

Bennet Robert Ames

# Out of the Depths: A Romance of Reclamation



Robert Bennet

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# Содержание

CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	17
CHAPTER V	20
CHAPTER VI	25
CHAPTER VII	31
CHAPTER VIII	36
CHAPTER IX	40
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

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TO

**“THE SONS OF MARTHA”**

## CHAPTER I

### DEEP CAÑON

The hunter was riding leisurely up the steep mountain side above Dry Mesa. On such an ascent most city men would have preferred to climb afoot. But there was a month's layer of tan on the hunter's handsome, supercilious face. He balanced himself lightly on his flat English saddle, and permitted the wiry little cow pony to pick the best path over the ledges and up the stiff slopes between the scattered pines.

In keeping with his saddle, the hunter wore English riding breeches and leggings. Otherwise he was dressed as a Texas cowboy of the past generation. His sombrero was almost Mexican in its size and ornateness. But his rifle was of the latest American pattern, and in place of the conventional Colt's he carried an automatic pistol. As his horse patiently clambered with him up towards the top of the escarpment the man gazed indolently about between half-closed eyelids and inhaled the smoke from an unbroken "chain" of gilt-tipped cigarettes.

The pony scrambled up the last ledges and came to a halt on the rim of High Mesa. It had been a long, hard climb. Tough as he was and mountain bred, the beast's rough coat was lathered with sweat and his flanks were heaving. The hunter's gaze roamed carelessly over the hilly pine-clad plateau of the upper mesa, while he took a nip of brandy from a silver-cased flask and washed it down with a drink of the tepid water in his canteen.

Having refreshed himself, he touched a patent lighter to another cigarette, chose a direction at random, and spurred his pony into a canter. The beast held to the pace until the ascent of a low but steep ridge brought him down to a walk. With the change of gait the hunter paused in the act of lighting a fresh cigarette, to gaze up at the sapphire sky. The air was reverberating with a muffled sound like distant thunder. Yet the crystal-clear dome above him showed no trace of a cloud all across from the magnificent snowy ranges on the east and north to the sparsely wooded mountains and sage-gray mesas to the south and west.

"Can't be thunder," he murmured—"no sign of a storm. Must be a stream. Ah! cool, fresh water!"

The sharp-roweled spurs goaded the pony up over the round of the ridge as fast as he could scramble. At the top he broke into a lope and raced headlong down the other side of the ridge through the tall brush. The reverberating sound of water was clearer but still muffled and distant.

The rider let his reins hang slack and recklessly dug in his spurs. The pony leaped ahead with still greater speed and burst out of the brush on to a narrow open slope that led down to the brink of a cañon. The hunter saw first the precipice on the far side of the yawning chasm—then the near edge, seemingly, to his startled gaze, right under his horse's forefeet. He was dashing straight at the frightful abyss.

A yell of terror burst from his lips, and he sought to fling himself backwards and sideways out of the saddle. His instinctive purpose was to fall to the ground and clutch the grass tufts. But in the same moment that he tried to throw himself off, the nimble pony swerved to the left so abruptly that the man's effort served only to keep himself balanced on the saddle. Had he remained erect or flung himself to the other side he must have been hurled off and down over the precipice.

Nor was the danger far from past. Carried on down the slope by the momentum of their headlong rush, the plunging pony "skidded" to the very brink of the precipice. Though the man shrank down and sought to avert his face, he caught a glimpse of the black depths below them as, snorting with fear, the pony wrenched himself around on the rim shelf of the edge.

For an instant—an instant that was an age of sickening suspense to his rider—the pony toppled. But before the man could shriek out his horror, the agile beast had recovered his balance and was

scrambling around, away from the edge. He plunged a few yards up the slope, and stopped, wheezing and blowing.

The man flung the reins over the pony's head and slipped to the ground. For a minute or longer he lay outstretched, limp and white-faced. When he looked up, the pony was stolidly cropping a tuft of grass. Beasts are not often troubled with imagination. The hunter remembered his brandy flask. After two long pulls at its contents, the vivid coloring began to return to his cheeks.

He rose to his feet and walked down to a ledge on the brink of the precipice with an air of bravado. But when he looked over into the chasm, he quickly shrank back and crouched on his hands and knees. Before again peering over he stretched himself out flat on the level ledge and grasped an out-jutting point of rock.

Beneath his dizzy eyes the precipitous sides of the cañon dropped away seemingly into the very bowels of the earth,—far down in sheer unbroken walls of black rock for hundreds and thousands of feet. He flattened closer to the rock on which he lay, and sought to pierce with his gaze the blue-black shadows of the stupendous rift. Every nerve in his body tingled; his ankles ached with the exquisite pain of that overpowering sight.

The chasm was so narrow and its depth so great that only in one place did the noonday sun strike down through its gloomy abyss to the bottom. At that single spot he could distinguish the foam and flash of the rushing waters, but elsewhere his only evidence of the sunken torrent beneath him was the ceaseless reverberations that came rolling up out of the depths.

“*Mon Dieu!*” he muttered. “To think I came so near—!.. Must be what they call Deep Cañon.”

He crept away from the brink. As he rose to his feet his trembling fingers automatically placed a cigarette between his lips and applied the patent lighter. Soothed by the narcotic, he stood gazing across at the far side of the cañon while he sucked in and slowly exhaled the smoke. With the last puff he touched a fresh cigarette to the butt of the first, thrust it between his lips, and snipped the cork stub over the edge into the cañon.

“There you are—take that!” he mocked the abyss.

As he turned away he drew out an extremely thin gold watch. The position of the hour hand brought a petulant frown to his white forehead. He hastened to mount his pony. Short as had been the rest, the wiry little animal had regained his wind and strength. Stung by the spurs, he plunged up the side of the ridge and loped off along its level top, parallel with the cañon.

The hunter drew his rifle from its saddle sheath and began to scrutinize the country before him in search of game. A pair of weather-beaten antlers so excited him that he even forgot to maintain his chain of cigarettes. His dark eyes shone bright and eager and his full red lips grew tense in resolute lines that completely altered the previous laxity of his expression.

He had covered nearly a mile when he was rewarded for his alertness by a glimpse of a large animal in the chaparral thicket before him. He drew rein to test the wind in approved book hunter fashion. There was not a breath of air stirring. The mesa lay basking in the dry, hot stillness of the July afternoon. He set the safety catch of his rifle, ready for instant firing, stretched himself flat on his pony's neck, and started on.

The animal in the thicket moved slowly to the right, as if grazing. At frequent intervals the hunter caught glimpses of its roan side, but could not see its head or the outline of its body. At seventy-five yards, fearful that his game might take fright and bolt, he turned his horse sideways, and slipped down to aim his rifle across the saddle. It was his first deer. He waited, twitching and quivering with “buck fever.”

Part of the fore quarters of the animal became visible to his excited gaze through a small gap in the screening bushes. The muzzle of his rifle wobbled all around the mark. Unable to steady it, he caught the sights as they wavered into line, and pulled the trigger.

The report of the shot was followed by a loud *bawl* and a violent crashing in the thicket. There could be no doubt that the animal had been hit and was seeking to escape. It was running across the

top of the ridge towards the cañon. The hunter sprang around the head of his pony and threw up his rifle, which had automatically reloaded itself. As it came to his shoulder, the wounded animal burst out of cover. It was a yearling calf.

But the sportsman knew that he had shot a deer, and a deer was all he saw. He was now fairly shaking with the “fever.” His finger crooked convulsively on the automatic firing lever. Instantly a stream of bullets began to pour from the wildly wavering muzzle, and empty shells whirred up from the ejector like hornets.

Before the hunter could realize what was happening, his magazine was exhausted, the last cartridge fired, and the shell flipped out. But he paid no heed to this. His eyes were on the fleeing calf. His cartridges were smokeless. Through the slight haze above his rifle muzzle he saw the animal pitch forward and fall heavily upon the round of the ridge. It did not move.

Tugging at the bridle to quicken his horse’s pace, he hastened forward to examine his game. He was still so excited that he was almost upon the outstretched carcass before he noticed the odd scar on its side. He bent down and saw that the mark was a cattle brand seared on the hide with a hot iron.

His first impulse was to jump on his pony and ride off. He was about to set his foot in the stirrup when the apprehensive glance with which he was peering around shifted down to the cañon. His gaze traveled back from the near edge of the chasm, up the two hundred yards of slope, and rested on the yearling as though estimating its weight.

It was a fat, thoroughbred Hereford. He could not lift it on his pony, and he had no rope to use as a drag-line. He shook his head. But the pause had given him time to recover from his panic. He shrugged his shoulders, drew a silver-handled hunting knife, and awkwardly set about dressing his kill.

## CHAPTER II

### A YEARLING SOLD

Three riders came galloping along the ridge towards the hunter. At sight of his pony the grizzled cowman in the lead signed to his companions and came to a sudden stop behind a clump of service-berry bushes. The others swerved in beside him, the bowlegged young puncher on the right with his hand at his hip.

“Jumping Jehosaphat!” he exulted. “We shore have got him, Mr. Knowles, the blasted—” His thin lips closed tight to shut in the oath as he turned his gaze on the lovely flushed face of the girl beside him. When his cold gray eyes met hers they lighted with a glow like that of fire through ice.

“You better stay here, Miss Chuckie,” he advised. “We’re going to cure that rustler.”

“But, Kid, what if—No, no! wait!” she cried at sight of his drawn Colt’s. “Daddy, stop him! The man may not be a rustler.”

“You heard the shooting,” answered the cowman.

“Yes, but he may have been after a deer,” answered the girl, lifting her lithe figure tiptoe in the stirrups of her man’s saddle to peer over the bushes.

“Deer?” rejoined the puncher. “Who’d be deer-hunting in July?”

“Then a bear. He fired fast enough,” remarked the girl.

“Not much chance of that round here,” said the cowman. “Still, it might be. At any rate, Kid, this time I want you to wait for me to ask questions *before* you cut loose.”

“If he don’t try any funny business,” qualified the puncher.

“Course,” assented Knowles. “Chuckie, you best stay back here.”

“Oh, no, Daddy. There’s only one man and between you and Kid—”

“*Sho!* Come on, then, if you’re set on it. Kid, you circle to the right.”

The puncher wheeled his horse and rode off around the chaparral. The girl and Knowles, after a short wait, advanced upon the hunter. They were soon within a few yards of him and in plain view. His pony stopped browsing and raised its head to look at them. But the man was stooped over, with his face the other way, and the incessant, reverberating roar of the cañon muffled the tread of their horses on the dusty turf.

The puncher crashed through the corner of the thicket and pulled up on the top of the slope immediately opposite the hunter. The latter sprang to his feet. The puncher instantly covered him with his long-barreled revolver and snapped tersely: “Hands up!”

“My—ante!” gasped the hunter. “A—a road agent!”

But he did not throw up his hands. With the rash bravery of inexperience, he dropped his knife and snatched out his automatic pistol. On the instant the puncher’s big revolver roared. The pistol went spinning out of the hunter’s hand. Through the smoke of the shot the puncher leveled his weapon.

“Put up your hands!—put them up!” screamed the girl, urging her horse forward.

The hunter obeyed, none too soon. For several moments he stood rigid, glaring half dazed at the revolver muzzle and the cool hard face behind it. Then slowly he twisted about to see who it was had warned him. The girl had ridden up within a few feet.

“You—you *tenderfoot!*” she flung at him. “Are you locoed? Hadn’t you any more sense than to do that? Why, if Daddy hadn’t told Mr. Gowan to wait—”

“You shore would have got yours, you—rustler!” snapped the puncher. “It was you, though, Miss Chuckie—your being here.”

“But he’s not a rustler, Kid,” protested the girl. “Where are your eyes? Look at his riding togs. If they’re not tenderfoot, howling tenderfoot—!”

“Just the same, honey, he’s shot a yearling,” said Knowles, frowning at the culprit. “Suppose you let me do the questioning.”

“Ah—pardon me,” remarked the hunter, rebounding from apprehension to easy assurance at sight of the girl’s smile. “I would prefer to be third-degreed by the young lady. Permit me to salute the Queen of the Outlaws!”

He bent over the fingers of one hand to raise his silver-banded sombrero by its high peak. It left his head—and a bullet left the muzzle of the puncher’s revolver. A hole appeared low down in the side of the sombrero.

“That’ll do, Kid,” ordered the cowman. “No more hazing, even if he is a tenderfoot.”

“Tenderfoot?” replied Gowan, his mouth like a straight gash across his lean jaws. “How about his drawing on me—and how about your yearling? That bullet went just where it ought to’ve gone with his hat down on his head.”

There was no jesting even of the grimmest quality in the puncher’s look and tone. He was very cool and quiet—and his Colt’s was leveled for another shot.

The hunter thrust up his hands as high as he could reach.

“You—you surely can’t intend to murder me!” he stammered, staring from the puncher to the cowman. “I’ll pay ransom—anything you ask! Don’t let him shoot me! I’m Lafayette Ashton—I’ll pay thousands—anything! My father is George Ashton, the great financier!”

“New York?” queried Knowles.

“No, no, Chicago! He—if only you’ll write to him!”

The girl burst into a ringing laugh. “Oh!” she cried, the moment she could speak, “Oh, Daddy! don’t you see? He really thinks we’re a bunch of wild and woolly bandits!”

