



## The LOST HERDS!

By PERCY A. CLARKE

### THE FIRST CHAPTER

#### THE TRAIL TO NOWHERE

**T**HE cattle stood or lay huddled together in the moonlight out on the wide mesquite plain.

Now and again a plaintive lowing would answer the shrill yapping of a coyote away in the distance. A camp fire glowed dully near by, revealing one figure lying shrouded in a horse blanket, while the glowing end of a cigarette showed where another man kept watch over the Double-H herd.

It was a peaceful scene—but the peace didn't last. Suddenly, away to the westward, a flaming flare shot

hissing into the sky. It was followed by another—and a third.

"Suffering snakes!" howled Bill Parker, starting to his feet.

The cattle, bellowing with fear, milled together, jostling, rearing, terror in their eyes.

"Stampede!" cried Bill, grabbing his buddy by the shoulder to arouse him. "Dirk! Quick!

Stampede!"

The cattle broke and fled as another flare went up. The thunder of their hoofs was enough to drag Dirk Robbins from sleep.

"What'n heck——" he blurted out.

*Where do the Double-H herds disappear to? And who are the rustlers? These are mysteries that two stalwart cowboy pals have got to solve to save themselves from the "calaboose"!*

Bill was seizing the halter of his horse. Dirk cast the blanket from him. His own cayuse was rearing and snorting with terror, and jerked the tethering pin clean out of the ground. Another second and he would have bolted, but with a frantic dive Dirk flung himself forward and grabbed the dangling rope. The next moment he was in the saddle of the bucking pony and galloping away over the mesquite in the rear of the stampeding herd.

He came level with Bill, who was riding like a demon.

"What's it mean, Bill?" he panted.

"I'll be gol-darned if I know!" grunted Bill. "Three flares I saw. Guess it was enough to scatter the beefs, and we've gotta catch 'em. Look! There goes another!"

To the north, this time, the flame shot up in the darkness, and vanished. Brief though its appearance had been, it was enough to swing the terrified steers towards the south.

"Heck!" exclaimed Dirk, as yet another flare hissed up to the southward. "Rustlers!"

"Ride, buddy!" snapped Bill. "Mebbe we'll turn 'em."

They rode for all they were worth, but the herd kept well ahead of them. Their cayuses gave of their best, but with streaming tails the terrified steers headed east at a speed that was amazing.

The dust flew up in dense, choking clouds that at times completely hid the cattle from the two pursuing cow-punchers. Dirk and Bill said no more—they couldn't. The dust was in their eyes and nostrils as they crouched over their horses' heads.

The pace was terrific, and the ground fairly shook beneath the thunder of the stampeding hoofs. The buddies' horses were the best the

Double-H ranch could produce, but they couldn't catch up with the terrified cattle that pelted eastward in a panic.

"We'll never turn 'em," panted Bill.

"Know this country?" queried Dirk.

"Not much."

"I do—a bit. Guess there's cliffs where we're heading. The brutes'll sure hev to turn mighty soon now. Keep going."

"Hi—yip!" yelled Bill. But he might have been crooning a love song for all the notice the herd took of him.

But sure enough mountains appeared away beyond the tossing horns of the cattle. The mesquite plain seemed to end in precipitous cliffs.

"Got 'em!" grunted Bill.

They wanted a chance to turn the terrified beasts, to get them milling round and round in circles until they stopped from sheer exhaustion, which is the only way of dealing with stampeding cattle.

But suddenly flares went hissing up into the darkness to north and south.

"Heck!" growled Bill.

The cattle seemed to shoot ahead faster than ever, straight for the towering cliffs. The two buddies followed and the thunder of hoofs echoed in the confines of a gorge, barely twenty yards wide.

The cattle blocked it completely from side to side, but they kept travelling. The dust was like a dense fog, only worse, on account of the grit. Bill and Dirk, racing on, urging their horses to fresh endeavours, could see nothing except the swirling dust.

But they held on grimly, the perspiration streaming down their faces, their horses in a lather—on, on, down the echoing gorge.

Suddenly Bill stooped and pointed to the floor of the sheriff's office. "Look!" he exclaimed. Dirk started—for clearly to be seen were the imprints of moccasined feet! "Indians!" he gasped.



The dawn began to show over the mountain peaks and the shadows faded. The ponies were showing signs of flagging, and the herd, lost to view in the wreathing clouds of dust, had drawn ahead of the pals. Try as they might they could not gain on the runaways.

