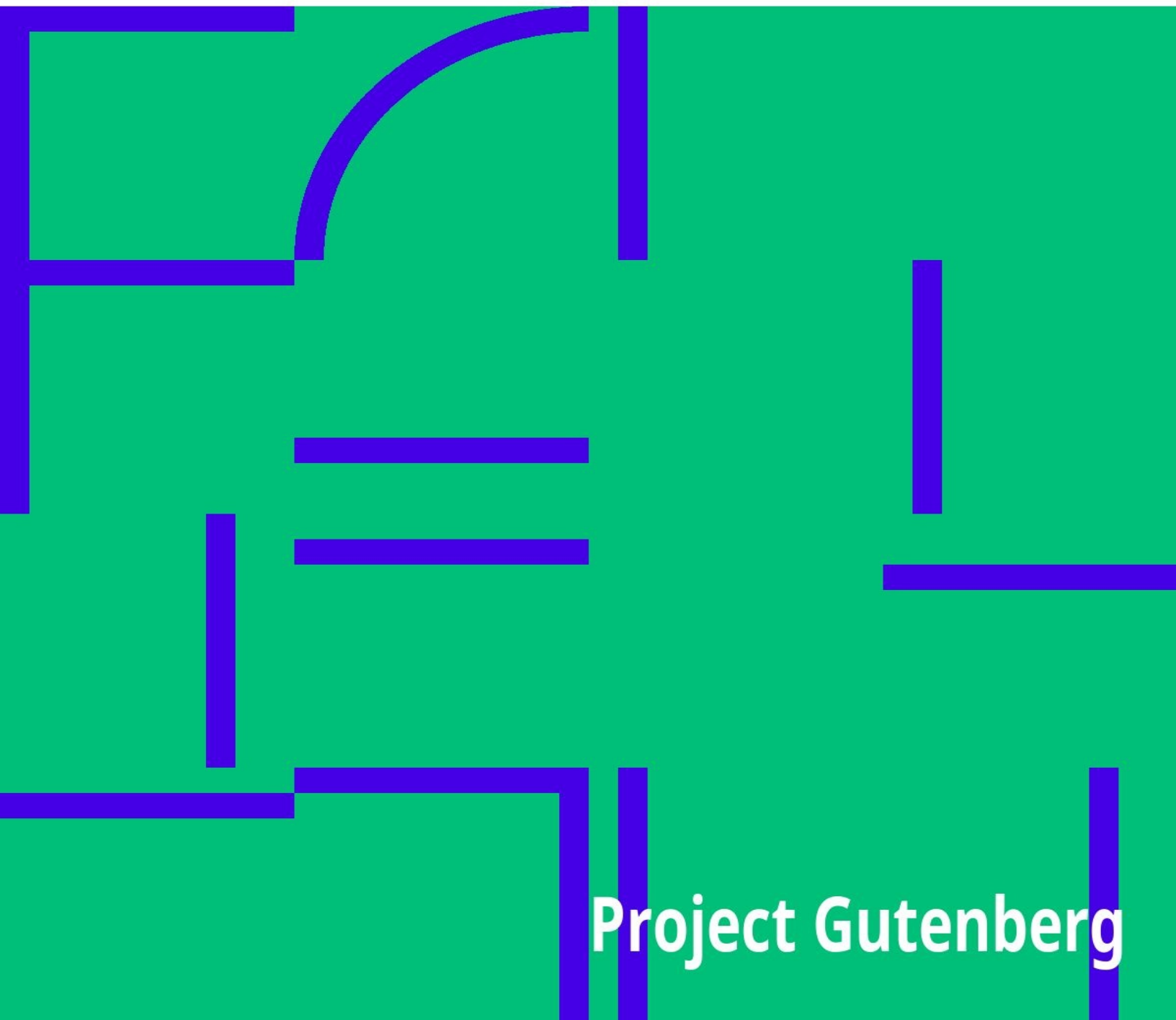


Out of the Depths

A Romance of Reclamation

Robert Ames Bennet



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Title: Out of the Depths

A Romance of Reclamation

Author: Robert Ames Bennet

Release Date: June 15, 2009 [eBook #29131]

Language: English

Character set encoding: ISO-8859-1

START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OUT OF THE DEPTHS

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Transcriber's Note:

The author consistently refers to a handgun as a "Colt's." This is a Colt's revolver, though the word "revolver" is not used.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

It was a wild race [*Page 32*]

Out of the Depths

A ROMANCE OF RECLAMATION

BY

ROBERT AMES BENNET

AUTHOR OF "OUT OF THE PRIMITIVE," "THE SHOGUN'S
DAUGHTER," "WHICH ONE," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

GEORGE BREHM

emblem

CHICAGO

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1913

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Published March, 1913

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TO
“THE SONS OF MARTHA”

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OUT OF THE DEPTHS

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. 10

“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. 21

“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 been³³ 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 glance⁴⁰ 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 condoled. “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?” condoled 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. 69

“Oh, no, no, I did not mean—I could not pay a penny. I’m utterly destitute—a—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 rumpled 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 employées 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 axlegrease 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—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, ’tishn’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."

Gowan looked down. After a brief pause he replied with unexpected submissiveness: "All right, Mr. Knowles. You're the boss. Reckon you know best. I don't savvy these city folks."

"Glad you admit it," said Knowles. "You're all wrong in sizing him up that way. I've a notion he's got a lot of good in him, spite of his city rearing. I wouldn't object, though, if you wanted to test him out with a little harmless hazing, long as you didn't go too far."

"No," declined Gowan. "I've got my own notion of what he is. There's just one way to deal with skunks, and that is, don't fool with them."

The cowman accepted this as conclusive. But when, a little later, Ashton met Gowan at the supper table he was rendered uneasy by the cold glint in the puncher's gray eyes. As nothing was said about the postmaster's receipt, he could conjecture no reason for the look other than that Gowan was planning to render him ridiculous with some cowboy trick.

Isobel had assured him with utmost confidence that the testing of his horsemanship by means of Rocket had been intended only as a practical joke, and that Gowan would never have permitted him to mount the horse had he considered it at all dangerous. Yet the fellow might next undertake jokes containing no element of physical peril and consequently all the more humiliating unless evaded.

In apprehension of this, the tenderfoot lay awake most of that night and fully half of the next. His watch was fruitless. Each night Gowan and the other men left him strictly alone in his far dark corner of the bunkhouse. In the daytime the puncher was studiously polite to him during the few hours that he was not off on the range.

The third evening, after supper, Gowan handed Isobel the horny, half-flattened

rattles of an unusually large rattlesnake.

“What is it? Do you wish me to guess his length?” she asked, evidently surprised that he should fetch her so commonplace an object. “I make it four feet.”

“You’re three inches short,” he replied.

“Well, what about it?” she inquired.

“Nothing—only I just happened to get him up near the bunkhouse, Miss Chuckie. Thought I’d tell you, in case he has a mate around.”

“We must all look sharp. You, too, Mr. Ashton. They are more apt to strike without warning, this time of year.”

“I know,” remarked Ashton. “It’s before they cast their old skin, and it makes them blind.”

“Too early for that,” corrected Knowles. “I figure it’s the long spell of the summer’s heat. Gets on their nerves, same as with us.”

“They shore are mighty like some humans,” observed Gowan. “Look at the way they like to snuggle up in your blankets on a cool night. Remember how I used to carry a hair rope on spring round-up?”

“I remember that they used to crawl into the bunkhouse before the floor was laid,” said Isobel. She smiled at Ashton. “That was the Dry Mesa reptilian age. I first learned to handle a ‘gun’ shooting at rattlers. There were so many we had to make it a rule to kill everyone we could. But there hasn’t been one killed so near the house for years.”

“They often go in pairs. This one, though, may have been a lone stray,” added Gowan. He looked at his employer. “Talking about strays, guess I’d best go out in the morning and head back that Bar-Lazy-J bunch. I can take an iron along and brand those two calves, same trip.”

Knowles nodded and returned to his Government report. The two young men and Isobel began an evening’s entertainment at the piano. Ashton enjoyed himself immensely. Though so frank and unconstrained in manner, the girl was as truly refined as the most fastidiously reared ladies of the East.

At the end of the delightful evening he withdrew with Gowan to the bunkhouse, reluctant to leave, yet aglow with pleasure. Isobel had so charmed him that he lay in his bunk forgetful of all else than her limpid blue eyes and dimpled cheeks. But after his two nights of broken rest he could not long resist the

heaviness that pressed together his eyelids. He fell asleep, smiling at the recollection of the girl's gracious, "Good-night and pleasant dreams!"

With such a kindly wish from her, his dreams certainly should have been heavenly. Yet he began the night by sinking into so profound a sleep that he had no dreams whatever. When at last he did rouse to the dream-state of consciousness, it was not to enjoy any pleasant fantasy of music and flowers.

He was lying in Deep Cañon, down at the very bottom of those gloomy depths. About him was an awful stillness. The river of the abyss was no longer roaring. It had risen up, up, up to the very rim of the precipices—and all the tremendous weight of its waters was above him, bearing down upon him, smothering him, crushing in his chest! He sought to shriek, and found himself dumb.

Suddenly an Indian stood over him, a gigantic Indian with feet set upon his breast. The red giant was a medicine man, for he clashed and rattled an enormous gourd full of bowlders.

The rattle sounded sharper, shriller, more vibrant in the ears of the rousing sleeper. His eyelids fluttered, rose a little way, and snapped wide apart. His eyes, bared of their covers, glared in utter horror of that which they saw. Their pupils dilated, their balls bulged as if about to burst from the sockets.

The weight was still on his chest,—a weight far more to be dreaded than a cañon full of water or the foot of an Indian Titan. It was a weight of living, quivering coils. Above those coils, clearly illuminated in the full daylight that streamed through the open door of the bunkhouse, there upreared a hideous gaping maw, set with four slender curved fangs of dazzling whiteness.

The snake's eyes, green as emeralds, glared down into the face of the man with such intense malignancy that they seemed to stream forth a cold evil light. Fortunately he was paralyzed with fright. The slightest movement would have caused that fanged maw to lash down into his face.

Something partly obscured the light in the doorway. Ashton was too terrified to heed. But the snake was more sensitive to the change in the light. Without altering the deadly poise of its head, it again sounded its shrill, menacing rattle. The shadow passed and the light streamed in as before. The rattling ceased. There followed a pause of a few seconds' duration—To the man every second was an age-long period of horror.

A faint metallic click came from across the room. Slight as was the sound, the irritated snake again set its rattle to quivering. The triangular head flattened back

for the delayed stroke at the ashen face of the man. The billowing coils stiffened—the stroke started. In the same instant came a report that to the strained ears of the man sounded like the crashing roar of a cannon.

It sounded its shrill, menacing rattle

The head and forepart of the snake's body shot alongside his face, writhing¹²⁷ in swift convulsions. The first touch of its cold scales against his cheek broke the spell of horror that had bound him. He jerked his head aside, and flung out his left hand to push the hideous thing from him. As his fingers thrust away the nearest coil, the head flipped around on its half-severed neck, and the deadly jaws automatically gaped and snapped together. Two of the dripping poison fangs struck in the cushion of flesh on the outer edge of Ashton's hand. With a shriek, he flung the dying snake on the floor and put the wounded hand to his mouth.

"He struck you!" cried the voice of Isobel, "but only on the hand, thank goodness! Wait, I'll fix it. Lie still."

She came swiftly across the room, thrusting a long-barreled automatic pistol into its holster under a fold of her skirt. Her other hand drew out a locket that was suspended in her bosom.

"Whiskey! I'm bitten!" panted Ashton, sucking frantically at his wounds. "Quick! I'm bitten. Give me whiskey!"

"Steady, steady," she reassured. "It's not bad—only on your hand. Give it to me. Here's something a thousand times better than whiskey—permanganate."¹²⁸

While speaking, she caught up his neckerchief from the head of the bunk and knotted it about the wrist of the wounded hand tightly enough to check the circulation.

"Now hold it steady," she directed. "Won't have to use a knife. You tore open the holes when you jerked off the horrid thing."

Obedient but still sweating with fear, he held up the bleeding hand. She had opened her locket, in which were a number of small, dark-purple crystals. Two of the larger ones she thrust lengthwise as deeply as she could into the little slits gashed by the fangs. Another large and two small crystals were all that she could force into the openings.

"There!" she cheerily exclaimed. "That will kill the poison in short order, and will not hurt you a particle. It's the best thing there is to cheat rattlers,—just

cheap, ordinary permanganate of potash. If people only had sense enough always to carry a few crystals, no one would ever die of rattlesnake bites.”

“I’ve—I’ve heard that whiskey—” began Ashton.

“Yes, and far more victims die from the whiskey than from the bites,” rejoined Isobel.

“But a stimulant—”

“Stimulant, then heart depressant—first up, then down—that’s alcohol. No, you’ll get only one poison, the snake’s, this time. So don’t worry. You’ll soon be all right. Even had you been struck in the face, quick action with permanganate would have saved you.”

He shuddered. “Ah!... But if you had not come!”

“It was fortunate, wasn’t it?” she remarked. “I did not know you were in here. I was going up to the corral and heard the rattle as I came past. It was so faint that I might not have noticed it, had not Kid told of killing the rattler yesterday.”

Ashton stared fearfully at his blackening hand. Isobel smiled and began to unknot the neckerchief.

“There is nothing to fear,” she insisted. “That is due only to lack of circulation. You’ll soon be all right. Come up to the house as soon as you can and get two or three cups of coffee. I’ll tell Yuki.”

She hastened out. When he had made sure that the still writhing snake was far over on the floor, he slipped from his bunk and dressed as quickly as was possible without the use of his numbed hand. Shirt, trousers, boots—he stopped for no more, but hurried after Isobel. Whether because of the effects of the poison or merely as the reaction of the shock, he felt faint and dizzy. Several cups of hot strong coffee, however, went far towards restoring him.

CHAPTER X

COMING EVENTS

Knowles had gone with Gowan to cut out and drive back the stray cattle belonging to the adjoining range. They returned during the regular supper hour. The cowman washed quickly and hastened in to the table. Gowan, however, loitered just outside the door, fastening and refastening his neckerchief. He entered the dining-room while Isobel was in the midst of telling her father about the snake.

“Did you hear, Kid?” she asked, when she finished her vivid account.

“Yes, Miss Chuckie. I was slicking-up close ’longside the door. I heard all you told,” he replied as he took his seat at the corner next to the animated girl. “We shore have got one mighty lucky tenderfoot on this range.”

“Indeed, yes!” exclaimed Ashton. “Had not Miss Chuckie chanced to be passing as the monster rattled—You know, she says that she might not have heeded it but for your killing the other snake yesterday. That put her on the alert.”

The puncher stared across the table at the city man with a coldly speculative gaze. “You shore are a lucky tenderfoot,” he repeated. “’Tain’t every fellow gets that close to a rattler this time of year and comes out of it as easy as you have. All I can see is you’re kind of pale yet around the gills.”

Ashton held up his bandaged left hand. “Ah, but I have also this memento of the occasion. It is far from a pleasant one, I assure you.”

“Feels ’most as bad as a bee sting, don’t it?” ironically condoled the puncher.

“What I can’t make out,” interposed Knowles, “is how that rattler got up into Mr. Ashton’s bunk.”

Gowan again stared across at the tenderfoot, this time with unblinking solemnity. “Can’t say, Mr. Knowles,” he replied. “Except it might be that desperado guide of his came around in the night and brought him Mr. Rattler for bedfellow.”

“Oh, Kid!” remonstrated Isobel. “It’s not a joking matter!”

“No, you’re dead right, Miss Chuckie,” he agreed. “There shore ain’t any joke about it.”

“Ah, but perhaps I can make one,” gayly dissented Ashton. “Had you not interfered, Miss Chuckie, the poor snake would have taken one bite, and then curled up and died. I’m so charged with nicotine, you know.”

Neither Isobel nor the puncher smiled at this ancient witticism. But Knowles burst into a hearty laugh, which was caught up and reënforced by the hitherto silent haymakers.

“By—James! Ashton, you’ll do!” declared the cowman, wiping his eyes. “When a tenderfoot can let off a joke like that on himself it’s a sure sign he’s getting acclimated. Yes, you’ll make a puncher, some day.”

Ashton smiled with gratification, and looked at Isobel in eager-eyed appeal for the confirmation of the statement. She smiled and nodded.