The hunter looked uncertainly from her dimpled face to Gowan’s ready revolver. Turning sharply about to the cowman, he caught him in a reluctant grin. With a sudden spring, he placed the girl between himself and the scowling puncher. Behind this barrier of safety he swept off his hat and bowed to the girl with an exaggerated display of politeness that hinted at mockery.

“So it’s merely a cowboy joke,” he said. “I bend, not to the Queen of the Outlaws, but to the Princess of the Cows!”

Her dimples vanished. She looked over his head with the barest shade of disdain in her expression.

“The joke came near to being on us,” she said. “Kid, put up your gun. A tenderfoot who has enough nerve and no more sense than to draw when you have the drop on him, you’ve hazed him enough.”

Gowan sullenly reloaded his Colt’s and replaced it in its holster.

“That’s right,” said Knowles; but he turned sharply upon the offender. “Look here, Mr. Ashton, if that’s your name—there’s still the matter of this yearling. Shooting stock in a cattle country isn’t any laughing matter.”

“But, I say,” replied the hunter, “I didn’t know it was your cow, really I didn’t.”

“Doesn’t make any difference whose brand was on the calf. Even if it had been a maverick—”

“But that’s it!” interrupted Ashton. “I didn’t see the brand—only glimpses of the beast in the chaparral. I thought it a deer until after it fell and I came up to look.”

“You shore did,” jeered Gowan. “That’s why you was hurrying to yank off the hide. No chance of proving a case on you with the brand down in Deep Cañon.”

“Indeed no,” replied Ashton, drawing a trifle closer to the girl’s stirrup. “You are quite wrong—quite. I was dressing the animal to take it to my camp. Because I had mistaken it for a deer was no reason why I should leave it to the coyotes.”

“What business you got hunting deer out of season?” questioned Knowles.

“Pardon me, but are you the game warden?” asked Ashton, with a supercilious smile.

“Never you mind about that,” rejoined the cowman. “Just you answer my question.”

Ashton shrugged, and replied in a bored tone: "I fail to see that it is any of your affair. But since you are so urgent to learn—I prefer to enjoy my sport before the rush of the open season."

"Don't you know it's against the law?" exclaimed the girl.

"Ah—as to that, a trifling fine—" drawled the hunter, again shrugging.

"Humph!" grunted Knowles. "A fine might get you off for deer. Shooting stock, though, is a penitentiary offense—when the criminal is lucky enough to get into court."

"Criminal!" repeated Ashton, flushing. "I have explained who I am. My father could buy out this entire cattle country, and never know it. I'll do it myself, some day, and turn the whole thing into a game preserve."

"When you do," warned Gowan, "you'd better hunt a healthier climate."

"What we're concerned with now," interposed Knowles, "is this yearling."

"The live or the dead one, Daddy?" asked the girl, her cheeks dimpling.

"What d'you—Aw—*haw! haw! haw!*— The live or the dead one! Catch that, Kid? The live or the dead one! *Haw! haw! haw!*"

The cowman fairly roared with laughter. Neither of the young men joined in his hilarious outburst. Gowan waited, cold and unsmiling. Ashton stiffened with offended dignity.

"I told you that the shooting of the animal was unintentional," he said. "I shall settle the affair by paying you the price usually asked for veal."

"You will?" said the cowman, looking down at the indignant tenderfoot with a twinkle in his mirth-reddened eyes. "Well, we don't usually sell veal on the range. But I'll let you have this yearling at cutlet prices. Fifty dollars is the figure."

"Why, Daddy," interrupted the girl, "half that would be—"

"On the hoof, yes; but he's buying dressed veal," broke in the cowman, and he smiled grimly at the culprit. "Fifty dollars is cheap for a deer hunter who goes round shooting up the country out of season. He can take his choice—pay for his veal or make a trip to the county seat."

"That's talking, Mr. Knowles," approved Gowan. "We'll corral him at Stockchute in that little log calaboose. He'll have a peach of a time talking the jury out of sending him up for rustling."

"This is an outrage—rank robbery!" complained Ashton. "Of course you know I will pay rather than be inconvenienced by an interruption of my hunting." He thrust his slender hand into his pocket, and drew it out empty.

"Dead broke!" jeered Gowan.

Ashton shrugged disdainfully. "I have money at my camp. If that is not enough to pay your blackmail, my valet has gone back to the railway with my guide for a remittance of a thousand dollars, which must have come on a week ago."

"Your camp is at the waterhole on Dry Fork," stated Knowles. "Saw a big smoke over there—tenderfoot's fire. Well, it's only five miles, and we can ride down that way. We'll go to your camp."

"Ye-es?" murmured Ashton, his ardent eyes on the girl. "Miss—er—Chuckie, it is superfluous to remark that I shall vastly enjoy a cross-country ride with you."

"Oh, really!" she replied.

Heedless of her ironical tone, he turned a supercilious glance on Knowles. "Yes, and at the same time your papa and his hired man can take advantage of the opportunity to deliver my veal."

"What's that?" growled the cowman, flushing hotly.

But the girl burst into such a peal of laughter that his scowl relaxed to an uncertain smile.

"Well, what's the joke, honey?" he asked.

"Oh! oh! oh!" she cried, her blue eyes glistening with mirthful tears. "Don't you see he's got you, Daddy? You didn't sell him his meat on the hoof. You've got to dress and deliver his cutlets."

"By—James!" vowed Gowan. "Before I'll butcher for such a knock-kneed tenderfoot I'll see him, in—"

“Hold your hawsses, Kid,” put in Knowles. “The joke’s on me. You go on and look for that bunch of strays, if you want to. But I’m not going to back up when Chuckie says I’m roped in.”

Gowan looked fixedly at Ashton and the girl, swore under his breath, and swung to the ground. He came down beside the calf with the waddling step of one who has lived in the saddle from early childhood. Knowles joined him, and they set to work on the calf without paying any farther heed to the tenderfoot.

Ashton, after fastidiously wiping his hands on a wisp of grass, placed his hunting knife in his belt and his rifle in its saddle sheath. He next picked up his pistol, but after a single glance at the side plate, smashed in by Gowan’s first shot, he dropped the ruined weapon and rather hurriedly mounted his pony.

The girl had faced away from the partly butchered carcass. As Ashton rode around alongside, her pony started to walk away. Instead of reining in, she glanced demurely at Ashton, and called over her shoulder: “Daddy, we’ll be riding on ahead. You and Kid have the faster hawsses.”

“All right,” acquiesced Knowles, without pausing in his work.

Gowan said nothing; but he glanced up at the jaunty back of the tenderfoot with a look of cold enmity.

## CHAPTER III

### QUEEN OF WHAT?

Heedless of the men behind him, Ashton rode off with his ardent gaze fixed admiringly upon his companion. The more he looked at her the more astonished and gratified he was to have found so charming a girl in this raw wilderness.

As a city man, he might have considered the healthy color that glowed under the tan of her cheeks a trifle too pronounced, had it not been offset by the delicate mold of her features. Her eyes were as blue as alpine forget-me-nots.

Though she sat astride and the soft coils of her chestnut hair were covered with a broad-brimmed felt hat, he was puzzled to find that there really was nothing of the Wild West cowgirl in her costume and bearing. Her modest gray riding dress was cut in the very latest style. If her manner differed from that of most young ladies of his acquaintance, it was only in her delightful frankness and total absence of affectation. Yet she could not be a city girl on a visit, for she sat her horse with the erect, long-stirruped, graceful, yielding seat peculiar to riders of the cattle ranges.

“Do you know,” he gave voice to his curiosity, as she directed their course slantingly down the ridge away from Deep Cañon, “I am simply dying to learn, Miss Chuckie—”

“Perhaps you had better make it ‘Miss Knowles,’” she suggested, with a quiet smile that checked the familiarity of his manner.

“Ah, yes—pardon me!—‘Miss Knowles,’ of course,” he murmured. “But, you know, so unusual a name—”

“You mean Chuckie?” she asked. “It formerly was quite common in the West—was often used as a nickname. My real name is Isobel. I understand that Chuckie comes from the Spanish Chiquita.”

“Chiquita!” he exclaimed. “But that is not a regular name. It is only a term of endearment, like Nina. And you say Chuckie comes from Chiquita? Chiquita—dear one!”

His large dark eyes glowed at her brilliant with audacious admiration. Her color deepened, but she replied with perfect composure: “You see why I prefer to be addressed as ‘Miss Knowles’—by you.”

“Yet you permitted that common cowpuncher to call you Miss Chuckie.”

The girl smiled ironically. “For one thing, Mr. Ashton, I have known Kid Gowan over eight years, and, for another, he is hardly a *common* cowpuncher.”

“He looks ordinary enough to me.”

“Well, well!” she rallied. “I should have thought that even to the innocent gaze of a tenderfoot—Let me hasten to explain that the common or garden variety of cowshepherd is to be distinguished in many respects from his predecessor of the Texas trail.”

“Texas trail?” he rejoined. “Now I know you’re trying to string me. This Gowan can’t be much older than I am.”

The girl dropped her bantering tone, and answered soberly: “He is only twenty-five, and yet he is a full generation older than you. He was born and raised in a cow camp. He is one of the few men of the type that remain to link the range of today with the vanished world of the cattle frontier.”

“Yet you say that the fellow is only my age?”

“In years, yes. But in type he belongs to the generation that is past—the generation of longhorns, long drives, long Colt’s, and short lives; of stampedes, and hats like yours, badmen, and Injins.”

“Surely you cannot mean that this—You called him ‘Kid.’”

“Kid Gowan,” she confirmed. “Yes, he holds to the old traditions even in that. There are six notches on the hilt of his ‘gun,’ if you count the two little ones he nicked for his brace of Utes.”

“What! He is a real Indian fighter, like Kit Carson?”

“Oh, no, it was merely a band of hide hunters that came over the line from Utah, and Mr. Gowan helped the game warden run them back to their reservation.”

“He actually killed two of them?”

“Yes,” replied the girl, her gravity deepening to a concerned frown. “The worst of it is that I’m not altogether certain it was necessary. Men out here, as a rule, think much too little of the life of an Indian.”

“Ah!” murmured Ashton. “Two Indians. But didn’t you speak of six notches?”

“Six,” confirmed the girl, her brow partly clearing. “The others were different. Three were rustlers. The sheriff’s posse overtook them. Both sides were firing. Kid circled around and shot three. He happened to have a long-range rifle. Daddy says they threw up their hands when the first one fell; but Kid explained to me that he was too far away to see it.”

“Ah!” murmured Ashton the second time, and he put up his hand to the hole in the front of his sombrero.

“The last was two years ago,” went on the girl. “There was a dispute over a maverick. Kid was tried and acquitted on his plea of self-defense. There were no witnesses. He claimed that the other man drew first. Two empty shells were found in the other man’s revolver, and only one in Kid’s. That cleared him.”

Ashton took off his hat and stared at the holes where the heavy forty-four bullet had gone in and gone out. He was silent.

“You see, poor Kid has been unfortunate,” remarked the girl, as she headed her pony down over the edge of the mesa. “That time with the rustlers, all the posse were firing, and he just happened to be the one that got the best aim; and the time with the Indians, I’m sure he did not shoot to kill. It just happened that way. He told me so himself.”

Ashton ran his tongue over his lip. “Yes—I suppose so,” he muttered.

“Kid has all the good qualities and only a few of the faults of the old-time cowboys,” went on the girl. “He is almost fiercely loyal to Daddy’s interests. That’s why he led a raid on a sheep outfit, four years ago, when almost half of a large flock were run over into Deep Cañon—poor innocent beasts! Daddy was furious with Kid; but there was no legal proof as to who were members of the attacking party, and the sheep were destroying our range. All of Daddy’s cattle would have starved.”

“He was not punished?” murmured Ashton.

“Daddy could not be expected to discharge him, could he, when Kid did it to save our range? You see, it was just because he was so very loyal. You must not think from these things that he—It is true he is suspicious of strangers, but he always has been very kind and gentle to me. I am very fond of him.”

“You are?” exclaimed Ashton, stirred from his uneasy depression. “I should hardly have thought him the kind to interest a girl like you.”

“Really?” she bantered. “Why not? I have lived on the range ever since I was fourteen.”

He stared at her incredulously. “Since you were fourteen?”

“For nine years,” she added, smiling at his astonishment.

“But—it can’t be,” he protested, his eyes on her stylish costume. “At least, not all the time.”

She nodded at him encouragingly. “So you *can* see—a little. Nearly all my winters have been spent in Denver, except one in Europe.”

“Europe?” he repeated.

“We didn’t cross in a cattle boat,” she flashed back at him, dimpling mischievously. “Nor did I go as the Queen of the Rancho, or of the Roundup, or even of the Wild and Woolly Outlaw Band.”

He flushed with mortification. “I am only too well aware, Miss Knowles, how you must regard me.”

“Oh, I do not regard you at all—as yet,” she bantered. “But of course I could not expect you to know that Daddy’s sister is one of the Sacred Thirty-six.”

“Sacred—? Is that one of the orders of nuns?”

“None whatever,” she punned. In the same moment she drew a most solemn looking face. “My dear Mistah Ashton, I will have you to understand my reference was to that most select coterie which comprises Denver’s Real Society.”