There were no more flares—no need for them. The terrified cattle were not likely to stop for another hour or more.

Then the gorge ended, so suddenly that it took the pals by surprise. They found themselves riding over a treeless, grassless plain—a desert, in fact—where the air, even at dawn, was hot and stifling.

Away ahead rose a cloud of dust to

show where the herd still stampeded, and the cowboys followed, grimly, remorselessly, but at a slower speed as their horses slackened in distress.

"What's it mean?" queried Bill hoarsely.

"Rustlers, I guess," returned Dirk. "But—look! The dust's clearing, and——"

His voice trailed away into a gasp of utter amazement. A gentle breeze from the mountains flung the dust up into the air in spirals. It rose, thinned out, faded, and vanished.

So had the herd! Away to the misty horizon stretched the arid desert—miles and miles of reddish dust with boulders here and there, but not a sign of a single steer. The earth



might have opened and swallowed them up for all the pals could tell.

"Now what d'you know 'bout that?" gasped Bill.

"Guess they were moving faster'n we thought, an' we couldn't see 'em for dust."

"You're telling me!" grunted Bill. "But we kin see fer miles right now on this blamed desert, and steers don't go up in steam, no-how. Where'n heck hev they gone, an' what do we do now?"

"There's the trail, I guess," said Dirk. "Got'ny water?"

"Not a drop."

"No more have I, and this is the Salt Pan desert, the hottest spot on this blamed continent—below sea-level, if you know what that means. The sun is rising."

"Let's be moving," growled Bill.

He wasn't troubling about the risks just then. Nor was Dirk. They followed the trail left by the stampeding herd, but it didn't take them far. It suddenly ceased.

The sandy dust gave place to bare rock—as bare as the back of a man's hand—on which no boot or hoof could leave a mark. It stretched for miles before them. It was hopeless to attempt to find the vanished herd. The trail just led nowhere.

They parted and tried different directions, but hours of arduous search found them beaten and baffled. To make matters worse the sun rose above the mountain peaks and scorched down in fury.

And they had no water! The Salt Pan was known to them by reputation as a spot that had never been explored—a grilling desert where men went mad and died. And the herd—it had gone—vanished.

"Better get back hot-foot and report," said Dirk.

He spoke scarcely above a whisper and his voice was only a croak, for his lips were blackened and cracking and his tongue was swollen for want of water. Bill was in no better plight, and their horses were drooping pitifully.

Bill turned his pony, and they rode back slowly through the gorge, back the way they had come, and out on to the mesquite plain until they came to their hurriedly deserted camp. They pounced on the water flasks, but before they attended to their own wants the horses were cared for and given water.

"Waal," drawled Bill eventually. "A fine pair of goofs we're goin' ter be. 'Where'n heck's the herd?' the boss'll ask. 'Turned into nothing and gorn to be ghosts,' we'll say. 'Vanished into thin air afore our very eyes.' And he'll sure clap us in an asylum or something. And, further, buddy—what's that?"

He stepped away from the dead fire and, stooping, picked up something that glittered from the ground. He held it in the palm of his gnarled hand. It was a sheriff's badge of office.

"Jake Morton's, for a million," he said harshly. "And Jake allus was a crook, to my way o' thinkin'."

"Steady, buddy," put in Dirk. "I know you never cottoned on to the sheriff o' Canyon Gulch. Come to that, he ain't the sort I'd make a pal of. But that don't connect him with the loss of the herd. There ain't no reason why he couldn't ha' come riding this way any time in the past week and lost that by accident. We're goin' to look fools enough when we tell our tale to the boss, wi'out makin' things worse by accusing the sheriff wi' no proof to back us up."

"H'm, mebbe you're right, Dirk,"

agreed Bill reluctantly. "Guess I'll keep the badge, all the same. There's been dirty work, anyway. Solid steers don't go fading into nothing—but, heck, those did, Dirk. What d'you make of it?"

"I can't make a thing!" snapped Dirk irritably. "That herd vanished. Guess somebody helped 'em vanish. It's a mystery—and not the first that's happened in the Salt Pan. I'm goin' back to tell the boss, then I'll stock up wi' grub and water, and I'll ride that Salt Pan from end to end. I'll turn over every darned rock there till I solve the blamed mystery! See? Come on! Ride!"

It was a puzzled and disconsolate pair that took the trail back to the Double-H Ranch. Sam May, the boss, met them with utter consternation.