Upon his return from his remarkable ride to town she had assured him that he need not worry. Her present kindly look and the words of her father might have been expected to remove his last doubts. Such in fact was the result for the remainder of the evening.

But that night the new employé must have given much anxious thought to the question of his future and his great need to “make good.” The liveliness of his concern was shown by his behavior during the next two weeks. His zeal for work astonished Knowles quite as much as his efforts to be agreeable to his fellow employés gratified Miss Isobel. He charmed the Japanese cook with his praise of the cooking, he flattered the haymakers with his interest in their opinions. Towards the girl and her father he was impeccably respectful.

Within ten days he was “Lafe” to everybody except Gowan and the Jap. The latter addressed him as “Mistah Lafe”; Gowan kept to the noncommittal “Ashton.” The puncher had become more taciturn than ever, but missed none of the home evenings in the parlor. He watched Ashton with catlike closeness when Isobel was present, and seemed puzzled that the interloper refrained from courting her.

“Don’t savvy that tenderfoot,” he remarked one day to Knowles. “All his talk about his dad being a multimillionaire—Acted like it at the start-off. Came down to this candidate-for-office way of comporting himself. It ain’t natural.”

“Not when he’s on the same range with Chuckie?” queried the cowman, his eyes twinkling. “Why don’t you ever go into Stockchute and paint the town red?”

“That’s another thing,” insisted Gowan. “He started in with Miss Chuckie brash as all hell. Now he acts towards her like I feel.”

“That’s natural. He soon found out she’s a lady.”

“No, it ain’t natural, Mr. Knowles—not in him, it ain’t. Nor it ain’t natural for him to be so all-fired polite to everybody, nor his pestering you to find work for him.”

“And it’s not natural for a tenderfoot to gentle a hawss like Rocket the way he’s done already,” rallied Knowles. “That crazy hawss follows him about like a dog.”

“Yes; Ashton feeds him sugar, like he does the rest of you,” rejoined the puncher. “It ain’t natural in his brand of tenderfoot—Bound to ride out, if there’s any riding to do; bound to fuss and stew around the corral; bound to help with the haying; bound to help haul the water; bound to practice with his rope every moment he ain’t doing something else. Can’t tell me there ain’t a nigger in that woodpile.”

“Now, don’t go to hunting out any more mares’ nests, Kid,” admonished Knowles. “He’s just a busted millionaire, that’s all; and he’s proving he realizes it. Guess the smash scared him. He’s afraid he can’t make good. Chuckie says he thinks I’ll turn him adrift if he doesn’t hustle enough to earn his salt.”

“Why not fire him anyway? You don’t need him, and you won’t need him,” argued the puncher.

“Well, he helps keep Chuckie entertained. With you and him both on the place, she might conclude to stay over the winter, this year.”

Gowan’s mouth straightened to a thin slit. “Better send her to Denver right off.”

“Look here, Kid,” reproved the cowman. “You’ve had your chance, and you’ve got it yet. I’ve never interfered with you, and I’m not going to with him. It’s for Chuckie to pick the winner. Like as not it’ll be some man in town, for all I know. She has the say. Whether he wears a derby or a sombrero, she’s to have her own choice. I don’t care if he’s a millionaire or a busted millionaire or a bronco buster, provided he’s a man, and provided I’m sure he’ll treat her right.”

Gowan lapsed into a sullen silence.

Mounted as before on Rocket, Ashton had already made a second trip to Stockchute for mail, returning almost as quickly as on his wild first ride. Monday of his third week at the ranch he was sent on his third trip. As before, he

started at dawn. But this time he did not come racing back early enough for a belated noon meal as he had on each of the previous occasions.

By mid-afternoon Isobel began to grow uneasy. Remarkable as had been the efforts of his new rider's training, there was the not improbable chance that Rocket had reverted to his ugly tricks. She shuddered as she pictured the battered corpse of the city man dragging over the rocks and through the brush, with a foot twisted fast in one of the narrow iron stirrups.

Her father and Gowan were off on their usual work of inspecting the bunches of cattle scattered about the range. The other men were as busy as ever mowing more hay and hauling in that which was cured. She was alone at the ranch with the Jap. At four o'clock she saddled her best horse and rode out towards Dry Fork. She hoped to sight Ashton from the divide. But there was no sign of any horseman out on the wide stretch of sagebrush flats.

She rode down to Dry Fork, crossed over the sandy channel, and started on at a gallop along the half-beaten road that wound away through the sagebrush towards the distant Split Peak. An hour found her nearing the piñon clad hills on the far side of Dry Mesa, with still no sign of Ashton.

By this time she had worked herself into a fever of excitement and dread. Her relief was correspondingly great when at last she saw him coming towards her around the bend of the nearest hill. But his horse was walking and he was bent over in the saddle as if injured or greatly fatigued. Puzzled and again apprehensive, she urged her pony to sprinting speed.

When he heard the approaching hoofs Ashton looked up as if startled. But he did not wave to her or raise his sombrero. As she came racing up she scrutinized his dejected figure for wounds or bruises. There was nothing to indicate that he had been either shot or thrown. His sullen look when she drew up beside him not unnaturally changed her anxiety to vexation.

"What made you so slow?" she queried. "You know how eager I am for the mail each time. You might as well have ridden your own hawss."

"It—has come," he muttered.

"What?" she demanded.

"The letter from him."

"Him?" echoed the girl, trying hard to cover her confusion with a look of surprise.

His dejection deepened as he observed her heightened color and the light in her eyes. "Yes, from him," he mumbled.

"Oh, you mean Mr. Blake, I suppose," she replied. Lightly as she spoke, she could not suppress the quiver of eagerness in her voice. "If you will kindly give it to me now."

He drew out a letter, not from among the other mail in his pouch, but from his pocket. Her look of surprise showed that she was struck with the oddness of this. She was too excited, however, to consider what might be its meaning. She tore open the letter and read it swiftly. Her sparkling eyes and glowing cheeks when she looked up served only to increase Ashton's gloom.

"So the fellow is coming," he groaned. "What else could I have expected?"

The girl held out the open letter to him. It was in typewriting, addressed from Chicago, and read:—

Dear Madam:

In reply to your letter of inquiry regarding an inspection to determine the feasibility of irrigating certain lands in your vicinity—my fee for personal inspection and opinion would be \$50. per day and expenses, if I came as consulting engineer. However, I am about to make a trip to Colorado. If you can furnish good ranch fare for my wife, son, and self as guests, will look over your situation without charge. Wife wishes to rough-it, but must have milk and eggs. Will leave servants in car at Stockchute, where we shall expect a conveyance to meet us Thursday, the 25th inst., if terms agreeable.

Respectfully yours,
Thomas Blake.

Ashton crumpled the letter in his clenched hand as he had crumpled the letter from his father's lawyers.

"He is coming! he really is coming!" he gasped. "Thursday—only three days! Genevieve too!"

"And his son!" cried Isobel, too excited to heed the dismay in her companion's look and tone. "He and his family, too, as my guests!"

"Yes," said Ashton bitterly. "And what of it when he floods you off your cattle range? By another year or two, the irrigation farmers will be settling all over this mesa, thick as flies."

“Oh, no; it is probable that Mr. Blake will find there is no chance to water Dry Mesa,” she replied, in a tone strangely nonchalant considering her former expressions of apprehension. She drew the crumpled letter from his relaxing fingers, and smoothed it out for a second reading.

“Wife, son, and self,” she quoted. “Son? How old is he?”

“I don’t know. They’ve been married nearly two years,” muttered Ashton.

“Then it’s a baby!—oh! oh! how lovely!” shrieked the girl. “And its mamma wants to rough it! She shall have every egg and chicken on the place—and gallons of cream! We shall take the skim milk.”

Still Ashton failed to enthuse. “To them that have, shall be given, and from him who has lost millions shall be taken all that’s left!” he gibed.

“No, we’ll still have the skim milk,” she bantered, refusing to notice his cynical bitterness.

“I’m a day laborer!” he went on, still more bitterly. “I’m afraid of losing even my skim milk—And two weeks ago I thought myself certain of three times the millions that he will get when her father dies!”

“No use crying over spilt milk, or spilt cream, either!” she replied.

The note of sympathetic concern under her raillery brought a glimmer of hopefulness into his moody eyes.

“If I did not think your father will drive me away!” he murmured.

“Why should he?” she asked.

“Because when Blake comes—” Ashton paused and shifted to a question. “Will you tell your father about their coming?”

“Of course. I did not tell him about writing, because it would only have increased his suspense. But now—Let’s hurry back!”

A cut of her quirt set her pony into a lope. Rocket needed no urging. He followed and maintained a position close behind the galloping pony without breaking out of his rangy trot. Occasionally Isobel flung back a gay remark over her shoulder. Ashton did not respond. He rode after her, silent and depressed, his eyes fixed longingly on her graceful form, ever fleeing forward before him as he advanced.

Once clear of the sagebrush, she drew rein for him to come up. They rode side by side across Dry Fork and over the divide. When they stopped at the corral she would have unsaddled her pony had he not begged leave to do her the service.

As reward, she waited until he could accompany her to the house.

They found her father and Gowan resting in the cool porch after a particularly hard day's ride. The puncher was strumming soft melodies on a guitar. Knowles was peering at his report of the Reclamation Service, held to windward of a belching cloud of pipe smoke. His daughter darted to him regardless of the offending incense.

"Oh, Daddy!" she cried. "What do you think! Mr. Blake is coming to visit us!"

"Blake?" repeated the cowman, staring blankly over his pipe.

"Yes, Mr. Blake, the engineer—the great Thomas Blake of the Zariba Dam."

"By—James!" swore Gowan, dropping his guitar and springing up to confront Ashton with deadly menace in his cold eyes. "This is what comes of nursing scotched rattlers! This here tenderfoot skunk has been foreriding for that engineer! I warned you, Mr. Knowles! I told you he had sent for him to come out here and cut up our range with his damned irrigation schemes!"

"I send for Blake—I?" protested Ashton. He burst into a discordant laugh.

"Laugh, will you?" said Gowan, dropping his hand to his hip.

The girl flung herself before him. "Stop! stop, Kid! Are you locoed? He had nothing to do with it. I myself sent for Mr. Blake."

"*You!*" cried Gowan.

The cowman slowly stood up, his eyes fixed on the girl in an incredulous stare. "Chuckie," he half whispered, "you couldn't ha' done it. You're—you're dreaming, honey!"

"No. Listen, Daddy! It's been growing on you so—your fear that we'll lose our range. I thought if Mr. Blake came and told you it can't be done—Don't you see?"

"What if he finds it can?" huskily demanded Knowles.

"He can't. I'm sure he can't. If he builds a reservoir, where could he get enough water to fill it? The watershed above us is too small. He couldn't impound more than three thousand acre feet of flood waters at the utmost."

"How about the whole river going to waste, down in Deep Cañon?" queried her father.

"Heavens, Mr. Knowles! How would he ever get a drop of water out of that

awful chasm?” exclaimed Ashton. “I looked down into it. The river is thousands of feet down. It must be way below the level of Dry Mesa.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” replied the cowman. “Holes are mighty deceiving.”

“Well, what if it ain’t so deep as the mesa?” argued Gowan, for once half in accord with Ashton. “It shore is deep enough, ain’t it? Even allowing that this man Blake is the biggest engineer in the U.S., how’s he going to pump that water up over the rim of the cañon? The devil himself couldn’t do it.”

“If I am mistaken regarding the depth, that is, if the river really is higher than the mesa,” remarked Ashton, “there is the possibility that it might be tapped by a tunnel through the side of High Mesa. But even if it is possible, it still is quite out of the question. The cost would be prohibitive.”

“You see, Daddy!” exclaimed Isobel. “Lafe knows. He’s an engineer himself.”

“How’s that?” growled her father, frowning heavily at Ashton. “You never told me you’re an engineer.”

“I told Miss Chuckie the first day I met her,” explained Ashton. “Ever since then I’ve been so busy trying to be something else—”

“Shore you have!” jeered Gowan.

“But about Mr. Blake, Daddy?” interposed Isobel. “I’m certain he’ll find that no irrigation project is possible; and if *he* says so, you will be able to give up worrying about it.”

“So that’s your idea,” he replied. “Of course, honey, you meant well. But he’s a pretty big man, according to all the reports. What if he—” The cowman stopped, unable to state the calamity he dreaded.

“Yes, what if?” bravely declared his daughter. “Isn’t it best to know the worst, and have it over?”

“Well—I don’t know but what you’re right, honey.”

“It’s your say, Mr. Knowles,” put in Gowan. “If you want the tenderfeet on your range, all right. If you don’t, I’ll engage to head back any bunch of engineers agoing, and I don’t care whether they’re dogies or longhorns.”

“There is to be no surveying party,” explained Isobel. “Mr. Blake is coming to visit us with his wife and baby. Here is his letter.”

“Hey?” ejaculated Knowles. He read the letter with frowning deliberation, and passed it on to Gowan. “Well, he seems to be square enough. Guess we’ll have

to send over for him, honey, long as you asked him to come.”

“Oh, you will, Daddy!” she cried. She gave him a delicious kiss and cuddled against his shoulder coaxingly. “You’ll let me go over in the buckboard for them, won’t you?”

“Kind of early in the season for you to begin hankering after city folks,” he sought to tease her.

“But think of the baby!” she exclaimed as excitedly as a little girl over the prospect of a doll. “A baby on our ranch! I simply must see it at the earliest possible moment! Besides, it will look better for our hospitality for me to meet Mrs. Blake at the train, since she—That’s something I meant to ask you, Lafe. What does Mr. Blake mean by saying they will leave the servants in the car?”

“I presume they are traveling in Mr. Leslie’s private car, and will have it sidetracked at Stockchute,” answered Ashton.

“*Whee-ew!*” ejaculated Knowles. “Private car! And we’re supposed to feed them!”

“It is just because of the change we will give them that they are coming out here,” surmised Isobel. “Look at the letter again. Mr. Blake expressly writes that his wife wishes to rough-it. Of course she cannot know what real roughing-it means. But if she is coming to us without a maid, we shall like her as much as—as Mr. Blake.”

CHAPTER XI

SELF-DEFENSE

Nothing more was said about the trip to town until late Wednesday evening. As Knowles slammed shut his book and the young men rose to withdraw to the bunkhouse, he asked Gowan casually: "Got those harness hawsses in the corral?"

"Brought 'em in this afternoon. Greased the buckboard and overhauled the harness. Everything's in shape," answered the puncher.

Knowles merely nodded. Yet in the morning, immediately after the usual early breakfast, Gowan went up to the corral and returned driving a lively pair of broncos to the old buckboard. Ashton happened to come around the house as Knowles stepped from the front door. The cowman was followed by his daughter, attired in a new riding habit and a fashionable hat with a veil.

"You're just in time, Lafe," said Knowles. "Saddle a couple of hawsses and follow Chuckie to town. I misdoubt that seat is cramped for three, and a baby to boot." 126

"But I—it looks quite wide to me," said Ashton, flushing and drawing back.

"You know the size of Blake and his lady—I don't," replied the cowman. "Just the same, I want you to go along with Chuckie. There's not a puncher in this section would harm her, drunk or sober; but the fellows that come in and go out on the railroad are sometimes another sort."

"Of course I—if necessary," stammered Ashton. "Yet may I ask you to excuse me? In the event of trouble, Mr. Gowan, you know—"

"Great snakes!" called Gowan from the buckboard. "Needn't ask *me* to go, twice!"

"Can't spare you today," said Knowles, his keen eyes fixed on Ashton in unconcealed amazement.

It was inconceivable. For the first time in his career as an employé, the

tenderfoot was attempting to evade a duty,—a duty that comprised a fifty-mile ride in company with Miss Isobel Knowles!

The girl looked at Ashton with a perfect composure that betrayed no trace of her feelings.

“I’m sure there’s no reason whatever why Lafe should go, if he does not wish to,” she remarked. “Any of my hawsses will lead to the buckboard.”

“He’s going to town with you,” said Knowles, his jaw setting hard with stubborn determination.

“Why, of course, Mr. Knowles, if you really think it necessary,” reluctantly acquiesced Ashton. He put his hand into his pocket, shrugged, and asked in a hesitating manner: “May I request—I have only a small amount left from that five dollars. If you consider there are any wages owing me—Going to town, you know.”

