horse is next door to an outlaw, and you wouldn't get on him yourself, Babe!"

"You said an earful!" came the quick response. "I wouldn't!"

"Then how'd you come to let this fellow on? Who is he, anyhow?" cried Bud, as he slipped through a hunch of cowboys who opened to let him pass.

"Fresh tenderfoot," some one said.

"He would ride!" added another.

"Says he's your cousin," added a third ranch hand.

"My *cousin!*" cried Bud. Then he did not stop to do any more talking. He leaped the fence of the corral, and, as he did so he became aware of another stranger—a tenderfoot like the lad on Tartar—standing within the fenced-off place. This lad, who bore all the marks of a newly-arrived Easterner, was rather short and stout—not to say fat. He stood beside an ancient and venerable cow pony, which was never ridden when there was anything else in the corral to throw a saddle on. And this lad was gazing with fear-widened eyes at the figure of the other lad.

"Get off, Nort! Get off!" cried this stout lad.

"Don't tell him to do that!" ordered Bud sharply. "He'll break his neck sure! Stick, and I'll rope Tartar!" he shouted, trying to make his

voice heard above the thunder of the feet of the half-maddened horse, and the now somewhat subdued shouts of the cowboys.

Bud Merkel knew his business. He had not lived all his sixteen years on his father's ranch not to learn how to throw a skillful rope, and he now took his position just within the corral, and at a place where he could intercept the dashing outlaw, Tartar, as the animal came around again with the flapping lad clinging to his back.

"Can you manage, Bud?" called Slim, from his cross seat in his saddle, where he was looking on.

"I'll get him!" was the grim answer.

Many thoughts were shooting through the mind of Bud Merkel, not the least of which was the remark of Babe Milton to the effect that the lad on Tartar was Bud's cousin.

"Then the other must be, too," thought Bud as he swung his rope and directed a quick glance at the fat lad now hugging the inner rails of the corral fence. "But how'd they get here, and what made him try that outlaw?"

However, this was no time to spend in asking oneself questions. There was need of action, and it came a moment later.

Hissing and swishing through the air, the coils of Bud's lariat fell around the neck of the plunging, rearing, running Tartar. In another instant Bud had taken a turn or two around a post, and, by carefully applying a snubbing pressure, the pony was brought to a stop.

"Get down—quick!" ordered Bud when the horse was quiet enough to permit of this. And as the other lad obeyed, and shook himself together, limping over toward Bud the latter asked: "Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit," was the laughing answer. "I could 'a' stuck on. He couldn't throw me."

"Don't you fool yourself!" exclaimed Bud, while some of the cowboys went into the corral and loosened his lariat from the neck of the now subdued animal. Tartar, once the offending stranger was no longer on his back, seemed normal. "Don't you fool yourself! You couldn't have stayed on a second longer."

"Betcher I could!" came the quick response. "If you'll rope him again — —"

"Cut it out, Nort!" came from the fat lad, who looked enough like the daring rider to be his brother, as, indeed, he was.

"Oh, let me alone, Dick!" snapped the other. "I can ride!"

"Some ridin'! Oh, boy, some ridin'!" murmured the fat assistant foreman of Diamond X, while his companions grinned.

"You may know how to ride an ordinary horse," admitted Bud with a smile, as he coiled the rope which one of the men handed to him. "But Tartar isn't a regular pony. He's an outlaw, and even Del Pinzo won't take a chance on him. I don't see how they come to let you," he added, gazing somewhat reproachfully at the assembled cowboys.

They had begun to slink away, for they recognized the pseudo-authority held by the son of the ranch owner. Still they could justify their action, somewhat.

"He *wanted* to ride," declared Babe Milton. "Would have it so, and we roped Tartar for him. I told him your pa wouldn't like it if he was here, but — —"

"I reckon you thought you'd see some fun," said Bud, half smiling, for though he realized that the strange lad had been in some danger, he also realized that the cowboys, fond as they were of fun and practical jokes, would not have allowed the matter to go too far.

"It's up to me!" declared the slim lad, trying to brush some of the dust and horse hair from his clothes. "'Tisn't their fault at all."