“Indeed!” he said, with a subtle alteration in his tone and manner. “You say that your aunt is one of—”

“My aunt by adoption,” she corrected.

“Adoption?”

“I am not Daddy’s natural daughter. He adopted me,” explained the girl in her frank way.

“Yes?” asked Ashton, plainly eager to learn more of her history.

Without seeming to observe this, she adroitly balked his curiosity—“So, you see, Daddy’s sister is only my aunt by adoption. Still, she has been very, very good to me; though I love Daddy and this free outdoor life so much that I insist on coming back home every spring.”

“Ah, yes, I see,” he replied. “Really, Miss Knowles, you must think me a good deal of a dub.”

“Oh, well, allowances should be made for a tenderfoot,” she bantered.

“At least I recognized your queenliness, even if at first I did mistake what you were queen of,” he thrust back.

“So you still insist I’m a queen? Of what, pray?”

“Of Hearts!” he answered with fervor.

His daring was rewarded with a lovely blush. But she was only momentarily disconcerted.

“I am not so sure of that,” she replied. “Though it’s not Queen of Spades, because I do not have to work; and it can’t be Diamonds, because Daddy is no more than comfortably well to do—only six thousand head of stock. But as for Hearts—No, I’m sure it must be Clubs; I do so love to knock around. Really, if ever they break up this range, it will break my heart same time.”

“Break up the range? How do you mean?”

“Put it under irrigation and turn it into orchards and farms, as they have done so many places here on the Western Slope. You know, Colorado apples and peaches are fast becoming famous even in Europe.”

“I do not wonder, not in the least—if I am to judge from a certain sample of the Colorado peach,” he ventured.

This time she did not blush. “I am quite serious, Mr. Ashton,” she reproved him. “Daddy owns only five sections. The rest of his range is public land. If settlers should come in and homestead it, he would have to quit the cattle business. You cannot realize how fearfully we are watching the irrigation projects—all the Government reclamation work, and the private dams, too. There seems to be no water that can be put on Dry Mesa, yet the engineers are doing such wonderful things these days.”

Ashton straightened on his saddle. “That is quite true, Miss Knowles. You know, I myself am an engineer.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed in dismay. “You, an engineer? Have you come here to see if our mesa can be irrigated?”

“No, indeed, no, I shall not do that,” he replied. “I have not the slightest thought of such a project. I am merely out for sport.”

She eyed him uncertainly. “But—We get all the reports—There is an Ashton connected with that wonderful Zariba Dam, just being finished in Arizona.”

“That is my father. He is interested in it with a Mr. Leslie. They are financing the project. But I have nothing to do with it, nothing whatever, I assure you. The engineer is another man, a fellow named—”

He paused as if unable to remember. The girl looked at him with a shade of disappointment in her clear eyes.

“A Mr. Blake—Thomas Blake,” she supplied the name. “I thought you might have known him.”

“Ah–Blake?” he murmured hesitatingly. “Why, yes, I did at one time have somewhat of an acquaintance with him.”

“You did?” she cried, her eyes brilliant with excitement. “Oh, tell me! I–” She faltered under his surprised stare, and went on rather lamely: “You see, I–we have been immensely interested in the Zariba Dam. The reports all describe it as an extraordinary work of engineering. And so we have been curious to learn something about the engineer.”

“But if you’re so opposed to irrigation projects?” he thrust.

“That makes no difference,” she parried. “We–Daddy and I–cannot but admire such a remarkable engineer.”

Ashton shrugged. “The dam was a big thing. I fail to see why you should admire Blake just because he happened to blunder on the idea that solved the difficulty.”

“You do not like him,” she said with frank directness.

He hesitated and looked away. When he replied it was with evident reluctance: “No, I do not. He is–You would hardly admire him personally, even though he did bully Genevieve Leslie into marrying him.”

“He is married?” exclaimed the girl.

“No wonder you are surprised,” said Ashton. “It was the most amazing thing imaginable–she the daughter of H. V. Leslie, one of our wealthiest financiers, and he a rough, uncouth drunkard.”

“Drunkard?” almost screamed the girl. “No, no, not drunkard! I cannot believe it!”

“He certainly was one until just before Genevieve married him,” insisted Ashton. “I hear he has managed to keep sober since.”

“O-o-oh!” sighed Miss Isobel, making no effort to conceal her vast relief. She attempted a smile. “I am so glad to hear that he is all right now. Of course he must be!.. You say he married an heiress?”

“She is worth three millions in her own right, and Leslie is as daft over him as she is. Leslie and my father are the ones who backed him on the Zariba Dam.”

“How interesting! And I suppose Mr. Blake is a Western man. So many of the best engineers come from the West.”

Ashton looked at her suspiciously. He could not make out her interest in Blake. She apparently had come to regard the engineer as a sort of hero. Yet why should she continue to inquire about him, now that she knew he was a married man?

“I’m sure I cannot tell you,” he replied, somewhat stiffly. “The fellow seems to have come from nowhere. Had it not been for an accident, he would never have got within speaking distance of Genevieve, but they happened to be shipwrecked together alone–on the coast of Africa.”

“Wrecked?–shipwrecked? How perfectly glorious!”

“I wouldn’t mind it myself–with you!” he flashed back.

“I might,” she bantered. “This Mr. Blake, I imagine, was hardly a tenderfoot.”

“No, he was a roughneck,” muttered Ashton.

“You do not like him,” she remarked the second time.

“Why should I, a low fellow like that? I’ve heard that he even brags that he started in the Chicago slums.”

The girl put her hand to her bosom. “In the–the Chicago slums!” she half whispered.

“No wonder you are surprised,” said Ashton. “Anyone would presume that he would keep such a disgrace to himself. It shows what he is–absolutely devoid of good taste.”

“Is he–What does he look like?” she eagerly inquired.

Ashton shrugged. “Pardon me. I prefer not to talk any more about the fellow.”

Miss Isobel checked her curiosity. “Very well, Mr. Ashton.” She looked around, and suddenly flourished her leathern quirt. “Look–there are Kid and Daddy trying to head us. Come on, if you want a race. I’m going to beat them down to Dry Fork.”

## CHAPTER IV

### DOWNHILL AND UP

The lash of the quirt fell with a swish on the flank of the girl's pony. He did not wait for a second hint, but started down the steep slope "on the jump." Before Ashton realized what was happening, his own horse was following at the same breakneck pace.

Down plunged the two ponies—down, down, down the sharply pitched mountain side, leaping logs and stones, crashing through brush, scrambling or slithering stiff-legged down rock slides. It was a wild race, a race that would have been utterly foolhardy with any other horses than these mountain bred cow ponies. A single misstep would have sent horse and rider rolling for yards, unless sooner brought up against tree or rock.

Most of the color had left Ashton's cheeks, but his full lips were set in resolute lines. His gaze alertly took in the ground before his horse and at the same time the girl's graceful, swaying figure. Fortunately he knew enough to let his horse pick his own way. But such a way as it was! Had not the two animals been as surefooted as goats and as quick as cats, both must have pitched head over heels, not once, but a score of times.

They had leaped down over numbers of rocks and logs and ledges, and the girl had not cast back a single glance to see if Ashton was following. But as they plunged down an open slope she suddenly twisted about and flung up a warning hand.

"Here's a jump!" she cried—as though they had not been jumping every few yards since the beginning of that mad descent.

Hardly had she faced about again when her pony leaped and dropped with her clear out of sight. Ashton gasped and started to draw rein. He was too late. Three strides brought his horse to a ledge fully six feet high. The beast leaped over the edge without making the slightest effort to check himself.

Ashton uttered a startled cry, but poised himself for the shock with the cleverness of a skillful rider. His pony landed squarely, and at once started on again as if nothing unusual had happened.

The girl was already racing down the lower slope, which was more moderate, or rather, less immoderate than that above the ledge. She looked around and waved her hand gayly when she saw that Ashton had kept his seat.

The salute so fired him that he gave his pony the spur and dashed recklessly down to overtake her. At last he raced alongside and a little past her. She looked at his overridden pony and drew rein.

"Hold on," she said. "Better pull up a bit. You don't want to blow your hawss. 'Tisn't everyone can take that jump as neatly as he did."

"But the others?" he panted—"they'll beat us!"

"They cut down to the right. It's nothing to worry about if they do head us. They've got the best hawsses. We'll jog the rest of the way."

"Of course," he hastened to agree, "if you prefer."

"I'd prefer to lope uphill and down, but—" she nodded towards his pony's heaving flanks—"no use riding a willing hawss to death."

"No danger of that with this old nag. He's tough as a mule," Ashton assured her, though he followed her example by pulling his mount in to a walk.

"A mule knows enough to balk when he's got enough," she informed him.

He did not reply. With the lessening of his excitement habit sent his hand to his open packet of cigarettes. He had not smoked since before shooting the calf. As they came down into the shallow valley between the foot of the mesa and a parallel line of low rocky hills he could wait no longer. His lighter was already half raised to the gilt-tipped cigarette when it was checked by etiquette. He bowed to the girl as a matter of form.

“Ah, pardon me—if you have no objections,” he said.

“I have,” was her unexpected reply.

“Er—what?” he asked, his finger on the spring of the lighter.

“You inquired if I have any objections,” she answered. “I told you the truth. I dislike cigarettes most intensely.”

“But—but—” he stammered, completely taken aback, “don’t your cowboys all smoke?”

“Not cigarettes—where I ever see them,” she said.

“And cigars or pipes?” he queried.

“One has to concede something to masculine weakness,” she sighed.

“Unfortunately I have no cigars with me, not even at my camp, and a pipe is so slow,” he complained.

“Oh, pray, do not deprive yourself on my account,” she said. “You’ll find the cut between those two hills about as short a way to your camp as this one, if you prefer your cigarettes to my company.”

“Crool maid!” he reproached, not altogether jestingly. He even looked across at the gap through the hills to which she was pointing. Then he saw the disdain in her blue eyes. He took the cigarette from his lips, eyed it regretfully, and flung it away with a petulant fillip.

“There!” he said. Meeting her amused smile, he added in the injured tone of a spoiled child. “You don’t realize what a compliment that is.”

“What?—abstaining for a half hour or so? If I asked you to break off entirely, and you did it, I would consider that a real compliment.”

“I should say so!”

“But I am by no means sure that I would care to ask you,” she bantered.

“You’re not? Why, may I inquire?”

“I do not like to make useless requests.”

“Useless!” he exclaimed, his self-esteem stung by her raillery. “Do you think I cannot quit smoking them?”

“I think you do not care to try.”

Impulsively he snatched out a package of his expensive cigarettes and tossed it over his shoulder. Another and another and still others followed in rapid succession, until he had exhausted his supply.

“How’s that?” he demanded her approval.

“Well, it’s not so bad for a start-off,” she answered with an absence of enthusiasm that dashed him from his pose of self-abnegation.

“You don’t realize what that means,” he complained.

“It means, jilt Miss Nicotine in haste, and repent at leisure.”

“You’re ragging me! You ought to be particularly nice to me. I did it for you.”

“Thanks awfully. But I didn’t ask you to do it, you know.”

“Oh, now, that’s hardly—when I did it because of what you said.”

“Well, then, I promise to be nice to you until events do us part. That will be in about five minutes. Over there is Dry Fork Gulch. The waterhole is just down around this hill.”

Ashton took his ardent gaze off the girl’s face long enough to glance to his left. He recognized the tremendous gorge in the face of the mountain side that he had tried to ascend the previous day. It ran in with a moderately inclined bottom for nearly a mile, and then scaled up to the top of High Mesa in steep slopes and sheer ledges.

His eyes followed the dry gravelly creek bed around to the right, and he nodded: “Yes, my camp is just over the corner of those crags. But surely, Miss Knowles, you will not end our acquaintance there.”

She met his appealing look with a level glance. “Seriously, Mr. Ashton, don’t you think you had better move camp to another section? It seems to me you have done quite enough unseasonable deer hunting.”

Without waiting for him to reply, she urged her horse into a lope. His own mount was too jaded for a quick start. When he overtook the girl she had rounded the craggy hill on their right and was in sight of a scattered grove of boxelders below a dike of dark colored trap rock that outcropped across the bed of the creek.

Above the natural dam made by this dike the valley was bedded up with sand and large gravel washed down by the torrential rush of spring freshets. Below it the same wild floods, leaping down in a twenty-foot fall, had gouged out a pothole so wide and deep that it was never empty of water even in the driest seasons.

## CHAPTER V

### INTO THE DEPTHS

At the top of the bank made by the dike the girl pointed with her quirt down to the rock-rimmed pool edge where a pair of riders were just swinging out of their saddles.

“Hello, Daddy! We’re coming, Kid,” she called, and she turned to explain to Ashton. “They came around the other end of the hills; a longer way but better going. How’s this? Thought you said you were camped here.”

“Yes, of course. Don’t you see the tent? It’s right there among the—Why, what—where is it?” cried Ashton, gaping in blank amazement.

“We’ll soon see,” replied the girl.

Their horses were scrambling down the short steep slope to the pool, where the other horses were drinking their fill of the cool water. The two men watched Ashton’s approach, Knowles with an impassive gaze, Gowan with cold suspicion in his narrowed eyes.

“Well, honey,” asked the cowman, “did you have him pulling leather?”