“Lord!” said the cowman. “So that’s what you stuck on. ’Fraid of running out of change with a lady along. Here’s the balance of your first month’s wages, and more, if you want it.”

He drew out a fat wallet and began counting out banknotes.

“Oh, no, not so many,” said Ashton. “I wish only what you consider as owing to me now.”

“You’ll take an even hundred,” ordered Knowles, forcing the money on him. “A man doesn’t feel just right in town unless he’s well heeled. Only don’t show more than a ten at a time in the saloon.”

“You have chosen me to act as your daughter’s escort,” replied Ashton.

Quick to catch the inference of his remark, Isobel flashed him a look of approval, but called banteringly as she darted out to the buckboard: “Better move, if you expect to get near enough to escort me, this side of Stockchute.”

Gowan sprang down to hand her into the buckboard. She took the reins from him and spoke to the fidgetting broncos. They plunged forward and started off on a lope. Ashton perceived that she did not intend to wait for him. He caught Gowan’s look of mingled exultance and envy, and dashed for the corral. Rocket was outside, but at his call trotted to meet him, whinnying for his morning’s lump of sugar. Ashton flung on saddle and bridle, and slipped inside the corral to rope his own pony. Haste made him miss the two first throws. At last he noosed the pony, and slapped on the girl’s saddle and bridle.

As he raced off, pounding the pony with his rope to keep him alongside Rocket, Knowles waved to him from the house. He had saddled up in less than twice the time that Gowan could have done it,—which was a record for a tenderfoot. He waved back, but his look was heavy despite the excitement of the pursuit.

He expected to overtake Isobel in a few minutes. This he could have done had he been able to give Rocket free rein. But he had to hold back for the slower-gaited pony. Also, the girl had more of a start than he had at first realized, and she did her best to hold the handicap. Hitched to the light buckboard, her young broncos could have run a good part of the way to Stockchute. She was far out on the flat before she at last tired of the wild bumping over ruts and sagebrush roots, and pulled her horses down to a walk.

“I could have kept ahead clear across to the hills,” she flung back at him as he galloped up.

“You shouldn’t have been so reckless!” he reproached. “Every moment I’ve been dreading to see you bounced out.”

“That’s the fun of it,” she declared, her cheeks aglow and eyes sparkling with delight.

“But the road is so rough!” he protested. “Wouldn’t it be easier for you to ride my pony? He’s like a rocking-chair.”

“No,” she refused. But she smiled, by no means ill pleased at his solicitude for her comfort. She halted the broncos, and said cordially: “Tie the saddle hawsses to the back rail, and pile in. We may as well be sociable.”

He hastened to accept the invitation. She moved over to the left side of the seat and relinquished the lines to him. With most young ladies this would have been a matter-of-course proceeding; from so accomplished a horsewoman it was a tactful compliment. He appreciated it at its full value, and his mood lightened. They rattled gayly along, on across the flats, up and down among the piñon clad hills, and through the sage and greasewood of the valleys.

He had thought the country a desolate wilderness; but now it seemed a Garden of Eden. Never had the girl’s loveliness been more intoxicating, never had her manner to him been more charming and gracious. He could not resist the infection of her high spirits. For the greater part of the trip he gave himself over to the delight of her merry eyes and dimpling, rosy cheeks, her adorable blushes and gay repartee.

All earthly journeys and joys have an ending. The buckboard creaked up over

the round of the last and highest hill, and they came in sight of the little shack town down across the broad valley. Though five miles away, every house, every telegraph pole, even the thin lines of the railroad rails appeared through the dry clear air as distinct as a miniature painting. Miles beyond, on the far side of the valley, uprose the huge bulk of Split Peak, with its white-mantled shoulders and craggy twin peaks.

But neither Ashton nor Isobel exclaimed on this magnificent view of valley and peak. Each fell silent and gazed soberly down at the dozen scattered shacks that marked the end of their outward trip. Rapidly the gravity of Ashton's face deepened to gloom and from gloom to dejection. The horses would have broken into a lope on the down grade. He held them to a walk.

Chancing to gaze about and see his face, the girl started from her bright-eyed daydream. "Why, Lafe! what is it?" she inquired. "You look as you did the other day, when you brought the mail."

"It's—everything!" he muttered.

"As what?" she queried.

He shrugged hopelessly, hesitated, and drew out the roll of bills forced on him by Knowles. "Tell me, please, just how much of this is mine, at your father's usual rate of wages, and deducting the real value of that calf."

"Why, I can't just say, offhand," she replied. "But why should you—"

"I shall tell you as soon as—but first—" He drew out his watch. "This cost me two hundred and fifty dollars. It is the only thing I have worth trading. Would you take it in exchange for Rocket and the balance of this hundred dollars over and above what is due me?"

"Why—no, of course, I wouldn't think of such a thing. It would be absurd, cheating yourself that way. Anyhow, Rocket is your horse to ride, as long as you wish to."

"But I would like him for my own. How about trading him for my pony and the wages due me?"

"Well, that wouldn't be an unfair bargain. Your hawss is the best cow pony of the two."

"It is very kind of you to agree, Miss Chuckie! Here is all the money; and here is the watch. I wish you to accept it from me as a—memento."

“Mr. Ashton!” she exclaimed, indignantly widening the space between them as much as the seat would permit.

“Please!” he begged. “Don’t you understand? I am going away.”

“Going away?” she echoed.

“Yes.”

“But—why?”

“Because he is coming.”

“Mr. Blake?”

“Yes. I cannot stay after he—”

“But why not? Has he injured you? Are you afraid of him?”

“No. I’m afraid that you—” Ashton’s voice sank to a whisper—“that you will believe what he—what they will say against me.”

“Oh!” she commented, her expression shifting swiftly from sympathetic concern to doubt.

He caught the change in her look and tone, and flushed darkly.

“There are sometimes two sides to a story,” he muttered.

“Tell me your side now,” she suggested, with her usual directness.

His eyes fell before her clear honest gaze. His flush deepened. He hung his head, biting his twisted lip. After several moments he began to speak in a hesitating broken murmur:

“I’ve always been—wild. But I graduated from Tech.—not at the foot of my class. My father—always busy piling up millions—never a word or thought for me, except when I overspent my allowance. I was in a—fast set. My father—threatened me. I had to make good. I took a position in old Leslie’s office—Genevieve’s father. I—”

He paused, licked his lips, hesitated, and abruptly went on again, this time speaking with almost glib facility: “There was an engineers’ contest for a projected bridge over Michamac Strait. I started to draw plans, that I might enter the contest, but I did not finish in time. The plans of the other engineers were all rejected. I continued to work on mine. After the contest I happened to pick up a piece of torn plan out of the office wastebasket, and it gave me a suggestion how to improve the central span of my bridge.”

“Yes?” asked the girl, her interest deepening.

He again licked his lips, hesitated, and continued: “There was no name on that torn plan—nothing to indicate to whom it had belonged. So I used it—that is, the suggestion I got from it, and was awarded the bridge on my plans. This made me the Resident Engineer of the bridge, and I had it almost completed when this man Blake came back from Africa after Genevieve, and claimed that I had—had stolen his plans of the bridge. It seems they were lost in Mr. Leslie’s office. He claimed he had handed them in to me for the contest. But so had all the other contestants, and their plans were not lost. It may have been that one of the doorkeepers tore his plans up, out of revenge. Blake was a very rough brute of a fellow at that time. He quarreled with the doorkeeper because the man would not admit him to see Mr. Leslie—threatened to smash him. Afterwards he accused Mr. Leslie of stealing his plans.”

“Oh, no, no! he couldn’t have done that! He can’t be that kind of a man!” protested Isobel.

“It’s true! Even he will not deny it. Old Leslie thought him crazy—then. It was different when he came back and accused me! He had been shipwrecked with Genevieve. They were alone together all those weeks, and so one can—” Ashton checked himself. “No, you must not think—He saved her. When they came back he claimed the bridge as his own—those lost plans.”

“His plans? So that was it! And you—?”

“Of course they believed him. What was my word against his with Genevieve and Leslie. Leslie’s consulting engineer was an old pal of Blake’s. So of course I—I’ll say though that Blake agreed to put it that I had only borrowed his idea of the central span.”

“That was generous of him, if he really believed—”

“Did he?—did Genevieve? Do they believe it now? You see why I must go away.”

“I don’t any such thing,” rejoined the girl.

“You don’t?” he exclaimed. “When they are coming here, believing I did it! They must believe it, all of them! And my father—after all this time—They agreed not to tell him. Yet he has found out. That letter, up at the waterhole—it was from his lawyers. He had cut me off—branded me as an outcast.”

“Without waiting to hear your side—without asking you to explain? How unjust!

how unfair!” cried Isobel.

Ashton winced. “I—I told you I—my record was against me. But I was his son—he had no right to brand me as a—a thief! My valet read the letter. He must have told the guide—the scoundrels!”

Tears of chagrin gathered in the young man’s dark eyes. He bit his lip until the blood ran.

“O-o-oh!” sighed the girl. “It’s all been frightfully unjust! You haven’t had fair play! I shall tell Mr. Blake.”

“No, not him!—not him!” Ashton’s voice was almost shrill. “All I wish is to slip away, before they see me.”

“You don’t mean, run away?” she said, quietly placing her little gauntlet-gloved hand on his arm. “You’re not going to run away, Lafe.”

“What else?” he asked, his eyes dark with bitter despair. “Would you have me return, to be booted off the range when they tell your father?”

“Just wait and see,” she replied, gazing at him with a reassuring smile. “You’ve proved yourself a right smart puncher—for a tenderfoot. You’re in the West, the good old-style West, where it’s a man’s present record that counts; not what he has been or what he has done. No, you’re not going to run. You’re going to face it out—and going to stay to learn your new profession of puncher and—*man!*”

“But they will not wish to associate with me.”

“Yes, they will,” she predicted. “I shall see to that.”

He took heart a little from her cheery, positive assurance. “Well, if you insist, I shall not go until they show—”

“They’ll not recognize you at first. That will give me a chance to speak before they can say anything disagreeable. I’m sure Mr. Blake will understand.”

“But—Genevieve?”

“If she married him when he was as rough as you say, and if he agrees to let bygones be bygones, you need have no fear of Mrs. Blake. Only be sure to go into raptures over the baby. Tell her it’s the perfect image of its father.”

“What if it isn’t?” objected Ashton gloomily.

She dimpled. “One must allow for the difference in age; and there’s always some resemblance—each must have a mouth and eyes and ears and a nose.”

He caught himself on the verge of laughter. Her eyes were fixed upon him, pure and honest and dancing with mirth. A sudden flood of crimson swept up his face from his bristly, tanned chin to his white forehead. He averted his gaze from hers.

“You’re *good!*” he choked out. “I don’t deserve—But I can’t go—when you tell me to stay!”

“Of course you can’t,” she lightly rejoined. “Look! There’s the train coming. Push on the lines!”

CHAPTER XII

THE MEETING

A word started the horses into a lope. The buckboard was whirled along over the last two miles to Stockchute in a wild race against the train. The steam horse won. It had sidetracked the private car attached to the rear of the last pullman and was puffing away westward, when Ashton guided his running team in among the crude shacks of the town. He swung around at a more moderate pace towards the big chute for cattle-loading, and fetched up a few yards out from the rear step of the private car.

An assiduous porter had already swung down with a box step. A big, square-faced, square-framed man of twenty-eight or thirty stepped out into the car vestibule. He sprang to the ground as Miss Knowles stepped from the buckboard. She had lowered her veil, but it failed to mask the extreme brilliancy of her eyes and her quick changes of color. Her face, flushed from the excitement of the race into town, went white when she first saw the man in the vestibule; flushed again when he sprang down; again paled; and, last of all, glowed radiantly as she advanced to meet him.

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He hastened to her, baring his big head of its Panama, and staring at her fashionable hat and dress in frank surprise.

“Mr. Blake!” she murmured.

At the sound of her voice he started and fixed his light blue eyes on her veiled face with a keen glance. She turned pale and as quickly blushed, as if embarrassed by his scrutiny.

“Excuse me!” he apologized. “You are Miss Knowles?”

“Yes,” she murmured.

“Knowles?” he repeated, half to himself. “Strange! Haven’t I met you before?”

“In Denver?” she suggested. “I spend my winters in Denver. But there was one in Europe.”

“No, it wouldn’t be either. You must excuse me, Miss Knowles. There was something about your voice and face—rather threw me off my balance. If you’ll kindly overlook the bungling start-off! I’m greatly pleased to meet you. My wife will be, too. May I ask you to step aboard the car?—No, here she is now.”

A graceful, rather small lady, dressed with elegant simplicity, had come out into the car vestibule.

“Jenny, here’s Miss Knowles now,” said Blake. “She came to meet us herself.”

“That was very good of you, Miss Knowles,” said the lady, as the two advanced towards her. “We are very glad to meet you. Will you not come up out of the sun?”

The white-uniformed porter promptly stood at attention. Blake as promptly offered his hand. The girl accepted his assistance and mounted the car steps with an absence of awkwardness instantly noted by Mrs. Blake. That lady held out a somewhat thin white hand as Isobel drew off her gauntlet gloves. But she did not stop with the light firm handclasp. Lifting the girl’s veil, she kissed her full on her coral lips.

“We shall be friends,” she stated, a smile in her hazel eyes.

“I hope so,” murmured the girl, blushing with delight. “The only question is whether you will like me.”

Mrs. Blake patted the plump, sunbrowned hand that she had not yet relinquished. She was little if any older than the girl, but her air was that of matronly wisdom. “My dear, can you doubt it? I was prepared to like even the kind of young woman my husband told me to expect.”

“Bronco Bess, Queen of the Cattle Camp,” suggested the girl, dimpling. “Wait till you see me rope and hogtie a steer.”

Mrs. Blake smiled, and looked across at Ashton, who sat motionless under the shadow of his big sombrero, his face half averted from the car.

“I’ve a real surprise for you,” said the girl. “Mr. Blake, if I may tell it to you also.”

Blake swung up the steps, hat in hand. “It can’t be half as pleasant as the surprise you’ve already given us,” he said.

“I fear not,” she replied, with a quick change to gravity. She looked earnestly into their faces. “Still, I hope—yes, I really believe it will please you when you

consider it. But first, I want to tell you that out here it's our notion that a man should be rated according to his present life, and not blamed for his past mistakes."

"Certainly not!" agreed Mrs. Blake, with a swift glance at her husband. "If a man has mounted to a higher level, he should be upheld, not dragged down again."

"That's good old-style Western fair play," added Blake.

"I'm so glad you take it that way!" said Isobel. "A young man utterly ruined in fortune—partly at least through his own fault—came to us and asked to be hired. He has been a hard worker and a gentleman. His name is Lafayette Ashton."

"Ashton?" said Blake, his face as impassive as a granite mask.

"Yes. He has told me all about the bridge. He wished to go away, because he thought you and Mrs. Blake would not like to meet him. I told him you would be willing to let bygones be bygones, and help him start off with a new tally card."

"Lafayette Ashton working—as a cowboy!" murmured Mrs. Blake.

"He is still a good deal of a tenderfoot. But he is learning fast; and work!—the way he pesters Daddy to find him something to do!"

"He certainly must be a changed man," dryly commented Blake.

"*Cherchez la femme*," said his wife.

"Mrs. Blake!" protested the girl, blushing.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Find the woman," explained Mrs. Blake.

"That's easy," he said, fixing his twinkling eyes on the rosy-faced girl.

"But I'm sure it has not been because of me—at least not altogether," she qualified with her uncompromising honesty.

"I wouldn't blame him even if it was altogether," said Blake.

"Then you will be willing to overlook your past trouble with him?"

"Since you say he has straightened out—yes."

"That's good of you! That's what I expected of you!" exclaimed the girl. "That is he, in the buckboard."

Without a word, Blake started down the car steps.

“Bring him here at once, Tom,” said Mrs. Blake.

Her husband went up beside the motionless figure in the buckboard and held out his hand. “Glad to meet you, Ashton,” he said with matter-of-fact heartiness. “Jenny wants you to come to her. We’re not ready to start, as we were not certain we would be met.”

“Miss—Mrs. Blake wishes me to come!” mumbled Ashton.

“Yes,” said Blake, gripping the other’s hesitatingly extended hand.

Ashton flushed darkly. “But I—I can’t leave the horses,” he replied.

Blake signed to the porter, who hastened forward. “Hold the lines for this gentleman, Sam.”