"Good kid," murmured some of the cowboys, glad to be thus vindicated.

"I told him to keep off," said the fat lad, following Bud and the daring rider from the corral. "I told him to pick a quiet horse, but he said he wanted a buckler."

"He shore got it," chuckled Slim Degnan, as he ambled along. "He shore did!"

"Well, I'm glad you're not hurt," exclaimed Bud. "I guess you're my cousins; aren't you?" he asked, holding out his brown, muscular

hand to grasp the rather thinner and whiter palm of the lad who had been on Tartar.

"Yes, I'm Nort," was the response. "This is Dick, my brother. We're going to stay all summer—if you'll keep us," he added, with a whimsical smile. "And after this I'll let you pick my horses for me."

"It'll be safer, until you learn to ride," said Bud. "I mean learn to ride western cow ponies," he added quickly, for he did not want to assume this other lad could not ride.

"I guess I don't know so much as I thought I did," confessed Nort. "Though I did ride a lot at the Academy."

"Well, come on to the house," invited Bud. "Dad's away, but mother's there. Have you met her?"

"No," answered Nort. "We just got here. You see we came ahead of time. Happened to meet one of your wagons over at the depot, and rode out here in it. I sort of lost my head when I struck the ranch and wanted a ride right off the bat. I had it, too!" he added with a smile.

"Dad said something about you moseying out this way before snow flew," spoke Bud, as he walked with his cousins toward the main ranch house, which stood in the midst of a number of low red buildings, itself of the same structure and color. "But I didn't expect you so soon, or I'd 'a' been over to the station."

"It was all right—we didn't want any fussing," said Nort. "And, as I say, we started sooner than we expected. Didn't even write."

"No, I guess you didn't," admitted Bud. "Dad sort of mentioned, casual like, that you'd be along sooner or later, but he didn't get any word from you recently."

"Well, we're here, anyhow," spoke Dick, the fat youth, with a sigh of evident relief, as he looked back toward the corral.

"I just got in myself," said Bud. "Been away two days mending fence. Had to sleep out one night, and we weren't exactly prepared for it. But I'm mighty glad you've come! We can have some corking times. I'll get you ponies that'll be—er—better to ride than Tartar,"

he said, substituting the word "better" for that of "safer" which, at first, he had intended to use.

"That's good!" exclaimed Dick. "I don't claim to be any rider, though I can stick to the saddle once I land there," and he shot a side glance at his more impulsive brother.

"Oh, I could 'a' stuck if there'd been a *saddle*," declared Nort.

"That was the trouble. I'll ride Tartar yet!" he cried.

"Better go slow," advised Bud. "But there's mother in the door now, and I can smell grub. She'll be surprised to see you."

"Who's that girl?" asked Dick, as he noticed one standing beside the stout, motherly-looking woman in the doorway of the ranch house.

"That's my sister Nell," remarked Bud.

"Nell! Say, she has grown!" cried Nort. "I didn't know she was that big!"

"Oh, this is a good country for growing up in!" laughed Bud. "Here's Nort and Dick, Mother!" he called.

"Well, land sakes! I never expected to see *you* two!" cried Mrs. Merkel, hastily wiping off her mouth with the corner of her apron, preparatory to kissing her nephews. "Land! But you've grown!"

"Not any more than Nell!" declared Dick, as he kissed his aunt and girl cousin, an example gladly followed by Nort. For once the fat lad had beaten his slim brother to it.

"Why didn't you write? We didn't know you were coming for a month yet! Where's your trunks? How'd you get here? Come in and wash up and we'll have supper!"

All this Mrs. Merkel showered on the two "tenderfeet" in a breath, at the same time fairly "shooing" them into the house as a motherly hen might direct her chickens toward the feeding coop.

"Oh, we just pulled up stakes and lit out," laughed Nort. "We got tired of the East. Oh, but it's great here!" he exclaimed, as he looked back before entering the house, and saw, through the clear air, the

wonderful blue sky, and, in the distance, a range of mountains. "It's just what I dreamed it would be," he softly murmured.