"You ain't been to Dallas City and back. Where's the herd?" he rapped out.

"Guess they're ghosts be now," said Bill.

"Ghosts? Is this rustling, or crooked stuff, you're handing me?" roared the boss. "Where's my herd?"

"Steady, boss," said Dirk. "It's a mystery. I'll tell you."

He explained all that had happened, just as he had seen it happen, and Sam May's face grew darker and darker.

"Vanished, eh?" he snapped, when Dirk had finished. "D'you boys happen to know that if I don't meet that contract at Dallas City I'll be ruined and hev to sell out?"

"Sure, boss, I knew things wasn't too good," said Bill. "But I never guessed they was that bad."

"Well, they are. Thought I'd pull through, but now—the herd's gone—vanished." His face was ashen as he saw plain ruin confronting him.

Suddenly a hard glitter came to his eyes as if an idea had occurred to him. With lightning speed he drew a bead on the pals, a six-shooter in each hand.

"Reach for it, you coyotes!" he snapped. "Lively, now. You don't pull this stuff——"

"Boss!" cried Dirk, raising his hands, as Bill did the same. "We're not double-crossing you. Honest to——"

"Cut it out. Yew c'n talk to the judge!" retorted Sam May.

He fired one shot in the air, and men came running to his assistance.

"Take their hardware, boys. Tie 'em up and ride 'em into Canyon Gulch. Guess I'll tote along with 'em and see 'em stowed in the calaboose. I ain't having fifty head o' cattle rustled under me very nose. Vanished in thin air, eh? Expect me to believe that sort o' yarn? Heck! I wasn't born yesterday. If you didn't rustle 'em yourselves you was bribed to let it happen."

Bill burst into a torrent of indignation, but Dirk stopped him.

"I'll talk, Bill," he said. "Listen, boss. You're making a terrible mistake. I tell you——"

"Can it!" interrupted Sam May. "Another crack from either of you and I'll gag you. Git going, boys."

Three hours later Bill and Dirk, disarmed, were in the lock-up at Canyon Gulch. Sam May was in the office talking to Jake Morton, the sheriff.

"And I'd ha' gone bail on them two being straight," he was saying.

"Money'll tempt any man, boss," said the sheriff. "Mebbe Black Burgis of the Three Bees' outfit bribed 'em. You know how Burgis has hated you ever since you beat him in the Dallas City contract?"

"Sure!" cried Sam May. "Never thought o' that, Jake. But I'm not whacked yet. I'll send another herd to Dallas City right away. I'll have men riding the range along Burgis' borders so's he can't steal out on my herd wi'out someone seeing him. What's more, the cattle kin leave home at midnight so's they'll be crossing the mesquite at sun-up. Guess Black Burgis'll hev to be slick to horn in this time."

## THE SECOND CHAPTER

### THE MOCCASIN MARK I

"WHAT'N heck d'you think you're doing?" queried Dirk.

Bill was squatting on the floor of the cell over by the door, using his drinking water to wet the stone step that protruded from the bottom of the door, and industriously chafing one of his spurs, sharpening it until it was worn down to a point, with the appearance of a stout stiletto.

He glanced up with a queer grin on his bronzed face.

"If solid steers kin fade into nothing in the middle of the Salt Pan, guess we kin fade out o' this lock-up," he said.

Dirk stooped so that he could whisper to his pal.

"How's that going to help us?" he asked. "The boss was hasty. Mebbe he was rattled some, Bill. He can't prove a thing against us."

"That won't stop him losin' the second herd he sends to Dallas City, bo!" retorted Bill grimly. "He told the sheriff, and I've got a hunch Jake Morton's at the bottom of this."

"Hunches won't help!" snapped Dirk. Then he straightened, a gleam in his eyes. "But, Bill, old pard, if we kin get out o' here to-night we kin ride scout on that herd, watch that gorge, and——"

"Nix on the plans for a bit, chum," said Bill. "Let's win clear first."

He worked on his spur diligently, and the hours dragged by. After dark the sheriff went the rounds of his lock-up, then vanished. For a time the pals heard the rumble of voices in the office, then a door slammed, someone galloped away, and all was silence.

"Time we went," said Bill. He tried to speak calmly, but his voice was tremulous with excitement.

He was working away at the lock on the door with his specially prepared spur. It seemed like ages before the thing clicked sharply and the door opened.