Ashton reluctantly gave the lines into the mulatto’s sallow hands and stepped from the buckboard. His head hung forward as he followed Blake. But at the foot of the steps he removed his sombrero and forced himself to look up. Isobel was smiling down at him encouragingly. He looked from her to Mrs. Blake, his handsome face crimson with shame.

“How do you do, Lafayette?” Mrs. Blake greeted him with quiet cordiality. “This is a pleasant surprise.”

“Yes—yes, indeed! I—yes, very!” he stammered, so embarrassed that he would have stuck at the foot of the steps had not Blake started him up with a vigorous boost.

Mrs. Blake gave him her hand. “You look so strong and hearty!” she remarked. “It speaks well for the fare Miss Knowles provides.”

“Oh, that credit is due our Jap chef,” laughed the girl. “I can cut out a cow from the herd better than I can bone a chop. But the butter and eggs and cream that are awaiting you—Which reminds me that we’ve yet to see It.”

“It?” asked Blake.

“Yes, him—the *baby!*”

“Oh, you dear girl!” cooed Mrs. Blake. “Come in and see him.”

Isobel followed her into the car. Blake nodded to Ashton. But the younger man shrank away from the door.

“If you’ll kindly excuse me,” he muttered. “It would remind me too much of—

the time when—No, I'd rather not."

"Of course," assented Blake with ready understanding. "How do you like this country? I went through here once on a railway survey. It's rare good luck—this chance to visit Miss Knowles. Jenny is a little run down, as you see."

"I shall trust that her visit to this locality will soon quite restore her," remarked Ashton.

"It will. The doctors said Maine; I said Colorado. It has done you no end of good. You are looking particularly fine and fit."

"It has helped me—in more ways than one," murmured Ashton.

"Glad to hear you say it!" responded Blake in hearty approval.

Ashton turned from him as Isobel appeared in the doorway, cuddling a lusty, rosy-cheeked baby. The mother hovered close behind her.

"Look at him!" jeered Blake with heavily feigned derision. "Did you ever see such a big, fat, lubberly—"

"Yes, look at him, Lafe," said the girl, stepping out into the vestibule. "He is only a yearling, but isn't he just the perfect image of his father?"

Ashton burst into a ringing laugh, but abruptly checked himself at sight of the sober face of the young mother. "I—I beg pardon!" he stammered. "I—she—Miss Knowles—that is what she told me to tell you about him."

"And you didn't play up worth a little bit, Lafe!" complained the girl.

It was Blake's turn to laugh. "You—!" he accused. "Schemed to frame up a case on us did you!"

His wife smiled faintly, not altogether certain that an aspersion had not been cast upon her chuckling son.

"But it's partly true, really," remarked Ashton, peering at the baby's big pale-blue eyes.

Blake burst into a hilarious roar. But Mrs. Blake now beamed upon Ashton. "Then you, too, see the resemblance, Lafayette! Isn't it wonderful, and he so young? His name is Thomas Herbert Vincent Leslie Blake.—Now, my dear, if you please, I shall take him in. We must be preparing to start, if it is so long a drive."

"Do let me hold him until you and Mr. Blake are ready," begged the girl.

“I am not quite sure that—You will be careful not to drop him? He is tremendously strong, and he squirms,” dubiously assented the fond mother. “Come, Tom. We must not keep Miss Knowles waiting.”

Blake disappeared with her into the luxuriously furnished car.

“Isn’t he a dear?” cooed the girl, clasping the baby to her bosom and kissing his chubby clenched hands. He stared up into her glowing face with his round light-blue eyes. “Thomas Blake!—Tom Blake!” she whispered.

Ashton did not heed the words. He was gazing too intently at the girl and the child. His eyes glistened with a wonderment and longing so exquisitely intense that it was like a pain. The girl sank down in one of the cane chairs and laid the baby on his back. He kicked and gurgled, seized one of his upraised feet and thrust a pink big toe in between his white milk teeth.

“That’s more than you can do, Lafe!” challenged the girl.

She glanced up, dimpling with merriment,—met the adoration in his eyes, and looked down, blushing. He attempted to speak, but the words choked into an incoherent sound like a sob. He jumped from the car and hurried to take the lines from the porter.

CHAPTER XIII

THE OTHER LADY'S HUSBAND

Miss Knowles did not seem to observe Ashton's deflection. She remained worshipfully downbent over the wriggling, chuckling baby until its parents reappeared.

Mrs. Blake had changed to an easy and serviceable dress of plain, strong material. The skirt, cut to walking length, showed that her feet and ankles were protected by a pair of absurdly small laced boots. Her husband had shifted to an equally serviceable costume—flannel shirt, broad-brimmed felt hat, and surveyor's boots.

"Crossing the plains we packed a trunk with what we considered most necessary," said Mrs. Blake, as she took the baby. "It is not a large one, and in addition there is only my satchel and the level and the lunch my maid is putting up for us."

"There is room for more, if you wish," replied Isobel. "But we can send over here for anything you need, any time."

"You're not going to let us really rough-it!" complained Mrs. Blake, as her husband swung her to the ground. "Were it not for Thomas Herbert—"

"—We'd go to Africa again and eat lions," Blake completed the sentence. "Wait, though—we may have a chance at mountain lions."

The porter had gone to help a manservant fetch the trunk from the other end of the car. Isobel untied the saddle horses from the rear of the buckboard. The trunk was lifted in, and Blake lashed it on, together with his level rod and tripod, using Ashton's lariat.

"Level is in the trunk," he explained, in response to Ashton's look of inquiry. "I suppose we ride."

"I think it will be better if Lafe drives," objected Isobel. "I am so reckless, and you don't know the road, as he does. The only thing is Rocket—Lafe has about

trained him out of his tricks. But I should warn you that the hawss has been rather vicious.”

“Tom will ride him,” confidently stated Mrs. Blake.

Her husband took the bridle reins of the big horse and mounted him with the agility of a cowboy. For a moment Rocket stood motionless. Then, whether because of Blake’s weight or the fact that he was a stranger, all the beast’s newly acquired docility vanished. He began to plunge and buck even more violently than when first mounted by Ashton.

Half a hundred Stockchuteites—all the residents of the town and several floaters—had come down to inspect the palatial private car and its passengers. At Rocket’s first leap these highly interested spectators broke into a murmur of joyful anticipation. They were about to see the millionaire tenderfoot pull leather.

Yet somehow the event failed to transpire. Blake sat the flat saddle as if glued fast to it. His knees and legs were crushing against the sides of the leaping, whirling beast with the firmness of an iron vise. He held both hands upraised, away from the “leather.”

Presently Rocket’s efforts began to flag. Instead of seeking to quiet the frantic beast, Blake began to whoop and to strike him with his hat. Thus taunted, Rocket resorted to his second trick. He took the bit in his teeth and started to bolt. The crowd scattered before the rush of the runaway. But they need not have moved. Blake reached down on each side of the beast’s outstretched neck and pulled. Tough-mouthed as he was, Rocket could not resist that powerful grip. His head was drawn down and backwards until his trumpet nostrils blew against his deep chest. After half a dozen wild plunges, he was forced to a stand, snorting but subdued.

“That’s some riding, Miss Chuckie!” called the burly sheriff of the county. “Your guest forks a hawss like a buster.”

The girl rode forward beside Blake, her face radiant. She paid him the highest of compliments by taking his riding as a matter of course; but in her eyes was a look strangely like that of his wife’s fond gaze,—a look of pride at his achievement, rather than admiration.

“We’ll ride ahead of the team to keep clear of the dust,” she remarked.

He twisted about and saw that Ashton was starting to drive after them. His wife’s elderly maid was waving her handkerchief from one of the car windows. The

porter and the manservant stood at attention. He exchanged a nod and smile with his wife, patted Rocket's arched neck and clicked to him to start.

"This is great, Miss Knowles!" he said. "I did not look for such fun, first crack out of the box. And—if you don't mind my saying it—it's such a jolly surprise your being what you are."

The girl blushed with pleasure. "I—we have been so eager to meet you," she murmured. She added hurriedly, "On account of your wonderful work as an engineer, you know."

"I wouldn't have suspected Ashton of bragging for me," he replied.

"Oh, he—he says you have a remarkable knack of hitting on the solution of problems. But it's in the engineering journals and reports that we've read about your work. Perhaps that is why you thought we had met before. After reading about you so much, I felt that I already knew you, and so my manner, you know—"

He shook his head at this seemingly ingenuous explanation. "No, there is something about your voice and face—" His eyes clouded with the grief of a painful memory; his head sank forward until his square chin touched his broad chest. He muttered brokenly: "But that's impossible.... Anyway—better for them they died—better than to live after..."

Behind her veil the girl's face became deathly white. He raised his head and looked at her with a wistful gleam of hope. She had averted her face from him and was gazing off at the hills with dim unseeing eyes.

"Pardon me, Miss Knowles," he said, "but do you mind if I ask what is your first name?"

She hesitated almost imperceptibly before replying: "I am called Chuckie—Chuckie Knowles. Doesn't that sound cowgirlish? We always have a chuck-wagon on the round-ups, you know. But it's a name that used to be quite common in the West."

"Yes, it comes from the Spanish Chiquita," he said. He repeated the word with the soft caressing Spanish accent, "*Che-keé-tah!*"

A flood of scarlet swept up into the girl's pallid face, and slowly subsided to her normal rich coloring. After a short silence she asked in a conventional tone: "I suppose you are glad to get away from Chicago. The last papers we received say that the East is sweltering in one of those smothery heat waves."

“It’s the humidity and close air that kills,” said Blake. “I ought to know. I lived for years in the slums.”

“Oh, you—you really speak of it—openly!” the girl exclaimed.

“What of it?” he asked, astonished in turn at her lack of tact.

“Nothing—nothing,” she hastened to disclaim. “Only I know—have read about the dreadful conditions in the Chicago slums. It is—it must be so painful to recall them—That was so rude of me to—”

“Not at all,” he interrupted. To cover her evident confusion he held up his white hand in the scorching sunrays and commented jovially: “Talk about Eastern heat—this is a hundred and five Fahrenheit at the very least! A-a-ah!” He drew in a deep breath of the dry pure air. “This is something like! When you get your land under ditch, you’ll have a paradise.”

“Oh, but you do not understand,” she replied. “We want you to find out and tell us that Dry Mesa *cannot* be watered. Irrigation would break up Daddy’s range and put him out of business. It is just what we do not want.”

“I see,” said Blake, with instant comprehension of the situation.

“I know it cannot be done. But there are so many reclamation projects, and Daddy has read and read about them until he almost has a bee in his bonnet.”

“Yet you sent for me—an engineer.”

“Because I knew that when *you* told him our mesa couldn’t be watered, he would stop worrying. You know, you are quite a hero with us. We have read all about your wonderful work.”

Blake’s pale eyes twinkled. “So I’m a hero. Will you dynamite my pedestal if I figure out a way to water your range?”

She flashed him a troubled glance, but rallied for a quick rejoinder: “Even you can’t pump the water out of Deep Cañon, and Plum Creek is only a trickle most of the year.”

“I see you want me to make my report as dry as I can write it,” he bantered.

“No,” she replied, suddenly serious. “We wish the exact truth, though we hope you’ll find it dry.”

“Then you are to blame if the matter does not figure out your way,” he warned her. “You’ve given me a problem. If there is any possible way for me to irrigate your mesa, I am bound to try my best to work it out. Hadn’t you better head me

off before I start in? At present I haven't the remotest desire to do this except to comply with your wishes."

"It's as I told Daddy," she said. "If there really is a way, the sooner we know it the better. It is the uncertainty that is bothering Daddy. If your report is for us, all well and good; if against us, he will stand up and fight and forget about worrying."

"Fight?" asked Blake.

"Fight the project, fight against the formation of any irrigation district. He owns five sections. The reservoir might have to be on his patented land. He'd fight fair and square and hard—to the last ditch!"

"Isn't that a Dutchman's saying?" asked Blake humorously.

The girl's tense face relaxed, and she burst out in a ringing laugh. She shifted the conversation to less serious subjects, and they cantered along together, laughing and chatting like old friends.

By this time Ashton and Mrs. Blake had gradually come to the same stage of pleasant comradeship. Ashton had started the drive in a sullen mood, his manner half resentful and wholly embarrassed. Of this the lady was tactfully oblivious. Avoiding all allusion to the catastrophe that had befallen him, she told him the latest news of the mutual friends and acquaintances in whom ordinarily he would have been expected to be interested.

She even spoke casually of his father. His face contracted with pain, but he showed no bitterness against the parent who had disowned him. After that her graciousness towards him redoubled. With Isobel for excuse, she gradually shifted the conversation to ranch life and his employment as cowboy. In many subtle ways she conveyed to him her admiration of the manner in which he had turned over a new leaf and was making a clean fresh start in life.

After delicately intimating her feelings, she at once turned to less personal topics. The last traces of his embarrassment and moodiness left him, and he began to talk quite at his ease, though with a certain reserve that she attributed to the vast change in his fortunes. In return for her kindness, he repaid her by showing a real interest in Thomas Herbert Vincent Leslie Blake.

That young man spent his time chuckling and crowing and kicking, until overcome with sleep. Two hours out from Stockchute he awoke and vociferously demanded nourishment. Promptly the party was brought to a halt. They were among the piñons on one of the hillsides. While the baby took his dinner, Isobel

laid out the lunch and the men burned incense in the guise of a pair of Havana cigars produced by Blake.

The lunch might have been put up in the kitchen of a first-class metropolitan hotel. The fruit was the most luscious that money could buy; the sandwiches and cake would have tempted a sated epicure; the mineral water had come out of an ice chest so nearly frozen that it was still refreshingly cool. But—what was rather odd for a lunch packed in a private car—it included no wine or whiskey or liqueur. Blake caught Ashton's glance, and smiled.

"You see I'm still on the waterwagon," he remarked. "I've got a permanent seat. There have been times when it looked as if I might be jolted off, but—"

"But there's never been the slightest chance of that!" put in his wife. She looked at Isobel, her soft eyes shining with love and pride. "Once he gets a grip on anything, he never lets go."

"Oh, I can believe that!" exclaimed the girl with an enthusiasm that brought a shadow into the mobile face of Ashton.

"A man can't help holding on when he has something to hold on for," said Blake, gazing at his wife and baby.

"That's true!" agreed Ashton, his eyes on the dimpled face of Isobel.

Refreshed by the delicious meal, the party prepared to start on. But they did not travel as before. While Ashton was considerably washing out the dusty nostrils of the horses with water from his canteen, Isobel decided to drive with Mrs. Blake. Declaring that it would be like old times to sit a cowboy saddle, the big engineer lengthened the girl's stirrup leathers and swung on to the pony. This left Rocket to his owner.

At first Ashton seemed inclined to be stiff with his new road-mate. But as they jogged along, side by side, over the hills and across the sagebrush flats, Blake restricted his talk to impersonal topics and spared his companion from any allusion to their past difficulties. Throughout the ride, however, the two men maintained a certain reserve towards each other, and at no time approached the cordial intimacy that developed between the girl and Mrs. Blake before the end of their first mile together.

After telling merrily about her dual life as summer cowgirl and winter society maiden, Isobel drifted around, by seemingly casual association of ideas, to the troublesome question of irrigation on Dry Mesa, and from that to Blake and his work as an engineer.

“I do so hope Mr. Blake finds that there is no project practicable,” she went on. “He has warned me that if there seems to be any chance to work out an irrigation scheme on our mesa he is bound to try to do it.”

“And he would do it,” added Mrs. Blake with quiet confidence.

“Then I hope and pray he will find there is no chance, because Daddy would have to oppose him. That would be such a pity! He and I have read so much about Mr. Blake’s work that we have come to regard him as our—as one of our heroes.”

Mrs. Blake smiled. It was very apparent, despite the quietness and repression of her high-bred manner, that she was very much in love with her husband.

The girl continued in a meekly deferential tone: “So you will not mind my worshipping him. He is a hero, a real hero! Isn’t he?”

The words were spoken with an earnestness and sincerity that won Mrs. Blake to a like candor. “You are quite right,” she said. “Lafayette may have told you how Mr. Blake and I were wrecked on the most savage coast of Africa. He saved me from wild beasts and tropical storms, from fever and snakes,—from death in a dozen horrible forms. Then, when he had saved me—and won me, he gave me up until he could prove to himself that he was worthy of me.”