"Glad you like it! We'll have some swell times!" voiced Bud. "But you want to get those duds off," he added, as he glanced at his cousin's clothes.

"We sure do!" declared Nick. "We've got outfits in our trunks. They're in the wagon. Maybe they aren't just the proper clothes for a ranch, but they're old things — —"

"The older the better!" interrupted Bud, and he was about to follow his cousins inside when Nell exclaimed:

"Some one is coming! Look!"

They all turned to observe a solitary horseman riding at top speed for the group of ranch buildings. He came from the direction where Bud and the foreman had seen the slim wisp of smoke about an hour before, and as he rode, the man shouted above the thundering thuds of his horse's hoofs:

"Help! Help! Can't you send help!"

## CHAPTER III

### A MYSTERIOUS SEARCH

Nort and Dick Shannon, Bud's "city cousins," seemed to realize, as did the young rancher, his mother and sister, that something was wrong. Prepared as Nort and Dick were for strange and sensational happenings in the west, they sensed that this was out of the ordinary.

The solitary rider had also attracted the attention of the cowboys who, the excitement at the corral being over, had turned toward their bunk house to prepare for the evening meal. Slim Degnan, the foreman, Babe, his assistant, and one or two others started forward as if to intercept the horseman. But a cowboy on foot is like a sailor off the deck—out of his element. They wore high-heeled shoes—boots made especially for the use of spurs, and they were not capable of rapid progress except on their steeds.

The lone rider was past them in a flash, turning into the lane that led toward the ranch house, where Bud and the others could not be seen, having turned at the call for help.

"What's the matter of him—locoed?" asked Babe.

"Looks that way," murmured Slim. "But Ma Merkel will know how to handle him, and Bud has his gun. Still, I don't know but we'd better mosey up that way, so as to sort of back the boy up, as long as his dad's away."

"My idea coincides," murmured Babe. "We'll prospect along up there," he called to the other cowboys, some of whom seemed to show a desire to rush to a possible rescue. "It'll be all right."

By the time the foreman and his assistant had reached the porch on which stood the two tenderfeet eastern lads, with Bud, his mother and sister, the lone horseman had dismounted, not with any degree of skill, however, but slipping off as though greatly fatigued, or rendered limp from fright.

"Can you send help to him?" he gasped, pointing back in the direction whence he had come. "If you don't they may kill him! Oh, such men! Such men!"

"Kill who? What's the matter? What sort of help do you need?" asked Bud quickly, while Nort and Dick looked at the excited man. He bore none of the marks of the west. His garb was of the East as his riding had been, though he sat a fairly good saddle, or he never could have ridden at the speed he did. But he had a good horse. Even Dick and Nort knew enough about animals to tell that. The pony, his sides heaving and his nostrils distended, gave this not altogether mute evidence of his race against time.

"It's Professor Wright," came the panting answer. "He's off there— with his prospecting party. I'm his assistant!"

"I thought he looked like a professor," murmured Dick to Nort.

"Keep still!" sharply commanded Nort.

"I am Professor J. Elwell Blair," went on the still greatly excited rider, "an assistant to Professor Wright. We are camped about three miles from here, over there," and he waved his hand toward where Bud and Slim, on their homeward ride, had seen the wisp of smoke. "Some Mexicans threaten to attack us," went on the man who called himself Professor Blair. "In fact they had already started when Professor Wright bade me ride for help. We knew there was a ranch over in this direction. Can you send us help?" he asked anxiously.

"Sure!" exclaimed Bud.

"Oh, if your father were only here!" murmured Mrs. Merkel.

"Our boys are enough!" declared Nell, with sparkling eyes. "I wish I might go!" she added. "Can't I?"

"No indeed!" declared her mother. "The idea! You must take Slim with you!" she called after Bud, for he was already half way down the lane leading to the corral, calling on Professor Blair to follow, and shouting to Nort and Dick:

"Come on, if you want to see some lively doings!" Bud invited.

"We sure do!" yelled Nort.

"Hadn't we better change our clothes?" asked the slower Dick.