“No, and I didn’t lose him, either,” she replied, with a mischievous glance at Gowan. “I took that jump-off where the white-cheeked steer broke its neck. He took it after me without pulling leather.”

“Huh!” grunted the puncher. “Mr. Tenderfoot shore is some rider. We’re waiting for him now to ride around and find that camp where we were to deliver his veal.”

Ashton stared with a puzzled, half-dazed expression from the tentless trees beside him to the fore and hind quarters of veal wrapped in slicker raincoats and fastened on back of the men’s saddles.

“Well?” demanded Knowles. “Thought you said you were camped here.”

“I am—that is, I—My tent was right there between those two trees,” said Ashton. “You see, there are the twigs and leaves I had my valet collect for my bed.”

“Shore—valleys are great on collecting beds of leaves and sand and boulders,” observed Gowan.

“There’s his fireplace,” said the girl, wheeling her horse through a clump of wild rosebushes. “Yes, and he’s right about the tent, too. It is a bed. Here’s a dozen cigarette boxes and—What’s this, Mr. Ashton! Looks as if someone had left a note for you.”

“A note?” he muttered, slipping to the ground.

He ran over to the spot to which she was pointing. On a little pile of stones, in front of where his tent had been pitched, a piece of coarse wrapping paper covered with writing was fluttering in the light breeze. He snatched it up and read the note with fast-growing bewilderment.

“What is it?” sympathetically questioned the girl, quick to see that he was in real trouble.

He did not answer. He did not even realize that she had spoken. With feverish haste he caught up an opened envelope that had lain under the paper. Drawn by his odd manner, Knowles and Gowan came over to stare at him. He had torn a letter from the envelope. It was in typewriting and covered less than a page, yet he gaped at it, reading and re-reading the lines as if too dazed to be able to comprehend their meaning.

Slowly the involved sentences burned their way into his consciousness. As his bewilderment cleared, his concern deepened to dismay, and from dismay to consternation. His jaw dropped slack, his face whitened, the pupils of his eyes dilated.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” exclaimed the girl.

“Matter?”—His voice was hoarse and strained. He crumpled the letter in a convulsive grasp—“Matter? I’m ruined!—ruined! God!”

Knowles and the girl were both silent before the despair in the young man’s face. Gowan was more obtuse or else less considerate.

“Shore, you’re plumb busted, partner,” he ironically consoled. “Your whole outfit has flown away on the wings of the morning. Hope you won’t tell us the pay for your veal has vamoosed with the rest.”

“Oh, Kid, for shame!” reproved the girl. “Of course Daddy won’t ask for any pay–now.”

Ashton burst into a jangling high-pitched laugh.

“No, no! there’s still my pony and saddle and rifle and watch!” he cried, half hysterically. “Take them! strip me! Here’s my hat, too! I paid forty-five dollars for it–silver band.” He flung it on the ground. “There’s a hole in it–I wish the hole were through my head!”

“Now, now, look here, son. Keep a stiff upper lip,” said Knowles. “Don’t act like you’re locoed. It’s all right about that veal, as Chuckie says, and you oughtn’t to make such a fuss over the loss of a camp outfit.”

“Camp outfit?” shrilled Ashton. “If that were all! if that were all! What shall I do? Lost–all lost!–father–all! Ruined! Oh, my God! What shall I do? Oh, my God! Oh–” Anguish and despair choked the cry in his throat. He collapsed in a huddled, quivering heap.

“*Sho!* It can’t be as bad as that, can it?” consoled the cowman.

“Go away!” sobbed the prostrated man. “Go away! Take my pony–all! Only leave me!”

“If ever I saw a fellow plumb locoed!” muttered Gowan, half awe-struck.

“Maybe he’ll come to his senses if we leave him,” suggested Knowles. He took a step towards Ashton. “All right, son, we’ll go. But we’ll leave you half that veal, and we won’t take your hawss. D’you want help in looking for your outfit?”

Ashton shook his downbent head.

“Well, if you want to let the thieves get away with it, that’s your own lookout. You’d better strike back to the railroad.”

“Go away! Leave me!” moaned Ashton.

“Gone to smash–clean busted!” commented Gowan, as he turned about to go to his horse, his spurs jingling gayly.

Knowles followed him, shaking his head. The girl had been gazing at Ashton with an expression that varied from sympathetic commiseration to contemptuous pity. As her adopted father and Gowan mounted, she rode over to them.

“Go on,” she said. “I’ll overtake you as soon as I’ve watered my hawss.”

“You’re not going to speak to that kettle of mush again, Miss Chuckie,” remonstrated Gowan.

“Yes, I am, Kid, and you know you wouldn’t stop me if you could. He needs it. I’m glad you smashed his pistol. A rifle is not so handy.”

Knowles stared over the bushes at the huddled figure on the ground. “Look here, Chuckie, you can’t mean that?”

“Yes,” she insisted. “He is ready to do it right now, unless someone throws him a rope and hauls him out of the slough.”

“Lot of fuss over a tenderfoot you never saw before today,” grumbled Gowan.

“That’s not like you, Kid,” she reproached. “Besides, you don’t want the trouble of digging a grave. It would have to be deep, to keep out the coyotes. Daddy, you’re forgetting the veal.”

“So I am,” agreed the cowman. “Ride on, Kid. You’ll be carrying most weight.”

The puncher reluctantly wheeled his horse and started down the bank of the dry stream. Knowles unfastened the hind quarters of veal from behind the cantle of his saddle, lifted them into a fork of one of the low trees, and rode off after Gowan, folding up his blood-stained slicker.

The girl at once slipped from her pony and walked quietly around to the drooping, despairing man.

“Mr. Ashton,” she softly began, “they have gone. I have stayed to find out if there is anything I can do.”

She paused for him to reply. His shoulders quivered, but he remained silent. She went on soothingly: "You are all unstrung. The shock was too sudden. It must have been a terrible one! Won't you tell me about it? Perhaps that will make you feel better."

"As if anything could when I am ruined, utterly ruined!" he moaned.

"But how? Please tell me," she urged.

Slowly he raised his haggard face and looked up at her. There could be no question but that she was full of sincere sympathy and concern for him. Her eyes shone upon him with all the motherly tenderness that any good woman, however young, has in her heart for those who suffer.

"It's all in this—this letter," he muttered brokenly. "Expected my remittance in it—Got ruin! ruin!"

"It had been opened," suggested the girl. "Perhaps those who took your outfit also took your remittance money."

"No, there wasn't any—not a cent! My valet had my written instructions to open it and cash the money orders—that weren't there! He and the guide—they came back. The letter had told them all, all! I was not here. They took the outfit—the money—divided it. Left that note—they had no more use for me... Ruined! utterly ruined!"

"But if you wish us to run them down?"

"No—good riddance! What they took is less than what I owed them. Ungrateful scoundrels!"

"That's it!" approved the girl. "Get up your spunk. Cuss, if you like. Rip loose, good and hard. It will ease you off."

"It's no use," he groaned, slumping back into his posture of abject dejection.

"Oh, come, now!" she encouraged. "You're a young, healthy man. What if you have been bucked off this time? There are lots other hawsses in Life's corral."

He hung his head lower.

She went on, in an altered tone: "Mr. Ashton, it is evident you have been bred as a gentleman. I wish you to give me your word that you will not put an end to yourself."

There was a prolonged pause. At last he stirred as if uneasy under her steady gaze. He could not see her eyes, yet he seemed to feel them. Twice he started to speak, but checked himself and hesitated. The third time he muttered a reluctant, "I—will not."

"Good! I have your word," she replied. "I must go now. When you've shaken yourself together a bit, come down to the ranch. You ride down Dry Fork to the junction, and then three miles up Plum Creek. Daddy'll be glad to put you up a few days until you can think of what to do to get a new start. Good-by!"

She went back to her horse as lightfooted and graceful as an antelope. But he did not look up after her, nor did he respond to her cordial parting. For a long time after she rode away he continued to crouch as she had left him, motionless, almost torpid with the immensity of his loss.

The sun sank lower and lower. It touched the skyline of High Mesa and dipped below. The shadow of twilight fell upon Dry Fork and the waterhole. The man shivered and, as if afraid that the darkness would rush upon him, hastily opened his clenched hand and smoothed out the crumpled letter.

To his bloodshot eyes, the accusing words seemed to glare up at him in letters of fire:

*Sir:*

We have been instructed by our client, Mr. George Ashton, to inform you that he has at last learned the full particulars of the manner in which you obtained possession of the plans of Mr. Thomas Blake, C.E., drawn by him for the competition on the then projected Michamac bridge; how you copied said plans and destroyed the originals, and was awarded the construction of said bridge on said copied plans presented by you as of your own device and invention; that you were awarded and did enjoy the office of Resident Engineer of said bridge during a period

covering the greater part of the construction thereof, and received the full salary of said office, to and until said Blake took charge of said bridge, which had been imperilled by your incompetence; and said Blake, against your strenuous objections and opposition and at great personal risk, saved said bridge from destruction.

Wherefore, because of the disgrace which you have, by reason of the aforesaid actions and conduct, brought upon his name, and because of various and sundry acts of disobedience, as well as your life of frivolity and dissipation,—our client has instructed us to inform you, that he has cut you off from him absolutely; that he has drawn a new will wherein the amount of your legacy is fixed at the sum of one (\$1.00) dollar; that he will no longer make you an allowance in any sum whatever; that he no longer regards you as his son; that any communication addressed to him by you, either directly or indirectly, will not be received or read by him; and that he absolutely refuses to see you or to grant you a personal interview.

*Respectfully, etc.*

The signature was that of his father's confidential lawyers, and below, to the left, lest there be no possibility of misunderstanding, were his name and address in full: "Mr. Lafayette Ashton, Stockchute, Colorado."

Again he bent over with his head on his breast and the letter clutched convulsively in his slender palm.

A bloodcurdling yell brought him to his feet with a sudden leap. He still did not know the difference between the cry of a coyote and the deeper note of a timber wolf. He hastily started a fire, and ran to fetch his rifle from the saddle sheath. The pony was quietly munching a wisp of grass as best he could with the bit in his mouth. The unconcern of the beast reassured his master, who, however, filled the magazine of his rifle before offsaddling.

Having hobbled the pony for the night, Ashton laid the rifle on the rim of the pool, stripped, and dived in. He went down like a plummet, reckless of the danger of striking some upjutting ledge. He may have forgotten for the moment his word to the girl, or he may have considered that it did not prevent him from courting death by accident.

But, deeply as he dived, he failed to reach bottom. He came up, puffing and blowing, and swam swiftly around the pool before scrambling out to dress. The combined effect of the vigorous exercise, the grateful coolness of the water, and the riddance of the day's dust and sweat brought him ashore in a far less morbid frame of mind. Going up the bank, he pulled the hind quarters of veal from the tree and sliced off three or four ragged strips with his knife. After washing them, he put them to broil over his smoky fire of green twigs. The "cutlets" came off, one half raw and the other half burned to a crisp. But he had not eaten since the early forenoon. He devoured the mess without salt, ravenously. He topped off with the scant swallow of brandy left in his flask.

Stimulated by the food and drink, he set about gathering a large heap of wood. Three or four coyotes had approached his camp, attracted by the scent of the calf meat. With the fading of twilight into night they came in closer, making such a racket with their yelping and wailing that he thought himself surrounded by a pack of ravenous wolves.

He could not see how his pony was unconcernedly grazing within a few yards of one of the cowardly beasts. Had the wistful singers been timber wolves, the animal soon would have come hobbling in near the fire; but Ashton did not know that. He flung on brush and crouched down near the blaze, rifle in hand, peering out into the blackness. Every moment he expected to hear that terrible cry of which he had read, the death-scream of a horse, and then to hear the crunching of bones between the jaws of the ferocious wolves.

He had spent the previous night alone in camp, peacefully sleeping. But then the yells of the beasts of darkness had been far away, and the walls of his tent had shut him in from the wild. Tonight

his nerves had been shattered by the terrible blow of his father's repudiation. Worst of all, he had no tobacco with which to soothe them.

His dread of the supposed wolf pack in a way eased the anguish of his ruin by diverting his mind. But the lack of cigarettes served only to put a more frightful strain on his overwrought nerves. He felt it first in a vague discomfort that set his hands to groping automatically through his pockets. The absence of the usual box roused his consciousness, with a dismayed start, to the realization that he was absolutely without his soothing drug. The absconding guide and valet had taken the large store he had in camp, and, to please Miss Knowles, he had flung away all that were left in his pockets.

From vague fumbling he instantly concentrated his mind on an eager search for a packet that might have been overlooked, either in his pockets or around the camp. He could find none, nor even a single cigarette. His nerves were now clamoring wildly for their soothing poison. So great was the strain that it began to affect his mind. He fancied that the wolf pack was closing in to attack him. Twice he fired his rifle at imaginary eyes out in the darkness.

All the time the craving for nicotine increased in intensity, until he was half frantic. Midnight found him, torch in hand, crawling around on the ground where his tent had been pitched, hunting for cigarette stubs. He had only to look close in order to find any number. Most were no more than cork tips, but some had at least one puff left in them, and a few had been only half smoked.