“He did?” cried the girl. “But of course!—of course!”

“Yet that was nothing to the next proof of his strength and manhood,” went on the proud wife. “He destroyed a monster more frightful than any lion or tropical snake—he overcame the curse of drink that had come down to him from—one of his parents.”

“From—from his—” whispered the girl, her averted face white and drawn with pain.

Mrs. Blake had bent over to kiss the forehead of her sleeping baby and did not see. “If only all parents knew what terrible misfortunes, what tortures, their transgressions are apt to bring upon their innocent children!” she murmured.

“He told me that he won his way up out of the—the slums,” said Isobel. “It must be some men fail to do that because they have relatives to drag them down—their families.”

“It seems hard to say it, yet I do not know but that you are right, my dear,” agreed Mrs. Blake. “Strong men, if unhampered, have a chance to fight their way up out of the social pit. But women and girls, even when they escape the—

the worst down there, can hardly hope ever to attain—And of course those that fall!—Our dual code of morality is hideously unjust to our sex, yet it still is the code under which we live.”

The girl drew in a deep, sighing breath. Her eyes were dark with anguish. Yet she forced a gay little laugh. “Aren’t we solemn sociologists! All we are concerned with is that *he* has won his way up, and there’s no one ever to drag him down or disgrace him; and—and you won’t be jealous if I set him up on a pedestal and bring incense to him on my bended knees.”

“Only you must give Thomas Herbert his share at the same time,” stipulated the mother.

The girl burst into prolonged and rather shrill laughter that passed the bounds of good breeding. Her emotion was so unrestrained that when she looked about at her surprised companion her face was flushed and her eyes were swimming with tears.

“Please, oh, do please forgive me!” she begged with a humility as immoderate as had been her laughter. “I—I can’t tell you why, but—”

“Say no more, my dear,” soothed Mrs. Blake. “You are merely a bit hysterical. Perhaps the excitement of our coming, after your months of lonely ranch life—”

“You’re so good!” sighed the girl. “Yes, it was due to—your coming. But now the worst is over. I’ll not shock you again with any more such outbursts.”

She smiled, and began to talk of other things, with somewhat unsteady but persistent gayety.

CHAPTER XIV

A DESCENT

When the party arrived at the ranch, the girl hostess took Mrs. Blake to rest in the clean, simply furnished room provided for the visitors. Blake, after carrying in their trunk single-handed, went to look around at the ranch buildings in company with Ashton.

On returning to the house, the two found Knowles and Gowan in the parlor with the ladies. Isobel had already introduced them to Mrs. Blake and also to her son. That young man was sprawled, face up, in the cowman's big hands, crowing and valiantly clutching at his bristly mustache.

Gowan sat across from him, perfectly at ease in the presence of the city lady. But, with his characteristic lack of humor, he was unmoved by the laughable spectacle presented by his employer and the baby, and his manner was both reserved and watchful.

At sight of Blake, Isobel called to her father in feigned alarm: "Look out, Daddy! Better stop hazing that yearling. Here comes his sire."

Knowles gave the baby back to its half-fearful mother, and rose to greet his guest with hospitable warmth: "Howdy, Mr. Blake! I'm downright glad to meet you. Hope you've found things comfortable and homelike."

"Too much so," asserted Blake, his eyes twinkling. "We came out expecting to rough-it."

"Well, your lady won't know the difference," remarked Knowles.

"You're quite mistaken, Daddy, really," interposed his daughter. "She and Mr. Blake were wrecked in Africa and lived on roast leopards. We'll have to feed them on mountain lions and bobcats."

"If you mean that, Miss Chuckie," put in Gowan, "I can get a bobcat in time for dinner tomorrow."

The girl led the general outburst of laughter over this serious proposal. "Oh! oh!

Kid! You'll be the death of me!—Yet I sent you a joke-book last Christmas!”

“Couldn't see anything funny in it,” replied the puncher. “I haven't lost it, though. It came from you.”

To cover the girl's blush at this blunt disclosure of sentiment, Mrs. Blake somewhat formally introduced her husband to the puncher. He shook Blake's hand with like formality and politeness. But as their glances met, his gray eyes shone with the same cold suspicion with which he had regarded Ashton at their first meeting. Before that look the engineer's friendly eyes hardened to disks of burnished steel, and his big fist released its cordial grip of the other's small, bony hand. He gave back hostility for hostility with the readiness of a born fighter. Gowan was the first to look away.

The incident passed so swiftly that only Knowles observed the outflash of enmity. His words indicated that he had anticipated the puncher's attitude. He addressed Blake seriously: “Kid has been with us ever since he was a youngster and has always made my interests his own. Chuckie has been telling us what you said about putting through any project you once started.”

Blake nodded. “Yes. That is why I suggested to Miss Knowles that she call off the agreement under which I came on this visit. We shall gladly pay board, and I'll merely knock around; or, if you prefer, we'll leave you and go back tomorrow morning.”

“No, Daddy, no! we can't allow our guests to leave, when they've only just come!” protested Isobel.

“As for any talk about board,” added her father, “you ought to know better, Mr. Blake.”

“My apology!” admitted Blake. “I've been living in the East.”

“That explains,” agreed the cowman. “Even as far east as Denver—I've got a sister there; lives up beyond the Capitol. But I've talked with other men there from over this way. They all agree you might as well look for good cow pasture behind a sheep drive as for hospitality in a city. Sometimes you can get what you want, and all times you're sure to get a lot of attention you don't want—if you have money to spend.”

“That's true. But about my going ahead here?” inquired Blake. “Say the word, and I put irrigation on the shelf throughout our visit.”

Knowles shook his head thoughtfully. “No, I reckon Chuckie is right. We'd best

learn just how we stand.”

“What if I work out a practical project? There’s any amount of good land on your mesa. The lay of it and the altitude ought to make it ideal for fruit. If I see that the proposition is feasible, I shall be bound to put water on all of your range that I can. I am an engineer,—I cannot let good land and water go to waste.”

“The land isn’t going to waste,” replied Knowles. “It’s the best cattle range in this section, and it’s being used for the purpose Nature intended. As for the water, Chuckie has figured out there isn’t more than three thousand acre feet of flood waters that can be impounded off the watershed above us. That wouldn’t pay for building any kind of a dam.”

“And the devil himself couldn’t pump the water up out of Deep Cañon,” put in Gowan.

“The devil hasn’t much use for science,” said Blake. “It has almost put him out of business. So he is not apt to be well up on modern engineering.”

“Then you think you can do what the devil can’t?” demanded Knowles.

“I can try. Unless you wish to call off the deal, I shall ride around tomorrow and look over the country. Maybe that will be sufficient to show me there is no chance for irrigation, or, on the contrary, I may have to run levels and do some figuring.”

“Then perhaps you will know by tomorrow night?” exclaimed Isobel.

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s something,” said the cowman. “I’ll take you out first thing in the morning.—Lafe, show Mr. Blake the wash bench. There goes the first gong.”

When, a little later, all came together again at the supper table, nothing more was said about the vexed question of irrigation. Isobel had made no changes in her table arrangements other than to have a plate laid for Mrs. Blake beside her father’s and another for Blake beside her own.

The employés were too accustomed to Miss Chuckie to be embarrassed by the presence of another lady, and Blake put himself on familiar terms with them by his first remarks. If his wealthy high-bred wife was surprised to find herself seated at the same table with common workmen, she betrayed no resentment over the situation. Her perfect breeding was shown in the unaffected simplicity of her manner, which was precisely the same to the roughest man present as to her hostess.

Even had there been any indications of uncongeniality, they must have been overcome by the presence of Thomas Herbert Vincent Leslie Blake. The most unkempt, hard-bitten bachelor present gazed upon the majesty of babyhood with awed reverence and delight. The silent Jap interrupted his serving to fetch a queer rattle of ivory balls carved out one within the other. This he cleansed with soap, peroxide and hot water, in the presence of the honorable lady mother, before presenting it to her infant with much smiling and hissing insuckings of breath.

After supper all retired at an early hour, out of regard for the weariness of Mrs. Blake.

When she reappeared, late the next morning, she learned that Knowles, Gowan and her husband had ridden off together hours before. But Isobel and Ashton seemed to have nothing else to do than to entertain the mother and child. Mrs. Blake donned one of the girl's divided skirts and took her first lesson in riding astride. There was no sidesaddle at the ranch, but there was a surefooted old cow pony too wise and spiritless for tricks, and therefore safe even for a less experienced horsewoman than was Mrs. Blake.

Knowles and Gowan and the engineer returned so late that they found all the others at the supper table. Blake's freshly sunburnt face was cheerful. Gowan's expression was as noncommittal as usual. But the cowman's forehead was furrowed with unrelieved suspense.

"Oh, Mr. Blake!" exclaimed Isobel. "Don't tell us your report is unfavorable."

"Afraid I can't say, as yet," he replied. "We've covered the ground pretty thoroughly for miles along High Mesa and Deep Cañon. If the annual precipitation here is what I estimate it from what your father tells me, it would be possible to put in a drainage and reservoir system that would store four thousand acre feet. Except as an auxiliary system, however, it would cost too much to be practicable. As for Deep Cañon—" He turned to his wife. "Jenny, whatever else happens, I must get you up to see that cañon. It's almost as grand and in some ways even more wonderful than the Cañon of the Colorado."

"Then I must see it, by all means," responded Mrs. Blake. "I shall soon be able to ride up to it, Isobel assures me."

"Within a few days," said the girl. "But, Mr. Blake, pardon me—How about the water in the cañon? You surely see no way to lift it out over the top of High Mesa?"

“I’m sorry, but I can’t even guess what can be done until I have run a line of levels and found the depth of the cañon. I tried to estimate it by dropping in rocks and timing them, but we couldn’t see them strike bottom.”

“A line of levels? Will it take you long?”

“Maybe a week; possibly more. If I had a transit as well as my level, it would save time. However, I can make out with the chain and compass I brought.”

“Mr. Blake is to start running his levels in the morning,” said Knowles. “Lafe, I’d like you to help him as his rodman, if you have no objections. As you’ve been an engineer, you can help him along faster than Kid.—You said one would do, Mr. Blake; but if you need more, take all the men you want. The sooner this thing is settled, the better it will suit me.”

“The sooner the better, Daddy!” agreed Isobel, “that is, if our guests promise to not hurry away.”

“We shall stay at least a month, if you wish us to,” said Mrs. Blake.

“Two months would be too short!—And the sooner we are over with this uncertainty—Lafe, you’ll do your utmost to help Mr. Blake, won’t you?”

“Yes, indeed; anything I can,” eagerly responded Ashton.

Gowan’s face darkened at sight of the smile with which the girl rewarded the tenderfoot. Yet instead of sulking, he joined in the evening’s entertainment of the guests with a zeal that agreeably surprised everyone. His guitar playing won genuine praise from the Blakes, though both were sophisticated and critical music lovers.

Somewhat earlier than usual he rose to go, with the excuse that he wished to consult Knowles about some business with the owner of the adjoining range. The cowman went out with him, and did not return. An hour later Ashton took reluctant leave of Isobel, and started for the bunkhouse. Half way across he was met by his employer, who stopped before him.

“Everybody turning in, Lafe?”

“Not at my suggestion, though,” replied Ashton.

“Reckon not. Mr. Blake and his lady are old friends of yours, I take it.”

“Mrs. Blake is,” stated Ashton, with a touch of his former arrogance. “We made mud-pies together, in a hundred thousand dollar dooryard.”

“Humph!” grunted Knowles. “And her husband?”

The darkness hid Ashton's face, but his voice betrayed the sudden upwelling of his bitterness: "I never heard of him until he—until a little over three years ago. I wish to Heaven he hadn't taken part in that bridge contest!"

"How's that?" asked Knowles in a casual tone.

"Nothing—nothing!" Ashton hastened to disclaim. "You haven't been talking with Miss Chuckie about me, have you, Mr. Knowles?"

"No. Why?"

"It was only that I explained to her how I came to be ruined—to lose my fortune. You see, the circumstances are such that I cannot very well say anything against Blake; yet he was the cause—it was owing to something he did that I lost all—everything—millions! Curse him!"

"You've appeared friendly enough towards him," remarked Knowles.

"Yes, I—I promised Miss Chuckie to try to forget the past. But when I think of what I lost, all because of him—"

"So-o!" considered the cowman. "Maybe there's more in what Kid says than I thought. He's been cross-questioning Blake all day. You know how little Kid is given to gab. But from the time we started off he kept after Blake like he was cutting out steers at the round-up."

"Blake isn't the kind you could get to tell anything against himself," asserted Ashton.

"Well, that may be. All his talk today struck me as being straightforward and outspoken. But Kid has been drawing inferences. He keeps hammering at it that Blake must be in thick with his father-in-law, and that all millionaires round-up their money in ways that would make a rustler go off and shoot himself."

"Business is business," replied Ashton with all his old cynicism. "I'll not say that H. V. Leslie is crooked, but I never knew of his coming out of a deal second best."

"Well, at any rate, it's white of Blake to tell us beforehand what he intends to do if he sees a chance of a practical project."

"Has he told you everything?" scoffed Ashton.

"How about his offer to drop the whole matter and not go into it at all?" rejoined Knowles.

Ashton hesitated to reply. For one thing, he was momentarily nonplused, and, for

another, the Blakes had treated him as a gentleman. But a fresh upwelling of bitterness dulled his conscience and sharpened his wits.

“It may have been to throw you off your guard,” he said. “Blake is deep, and he has had old Leslie to coach him ever since he married Genevieve. He could have laid his plans,—looked over the ground, and found out just what are your rights here,—all without your suspecting him.”

“Well, I’m not so sure—”

“Have you told him what lands you have deeds to?”

“No, but if he knows as much about the West as I figure he does, he can guess it. Fence every swallow of get-at-able water to be found on my range this time of year, and you won’t have to dig a posthole off of land I hold in fee simple. Plum Creek sinks just below where Dry Fork junctions.”

“But you can’t have *all* the water?” exclaimed Ashton incredulously.

“Yes, every drop to be found outside Deep Cañon this time of year. There’s my seven and a half mile string of quarter-sections blanketing Plum Creek from the springs to down below Dry Fork, and five quarter-sections covering all the waterholes. That makes up five sections. A bunch of tenderfeet came in here, years ago, and preëmpted all the quarter-sections with water on them. Got their patents from the government. Then the Utes stampeded them clean out of the country, and I bought up their titles at a fair figure.”

“And you own even that splendid pool up where I had my camp?”

“Everything wet on this range that a cow or hawss can get to, this time of year.”

Ashton considered, and advised craftily: “Don’t tell him this. Does Miss Chuckie know it?”

“She knows I have five sections, and that most of it is on Plum Creek. I don’t think anything has ever been said to her about the waterholes. But why not tell Blake?”

“Don’t you see? Even if he finds a way to get at the water in Deep Cañon, he will first have to bore his tunnel. He and his construction gang must have water to drink and for their engines while they are carrying out his plans. You can lie low, and, when the right time comes, get out an injunction against their trespassing on your land.”

“Say, that’s not a bad idea. The best I could figure was that they might need one

of my waterholes for a reservoir site. But why not call him when he first takes a hand?" asked Knowles.

"No, you should not show your cards until you have to," replied Ashton. "With all Leslie's money against you, it might be hard to get your injunction if they knew of your plans. But if you wait until they have their men, machinery and materials on the ground, you will have them where they must buy you out at your own terms."

"By—James!" commented Knowles. "Talk about business sharps!"

"I was in Leslie's office for a time," explained Ashton. "Your interests are Miss Chuckie's interests. I'm for her—first, last, and all the time."

"Um-m-m. Then I guess I can count on you as sure as on Gowan."

"You can. I am going to try my best to win your daughter, Mr. Knowles. She's a lady—the loveliest girl I ever met."

"No doubt about that. What's more, she's got grit and brains. That's why I tell you now, as I've told Kid, it's for her to decide on the man she's going to make happy. If he's square and white, that's all I ask."

"About my helping Blake with his levels," Ashton rather hastily changed the subject. "I am in your employ—and so is he, for that matter. Don't you think I have a right to keep you posted on all his plans?"

"Well—yes. But he as much as says he will tell them himself."

"Perhaps he will, and perhaps he won't, Mr. Knowles. I've told you what Leslie is like; and Blake is his son-in-law."