Stealthily they crept out into the passage and along to the sheriff's office. There was not a sound. The shades were drawn over the window. Dirk found matches and lit a candle, setting it on the desk.

He was going about things deftly, calmly, and with a fixed purpose. He opened a drawer in the desk and took out two six-shooters and a supply of ammunition.

But Bill was studying the office suspiciously, as if he expected to find proof of the sheriff's guilt before his eyes.

Suddenly he stooped to the floor, pointing.

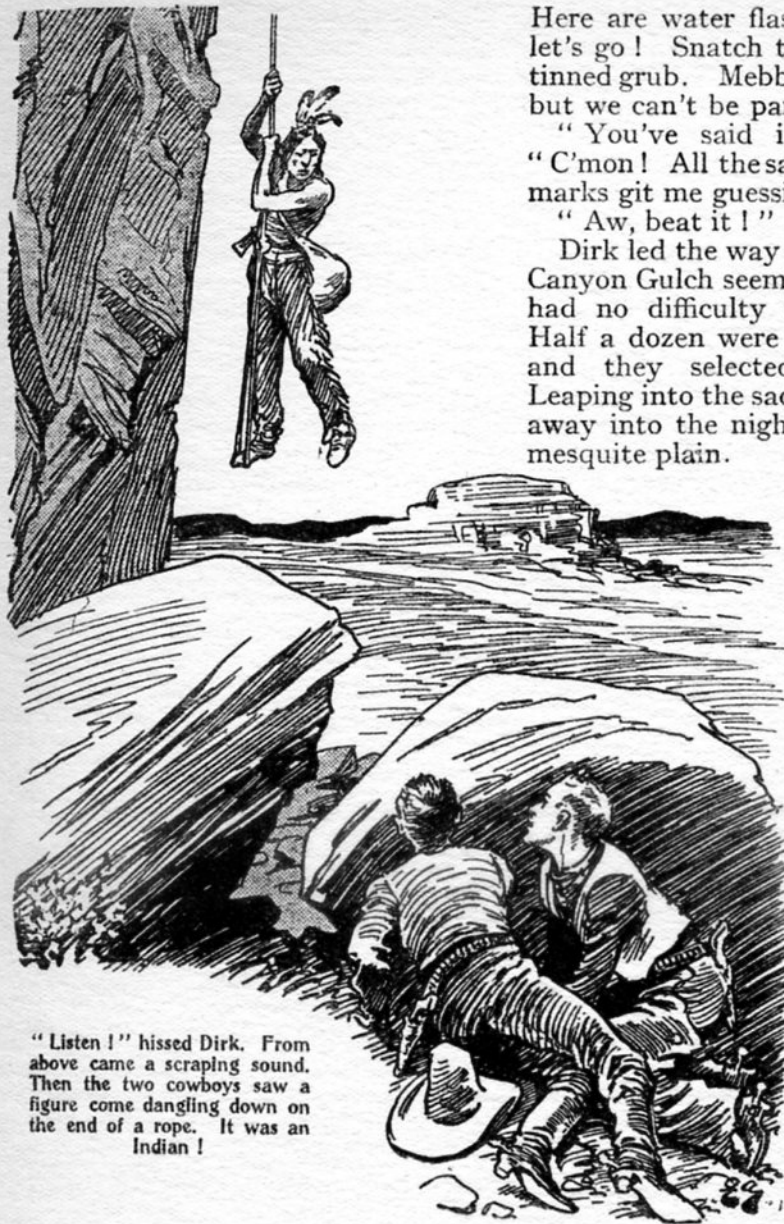
"Look!" he exclaimed, in a husky whisper.

Dirk stared too, for on the boards were the clear imprints of feet. Mostly they were made by boots—the sheriff's boots, maybe. But clearly to be seen were marks made by moccasined feet.

"Indians!" he gasped.

"One Injun," said Bill. "And there ain't been Injuns in these parts for the past ten years. That I do know. What's it mean, Dirk! How





"Listen!" hissed Dirk. From above came a scraping sound. Then the two cowboys saw a figure come dangling down on the end of a rope. It was an Indian!

come we never knew there was Injuns hereabouts?"

"Does that matter now?" retorted Dirk impatiently. "Here—hang on to this gun—and these shells.

Here are water flasks. Fill 'em and let's go! Snatch that loaf and some tinned grub. Mebbe it's near stealing, but we can't be particular."

"You've said it," growled Bill. "C'mon! All the same—the moccasin marks git me guessing, Dirk."