Beside the bed he came upon almost a handful, close together. By this time his jangled nerves were "toning down." He became conscious of great weariness. He stretched out on his leafy bed, and with his head pillowed on his arm, luxuriously sucked in the drugging smoke.

## CHAPTER VI

### A TEST OF CALIBER

When he opened his eyes the sun was beating down into his face. He had slept far into the morning. He stood up to stare around. His horse was cropping the grass near the lower side of the grove. There was no sign of any wolves. He walked over to his fireplace. The fire had burned to ashes hours ago. He started a fresh one with his patent lighter, and turned to where he had left the veal. It was gone.

He went a few steps farther, and found a bone gnawed clean of every shred of meat and gristle. A fox is a far less cunning thief than a coyote. The quantity of calf meat had alone saved his saddle and bridle, and even at that, one of the bridle reins was slashed and the stirrup leathers were gnawed. He looked from the white bone to the saddle, and ripped out a half dozen vigorous Anglo-Saxon oaths. It was not nice, but the explosion argued a far healthier frame of mind than either his morbid hysteria of the previous afternoon or his frenzy of the night.

After the outburst of anger had spent itself, he realized that he was hungry. The feeling became acute when he remembered that he had absolutely nothing on hand to eat. He hastened to saddle up. As he was about to mount he paused to look uncertainly up the trail on which he had thrown away the cigarettes. While he stood vacillating, his hand went to his hip pocket and drew out the silver-cased brandy flask. He looked at it, and its emptiness reminded him that he was thirsty. He went down to the pool for a drink. Having filled his flask, he returned up the bank and sprang into the saddle.

His horse, in fine fettle after the night's rest and grazing, started off on the jump, cow pony fashion. Ashton gave him his head, and the horse bore him at a steady lope down along the stream, crossing over to the other bank of the dry bed, of his own volition, when the going became too rough on the near side. The direction of the railway was now off across the sagebrush flats to Ashton's right, but he allowed his horse to continue on down the creek. About four miles from the waterhole he approached a bunch of grazing cattle. He drew rein and walked his horse past them, looking for a herder. There was none in sight. The animals were on their home range. He rode on down the creek at a canter.

A mile farther on, as he neared another scattered bunch of cattle, something thwacked the dry ground a little in front and to the left of him, throwing up a splash of sand and dust. His pony snorted and leaped ahead at a quickened pace.

Ashton turned to look back at the spot—and instinctively ducked as a bullet pinged past his ear so close that he felt the windage on his cheek. He did not lack quickness of perception. He glanced up the open slope to his left, and grasped the fact that someone was shooting at him with a rifle from the crest of the ridge half a mile distant.

Instantly he flung himself flat on his pony's neck and dug in his spurs. The pony bounded forward with a suddenness that spoiled the aim of the third bullet. It whined past over the beast's haunches. The fourth shot, best aimed of all, smashed the silver brandy flask in Ashton's hip pocket. Had he been upright in the saddle, the steel-jacketed bullet must have pierced him through the waist.

With a yell of terror, he flattened himself still closer to his pony's neck and dug in his spurs at every jump. The beast was already going at a pace that would have won most quarter-mile sprints. Just after the fourth shot he swept in among the scattered bunch of cattle, running at his highest speed. Still Ashton swung his sharp-roweled spurs. He knew that the range of a high-power rifle is well over a mile.

To his vast surprise, the shooting ceased the moment he raced into line with the first steer. The short respite gave him time to recover his wits.

As the pony sprinted clear of the last steer in the bunch, a fifth bullet ranged close down over Ashton's head. He pulled hard on the right rein and leaned the same way. The sixth shot burned the skin on the pony's hip as he swerved suddenly towards the edge of the creek channel. He made a wild leap out over the edge of the cut bank and came plunging down on a gravel bar. At once he started to race along the dry stream bed. But instead of spurring, Ashton now tugged at the bridle.

The pony swung to the left and came to a halt close in under the bank. Ashton cautiously straightened from his crouch. When erect he was just high enough to see over the edge of the bank. Looking back and up the ridge, he saw the figure of a man clearly outlined against the sky. His lips closed in resolute lines; his dark eyes flashed. Jerking out his rifle, he set the sight for fifteen hundred yards, and began firing at the would-be murderer as coolly and steadily as a marksman.

Before he had pulled the trigger the third time the man leaped sideways and knelt to return his fire. At once Ashton gripped his rifle still more firmly and drew back the automatic lever. The crackling discharge was like the fire of a miniature Maxim gun. Puffs of dust spouted up all around the man on the ridge crest. He sprang to his feet and ran back out of sight, jumping from side to side like an Indian.

"Ho!" shouted Ashton. "He's running! I made him run!"

He sat up very erect in his saddle, staring defiantly at the place where the murderer had disappeared.

"The coward! I made him run!" he exulted.

He shifted his grip on his rifle, and the heat of the barrel reminded him that he had emptied the magazine. He reloaded the weapon to its fullest capacity, and stood up in his stirrups to stare at the ridge crest. The murderer did not reappear. Ashton's exultance gave place to disappointment. He was more than ready to continue the duel.

He rode down the creek, searching for a place to ascend the cut bank. But by the time he came to a slope he had cooled sufficiently to realize the foolishness of bravado. Not unlikely the murderer was lying back out of sight, ready to shoot him when he came up out of the creek. He reflected, and decided that the going was quite good enough in the bottom of the creek bed. He rode on down the channel, over the gravel bars, at an easy canter.

After a half mile the bank became so low and the creek bed so sandy that he turned up on to the dry sod. As he did so he kept his eye warily on the now distant ridge. But no bullet came pinging down after him.

Instead, he heard the thud of galloping hoofs, and twisted about just in time to see a rider top a rise a short distance in front of him. He snapped down his breech sight and faced the supposed assailant with the rifle ready at his shoulder. Almost as quickly he lowered the weapon and snatched off his sombrero in joyful salute. The rider was Miss Knowles.

She waved back gayly and cantered up to him, her lovely face aglow with cordial greeting.

"Good noon!" she called. "So you have come at last? But better late than never."

"How could I help coming?" he gallantly exclaimed.

"I see. The coyotes stole your cutlets, and you were hungry," she bantered, as she came alongside and whirled her horse around to ride with him down the creek.

"How did you guess?" he asked.

"I know coyotes," she replied. "They're the worst—" She stopped short, gazing at the bleeding flanks of his pony. "Oh, Mr. Ashton! how could you? I did not think you so cruel!"

"Cruel?" he repeated, twisting about to see what she meant. "Ah, you refer to the spurring. But I simply couldn't help it, you know. There was a bandit taking pot shots at me as I passed the ridge back there."

"A bandit—on Dry Mesa?" she incredulously exclaimed.

"Yes; he pegged at me eight or nine times."

The girl smiled. "You probably heard one of the punchers shooting at a coyote."

“No,” he insisted, flushing under her look. “The ruffian was shooting at me. See here.”

He put his hand to his left hip pocket, one side of which had been torn out. From it he drew his brandy flask.

“That was done by the third or fourth shot,” he explained. “Do you wonder I was flat on my pony’s neck and spurring as hard as I could?”

The girl took the flask from his outstretched hand and looked it over with keen interest. In one side of the silver case was a small, neat hole. Opposite it half of the other side had been burst out as if by an explosion within. She took off the silver cap, shook out the shattered glass of the inner flask, and looked again at the small hole.

“A thirty-eight,” she observed.

“Pardon me,” he replied. “I fail to—Ah, yes; thirty-eight caliber, you mean.”

“It is I who must ask pardon,” she said in frank apology. “Your rifle is a thirty-two. I heard a number of shots, ending with the rattle of an automatic. Thought you were after another deer.”

He could afford to smile at the merry thrust and the flash of dimples that accompanied it.

“At least it wasn’t a calf this time,” he replied. “Nor was it a doe. But it may have been a buck.”

“Indian?” she queried, with instant perception of his play on the word.

“I didn’t see any war plumes,” he admitted.

“War plumes? Oh, that *is* a joke!” she exclaimed. She chanced to look down at the shattered flask, and her merriment vanished. “But this isn’t any joke. Didn’t you see the man who was shooting at you?”

“Yes, after I jumped my pony down into the creek. Perhaps the bandit thought he had tumbled us both. He stood up on top the ridge, until I cut loose and made him run.”

“He ran?”

Ashton’s eyes sparkled at the remembrance, and his chest began to expand. Then he met the girl’s clear, direct gaze, and answered modestly: “Well, you see, when I had got down behind the bank our positions were reversed. He was the one in full view. It’s curious, though, Miss Knowles—shooting at that poor calf, under the impression it was a deer, I simply couldn’t hold my rifle steady, while—”

“No wonder, if it was your first deer,” put in the girl. “We call it buck fever.”

“Yes, but wouldn’t you have thought my first bandit—Why, I couldn’t have aimed at him more steadily if I had been made of cast iron.”

“Guess he had made you fighting mad,” she bantered; but under her seeming levity he perceived a change in her manner towards him immensely gratifying to his humbled self-esteem.

“At first I was just a trifle apprehensive—” He hesitated, and suddenly burst out with a candid confession—“No, not a trifle! Really, I was horribly frightened!”

This was more than the girl had hoped from him. She nodded and smiled in open approval. “You had a good right to be frightened. I don’t blame you for spurring that way. Look. It wasn’t only one shot that came close. There’s a neat hair brand on your hawss’s hip that wasn’t there yesterday.”

“Must have been the shot just before we took the bank,” said Ashton, twisting about to look at the streak cut by the bullet. “The first was the only other one that didn’t go higher.”

“But what did the man look like?” questioned Miss Isobel. “I can’t imagine who—Can it be that your guide has a grudge against you on account of his pay?”

“I wouldn’t have thought it possible before yesterday, though he was a surly fellow and inclined to be insolent.”

“All such men are apt to be with tenderfeet,” she remarked, permitting herself a half twinkle of her sweet eyes. “But I should have thought yours would have kept on going. Whatever you may have owed him, he had no right to steal your outfit. He must be a real badman, if it’s true he is the party who did this shooting.”

“I shouldn’t be at all surprised,” agreed Ashton. In her concern over him she looked so charming that he would have agreed if she had told him the moon was made of green cheese.

She shook her head thoughtfully, and went on: "I can't imagine even one of our badmen trying to murder you that way. Their usual course would be to come up to you, face to face, pick a quarrel, and beat you to it on the draw. But whoever the cowardly scoundrel is, we'll turn out the boys, and either run him down or out of the country."

"If it's my guide, he probably is running already."

"I hope so," replied the girl.

"You do! Don't you want him punished?" exclaimed Ashton.

"Of course, but you see I don't want Kid to—to cut another notch on his Colt's."

"I must say, I cannot see how that—"

"You could if you realized how kind and good he has been to me all these years. Do you know, when I first came West, I couldn't tell a jackrabbit from a burro. Daddy had told me that each had big ears, and I got them mixed. And actually I didn't know the off from the nigh side of a hawss!"

"But we—er—have horses and riding-schools in the East," put in Ashton.

She parried the indirect question without seeming to notice it. "You proved that yesterday, coming down from High Mesa. I felt sure I would have you pulling leather."

"Pulling leather?" he asked. "You see, I own to my tenderfootness."

"Grabbing your saddle to hold yourself on," she explained. Before he could reply, she rose in her stirrups and pointed ahead with her quirt. "Look, that's the top of the biggest haystack, up by the feed-sheds. You'll see the buildings in half a minute."

Unheeded by Ashton, she had guided him off to the left, away from Dry Fork, across the angle above its junction with Plum Creek. They were now coming up over the divide between the two streams. Ashton failed to locate the haystack until its two mates and the long, half-open shelter-sheds came into view.

A moment later he was looking at the horse corral and the group of log ranch houses. Below and beyond them the scattered groves of Plum Creek stretched away up across the mesa—green bouquets on the slender silver ribbon of the creek's midsummer rill.

"Well?" she asked. "What do you think of my home?"

"Your summer home," he suggested.

"No, my real home," she insisted. "Auntie couldn't be nicer or fonder than she is; but her house is a residence, not a home, even to her. Anyway, here, where I have Daddy and Kid—I do so hope you and Kid will become friends."

"Since you wish it, I shall try to do my part. But it is a matter that might take time, and—" he smiled ruefully and concluded with seeming irrelevance—"I have no home."

She gazed at him with the look of tender motherly sympathy that he had been too distraught to really feel the previous day. "Do not say that, Mr. Ashton! Though a ranch house is hardly the kind of home to which you are accustomed, you will find that we range folks retain the old-fashioned Western ideas of hospitality."

"My dear Miss Knowles!" he exclaimed with ardent gallantry, "the mere thought of being under the same sky with you—"

"Don't, please," she begged. "This *is* the blue sky we are under, not a stuccoed ceiling."

"Well, I really meant it," he protested, greatly dashed.

"Kid often says nice things to me. But he speaks with his hands," she remarked.

"Deaf and dumb alphabet?" he queried wonderingly.

"Hardly," she answered, dimpling under his puzzled gaze. "Actions speak louder than words, you know."

"Ah!" he murmured, and his look indicated that she had given him food for thought.

They were now cantering down the long easy slope towards the ranch buildings. The girl's quick eye perceived a horseman riding towards the ranch from one of the groves up Plum Creek.