"Well, I'm not so sure. You and Kid, between you, have shaken my judgment of the man. It can't do any harm to watch him, and I'll be obliged to you for doing it. If it comes to a fight against him and the millions of backing he has, I want a fair deal and—But, Lord! what if we're making all this fuss over nothing? It doesn't stand to reason that there's any way to get the water out of Deep Cañon."

"Wait a week or so," cautioned Ashton. "In my opinion, Blake already sees a possibility."

CHAPTER XV

LEVELS AND SLANTS

At sunrise the next morning Blake screwed his level on its tripod and set up the instrument about a hundred yards away from the ranch house. Ashton held the level rod for him on a spike driven into the foot of the nearest post of the front porch. Blake called the spike a bench-mark. For convenience of determining the relative heights of the points along his lines of levels, he designated this first "bench" in his fieldbook as "elevation 1,000."

From the porch he ran the line of level "readings" up the slope to the top of the divide between Plum Creek and Dry Fork and from there towards the waterhole on Dry Fork. At noon Isobel and Mrs. Blake drove out to them in the buckboard, bringing a hot meal in an improvised fireless-cooker.

"And we came West to rough-it!" groaned Blake, his eyes twinkling.

"You can camp at the waterhole where Lafe did, and I'll send Kid out for that bobcat," suggested the girl. "You could roast him, hair and all."

"What! roast Gowan?" protested Blake. "Let me tell you, Miss Chuckie—you and my wife and Ashton may like him that much, but I don't!"

"You need not worry, Mr. Tenderfoot," the girl flashed back at him. "Whenever it comes to a hot time, Kid always gets in the first fire, without waiting to be told."

"Don't I know it?" exclaimed Ashton. "Maybe you haven't noticed this hole in my hat, Mrs. Blake. He put a bullet through it."

"But it's right over your temple, Lafayette!" replied Mrs. Blake.

"Lafe was lifting his some-berero to me, and Kid did it to haze him—only a joke, you know," explained Isobel. "Of course Lafe was in no danger. It was different, though, when somebody—we think it was his thieving guide—took several rifle shots at him. Tell them about it, Lafe."

Ashton gave an account of the murderous attack, more than once checking

himself in a natural tendency to embellish the exciting details.

“Oh! What if the man should come back and shoot at us?” shuddered Mrs. Blake, drawing her baby close in her arms.

“No fear of that,” asserted Isobel. “Kid found that he had fled towards the railroad. That proves it must have been the guide. He would never dare come back after such a crime.”

“If he should, I always carry my rifle, as you see,” remarked Ashton; adding, with a touch of bravado, “I made him run once, and I would again.”

“I’m glad Miss Chuckie is sure he will not come back,” said Blake. “I don’t fancy anyone shooting at me that way.”

“Timid Mr. Blake!” teased the girl. “Genevieve has been telling me how you faced a lion with only a bow and arrow.”

“Had to,” said Blake. “He’d have jumped on me if I had turned or backed off.—Speaking about camping at that waterhole, I believe we’ll do it, Ashton, if it’s the same thing to you. It would save the time that would be lost coming and going to the ranch.”

“Save time?” repeated Isobel. “Then of course we’ll bring out a tent and camp kit for you tomorrow. Genevieve and I can ride or drive up to the waterhole each day, to picnic with you.”

“It will be delightful,” agreed Mrs. Blake.

“You ride on ahead and wait for us in the shade,” said her husband. “We’ll knock off for the day when we reach that dolerite dike above the waterhole.—If you are ready, Ashton, we’ll peg along.”

He started off to set up his level as briskly as at dawn, though the midday sun was so hot that he had to shade the instrument with his handkerchief to keep the air-bubble from outstretching its scale. His wife and the girl drove on up Dry Fork to the waterhole.

Mrs. Blake was outstretched on her back, fast asleep, and Isobel was playing with the baby under the adjoining tree, when at last the surveyors came up on the other side of the creek and ended their day’s run with the establishment of a bench-mark on the top of the dike above the pool. Blake seemed as fresh as in the morning. He took a moderate drink of water dipped up in the brim of his hat, and without wakening his wife, sat down beside her to “figure up” his fieldbook.

Ashton had come down to the pool panting from heat and exertion. It was the first time that he had walked more than half a mile since coming to the ranch, for he had immediately fallen into the cowboy practice of saddling a horse to go even short distances. He had his reward for his work when, having soused his hot head in the pool and drunk his fill, he came up to rest in the shade of Isobel's tree. Very considerately the baby fell asleep. To avoid disturbing him and his mother, the young couple talked in low tones and half whispers very conducive to intimacy.

Ashton did his utmost to improve his opportunity. Without openly speaking his love, he allowed it to appear in his every look and intonation. The girl met the attack with banter and raillery and adroit shiftings of the conversation whenever his ardent inferences became too obvious. Yet her evasion and her teasing could not always mask her maidenly pleasure over his adoration of her loveliness, and an occasional blush betrayed to him that his wooing was not altogether unwelcome.

He was in the seventh heaven when Mrs. Blake awoke from her health-giving sleep and her husband closed his fieldbook. The girl promptly dashed her suitor back to earth by dropping him for the engineer.

"Mr. Blake! You can't have figured it out already?" she exclaimed. "What do you find?"

"Only an 'if,' Miss Chuckie," he answered. "If water can be stored or brought by ditch to this elevation, practically all Dry Mesa can be irrigated. Our bench-mark there on the dike is more than two hundred feet above that spike we drove into your porch post."

"Is that all you've found out today?"

"All for today," said Blake. "I could have left this line of levels until later, but I thought I might as well get through with them."

"You would not have run them if you had thought they would be useless," she stated, perceiving the point with intuitive acuteness.

"I like to clean up my work as I go along," he replied. "If you wish to know, I have thought of a possible way to get water enough for the whole mesa. It depends on two 'ifs.' I shall be certain as to one of them within the next two days. The other is the question of the depth of Deep Cañon. If I had a transit, I could determine that by a vertical angle,—triangulation. As it is, I probably shall have to go down to the bottom."

“Go down to the bottom of Deep Cañon?” cried the girl.

“Yes,” he answered in a matter-of-course tone. “A big ravine runs clear down to the bottom, up beyond where your father said you first met Ashton. I think it is possible to get down that gulch.—Suppose we hitch up? We’ll make the ranch just about supper-time.”

Ashton hastened to bring in the picketed horses. When they were harnessed Isobel fetched the sleeping baby and handed him to his mother; but she did not take the seat beside her.

“You drive, Lafe,” she ordered. “I’m going to ride behind with Mr. Blake. It’s such fun bouncing.”

All protested in vain against this odd whim. The girl plumped herself in on the rear end of the buckboard and dangled her slender feet with the gleefulness of a child.

“Mr. Blake will catch me if I go to jolt off,” she declared.

The engineer nodded with responsive gayety and seated himself beside her. As the buckboard rattled away over the rough sod, they made as merry over their jolts and bounces as a pair of school-children on a hayrack party.

Mrs. Blake sought to divert Ashton from his disappointment, but he had ears only for the laughing, chatting couple behind him. The fact that Blake was a married man did not prevent the lover from giving way to jealous envy. Chancing to look around as he warned the hilarious pair of a gully, he saw the girl grasp Blake’s shoulder. Natural as was the act, his envy flared up in hot resentment. Except on their drive to Stockchute, she had always avoided even touching his hand with her finger tips; yet now she clung to the engineer with a grasp as familiar as that of an affectionate child. Nor did she release her clasp until they were some yards beyond the gully.

Mrs. Blake had seen not only the expression that betrayed Ashton’s anger but also the action that caused it. She raised her fine eyebrows; but meeting Ashton’s significant glance, she sought to pass over the incident with a smile. He refused to respond. All during the remainder of the drive he sat in sullen silence. Genevieve bent over her baby. Behind them the unconscious couple continued in their mirthful enjoyment of each other and the ride.

When the party reached the ranch, the girl must have perceived Ashton’s moroseness had she not first caught sight of her father. He was standing outside the front porch, his eyes fixed upon the corner post in a perplexed stare.

“Why, Daddy,” she called, “what is it? You look as you do when playing chess with Kid.”

“Afraid it’s something that’ll annoy Mr. Blake,” replied the cowman.

“What is it?” asked Blake, who was handing his wife from the buckboard.

As the engineer faced Knowles, Gowan sauntered around the far corner of the house. At sight of the ladies he paused to adjust his neckerchief.

“Can’t understand it, Mr. Blake,” said the cowman. “Somebody has pulled out that spike you drove in here this morning.”

“Pulled the spike?” repeated Gowan, coming forward to stare at the post. “That shore is a joke. The Jap’s building a new henhouse. Must be short of nails.”

“That’s so,” said Knowles. “I forgot to order them for him. I’m mighty sorry, Mr. Blake. But of course the little brown cuss didn’t know what he was meddling with.”

“Jumping Jehosaphat!” ejaculated Gowan. “That shore is mighty hard luck! I reckon pulling that spike turns your line of levels adrift like knocking out the picket-pin of an uneasy hawss.”

Blake burst into a hearty laugh. “That’s a fine metaphor, Mr. Gowan. But it does not happen to fit the case. It would not matter if the spike-hole had been pulled out and the post along with it, so far as concerns this line of levels.”

“It wouldn’t?” muttered Gowan, his lean jaw dropping slack. He glowered as if chagrined at the engineer’s laughter at his mistake.

Without heeding the puncher’s look, Blake began to tell Knowles the result of his day’s work. While he was speaking, they went into the house after his wife and the girl, leaving Gowan and Ashton alone. Equally sullen and resentful, the rivals exchanged stares of open hostility. Ashton pointed a derisive finger at the spike-hole in the post.

“Hole ... and the post along with it!” he repeated Blake’s words. “On bridge work it might have caused some trouble. But a preliminary line of levels—*Mon Dieu!* A Jap should have known better—or even a yap!” With a supercilious shrug, he swung back into the buckboard and drove up to the corral.

Gowan’s right hand had dropped to his hip. Slowly it came up and joined the other hand in rolling a thick Mexican cigarette. But the puncher did not light his “smoke.” He looked at the spike-hole in the post, scowled, and went back around

the house.

CHAPTER XVI

METAL AND METTLE

At dawn Blake and Ashton drove up to the waterhole on Dry Fork with their camp equipment. There they left the outfit in the buckboard and proceeded with the line of levels on up the creek bed into the gorge from which it issued.

For more than a mile they carried the levels over the bowlders of the gradually sloping bottom of that stupendous gash in the mountain side. So far the work was fairly easy. At last, however, they came to the place where the bed of the gulch suddenly tilted upward at a sharp angle and climbed the tremendous heights to the top of High Mesa in sheer ascents and cliff-like ledges. Blake established a bench-mark at the foot of the acclivity, and came forward beside Ashton to peer up the Titanic chute between the dizzy precipices. From where they stood to the head of the gulch was fully four thousand feet.

“What do you think of it?” asked the engineer.

“I think this is where your line ends,” answered Ashton, and he rolled a cigarette. He had been anything but agreeable since their start from the ranch.¹⁸⁶

“We of course can’t go up with the level and rod,” said Blake, smiling at the absurdity of the suggestion. “Still, we might possibly chain it to the top.”

Ashton shrugged. “I fail to see the need of risking my neck to climb this goat stairway.”

“Very well,” agreed Blake, ignoring his companion’s ill humor. “Kindly take back the level and get out the chain.”

Ashton started off without replying. Blake looked at the young man’s back with a regretful, half-puzzled expression. But he quickly returned to the business in hand. He laid the level rod on a rock and inclined it at the same steep pitch as the uptilt of the gorge bottom. Over the lower end of this he held a plumb bob, and took the angle between the perpendicular line of the bob-string and the inclined line of the rod with a small protractor that he carried in his notebook. The angle measured over fifty degrees from the horizontal.

Having thus determined the angle of inclination, the engineer picked a likely line of ascent and started to climb the gulch chute. He went up in rapid rushes, with the ease and surefootedness of a coolheaded, steel-muscled climber. He stopped frequently, not because of weariness or of lack of breath, but to test the structure and hardness of the rocks with a small magnifying glass and the butt of his pocket knife.

At last, nearly a thousand feet up, his ascent was stopped by a sheer hundred-foot cliff. He had seen it beetling above him and knew beforehand that he could not hope to scale such a precipice; yet he clambered up to it, still examining the rock with minute care. As he walked across the waterworn shelf at the foot of the sheer cliff, his eye was caught by a wide seam of quartz in the side wall of the gulch.

Going on over to the vein, he looked at it in several places through his magnifying glass. Everywhere little yellow specks showed in the semi-translucent quartz. He drew back across the gorge to examine the trend of the vein. It ran far outward and upward, and in no place was it narrower than where it disappeared under the bed of the gorge.

His lips pursed in a prolonged, soundless whistle. But he did not linger. Immediately after he had estimated the visible length and dip of the seam, he began his descent. Arriving at the foot without accident, he picked up the level rod and swung away down the gulch.

He saw nothing of Ashton until he had come all the distance down across the valley to the dike above the pool. His assistant was in the grove below, assiduously helping Miss Knowles to erect a tent that the girl had improvised from a tarpaulin. Genevieve and Thomas Herbert were interesting themselves in the contents of the kit-box. The two ladies had ridden up to the camp on horseback, Isobel carrying the baby.

When Blake came striding down to them, the girl left Ashton and ran to meet him, her eyes beaming with affectionate welcome.

“What has kept you so long?” she called. “Lafe says the gulch is absolutely unclimbable. I could have told you so, beforehand.”

“You are right. I tried it, but had to quit,” replied Blake, engulfing her outstretched hand in his big palm.

When he would have released her, she caught his fingers and held fast, so that they came down to his wife hand in hand. Oblivious of Ashton’s frown, the girl

dimpled at Mrs. Blake.

“Here he is, Genevieve,” she said. “We have him corralled for the rest of the morning.”

“Sorry,” replied Blake, stooping to pick up his chuckling son. “We can’t knock off now.”

“But if you cannot continue your levels?” asked his wife. “From what Lafayette told us, we thought you would not start in again until after lunch.”

“No more levels until tomorrow,” said Blake. “But I must settle one of my big ‘ifs’ by night. To do it, Ashton and I will have to go up on High Mesa and measure a line. There’s still two hours till noon. We’ll borrow your saddle ponies, Miss Chuckie, and start at once, if Jenny will put us up a bite of lunch.”

“Immediately, Tom,” assented Mrs. Blake, delighted at the opportunity to serve her big husband.

“When shall we take Genevieve to see the cañon?” asked the girl. “I am sure she can ride up safely on old Buck.”

“We have only the two saddle horses today,” replied Blake. “If our measurement settles that ‘if’ one way, I shall start a line of levels up the mountain tomorrow morning, if the other way, any irrigation project is out of the question, and we shall go up to the cañon merely as a sightseeing party.”

“Ah!” sighed the girl. “‘If!’ ‘if’—I do so hope it turns out to be the last one!”

Blake looked at her with a quizzical smile. “Perhaps you would not, Miss Chuckie, if you could see all the results of a successful water system.”

“You mean, turning our range into farms for hundreds of irrigationists,” she replied. “I suppose I am selfish, but I am thinking of what it would mean to Daddy. Just consider how it will affect us. For years this land has been our own for miles and miles!”

“Well, we shall see,” said Blake, his eyes twinkling.

“Yes, indeed!” she exclaimed. “Lafe, if you’ll help me saddle up and help Mr. Blake rush up to do that measuring, I’ll—I’ll be ever so grateful!”

Though all the more resentful at Blake over having to leave her company, Ashton eagerly sprang forward to help the girl saddle the ponies. When they were ready, she filled his canteen for him and took a sip from it “for luck.” Genevieve had packed an ample lunch in a gamebag, along with her husband’s

linked steel-wire surveyor's chain.

Ten minutes after Blake's arrival, he handed the baby to its mother and swung into the saddle. Ashton had already mounted, fired by a kind glance from the girl's forget-me-not eyes. In his zeal, he led the way at a gallop around the craggy hill and across the intervening valley to the escarpment of High Mesa. Had not Blake checked him, he would have forced the pace on up the mountain side.

"Hold on," called the engineer. "We want to make haste slowly. That buckskin you're on isn't so young as he has been, and my pony has to lug around two hundred pounds. We'll get back sooner by being moderate. Besides you don't wish to knock up old Buck. He is about the only one of these jumpy cow ponies that is safe for Jenny."