"Aw, beat it!"

Dirk led the way out into the night. Canyon Gulch seemed deserted. They had no difficulty in finding horses. Half a dozen were in the compound, and they selected the best two. Leaping into the saddles they galloped away into the night, heading for the mesquite plain.

There was neither sight nor sound of pursuit. Canyon Gulch was not a big place, and the townsfolk expected the sheriff to look after his own prisoners. But the sheriff wasn't at home that night—which was peculiar, to say the least.

"Mebbe he's out helping Sam May keep a watch on Black Burgis," suggested Dirk.

"And mebbe not," retorted Bill. "Jake Morton's a

snake, Dirk. Guess he's more likely to be fixing up how to stampede the second herd into the gorge."

"I wonder," mused Dirk.

He said no more. But his brain

was busy as he rode. They kept on at a fair lick along the mesquite and came to where the plain ended abruptly in a steep cliff that rose high above them.

They rode in close under the cliff and about ten yards from the mouth of the gorge Dirk called a halt. The night was dark, but he had seen a cave in the cliff, with a boulder at the mouth.

"What now?" asked Bill, dismounting.

"Guess this is where we wait and watch," replied Dirk. "Put the cayuses in the cave and we'll lie doggo behind this rock."

"Okay," grunted Bill. "But don't it strike you, Dirk, that us breaking out o' the calaboose makes it look like we are guilty?"

"Too late to worry about that," said Dirk. "We were framed, Bill, and I don't sit down under it."

"Nor me."

"Besides," Dirk went on grimly. "You got a hunch the sheriff's a crook and I've got a hunch the second herd will be stampeded just like the first. Some crook, or crooks, has got a cute stunt on in the Salt Pan desert. It's succeeded once and he'll try it again. But mind, Bill. When I yells for action, don't stop to argue. Jump to it."

"I'm with you, pard," growled Bill.

They stabled the horses in the cave, ready to hand, and out of sight, while they crouched behind the boulder and waited for dawn. The cliff bulged out above their heads and hid them from view of anyone who chanced to be up on the mountains. Not that they expected any sort of danger from that direction.

The hours went by slowly, and it was cold out on the mesquite. Just before dawn the darkness was more

intense than ever, and it was then that Dirk's hand clamped hard on Bill's arm.

"Listen!" he hissed. "Injuns!"

From above them came a strange scraping, shuffling noise. Then through the gloom they saw a figure dangling on the end of a rope. It was an Indian, but what tribe he belonged to it was too dark to see. But both the cowpunchers observed that a bundle of some sort dangled from his belt.

He dropped from the rope, landing without a sound, and slunk off into the darkness and vanished. He was followed by another—and another—half a dozen in all. They went off in different directions—two out due west, two to the north and two to the south.

"What's in them bundles?" whispered Bill.

"Quiet!" hissed Dirk. "Dawn's coming, I guess. Hear anything?"

Somewhere out on the mesquite a stock whip cracked and the breeze carried the shrill "Hi-yip" of a cowpuncher.

"I kin smell 'em," whispered Bill, sniffing the wind. "The boss is driving 'em fast, I reckon."

"If anything's to happen it'll happen right now, before the light's too good," suggested Dirk.

He peered through the gloom. The sun was rising, but the mountains to the east prevented the rays reaching the mesquite as yet. Over the surface of the plain hung a dense mist that even the morning breeze could not, as yet, disperse.

And suddenly it happened. Away to the west a huge tongue of flame shot up into the sky, hissing like a thousand serpents. But there was a difference from the night before, for the fire travelled along towards the



A THRILLING INCIDENT ON THE WESTERN RANGES



Facing page 161

**REDSKIN RAIDERS!**

*Specially painted for "Holiday Annual" by D. C. Eyles.*

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herd that broke in terror and bolted for it.

To the south and north more flares appeared. They too seemed to move along the ground, hissing and crackling in a way that sounded terrifying in the stillness of the dawn.

Out of the mist appeared the herd, with tossing horns and streaming tails, the thunder of their hoofs making the earth tremble. Behind them sounded the cracking of whips and the startled yells of the cow-punchers. But Dirk and Bill knew from experience that nothing short of exhaustion would stop that stampede, and the fire was travelling all the time, keeping level with the startled beasts, to the north and the south, heading them towards the gorge where the pals waited and watched.

"The horses!" snapped Dirk. "Ride for it!"