“There’s Kid coming in,” she remarked. “He went out early this morning after a big wolf that had killed a calf. He reported last evening that he found the carcass over near the head of Plum Creek. A wolf that gets to killing calves this time of year is a pretty costly neighbor. Daddy told Kid to go out and try to get him.”

“I’m glad you didn’t let him get *this* calf-killer,” observed Ashton.

“Oh, as soon as we saw your tenderfoot riding togs—!” she rejoined. “Seriously, though, you must not mind if the men poke a little fun at you. Most of them are more farmhands than cowboys, but Kid will be apt to lead off. I do so want you to be agreeable to Kid. He is almost a member of the family, not a hired man.”

“I shall try to be agreeable to him,” replied Ashton, a trifle stiffly.

The puncher had seen them probably before they saw him. He was riding at a pace that brought him to the horse corral a few moments ahead of them. When they came up he nodded carelessly in response to Ashton’s studiously polite greeting, “Good day, Mr. Gowan,” and turned to loosen the cinch of his saddle.

“You’ve been riding some,” remarked the girl, looking at the puncher’s heaving, lathered horse.

“Jumped that wolf—ran him,” replied Gowan, as he lifted off his saddle and deftly tossed it up on the top rail of the corral.

“You’re in luck,” congratulated Miss Isobel. She explained to Ashton: “The cattlemen in this county pay fifteen dollars for wolf scalps. That’s in addition to the state bounty.”

Ashton sprang off to offer her his hand. But she was on the ground as soon as he. Gowan stared at him between narrowed lids, and replied to the girl somewhat shortly: “I didn’t get him this time, Miss Chuckie.”

“You didn’t? That’s too bad! You don’t often miss. I wish you had been with me, to run down the scoundrel who tried to murder Mr. Ashton.”

Gowan burst into the harsh, strained laughter of one who seldom gives way to mirth. He checked himself abruptly and cast a hostile look at Ashton. “By—James, Miss Chuckie, you don’t mean to say you let a tenderfoot string you?”

“How about this?” asked the girl. She held out the silver flask, which she had not returned to Ashton.

Gowan gave it a casual glance, and answered almost jeeringly: “Easy enough for him to set it up and plug it—if he didn’t get too far away.”

“His rifle is a thirty-two. This was done by a thirty-eight,” she replied.

“Thirty-eight?” he repeated. “Let’s see.” He took the flask from her, drew a rifle cartridge from his belt, and fitted the steel-jacketed bullet into the clean, small hole. “You’re right, Miss Chuckie. It shore was a thirty-eight.” He turned sharply on Ashton. “Where’d it happen? Who was it?”

“Over on that dry stream,” answered Ashton. “Unfortunately the fellow was too far away for me to be able to describe him.”

“But we think it may have been his guide,” explained the girl.

“Guide?” muttered Gowan, staring intently at Ashton.

“Yes. You see, if he was mean enough to help steal Mr. Ashton’s outfit, he—”

“Shore, I savvy!” exclaimed the puncher. “I’ll rope a couple of fresh hawsses, and go out with Mr. Ashton after the two-legged wolf.”

“That’s like you, Kid! But you must wait at least until you’ve both had dinner. Mr. Ashton, I’m sure, is half starved.”

“Me, too, Miss Chuckie. But you know I’d rather eat a wolf or a rustler or even a daring desperado than sinkers and beans, any day.”

“You’ll come in with us and see what Daddy has to say about it,” the girl insisted.

She started to loosen her saddle-cinch. Gowan handed back the silver flask, and stripping off saddle and bridle from her horse, placed them on the rail beside his own. Ashton waited, as if

expecting a like service. The puncher started off beside Miss Isobel without looking at him. Ashton flushed hotly, and hastened to do his own unsaddling.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE CHANCE OF RECLAMATION

Beyond the bunkhouse, which was the nearest building to the corral, stood the low but roomy log structure of the main ranch house. As Ashton came around the front corner, close behind Gowan and the girl, Knowles rose from his comfortable chair in the rustic porch, knocked out the half burned contents of his pipe and extended a freckled, corded hand to the stranger.

"Howdy, Mr. Ashton! Glad to see you!" he said with hearty hospitality. "Hope you've come to ease up our lonesomeness by a month or two's visit."

"Why, I—You're too kind, really!" replied Ashton, his voice quavering and breaking at the unexpected cordiality of the welcome. "If you—I shall take advantage of your generous offer. You see, I'm rather in a box, owing to my—" He caught himself up, and tightened his slackening lip. "But you'll pardon me if I ask you to let me do something in return for your hospitality."

"We don't sell our hospitality on the range," brusquely replied the cowman.

"Oh, no, no, I did not mean—I could not pay a penny. I'm utterly destitute—a pauper!" A spasm of bitter despair contorted his handsome face.

Knowles and the girl hastily looked away from him, that they might not see him in his weakness. But he rallied and forced a rather unsteady laugh at himself. "You see, I haven't quite got used to it yet. I've always had money. I never really had to work. Now I must learn to earn a living. It's very good of you, Mr. Knowles, but—there's that veal. If only you'll let me work out what I owe you."

"You don't owe me a cent for the yearling," gruffly replied the cowman. "Don't know what I could put you at, anyway."

"Might use him to shoo off the rattlers and jackrabbits from in front the mowing machine," suggested Gowan.

"Mr. Ashton can ride," interposed the girl, with a friendliness of tone that brought Gowan to a thin-lipped silence.

"That's something," said Knowles, gazing speculatively at the slim aristocratic figure of the tenderfoot. "You're not built for pitching hay, but like as not you have the makings of a puncher. Ever throw a rope?"

"Never. I shall start practicing the art—at once."

"No, not until you and Kid have had dinner," gayly contradicted the girl. "We've had ours. But Yuki always has something ready. Kid, if you'll show Mr. Ashton where to wash, I'll tell Yuki."

She darted through the open doorway into the house. At a curt nod from Gowan, Ashton followed him around to the far side of the house, leaving Knowles in the act of hastily reloading his pipe. Under a lean-to that covered a door in the side of the house was a barrel of water and a bench with two basins. On a row of pegs above hung a number of towels, all rumped but none dirty.

Gowan pointed to a box of unused towels, and proceeded to lather and wash himself. Ashton took a towel, and after rinsing out the second washbasin, made as fastidious a toilet as the scant conveniences of the place would permit. There were combs and a fairly good mirror above the soap shelf. Gowan went in by the side door, without waiting for his companion. Ashton presently followed him, having looked in vain for a razor to rid himself of his two days' growth of beard.

The long table told him that he had entered the ranch mess-hall, or rather, dining-room. Though the table was covered with oilcloth and the rough-hewn logs of the outer walls were lime-plastered only in the chinks, the seats were chairs instead of benches, and between the gay Mexican *serape* drapes of the clean windows hung several well-done water color landscapes, appropriately framed in unbarked pine. On the oiled deal floor were scattered half a dozen Navajo rugs.

Gowan had taken a seat at one end of the table. As Ashton sat down at the neatly laid place opposite him, a silent, smiling, deft-handed Jap came in from the kitchen with a heaping trayful of dishes. For the most part, the food was ordinary ranch fare, but cooked with the skill of a *chef*. The exceptions were the fresh milk and delicious unsalted butter. On most cattle ranches, the milk comes from “tin cows” and the butter from oleomargarine tubs.

The two diners were well along in their meal, eating as earnestly and as taciturnly as the Jap served, when Miss Isobel came in with her father. The girl had dressed for the afternoon in a gown of the latest style, whose quiet color and simple lines harmonized perfectly with her surroundings. She smiled impartially at puncher, tenderfoot, and Jap.

“Thank you, Yuki. I see you did not keep our hungry hunters waiting.—Mr. Ashton, I have told Daddy about that shooting.”

“It’s a mighty strange happening. You might tell us the full particulars,” said Knowles.

Ashton at once gave a fairly accurate account of the affair. He could hardly exaggerate the peril he had incurred, and the touch of exultance with which he described his defeat of the murderer was quite pardonable in a tenderfoot.

“Strange—mighty strange. Can’t understand it,” commented the cowman when Ashton had finished his account.

“It shore is, Mr. Knowles,” added Gowan. “The only thirty-eight on the ranch is mine. That seems to clear our people.”

“Of course! It could not possibly be any of our people!” exclaimed the girl.

“Mr. Ashton thinks it might have been his guide,” went on Gowan.

“His guide? What caliber was his rifle?” shrewdly queried the cowman.

“Why, I—really I cannot remember,” answered Ashton. “I know it was of a larger bore than mine, but that is all.”

“Um-m,” considered Knowles. “Looks rather like he’s the man. Can’t think of anyone else. Trouble is, if he was laying in wait for you, his horse would be fresh. Must have covered a right smart bit of territory by now.”

“I’ll go out and take a look at his tracks,” said Gowan, rising with a readiness that brought a nod of approval from his employer.

“You’ll be careful, Kid,” cautioned the girl, with a shade of concern in her tone.

“He’ll keep his eye open, Chuckie,” reassured her father. “It’s the other fellow wants to be careful, if he hasn’t already vamoosed. Hey, Kid?”

“I’ll get him, if I get the chance,” laconically replied Gowan, looking from the girl to Ashton with the characteristic straightening of his lips that marked the tensing of his emotions.

As he left the room Miss Isobel smiled and nodded to Ashton. “You see how friendly he is, in spite of his cold manner to strangers. I thought he had taken a dislike to you, yet you saw how readily he offered to go out after your assailant.”

“More likely it’s because he thinks it would discredit us to let such a scoundrel get away,” differed her father. “However, he’ll leave you alone, Mr. Ashton, if you stay with us as a guest, and will only haze you a bit, if you insist upon joining our force.”

“You mean, working for you? I must insist on that,” said Ashton, with an eager look at the girl. “If only I can do well enough to be employed right along!”

The cowman grunted, and winked solemnly at his daughter. “Yes, I can understand your feeling that way. How about the winter, though? You mayn’t like it over here so well then.”

Ashton flushed and laughed at the older man’s shrewdness; hesitated, and confessed candidly: “No, I should prefer Denver in winter.”

Miss Isobel blushed in adorable payment of his compliment, but thrust back at him: “We bar cowboys in the Sacred Thirty-six.”

He winced. Her stroke had pierced into his raw wound.

“Oh!—oh!” she breathlessly exclaimed. “I didn’t mean to—Oh, I’m so sorry!”

He dashed the tears from his eyes. “No, you—don’t apologize! It’s only that I’m—Please don’t fancy I’m a baby! You see, when a fellow has always lived high—on top, you know—and then to have everything go out from under him without warning!”

“Keep a stiff upper lip, son,” advised Knowles. “You’ll pull through all right. It isn’t everyone in your fix that would be asking for work.”

Ashton laughed a trifle unsteadily. “It’s very kind of you to say that, Mr. Knowles. I—I wish a steady position, winter as well as summer.”

“How about Denver?” asked Knowles.

“That can wait,” replied Ashton. He met the girl’s smile of approval, and rallied fully. “Yes, that can wait—and so can I.”

Again the girl blushed, but she found a bantering rejoinder: “With you and Kid and Daddy all waiting for me to come home, I suppose I’ll have to cut the season short.”

“The winters here are like those you read about up at the North Pole,” the cowman informed Ashton. “But we get our sunshine back along in the spring.”

“Oh, Daddy! you’re a poet!” cried his daughter, flinging her arm around his sunburnt neck.

“Wish I were one!” enviously sighed Ashton. The cowman gave him a look that brought him to his feet. “Mr. Knowles,” he hastened to ask, “if you’ll kindly tell me what my work is to be this afternoon.”

The older man’s frown relaxed. “Did you come out here from Stockchute?”

“Yes.”

“Think you could find your way back?”

“Why, yes; though we wandered all around—But surely, Mr. Knowles, you’ll not require me—”

“I want a man to ride over with some letters and fetch the mail. I’ll need Gowan for work you can’t do. Chuckie was to have gone; but I can’t let her now, until we’re more sure about that man who shot at you.”

“I see.”

“Well, have you got the nerve, in case the man is loose over that way?”

Ashton’s eyes flashed. “I’ll go! Perhaps I’ll get another crack at the scoundrel.”

“Keep cool. It’s ninety-nine chances in the hundred he’s on the run and’ll keep going all week.”

“Shall I start now? As we came by a very roundabout way—We went first in the opposite direction, and then skirted High Mesa down from the mountains. So, you see, I may have a little difficulty—”

“No you won’t. There’s our wagon trail. Even if you got off that, all you’d have to do would be to keep headed for Split Peak. That’s right in line with Stockchute. But you’ll not start till morning. I haven’t got all my letters written. That’ll give you all day to go and come. It’s only twenty-five miles over there. Chuckie, you show this new puncher of ours over the place, while I write those letters.”

“I’ll start teaching him how to throw a rope,” volunteered the girl.

She led the way out through a daintily furnished front room, in which Ashton observed an upright piano and other articles of culture that he would never have expected to come upon in this remote section. In passing, the girl picked up a wide-brimmed lacy hat.

Once outside, she first took Ashton for a walk up Plum Creek to where half a dozen men were at work with a mowing machine and horse rakes making hay of the rich bunch-grass.