"That's so," admitted Ashton. "Suppose you set the pace."

He stopped to let Blake pass him, and trailed behind up the mountain side. He had headed into a draw. The engineer at once turned and began zigzagging up the steep side of the ridge that thrust out into the valley between the draw and the gulch of Dry Fork. At the stiffest places he jumped off and led his pony. None too willingly, Ashton followed the example set by his companion. There were some places where he could not have avoided so doing—ledges that the old buckskin, despite his years of mountain service, could hardly scramble up under an empty saddle.

Long before they reached the point of the ridge, Ashton was panting and sweating, and his handsome face was red from exertion and anger. But his indignation at being misguided up so difficult a line of ascent received a damper when he reached the lower end of the ridge crest. Blake, who had waited patiently for him to clamber up the last sharp slope, gave him a cheerful nod and pointed to the long but fairly easy incline of the ridge crest.

"In mountain climbing, always take your stiffest ground first, when you can," he said. "We can jog along pretty fast now."

They mounted and rode up the ridge, much of the time at a jog trot. Before long they came to the top of High Mesa, and galloped across to one of the ridges that lay parallel with Deep Cañon. Climbing the ridge, they found themselves looking over into a ravine that ran down to the right to join another ravine from the opposite direction, at the head of Dry Fork Gulch. Blake turned and rode to the left along the ridge, until he found a place where they could cross the ravine. The still air was reverberating with the muffled roar of Deep Cañon.

From the ridge on the other side of the ravine, they could look down between the scattered pines to the gaping chasm of the stupendous cañon. But Blake rode to the right along the summit of the ridge until they came opposite the head of Dry Fork Gulch. Here he flung the reins over his pony's head, and dismounted. Ashton was about to do the same when he caught sight of a wolf slinking away like a gray shadow up the farther ravine. He reached for his rifle, and for the first time noticed that he had failed to bring it along. In his haste to start from camp he had left it in the tent.

"*Sacre!*" he petulantly exclaimed. "There goes twenty-five dollars!"

"How's that?" asked Blake. He looked and caught a glimpse of the wolf just as it vanished. "Why don't you shoot?"

"Left my rifle in camp, curse the luck!"

"Keep cool," advised Blake. "It's only twenty-five dollars, and you might have missed anyway."

"Not with my automatic," snapped Ashton. "You needn't sneer about the money. You've seen times when you'd have been glad of a chance at half the amount."

"That's true," gravely agreed the engineer. "What's more, I realize that it is far harder for you than it ever was for me. I want to tell you I admire the way you have stood your loss."

"You do?" burst out the younger man. "I want to tell *you* I don't admire the way you ruined me—babbling to my father—when you promised to keep still! You sneak!"

Blake looked into the other's furious face with no shade of change in his grave gaze. "I have never said a word to your father against you," he declared.

"Then—then how, after all this time—?" stammered Ashton, even in his anger unable to disbelieve the engineer's quiet statement. He was disconcerted only for the moment. Again he flared hotly: "But if you didn't, old Leslie must have! It's all the same!"

"No, it is not the same," corrected Blake. "As for my father-in-law, if he said anything about—the past, I feel sure it was not with intention to hurt your interests."

"Hurt my interests! You know I am utterly ruined!"

"On the contrary, I know you are not ruined. You have lost a large allowance,

and a will has been made cutting you off from a great many millions that you expected to inherit. But you have landed square on your feet; you have a pretty good job, and you are stronger and healthier than you were.”

“If you break up Mr. Knowles’ range with your irrigation schemes, I stand to lose my job. You know that.”

“If the project proves to be feasible, I shall offer you a position on the works,” said Blake.

“You needn’t try to bribe me!” retorted Ashton. “I’m working for Mr. Knowles.”

“Well, he directed you to help me with this survey,” replied the engineer, with imperturbable good nature. “The next move is to chain across to the cañon.”

He pulled his surveyor’s chain from the bag and descended the ridge to an out-jutting rock above the head of the tremendous gorge in the mountain side. Ashton followed him down. Blake handed him the front end of the chain.

“You lead,” he said. “I’ll line you, as I know where to strike the nearest point on the cañon.”

Ashton sullenly started up the ridge, and the measurement began. As Blake required only a rough approximation, they soon crossed the ridge and chained down through the trees to the edge of Deep Cañon. Ashton was astonished at the shortness of the distance. The cañon at this point ran towards the mesa escarpment as if it had originally intended to drive through into Dry Fork Gulch, but twisted sharp about and curved back across the plateau. Even Blake was surprised at the measurement. It was only a little over two thousand feet.

“Noticed this place when out with Mr. Knowles and Gowan,” he remarked, gazing down into the abyss with keen appreciation of its awful grandeur. “They told me it is the nearest that the cañon comes to the edge of the mesa, until it breaks out, thirty or forty miles down.”

“How—how about that ‘if’ you said this measurement would settle?” asked Ashton.

“What’s the time?”

Ashton looked at his watch, frowning over the evasive reply. “It’s two-ten.”

“I’ll figure on the proposition while we eat lunch,” said Blake. “I can answer you better regarding that ‘if’ when I have done some calculating. Luckily I climbed up to examine the rock in the gulch.” He smiled quizzically at his companion.

“You were right as to its being unclimbable; but I found out even more than I expected.”

Ashton silently took the bag from him and arranged the lunch and his canteen on a rock under a pine. The engineer figured and drew little diagrams in his fieldbook while he ate his sandwiches. Ashton had half drained the canteen on the way up the mountain. Before sitting down Blake had rinsed out his mouth and taken a few swallows of water. After eating, he started to take another drink, noticed his companion’s hot dry face, and stopped after a single sip.

“Guess you need it more than I do,” he remarked, as he rose to his feet. “Time to start. I wish to go around and down the mountain on the other side of the gulch.”

“How about the—the ‘if’?” inquired Ashton.

“Killed,” answered Blake. “There now is only one left. If that comes out the same way, Dry Mesa will have good cause to change its name.”

“You can tunnel through from the gulch to the cañon?” exclaimed Ashton.

“Yes; and I shall do so—if Deep Cañon is not too deep.”

“I hope it is a thousand feet below Dry Mesa!” said Ashton.

“In the circumstances,” Blake replied to the fervent declaration, “I am glad to hear you say it.”

Ashton stared, but could detect no sarcasm in the other’s smile of commendation.

CHAPTER XVII

A SHOT IN THE DUSK

They returned to their grazing ponies, and at once started the descent of the mountain, after crossing the ravine where they had seen the wolf. Blake chose a route that brought them down into the valley above the waterhole shortly before five o'clock. They cantered the remaining distance along the wide, gravelly wash of the creek bed to the dike.

Looking down from the dike, they saw that Knowles and Gowan had come up the creek and were waiting for them in company with the ladies. Ashton set spurs to his horse and dashed across above the pool, to descend the slope to the party. Blake descended on the other side, to water his horse and slake his own thirst.

To Ashton's chagrin, Isobel joined Genevieve in hastening to meet the engineer. He rode down beside the two men and jumped off to follow the ladies. But Gowan sprang before him.

"Hold on," he said. "Mr. Knowles wants your report."

"If you'll oblige us, Lafe," added the cowman. "I'm pretty much worked up."²⁹⁸

"You have cause to be!" replied Ashton. "He says the only question left is whether the water in the cañon is not at too low a level. We measured across from the creek gulch to the cañon. A tunnel is practicable, he says."

"Through all that mountain?" scoffed Gowan. "It's solid rock, clean through. It would take him a hundred years to burrow a hole like that."

"You know nothing of engineering and its tools. We now have electric drills that will eat into granite like cheese," condescendingly explained Ashton.

"Think I don't know that? But just you try to figure out how he's going to get his electricity for his drills," retorted Gowan.

Without stopping for his disconcerted rival to reply, he turned his back on him and started towards Isobel. The girl was running up from the pool, her face

almost pitiful with disappointment.

“Oh, Daddy!” she called, “Mr. Blake says that if the water in the cañon—”

“Needn’t tell me, honey. I know already,” broke in her father, hastening to meet her.

She flung her arms about his neck, and sobbed brokenly: “I’m—I’m so sorry for you, D-Daddy!”

“There, there now!” he soothed, awkwardly patting her back. “’Tisn’t like you to cry before you’re hurt.”

“No, no—you! not me. It doesn’t matter about me!”

“Doesn’t it, though! But I’m not hurt either, as yet. It’s a long ways from being a sure thing.”

“All the way down to the bottom of Deep Cañon!” put in Ashton.

“And then some!” added Gowan. “I’ve hit on another ‘if,’ Miss Chuckie.”

“You have? Oh, Kid, tell us!”

“It’s this: How’s he going to get electricity to dig his tunnel?”

Blake was coming up from the pool, with his baby in one arm and his wife clinging fondly to the other. He met the coldly exultant glance of Gowan, and smiled.

“The only question regarding the power is one of cost, Mr. Gowan,” he said. “There is no coal near enough to be hauled. But gasolene is not bulky. If there was water power to generate electricity, a tunnel could be bored at half the cost I have figured. The point is that there is no water power available, nor will there be until the tunnel is finished.”

“What! You talk about finishing the tunnel? Didn’t you say it is still uncertain about the water?” demanded Knowles.

“I was merely explaining to Mr. Gowan,” replied Blake. “The question he raised is one of the factors in our problem as to whether an irrigation project is practicable. We now know that we have the land for it, the tunnel site, the reservoir site—” he pointed to the valley above the dike—“and I have figured that the cost of construction would not be excessive. All that remains is to determine if we have the water. I have already explained that this will require a descent into the cañon.”

“You say that that will decide it, one way or the other?” queried Knowles, his forehead creased with deep lines of foreboding.

“Yes,” replied Blake. “I regret that you feel as you do about it. Consider what it would mean to hundreds, yes, thousands of people, if this mesa were watered. I assure you that you, too, would benefit by the project.”

“I don’t care for any such benefit, Mr. Blake. I’ve been a cowman for twenty-five years. I want to keep my range until the time comes for me to take the long trail.”

“It would be hard to change,” agreed the engineer. “However, the point now is to find what Deep Cañon has to tell us.”

“You still think you can go down it?”

“Yes, if I have ropes, a two-pound hammer, and some iron pins; railroad spikes and picket-pins would do.”

“Going to rope the rocks and pull them up for steps?” asked Gowan.

“I shall need two or three hundred feet of half-inch manila,” said Blake, ignoring the sarcasm.

“They may have it at Stockchute,” said Knowles. “Kid, you can drive over with the wagon and fetch Mr. Blake all the rope and other things he wants. I can’t stand this waiting much longer.”

“There will be no time lost,” said Blake. “It will take Ashton and me all of tomorrow to carry a line of levels up the mountain.”

“Why need you do that, Tom?” asked his wife.

“Yes, why, if all that’s left is to go down into the cañon?” added Isobel, dabbing the tears from her wet eyes.

Ashton thrust in an answer before Blake could speak. “We must see how high the upper mesa is above this one, Miss Chuckie, and then compare the difference of altitude with the depth of the cañon, to see whether its bottom is above or below the bottom of the gulch.”

“Oh—measure up and then down, to see which way is longest,” said Genevieve.

“Sorry, ma’am,” broke in Knowles. “We’ll have to be starting now to get home by dark. If you think you can trust me with that young man, I’d like the honor of packing him all the way in. I’ve toted calves for miles, so I guess I can hold onto a baby if I use both hands.”

“You shall have him!” replied Genevieve, smiling like a daughter as she met the look in his grave eyes. “Tom, give Thomas to Mr. Knowles—when he is safe in the saddle.”

Even Gowan cracked a smile at this cautious qualification. He hastened to bring Isobel’s horse and hold him for her—which gave Ashton the opportunity to help her mount. Both services were needless, but she rewarded each eager servitor with a dimpled smile. When Blake handed the baby up to Knowles, his wife, untroubled by mock modesty, gave him a loving kiss. He lifted her bodily into the saddle, and she rode off with her three companions.

Isobel, however, wheeled within the first few yards, and came back for a parting word: “You can expect us quite early tomorrow. We will overtake you on your way up the mountain. I wish Genevieve to see the cañon. Good night—Pleasant dreams!”

She had addressed Ashton, but her last smile was for Blake, and it was undisguisedly affectionate. As she loped away after the others, Ashton frowned, and, picking up his rifle, started off up the valley. Blake was staring after the girl with a wondering look. He turned to cast a quizzical glance at the back of the resentful lover.

When the latter had disappeared around the hill, the engineer took the frying pan and walked up into the creek bed above the dike. After going some distance over the gravel bars, he came to a place where the swirl of the last freshet had gouged a hole almost to bedrock. Scooping a panful of sand and gravel from the bottom of the hole, he went back and squatted down beside the pool within easy reach of the water.

He picked the larger pebbles from the pan, added water, and began to swirl the contents around with a circular motion. Each turn flirted some of the sand and water over the pan’s beveled edge. Every little while he renewed the water. At last the pan’s contents were reduced to a half dozen, irregular, dirty, little lumps and a handful of “black sand” in which gleamed numbers of yellow particles.

Blake put the nuggets into his pocket and threw the rest out into the pool. He returned to the tent and sat down to re-check his level-book and his calculations on the approximate cost of the tunnel. Sundown found him still figuring; but when twilight faded into dusk, he put away his fieldbook and started a fire for supper.

He was in the act of setting on a pan of bacon when, without the slightest warning, a bullet cut the knot of the loose neckerchief under his downbent chin.

In the same instant that he heard the ping of the shot he pitched sideways and flattened himself on the ground with the chuck-box between him and the fire. A roll and a quick crawl took him into the underbrush beyond the circle of firelight. No second bullet followed him in his amazingly swift movements. He lay motionless, listening intently, but no sound broke the stillness of the evening except the distant wail of a coyote and the hoot of an owl.

Half an hour passed, and still the engineer waited. The dusk deepened into darkness. At last a heavy footfall sounded up on the dike. Blake rose, and slipping silently to the tent, groped about until he found a heavy iron picket-pin.

Someone came down the slope and kicked his way petulantly through the bushes to the dying fire. He threw on an armful of brush. The light of the up-blazing flame showed Ashton standing beside the chuck-box, rifle in hand. But he dropped the weapon to pick up the overturned frying pan, which lay at his feet.

“Hello, Blake!” he sang out irritably. “I supposed you’d have supper waiting. Haven’t turned in this early, have you?”

“No,” replied Blake, and he came forward, carelessly swinging the picket-pin. “Thought I saw a coyote sneaking about, and tried to trick him into coming close enough for me to nail him with this pin.”

“With that!” scoffed Ashton. “But it would do as well as my rifle. I took a shot at a wolf, and then the mechanism jammed. I can’t get it to work.”

“You fired a shot?” asked Blake.

“Yes. Was it too far off for you to hear? I circled all around these hills.”

“No, I heard it,” replied Blake, looking close into the other’s sullen face. “You may not have been as far away as you thought.”

“I was far enough,” grumbled Ashton. “I’ve walked till I’m hungry as a shark.”

“Do you realize that you want to be careful how you shoot with these high-power rifles?” asked Blake. “They carry a mile or more.”

“I’ve carried mine more than that, and *it* won’t carry an inch,” complained Ashton. “Wish you would see if you can fix it, while I get on some bacon.”

Blake took his scrutinizing gaze from his companion’s face, and picked up the rifle. Ashton showed plainly that he was tired and hungry and very irritable, but there was no trace of guilt in his look or manner. While he hurriedly prepared supper, Blake took apart the mechanism of the rifle. He discovered the trouble at

once.

“This is easy,” he said. “Nothing broken—just a screw loose. Have you been monkeying with the parts, to see how they work?”

“No; I don’t care a hang how they work. What gets me is that they didn’t work!”

“Queer, then, how this screw got loose,” said Blake as he tightened it with the blade of his pocket knife. “It sets tight enough. Of course it might have come from the factory a bit loose, and jarred out with the firing; but neither seems probable.”

“Is it all right now?” queried Ashton.

“Yes.—Seems to me someone *must* have loosened this screw.”

“What’s the difference how it happened, if it will not happen again?” irritably replied Ashton. “Guess this bacon is fried enough. Let’s eat.”

Blake recoupled the rifle, emptied the magazine, tested the mechanism, refilled the magazine, and joined his ravenous companion in his ill-cooked meal.