Bill didn't argue or question. He was in the saddle as quickly as Dirk, and knee to knee they rode out on to the mesquite, and into the gorge, barely thirty yards ahead of the stampeding cattle.

"Say!" panted Bill, as he rode like a man possessed. "What's the idea? Them cattle hev got to vanish in the Salt Pan."

"Sure," snapped back Dirk. "This is where we solve the mystery. Keep ahead of 'em, Bill. When they vanish, guess we'll hev to vanish, too!"

Bill guffawed as he urged his horse onward beside Dirk's.

"I git you, Pard! Ride for it! Hi-yip!"

### THE THIRD CHAPTER

#### THE VANISHING TRICK!

THE sun was sucking up the mist and scorching down as they rode madly along the gorge with a herd of terrified cattle thundering

behind them. The dust rose in dense, suffocating clouds, but this time the pals were ahead of it. But if anything happened—the slightest mischance—a loose stone to turn a horse's foot—it would mean certain death beneath those stampeding hoofs.

The speed was terrific, and it was all the horses could do to keep ahead of the herd. The pals crouched over their ponies' manes, urging them on, helping them over the rocks that strewed the floor of the gorge.

The din echoed and re-echoed amongst the crannies of the cliffs on either side, but suddenly another sound startled the pals—a shrill whooping and yelling, and the rattle of rifle fire, while bullets hummed around their heads.

They had been seen, and their presence ahead of the herd that was to vanish was obviously resented.

Bill turned his head, gazing over his shoulder up at the cliffs that bordered the gorge. On the plateau at the top rode a number of Indians in full war-paint!

"Piyutes!" he roared. "How about the moccasin mark in the sheriff's——"

He got no further. Half-way up the cliff more Indians appeared from behind the boulders. They were on foot. One warrior took careful aim and fired, and Bill's horse stumbled and fell, shot through the head, while Bill took a header in the dust, full in the path of the stampeding cattle.

Bill was on his feet as Dirk rode alongside him, freeing one stirrup.

"Leave me!" panted Bill.

"Git up, you tarnation fool!" snapped Dirk.

He grabbed Bill's shoulder and helped him up into the stirrup. By



that time the snorting, plunging, speeding cattle were almost on top of them.

Dirk flogged his horse, but the animal couldn't make the speed with a double load. The terrified herd was gaining on them.

Dirk reined his horse round, riding close in under the cliff behind a spur of rock. Dismounting, he and Bill drew the horse close in, and the men and the cayuse crouched there as the thundering herd floundered past, snorting, bellowing with fear, rushing ahead blindly towards the Salt Pan desert.

"The boys'll be riding on the tail of the herd," said Bill.

He spoke huskily, for he couldn't be sure what sort of reception he and Dirk would receive at the hands of the Double-H outfit, now.

But no cowpunchers appeared. The last of the herd went by, the choking dust settled down, and silence descended in the gorge.

"Funny," muttered Dirk.

"Hev they funked it?" queried Bill. "Mebbe they went back for help."

"Anyway," said Dirk. "I'm going to follow the herd. Guess my plan went wrong. I never calculated on them Piyutes showing up like that. Let's go."

But the one remaining horse was crippled, and limped badly. Dirk tethered it close to the rock out of harm's way, and they proceeded on foot.

The Indians had vanished, maybe thinking that the pals had perished under the hoofs of the herd. The cattle had gone out into the desert, but they had left a trail which the pals followed.

On and on they plodded, as the sun rose higher and hotter. They came

out of the gorge and proceeded on along the trail across the terrible Salt Pan desert. It was slow work on foot, but they stuck to it grimly until the trail ended abruptly, as it had done before, where the bare rock began.

"Listen, Bill," said Dirk. "Maybe we'll peg out in this desert. You don't have to come with me if you don't want to, but I'm aiming to find the truth or leave my bones here."

"Aw, don't talk so much, buddy," growled Bill. "Which way do we go?"

"Straight on, I guess," returned Dirk. "Cattle usually run like that. We keep straight on."

They continued, keeping a course in line with a distant mountain peak, to prevent them walking in circles. They were two insignificant specks in a vast desolate expanse, and the sun beat down upon them mercilessly.

Sipping at their water sparingly, they held on their way for a couple of hours.

"Notice anything?" asked Dirk eventually.

"Sure," said Bill. "The ground's rising all the way."

"Here's the ridge, though."