“Daddy feeds all he can in winter,” she explained. “The spring when I first came back from Denver I cried so over the starving cattle that he promised to always afterwards cut and stack all the hay he could. And he has found it pays to feed well. We would put a lot of land into oats, but, as you see, there’s not enough water in the creek.”

“That’s where an irrigation system would come in,” remarked Ashton.

“Oh, I hope you don’t think it possible to water our mesa!” she cried. “I told you how it would break up our range.”

“I assure you, I don’t think at all,” he replied. “I’m not a reclamation engineer—never specialized on hydraulics.”

She flashed an odd look at him. “You never? But Mr. Blake—that wonderful engineer of the Zariba Dam—he would know, wouldn’t he?”

“I—suppose he would—that is, if he—” Ashton hesitated, and exclaimed, “But that’s just it!”

“What?” she asked.

“Why, to—to have him come here. He’s the luckiest for blundering on ways to do things,” muttered Ashton. He added with growing bitterness: “Yes, if there’s any way at all to do it, you’d have him flooding your whole range—deluging it. He’s got all those millions to back him.”

“You do not like him,” said the girl. She looked off towards High Mesa, her face glowing with suppressed excitement. “No doubt you are right—as to his ability. But—don’t you see?—if it can be done, it is bound to be done sooner or later. All the time Daddy and I—and Kid, too—are living under this constant dread that it may be possible. But if such an engineer as—as Mr. Blake came and looked over the situation and told us we needn’t fear—don’t you see how—?”

“You don’t mean that you—?” Ashton, in turn, left his question unfinished and averted his face.

“Yes,” she answered. “I’m sure it will be best to put an end to this uncertainty. So I believe I shall send for—for Mr. Blake.”

“But—why for—for him—in particular?” he stammered.

“I am sorry you dislike him,” she said, regaining her composure when she saw that he too was agitated.

He did not reply. She tactfully changed the subject. By the time they had circled around, back to the half open feed-sheds, he was gayly chatting with her on music and the drama. When they came down to the horse corral she proceeded to lecture him on the duties of a cowboy and showed him how to hold and throw a rope. Under her skillful tuition, he at last learned the knack of casting an open noose.

Evening was near when they returned to the house. As before, they caught Knowles in the front porch contentedly puffing at his pipe. He dropped it down out of sight. The girl shook her finger at him, nodded to Ashton, and went indoors. Immediately the cowman put his pipe back into his mouth and drew another from his pocket, together with an unopened sack of tobacco.

“Smoke?” he asked.

Ashton’s eyes gleamed. In the girl’s presence he had been able to restrain the fierce craving that had tortured him since dinner. Now it so overmastered him that he almost snatched the pipe and tobacco out of the cowman’s hand. The latter gravely shook his head.

“Got it that bad, have you?” he deplored.

Ashton could not answer until his pipe was well under way.

“I’m—I’m breaking off,” he replied. “Haven’t had a cigarette all day—nor anything else. A-ah!”

“Glad you like it,” said Knowles. “A pipe is all right with this kind of tobacco. You can’t inhale it like you can cigarettes, unless you want to strangle.”

“I shall break off entirely as soon as I can,” asserted Ashton.

“Well,” considered Knowles, “I’m not saying you can’t or won’t. It’s mighty curious what a young fellow can do to please a pretty girl. Just the same, I’d say from the color of Kid’s fingers that he hasn’t forgotten how to roll a fat Mexican *cigaretto*.—Hello! ‘Talk of the devil—’ Here he comes now.”

Gowan came around the corner of the house, his spurs jingling. His eyes were as cold and his face as emotionless as usual.

“Well?” asked Knowles. “Have a seat.”

“Didn’t get him,” reported Gowan, dropping into a chair. “Near as I could make out, he cut straight across for the railroad, on the jump.”

“Then it must have been that guide!” exclaimed Ashton.

“Looks that way,” added Knowles. “Glad of it. We won’t see him again, unless you want to notify the sheriff, when you ride over tomorrow.”

“No, oh, no. I am satisfied to be rid of him.”

“If he don’t come back,” remarked Gowan.

“He won’t,” predicted Knowles.

“Well, not for a time maybe,” agreed Gowan.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A MAN'S SIZE HORSE

At dusk the sonorous boom of a Japanese gong gave warning of the approach of the supper hour. A few minutes later a second booming summoned all in to the meal. Miss Isobel sat at one end of the table; her father at the other. Along the sides were the employés, Ashton and Gowan at the corners nearest the girl. A large coal oil lamp with an artistic shade cast a pink light on the clean white oilcloth of the table and the simple tasteful table service.

Yuki, the silent Jap, served all with strict impartiality, starting with the mistress of the house and going around the table in regular succession, either one way or the other. The six rough-appearing haymakers used their knives with a freedom to which Ashton was unaccustomed, but their faces were clean, their behavior quiet, and their occasional remarks by no means inapt.

After the meal they wished Miss Knowles a pleasant "Good-night," and left for the bunkhouse. But Ashton and Gowan, at the smiling invitation of the girl, followed her into the front room. Knowles came in a few minutes later and, with scarcely a glance at the young people, settled down beside a tableful of periodicals and magazines to study the latest Government report on the reclamation service.

Ashton had entered the "parlor" under the impression that here he would have Gowan at a disadvantage. To his surprise, the puncher proved to be quite at ease; his manners were correct and his conversation by no means provincial. A moment's reflection showed Ashton that this could not well be otherwise, in view of the young fellow's intimacy with Miss Chuckie Isobel.

Another surprise was the discovery that Gowan had a remarkably good ear for music and knew even more than the girl about the masters and their works. There was a player attachment to the piano, and the girl and Gowan had a contest, playing the same selections in turn, to see which could get the most expression by means of the mechanical apparatus. If anything, the girl came out second best. At least she said so; but Ashton would not admit it.

Between times the three chatted on a thousand and one topics, the girl always ready to bubble over with animation and merriment. She bestowed her dimpled smiles on both her admirers with strict impartiality and as impartially stimulated each to his best with her tact and gay wit.

At nine o'clock sharp Knowles closed his report and rose from his comfortable seat.

"Time to turn in, boys. Coal oil costs more than sunlight," he announced, in the flat tone of a standing joke. "We'll take a jog down creek to the Bar-Lazy-J ranch, first thing tomorrow, Kid.—Ashton, you'd better start off in the cool, before sunup. Here's my bunch of letters, case I might forget them."

He handed over half a dozen thinly padded envelopes. Gowan was already at the door, hat in hand.

"Good night, Mr. Knowles. Good night, Miss Chuckie. Pleasant dreams!" he said.

"Same to you, Kid!" replied the girl.

"May I give and receive the same?" asked Ashton.

"Of course," she answered. "But wait a moment, please. I've some letters to go, myself, if you'll kindly take them with Daddy's."

As she darted into a side room, Knowles stepped out after Gowan. When the girl returned, Ashton took the letters that she held out to him and deliberately started to tie them in a packet with those of her father. His sole purpose was to prolong his stay to the last possible moment. But inadvertently his eye caught the name "Blake" on one of the envelopes. His smile vanished; his jaw dropped.

"Why, Mr. Ashton, what is the matter?" said the girl.

“I—I beg your pardon,” he replied. “I did not realize that—But it’s too absurd—it can’t be! You did not mean what you said this afternoon. It can’t be you’re writing to that man to come here.”

“I am,” she replied.

“But you can’t—you must not. He’s the very devil for doing impossible things. He’ll be sure to turn loose a flood on you—drown you out—destroy your range!”

“If it can be done, the sooner we know it the better,” she argued. “Daddy says little, but it is becoming a monomania with him—the dread. I wish to put an end to his suspense. Besides, if—if this Mr. Blake is as remarkable as you and the reports say he is, it will be interesting to meet him. My only fear is that so great an engineer will not think it worth while to come to this out-of-the-way section.”

“The big four-flusher!” muttered Ashton.

“How you must dislike him! It makes me all the more curious to see him.”

“Does your father know about this letter?” queried Ashton.

“You forget yourself, sir,” she said.

Meeting her level gaze, he flushed crimson with mortification. He stood biting his lip, unable to speak.

She went on coldly: “I do not ask you to tell me the cause of your hatred for Mr. Blake. I assume that you are a gentleman and will not destroy my letter. But even if you should do so, it would mean only a short delay. I shall write him again if I receive no reply to this.”

Ashton’s flush deepened. “I did not think you could be so hard. But—I presume I deserved it.”

“Yes, you did,” she agreed, with no lessening of her coldness.

“I see you will not accept an apology, Miss Knowles. However, I give you my word that I will deliver your letter to the postmaster at Stockchute.”

He started out, very stiff and erect. As he passed through the doorway she suddenly relented and called after him: “Good night, Mr. Ashton! Pleasant dreams!”

He wheeled and would have stepped back to reply had not Knowles spoken to him from the darkness at the end of the porch: “This way, Ashton. Kid is waiting to show you to the bunkhouse. You’ll find a clean bunk and new blankets. I’ve also issued you corduroy pants and a pair of leather chaps from the commissary. Those city riding togs aren’t hardly the thing on the range. There’s a spare saddle, if you want to change off from yours.”

“Thank you for the other things; but I prefer my own saddle,” replied Ashton.

He now perceived the dim form of Gowan starting off in the starlight, and followed him to the bunkhouse. The other men were already in their beds, fast asleep and half of them snoring. Gowan silently lit a lantern and showed the tenderfoot to an unoccupied bunk in the far corner of the rough but clean building. After a curt request for Ashton to blow out the lantern when through with the light, he withdrew, to tumble into a bunk near the door.

Ashton removed twice as many garments as had the puncher, and slipped in between his fresh new blankets, after several minutes spent in finding out how to extinguish the lantern. For some time he lay listening. He had often read of the practical jokes that cowboys are supposed always to play on tenderfeet. But the steady concert of the snoring sleepers was unbroken by any horseplay. Presently he, too, fell asleep.

He was wakened by a general stir in the bunkhouse. Day had not yet come, but by the light of a lantern near the door he could see his fellow employés passing out. He dressed as hastily as he could in his gloomy corner, putting on his new trousers and the stiff leather chapareras in place of his breeches and leggings. Gowan came in, glanced at him with a trace of surprise, and went out with the lantern.

Ashton followed to the house and around into the side porch. The other men were making their morning toilets by lantern light, each drying face and hands on his own towel. Ashton and Gowan waited their turn at the basins, and together went into the lamplit dining-room, where the Jap cook was serving bacon, coffee, and hot bread. Ashton lingered over his meal, hoping to see Miss Isobel. But neither she nor her father appeared.

Gowan had gone out with the other men. Presently he came back to the side door and remarked in almost a friendly tone: "Your hawss is ready whenever you are, Ashton."

"Thanks," said Ashton, rising. "The poor old brute must be rather stiff after the spurring I gave him yesterday."

Gowan did not reply. He had gone out again. Somewhat nettled, Ashton hastened after him. Dawn had come. The gray light in the east was brightening to an exquisite pink. The clear twilight showed the puncher waiting at the front of the house beside a saddled horse. A glance showed Ashton that the saddle and bridle were his own, but that the horse was a big, rawboned beast.

"That's not my pony," he said.

"This here Rocket hawss ain't *any* pony," agreed Gowan. "He's a man's size hawss. Ain't afraid you'll drop too far when you fall off, are you?"

"You're trying to get me on a bucking bronco!" said Ashton, suspiciously eyeing the bony, wild-eyed brute.

"He's no outlaw," reassured Gowan. "Most all our hawsses are liable to prance some when they've et too many rattlers. But Miss Chuckie said you can ride."

"I can," said Ashton, tightening the thong of his sombrero down across the back of his head and buttoning his coat.

"Roped this Rocket hawss for you because Mr. Knowles wants his mail by sundown," remarked Gowan. "He shore can travel some when he feels like it. Don't know as you'll need your spurs. Here's a five-spot Mr. Knowles said to hand you by way of advance. Thought you might want to refresh yourself over at Stockchute. Wouldn't rather have another saddle and bridle, would you?"

"Kindly thank Mr. Knowles for me," said Ashton, pocketing the five dollar bill. "No—the horse is hard-mouthed, but I prefer my own saddle and bridle."

He drew his rifle from its sheath, wiped the dew from the butt, and tested the mechanism. The horse cocked his ears, but stood motionless while the rifle was taken out and replaced. Ashton picked up the reins from the ground and threw them over the horse's head. The beast did not swing around, but his ewe neck straightened and his entire body stiffened to a peculiar rigidity.

Ashton tested the tightness of his saddle girth, and paused to gaze at the closed front door of the house. Aside from his saddle and burlesque sombrero, he looked every inch a puncher, both in dress and in bearing. But Miss Isobel missed the effect of his new *ensemble*. She missed also the interesting spectacle of his mounting.

If he had never ridden a cow pony he would have been thrown and dragged the instant he put his foot in the narrow metal stirrup. The horse was watching him alertly, every muscle tense. Ashton smiled confidently, spoke to the beast in a quiet tone, and pulled on the off rein. The horse bent his head to the pull, for the moment off his guard. In a twinkling Ashton had his foot in the stirrup and was up in the saddle. His toe slipped into the other stirrup as the horse jumped sideways.