They crossed it and found that the bare rock surface of the desert went down in a long, gentle gradient on the other side. After plodding down this slope for half an hour they glanced back to discover that the mountains and the gorge through which they had come were completely hidden.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Bill. "That's how the cattle vanished. The dust hid 'em, and by the time it had cleared they was over the ridge and out o' sight. And a thousand cattle couldn't rise dust off this rock. We're on the right trail, buddy."

The slope became steeper the farther they went, and suddenly it





"Look out!" roared Dirk, and he spun round, his revolver spitting fire. Bill was at his back as a party of savage warriors rushed at them. But above the din of fighting rose another roar—as Sam May, at the head of his punchers, rode to the rescue!

swooped down to a gulch that ran southward like a long cleft in the earth. At the bottom of this gulch the dust was thick, and bore the imprints of hoofs.

"Heck! We're gitting warm!" exclaimed Bill. "And look here!"

He picked up an Indian's feather from the trail.

"Stationed here to head the herd south," said Dirk, drawing his gun. "Guess we'll solve this mystery mighty slick."

But he spoke too soon. The gulch continued for five miles or more. It was like walking along a tremendous rut left by a cart-wheel.

As the pals plodded on, covered with dust, their clothes saturated with perspiration, the gulch dropped deeper and deeper, cut through a spur of the mountains, so that the peaks towered thousands of feet above their heads, then suddenly came out on the edge of a fertile valley!

"Suffering snakes!" gasped Bill.

Green grass, trees, cattle browsing peacefully in the shade—who could have suspected the existence of such a place in the heart of a desert? A stream trickled down from the hills and wound its course across the pasturage.

But Dirk saw other things away beyond the trees.

"Tepees!" he cried. "The Piyutes' village. And, say—is that a white man?"

"Jake Morton, for a million!" snapped Bill.

They crept out into the valley, crawling from tree to tree until they were on the verge of the village, crouched behind a thorn bush, watching a white man who was obviously bargaining with the be-feathered chief of the Piyutes. It was Jake Morton, the sheriff of Canyon Gulch!

"The snake!" hissed Bill. "If I could only——"

"Look out!" roared Dirk.

He spun round, his revolver spitting fire. Bill was at his back as a party of warriors rushed at them. The savage bronzed and painted faces glowered all round them. Their guns empty, the two chums clubbed them and fought madly, dodging the whirling tomahawks until a rifle butt crashed on Bill's head and brought him down.

Dirk stood over his pal and fought. He didn't expect mercy and asked for none. He knew that Jake Morton wouldn't want any living witnesses to get back to Canyon Gulch.

But another roar rose high above the bedlam—a ringing cheer and the thunder of hoofs. Dirk stared as the Indians before him broke and fled, scuttling for safety.

Sam May, the boss of the Double-H, was riding in at the head of his punchers.

Dirk saw Jake Morton bend almost double and dive for the bushes, and he flung himself at the crook. The sheriff wheeled with a snarl of hate and brought up his six-shooter. Before he could let fly, however, Dirk smashed his fist full in his face, and the man dropped with scarcely a moan, out to the wide.

Dirk, dazed and bewildered, stood over him what time Bill rose groggily to his feet.

"Guess my hunch was right, pard," he said. "But here's the boss."

Sam May, astride his horse, was grinning down at them, a trifle awkwardly.

"Howdy, boys? All sound, I hope? Guess I treated you two kinder rough. I was sure rattled over the loss of the herd, you see. Might ha' known you two weren't crooked. I was out on the mesquite afore dawn watching for trouble, and saw you two go into hiding by the gorge. At first I thought you were crooked, but when I saw them Piyutes I tumbled to your game. I rode back for help and came along with every man I could rustle, and then—well, guess we followed your trail right here. Your yarn was correct all the time, and the crooks pulled the deal twice."

"But the fire which scared the cattle *travelled* the second time," said Bill. "How was that done?"

"Simple," explained the boss. "The sheriff had given them Indians cans of oil and they laid trails from one flare to another."

"Cute," remarked Dirk. "But I guess there won't be any more vanishing herds round these parts."

He was right. The Piyutes were cleared out, and Jake Morton went to jail. Bill Parker is sheriff now at Canyon Gulch, and Sam May's range boss is Dirk Robbins.

The Double-H met the Dallas City contract and have prospered ever since. As for Black Burgis of the Three Bees, he never had anything to do with the business, which, but for Dirk and Bill, would have brought ruin to their boss.

THE END