The leap was tremendous, but it failed to unseat Ashton. It was instantly followed by other wild jumps—whirling forward and sidelong leaps, interspersed with frantic plunging and rearing. Gowan looked on, agape with amazement. The tenderfoot stuck fast on his flat little saddle and only once pulled leather. Rocket was not a star buckler, but he had thrown more than one half-baked cowboy.

Finding that he could not unseat his rider, the beast suddenly gave over his plunging, and bolted at furious speed down the smooth slope towards Plum Creek. Before they had gone half a furlong Ashton realized that he was on a blooded horse of unusual speed and a runaway. He could not hope to pull down so tough-mouthed a beast with his ordinary curb. The best he could do was to throw all his weight on the right rein. Unable altogether to resist the steady tug at his head, the racing horse gradually swerved until he was headed across the mesa towards the jagged, snow-streaked twin crests of Split Peak.

Horse and rider were still in the curve of their swift flight when Isobel Knowles came out into the porch, yawning behind her plump, sunbrowned hand. A glance at Gowan cut the yawn short. She looked alertly afield and at once caught sight of the runaway.

“Kid!—O-oh!” she cried. “Mr. Ashton!—on Rocket!”

Gowan spun about to her with a guilty start, but answered almost glibly: “You said he could ride, Miss Chuckie.”

“He’ll—he’ll be killed!—Daddy!”

Knowles stepped out through the doorway, cocking his big blue-barreled Colt’s. Gowan hastily pointed towards the runaway. Knowles looked, and dropped the revolver to his side. “What’s up?” he growled.

“Kid—he—he put Mr. Ashton on Rocket!” breathlessly answered his daughter.

“Sorry to contradict you, Miss Chuckie,” said Gowan. “He put himself on.”

“He’s on yet,” dryly commented the cowman. “May be something to that boy, after all.”

“But, Daddy!—”

“Now, just stop fussing yourself, honey. He and Rocket are going smooth as axle grease and bee-lining for Stockchute. How did the hawss start off?—skittish?”

“Enough to make the tenderfoot pull leather,” said Gowan.

“If he stuck at all, with that fool saddle—!” rejoined Knowles. “Don’t you worry, honey. He sure can fork a hawss—that tenderfoot.”

“Oh, yes,” the girl sighed with relief. “If Rocket started off bucking, and he kept his seat, of course it’s all right. See him take that gully!”

“You sure gave me a start, honey, calling out that way.—Well, Kid, it’s about time we were off. I’ll get my hat.”

Gowan stepped nearer the girl as her father went inside. “I’ll leave it to the tenderfoot to tell you, Miss Chuckie. He’ll have to own up I gave him fair warning. Told him he wouldn’t need his spurs, and asked if he’d have another bit and saddle; but it wasn’t any use. He’s the kind that won’t take advice.”

“I know you meant it as a joke, Kid. You did not realize the danger of his narrow stirrups. Had he been caught in mounting or had he been thrown, he would almost certainly have been dragged. And for you to give him our one ugly hawss!”

“You said he could ride,” the puncher defended himself.

“I’ll forgive you for your joke—if he comes back safe,” she qualified, without turning her gaze from the now distant horse and rider.

Gowan started for the corral, the slight waddle of his bowlegged gait rather more pronounced than usual. When Knowles came out with his hat, the runaway was well up on the divide towards Dry Fork. Rocket was justifying his name.

In a few seconds the flying horse and rider had disappeared down the far slope. The girl followed her father and Gowan to the corral, and after they had ridden off, she roped and saddled one of the three horses in the corral. She mounted and was off on the jump, riding straight for the nearest point on the summit of the divide.

As, presently, she came up towards the top of the rise, she gazed anxiously ahead towards Dry Fork. Before she could see over the bend down to the creek channel, she caught sight of a cloud of dust far out on the mesa beyond the stream. She smiled with relief and wheeled about to return. The tenderfoot had safely crossed the stream bed. He would have Rocket well in hand before they came to rough country.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE SNAKE

Early in the afternoon, having nothing else to do, Isobel again saddled up and started off towards Dry Fork. Her intention was to ride out on the road to Stockchute and meet Ashton, if he was not too late.

As she rode up one side of the divide, a hat appeared over the bend of the other side. She could not mistake the high peak of that comic opera sombrero. Ashton was almost back to the ranch. Her first thought was that he had gone part way, and given up the trip. The big sombrero bobbed up and down in an odd manner. She guessed the cause even before Ashton's head and body appeared, rising and falling rhythmically. She stared as Rocket swept up into view, covering the ground with a long-strided trot.

Ashton waved to her. She waved back. A few moments later they were close together. As she spun her pony around, he pulled in his horse to a walk, patting the beast's neck and speaking to him caressingly.

"Back already?" she asked. "Surely, you've not been to Stockchute—Yes, you have!" Her experienced eye was taking in every indication of his horse's condition. "He's been traveling; but you've handled him well."

"He's grand!" said Ashton. "Been putting him through his paces. I suppose he is your father's best mount."

"Daddy and Kid ride him when they're in a hurry or there's no other horse handy."

"You can't mean—? Then perhaps I can have him again occasionally."

"You like him, really?"

"All he needs is a little management," replied Ashton, again patting the horse's lean neck.

"If you wish to take him in hand, I'll assign him to you. No one else wants him."

"As your rural deliveryman's mount—" began Ashton. He stopped to show the bulging bag slung under his arm. "Here's the mail. Do you wish your letters now?"

"Thank you, no."

"Here is this, however," he said, handing her a folded slip of paper.

She opened it and looked at the writing inside. It was a receipt from the postmaster at Stockchute to Lafayette Ashton for certain letters delivered for mailing. The address of the letter to Thomas Blake was given in full. The girl colored, bit her lip, and murmured contritely: "You have turned the tables on me. I deserved it!"

"Please don't take it that way!" he begged. "My purpose was merely to assure you the letter was mailed. After all, I am a stranger, Miss Knowles."

"No, not now," she differed.

"It's very kind of you to say it! Yet it's just as well for me to start off with no doubts in your mind, in view of the fact that in two or three weeks—"

"Yes?" she asked, as he hesitated.

"I—Your father will hardly keep me more than two weeks, unless—unless I make good," he answered.

"I guess you needn't worry about that," she replied, somewhat ambiguously.

He shrugged. "It is very good of you to say it, Miss Knowles. I know I shall fail. Can you expect anyone who has always lived within touch of millions, one who has spent more in four years at college than all this range is worth—He cut my allowance repeatedly, until it was only a beggarly twenty-five thousand."

“Twenty-five thousand dollars!” exclaimed Isobel. “You had all that to—to throw away in a single year?”

“He cut me down to it the last year—a mere bagatelle to what I had all the time I was at college and Tech.,” replied Ashton, his eyes sparkling at the recollection. “He wished me to get in thick with the New Yorkers, the sons of the Wall Street leaders. He gave me leave to draw on him without limit. I did what he wished me to do,—I got in with the most exclusive set. Ah-h!—the way I made the dollars fly! Before I graduated I was the acknowledged leader. What’s more, I led my class, too—when I chose.”

“When you chose!” she echoed. “And now what are you going to do?”

The question punctured his reminiscent elation. He sagged down in his saddle. “I don’t know,” he answered despondently. “*Mon Dieu!* To come down to this—a common laborer for wages—after *that!* When I think of it—when I think of it!”

“You are not to think of it again!” she commanded with kindly severity. “What you are to remember all the time is that you are now a man and honestly earning your own living, and no longer a—*a leech battenning on the sustenance produced by others.*”

He winced. “Was that my fault?”

“No, it was your father’s. I marvel that he did not utterly ruin you.”

“He has! In his last will he cuts me off with only a dollar.”

“So that was it?—And you think that ruined you? I say it saved you!” she went on with the same kindly severity. “You were a parasite. Now the chance is yours to prove that you have the makings of a man. You have started to prove it. You shall not stop proving it. You are not going to be a quitter.”

“No!” he declared, straightening under her bright gaze. “I will not quit. I will try my best to make good as long as the chance is given me.”

“Now you’re talking!” she commended him breezily.

“How could I do otherwise when you asked me?” he replied with a grave sincerity far more complimentary than mere gallantry.

She colored with pleasure and began to tell him of the cattle and their ways.

When they reached the corral she complimented him in turn by allowing him to offsaddle her horse. They walked on down to the house and seated themselves in the porch. As he opened the bag of mail for her she noticed that her hand was empty and turned to look back towards the corral.

“Your receipt from the postmaster,” she remarked; “I must have dropped it.”

He sprang up. “If you wish to keep it, I shall go back and find it for you.”

“No, oh, no; unless you want it yourself,” she replied.

“Not I. The matter is closed, thanks to your kindness,” he declared, again seating himself.

He was right, in so far as they were concerned. Yet the matter was not closed. That evening, when Knowles and Gowan returned from their day of range riding, the younger man noticed a crumpled slip of paper lying against the foot of the corral post below the place where he tossed up his saddle. He picked it up and looked to see if it was of any value. An oath burst from his thin-drawn lips.

“Shut up, Kid!” remonstrated Knowles. “I’m no more squeamish than most, but you know I don’t like any cussing so near Chuckie.”

“Look at this!” cried Gowan—“Enough to make anybody cuss!”

He thrust out the slip of paper close before his employer’s eyes. Knowles took it and read it through with deliberate care.

“Well?” he said. “It’s a receipt from the postmaster to Ashton for those letters I sent over by him. What of it?”

“*Your* letters?” asked Gowan, taken aback. “Did you write that one what is most particularly mentioned, the one to that big engineer Blake?”

“No. What would I be doing, writing to him or any engineer? They’re just the people I don’t want to have any doings with.”

“Then if you didn’t write him, who did?” questioned Gowan, his mouth again tightening.

“Why, I reckon you’ll have to do your own guessing, Kid—unless it might be Ashton did it.”

“That’s one leg roped,” said Gowan. “Can you guess why he’d be writing to that engineer?”

“Lord, no. He may have the luck to know him. Mr. Blake is a mighty big man, judging from all accounts; but money stands for a lot in the cities and back East, and Ashton’s father is one of the richest men in Chicago. I looked it up in the magazine that told about his helping to back the Zariba Dam project.”

“That’s another leg noosed—on the second throw,” said Gowan. “Another try or two, and we’ll have the skunk ready for hog-tying.”

“How’s that?” exclaimed the cowman. “You’ve got something up your sleeve.”

“No, it’s that striped skunk that’s doing the crooked playing,” snapped Gowan. “Can’t you savvy his game? It’s all a frame-up—his sending off his guide and outfit, so’s to let on to you he’d been busted up and kicked out by his dad. You take him in to keep his pretty carcass from the coyotes—which has saved them from being poisoned.”

“Now, look here, Kid, only trouble about you you’re too apt to go off at half-cock. This young fellow may not be—”

“He shore is a snake, Mr. Knowles, and this receipt proves it on him,” broke in the puncher. “Ain’t you taken him into your employ?—ain’t you treated him like he was a man?”

“Well, ’tisn’t every busted millionaire would have asked for work, and he seems to mean it.”

“Just a bluff! You don’t savvy the game yet. Busted millionaire—*bah!* He’s the coyote of that bunch of reclamation wolves. He comes out here to sneak around and get the lay of things. We happen to catch him rustling. To save his cussed carcass, he lets out about who his dad is. Course he couldn’t know we’d got all the reports on that Zariba Dam and who backed the engineer, nor that we’d know all about Blake.”

“Well?” asked Knowles, frowning.

“So he works us for suckers,—worms in here with us where he can learn all about you and your holdings; ropes a job with you, and gets off his report to that engineer Blake, first time he rides over to town.”

“Is that all your argument?” asked Knowles.

“Ain’t it enough?” rejoined Gowan. “Ain’t he and that bunch all in cahoots together? Ain’t this sneaking cuss’s dad either the partner or the boss of Blake? Ain’t Blake engaged in reclamation projects? You shore see all that. What follows?—It’s all a frame-up, I tell you. Young Ashton comes out here as a sort of forerider for his concern; finds out what his people want to know, and now he’s sent in his report to Blake. Next thing happens, Blake’ll be turning up with a surveying outfit.”

Knowles scratched his head. “Hum-m-m—You sure put up a mighty stiff argument, Kid. I’m not so sure, though... Um-m-m—Strikes me some of your knots might be tighter. First place, there wasn’t any play-acting about the way the boy went plumb to pieces there at the waterhole. Next place, a man like his father, that’s piled up a mint of money, isn’t going to send out his son as forerider in a hostile country. Lastly, I’ve read a lot more about that engineer Blake than you have, and I’ve sized him up as a man who won’t do anything that isn’t square and open.”

“Maybe he ain’t in on the dirty side of the deal,” admitted Gowan. “How about this letter, though?”

“Just a friendly writing, like as not,” answered the cowman. “No, Kid—only trouble with you is you’re too anxious over the interests of Dry Mesa range. I appreciate it, boy, and so does Chuckie. But that’s no reason for you to take every newcomer for a wolf ’til he proves he’s only a dog.”

“You won’t do anything?” asked the puncher.

“What d’you want me to do?”

“Fire him—run him off Dry Mesa,” snapped Gowan.

“Sorry I can’t oblige you, Kid,” replied Knowles. “You mean well, but you’ll have to make a better showing before I’ll turn adrift any man that seems to be trying to make good.”

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