Immediately after eating, Ashton flung himself down in the tent. A few minutes later Blake crept in beside him and struck a match. The young man had already fallen into the deep slumber of utter physical and mental relaxation. Blake went outside and listened to the wailing of the coyotes. Difficult as it was to determine the direction of their mournful cries, he at last satisfied himself that they were circling entirely around the camp.

A watchdog could not have indicated with greater certainty that there was no other wild beast or any human being lurking near the waterhole. Blake crept back into the tent and was soon fast asleep beside his companion.

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE BRINK

Early to bed, early to rise. The two men were up at dawn. During the night the coyotes had sneaked into the camp. But Blake had fastened the food in the chuck-box and slung everything gnawable up in the branches out of reach of the sly thieves.

At sunrise the two started out on their day's work, Ashton carrying his rifle and canteen and the level rod, Blake with the level and a bag containing their lunch and a two-quart sirup-can of water.

"We'll run a new line from the dike bench, around the hill and across the valley the way we rode out yesterday," said the engineer, as they climbed the slope above the waterhole. "That will give us a check by cross-tying to the line of the creek levels where it runs into the gulch."

"Can't you trust to the accuracy of your own work?" asked Ashton with evident intent to mortify.

Blake smiled in his good-natured way. "You forget the first rule of engineering. Always check when you can, then re-check and check again.—Now, if you'll kindly give me a reading off that bench." 208

Ashton complied, though with evident ill will. He had wakened in good spirits, but was fast returning to his sullenness of the previous day. He took his time in going from the bench-mark to the first turning point. Blake moved up past him with inspiring briskness, but the younger man kept to his leisurely saunter. In rounding the corner of the hill twice as much time was consumed as was necessary.

When they came to the last turn at the foot of the rocky slope, where the line struck out across the valley towards the foot of the mountain side, Ashton paused to roll a cigarette before holding his rod for the reading. Small as was the incident, it was particularly aggravating to an engineer. The reading would have taken only a moment, and he could then have rolled his cigarette and smoked it

while Blake was moving past him for the next “set up.” Instead, he deliberately kept Blake waiting until the cigarette had been rolled and lighted.

Blake “pulled up” his level and started forward, his face impassive. Ashton leaned jauntily on the rod, sucked in a mouthful of smoke, and raising his cigarette, flicked the ash from the tip with his little finger. At the same instant a bullet from the crags above him pierced the crown of his hat. He pitched forward on his face, rolled half over, and lay quiet.

Most men would have been dumfounded by the frightful suddenness of the occurrence—the shot and the instant fall of Ashton. It was like a stroke of lightning out of a clear sky. Blake did not stand gaping even for a moment. As Ashton’s senseless body struck the ground, he sprang sideways and bent to lay down his instrument, with the instinctive carefulness of an old railroad surveyor. A swift rush towards Ashton barely saved him from the second bullet that came pinging down from the hill crest. It burned across the back of his shoulder.

Heedless of the blood spurting from the wound in the side of Ashton’s head, Blake snatched up the automatic rifle and fired at a point between two knobs of rock on the hill crest. Promptly a hat appeared, then an arm and a rifle. It might have been expected that a bullet would have instantly followed; yet the assassin was strangely deliberate about getting his aim. Blake did not wait for him. He began to fire as fast as the automatic ejector and reloader set the rifle trigger. Three bullets sped up at the assassin before he had time to drop back out of sight.

Blake started up the hillside, his pale eyes like white-hot steel. He was in a fury, but it was the cold fury of a man too courageous for reckless bravado. He went up the hill as an Apache would have charged, dodging from cover to cover and, wherever possible, keeping in line with a rock or tree in his successive rushes. At every brief stop he scanned the ridge crest for a sign of his enemy. But the assassin did not show himself. For all that Blake could tell, he might be waiting for a sure shot, or he might be lying with a bullet through his brain.

To avoid suicidal exposure, the engineer was compelled to veer off to the right in his ascent. He reached the ridge crest without a shot having been fired at him. Leaping suddenly to his feet, he scrambled up to the flat top of a high crag, from which he could peer down upon the others. The natural embrasure from which the assassin had fired was exposed to his view; but the place was empty. He looked cautiously about at the many huge boulders behind which a hundred men might have been crouching unseen by him, advantageous as was his position. To

flush the assassin would require a bold rush over and around the rocks.

Blake set his powerful jaw and gathered himself together for the leap down from his crag. At that moment his alert eye caught a glimpse of a swiftly moving object on the mesa at the foot of the far side of the hill. It was a horse and rider racing out of sight around the bend of a ridge point.

Blake whipped the rifle to his shoulder. But the cowardly fugitive had disappeared. He lowered the rifle and started back down the hill faster than he had come up. Leaping like a goat, sliding, rushing—he raced to the bottom in a direct line for Ashton.

The victim lay as he had fallen, his head ghastly red with blood, which was still oozing from his wound. Blake dropped down beside the flaccid body and tore open the front of the silk shirt. He thrust in his hand. For some moments he was baffled by the violent throbbing of his own pulse. Then, at last, he detected a heartbeat, very feeble and slow yet unmistakable.

He turned Ashton on his side, and washing away the blood with water from the canteen, examined the wound with utmost carefulness. The bullet had pierced the scalp and plowed a furrow down along the side of the skull, grazing but not penetrating the bone.

“Only stunned.... Mighty close, though,” muttered Blake. He looked at the ashen face of the wounded man and added apprehensively, “Too close!... Concussion—”

Hastily he knotted a compress bandage made of handkerchiefs and neckerchiefs around the bleeding head, and stretching Ashton flat on his back, began to pump his arms up and down as is done in resuscitating a drowned person. After a time Ashton’s face began to lose its deathly pallor. His heart beat less feebly; he drew in a deep sighing breath, and stared up dazedly at Blake, with slowly returning consciousness.

“I’ll smoke all I please and when I please,” he murmured in a supercilious drawl.

Blake dashed his face with the cupful of water still left in the canteen. The wounded man flushed with quick anger and attempted to rise.

“What—what you—How dare you?” he spluttered, only to sink back with a groan, “My head! O-o-oh! You’ve smashed my head!”

“You’re in luck that your head *wasn’t* smashed,” replied Blake. “It was a bullet knocked you over.”

“Bullet?” echoed Ashton.

“Yes. Scoundrel up on the hill tried to get us both.”

“Up on the hill?” Ashton twisted his head about, in alarm, to look at the hill crest. “But if he—He may shoot again.”

“Not this time. I went up for him. He went down faster, other side the hill. Saw him on the run. The sneaking—” Blake closed his lips on the word. After a moment his grimness relaxed. “Came back to start your funeral. Found you’d cheated the undertaker. How do you feel now?”

“I believe I—” began Ashton, again trying to raise himself, only to sink back as before. “My head!—What makes me so weak?”

“Don’t worry,” reassured Blake. “It’s only a scalp wound. You are weak from the shock and a little loss of blood. I’ll get you a drink from my can, and then tote you into camp. You’ll be all right in a day or two.”

He fetched the can of water from his bag, which he had dropped beside the level. Ashton drank with the thirstiness of one who has lost blood. When at last his thirst was quenched, he glanced up at Blake with a look of half reluctant apology.

“I said something about your striking me,” he murmured. “I did not understand—did not realize I had been shot. You see, just before—”

“That’s all right,” broke in Blake. “I owe you a bigger apology. Last evening, while you were out hunting, someone took a shot at me. It must have been this same sneaking skunk. I thought it was you.”

“You thought I could try to—to shoot you?” muttered Ashton.

“Yes. There’s the old matter of the bridge, and you seem to think I am responsible for what your father has done. But after you came in, I soon concluded that you had fired towards the camp unintentionally.”

“If you had asked,” explained Ashton, “I was around at the far end of these hills, nearly two miles from the camp, when I shot at the wolf and the rifle went wrong.”

“That was a fortunate occurrence—your going out and seeing the wolf;” said Blake. “If you hadn’t taken that shot, we would not have known your rifle was out of gear. My first bullet merely made the sneak rise up to pot me. If the rapidity of the next three shots hadn’t rattled him, I believe he would have potted

me, instead of running.”

“So that was it?” exclaimed Ashton. “Do you know, I believe it must be the same scoundrel who attacked me the first day I rode down Dry Fork. No doubt he remembered how I ripped loose at him with the automatic-catch set.”

“Your thieving guide?” said Blake. “But why should he try to kill me?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” murmured Ashton. “Another drink, please.”

“I shall tote you back to camp, and—No, I’ll lay you over there in the shade and go up to see if he is in sight.”

Picking up the wounded man as easily as if he had been a child, the engineer carried him over under a tree, fetched him the can of water, and for the second time climbed the rocky hillside. Scaling his lookout crag, he surveyed the country below him. A mile down the creek two riders were coming up towards the waterhole at an easy canter. He surmised that they were his wife and Miss Knowles.

Their approach brought a shade of anxiety into his strong face. He swept the landscape with his glance. A little cloud of dust far out on the mesa towards Split Peak caught his eye. He looked at it steadfastly under his hand, and drew a deep breath of relief as he made out a fleeing horse and rider.

He descended to Ashton, and taking him up pick-a-back, swung away for the camp with long, swift strides. Before he had gone half the distance, he felt Ashton’s arms loosening their clasp of his neck. He caught him as he sank in a swoon. Without a moment’s hesitation, he slung his senseless burden up on his shoulder like a sack of meal, and hastened on faster than before.

Swiftly as he walked, the ladies reached the camp before him. When he came to the top of the dike slope, his wife had dismounted and Isobel was handing down the baby to her. As the girl slipped out of the saddle she looked up the slope. With a startled cry, she darted to meet Blake.

Quick to forestall her alarm, he called in a gasping shout: “Not serious—not serious!”

“Oh, Tom—Mr. Blake!” she cried. “What has happened?”

“Scalp wound—faint—blood loss,” Blake panted in terse answer.

“He is wounded? O-o-oh!” She ran up and looked fearfully at the bloodsoaked bandages across Ashton’s hanging head.

Blake staggered on down the slope without pausing. Genevieve had started to meet him. But at her husband's panting explanation, she laid the baby on the nearest soft spot of earth and darted to the kit-chest. She was opening a "first aid" box when Blake crashed through the bushes and sank down with his burden under the first tree.

Genevieve hastened towards the men, calling to her companion: "Water, Chuckie—that pail by the fireplace."

The girl flew to fetch a bucket of water from the pool.

Blake was peering anxiously down into Ashton's white face. "Didn't—know—but—that—" he panted.

"No," reassured his wife. "He will soon be all right."

She drew the unconscious man flat on his back and held a bottle of ammonia to his nostrils. The powerful stimulant revived him just as the girl came running back with the water. He opened his eyes, and the first object they rested upon was her anxious pitiful face. He smiled and whispered gallantly: "Don't be afraid. I'm all right—now!"

"Then I'll drink first," said Blake.

He took a deep draught from the pail, doused a hatful of water over his hot head and face, and stretched out to cool off. Genevieve, assisted by the deeply concerned girl, took the handkerchief bandage from Ashton's head and washed the wound with an antiseptic solution. She then clipped away the hair from the edges and drew the scalp together with a number of stitches.

In this last the hardy cowgirl was unable to help. She clasped Ashton's hand convulsively and sat shuddering. Ashton smiled up into her tender pitying eyes. Genevieve had numbed his wound with cocaine. He was quite satisfied with the situation.

Another antiseptic washing and a compress of sterilized cotton bound on with surgical bandages completed the operation. Then, when it was all over with, the young mother, who had gone through everything with the aplomb and deftness of a surgeon, quietly sank back in a faint. On the instant Blake was reaching for the ammonia bottle.

A whiff restored his wife to consciousness. She opened her eyes, and smiling at her weakness, sought to rise. He held her down with gentle force and ordered her to lie quiet.

“I shall fetch Tommy,” he added. “We’ll all take a *siesta* until noon.”

CHAPTER XIX

THE PLOTTERS

When Blake came back with the baby, Isobel begged him for a full account of how Ashton had been wounded. In relating the affair he sought to minimize the danger that he had incurred, and he omitted all mention of the bullet shot at him the previous evening. But his account was frequently interrupted by exclamations from his wife and Isobel.

At the end he dwelt strongly on the cowardly haste of the assassin's flight; only to be met by a shrewdly anxious rejoinder from the girl: "He ran away after he attacked Lafe the other time. He will come back again!"

"Oh, Tom!" cried Genevieve—"if he does!"

"We will get him, that is all there is to it," replied her husband. "What do you say to that, Ashton?"

"We will not have the chance," said Ashton. "I don't believe he has nerve enough to try it the third time. But if he should—"

"No, no! I hope he keeps running forever!" fervently wished Isobel. "Don't you realize how close a miss that was, Lafe?—and the other time, too?"

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"I like having one Miss close," he punned.

The girl blushed, but failed to show any sign of resentment.

Blake looked significantly at his wife. "Don't know but what I've changed my mind about a *siesta*," he remarked. "Here's Tommy gone to sleep just when I wanted to fight him. Do you think Miss Chuckie can keep him and Ashton from running away if I go to bring in the level?"

"You say you had started to run the line of levels across to the mountain?" she asked.

"Yes.... This little pleasantry has knocked us out of a day's work and you out of your trip to the cañon."

“But why couldn’t I rod for you?” she suggested. “I noticed Lafayette the other day. It seems easier than golfing.”

“It is.”

“Then I shall do it. A good walk is exactly what I need.”

“Genevieve!” hastily appealed Isobel. “Surely you’ll not go off and leave me—us!”

“Thomas is asleep, and Lafayette needs to be quiet,” was the demure reply. “Come, Tom. We’ll run the levels over to the foot of the mountain, at least.”

With a reproachful glance at the smiling couple, the girl slipped over to put Thomas Herbert between herself and Ashton. Blake found another bag and can, which last he filled with water from the bucket. Genevieve put on the cowboy hat that she had borrowed at the ranch, and sprang up to join him.

He paused for a question: “How about leaving the rifle?”

Isobel put her hand to a fold in her skirt and drew out her long-barreled automatic pistol. “I can do as well or better with this,” she answered.

“What a wicked looking thing!” exclaimed Genevieve. “Surely, dear, you do not shoot it?”

“Shoot it!” put in Ashton. “Hasn’t she told you about saving me from a rattler?”

“She did?”

“Yes,” he replied, and he told about the rattlesnake in the bunkhouse.

“But I ought to have shot quicker,” Isobel explained, when he finished. “I missed the head, though I aimed at it.”

“The way we’ve left Thomas about on the ground!” exclaimed Genevieve. “Are there any of the horrid things around here? Is that why you carry the pistol?”

“No, no, don’t be afraid. We’ve killed them out here, long ago, because of the cattle. I carry my pistol on the chance of killing wolves. They’re dreadfully harmful to the calves and colts, you know.”

“Good for you,” praised Blake, as he picked up the rifle. “Well, we’re off.”

He started away, hand in hand with his wife. They were soon at the top of the dike slope and almost dancing along over the dry turf. It was months since they had been alone together in the open, and they were still deeper in love than at the time of their marriage—if that were possible.

They soon reached the place where the shooting had occurred. Here they picked up the lunch bag, Ashton's canteen and his hat, now punctured with another bullet hole; and at once started to carry the line of levels out across the valley. A few words of instruction made an efficient rodwoman of Genevieve, so that they soon reached the foot of the ridge up which her husband had led Ashton the previous day. Here he established a bench-mark, and turned along the base of the escarpment to the mouth of Dry Fork Gully, where he checked the line of levels that had been run up the bed of the creek.

"Good work—less than three tenths difference, and all that I am concerned about is an error in feet," he commented. "It's getting along towards noon. We'll go up the gulch, and eat our lunch in the shade. This place is almost as much of a sight as the cañon."

Genevieve more than agreed with her husband's opinion when he led her up into the stupendous gorge and the walls of rock began to tower on each side ever steeper and loftier.

"Oh, I do not see how anything can be so grand, so awesome as this!" she cried, gazing up the precipices. "It makes me positively giddy to look at such heights!"

"Better stop off for a while," advised Blake. "We are almost to where the bottom tilts skyward. You can stargaze while we are eating lunch. It's rougher along here. We can get on faster this way."

He picked her up in his arms as though she were a feather, and carried her on up the gulch to the foot of the Titanic chute. Here, resting on a flat rock in the cool semi-twilight of the gorge bottom, they ate their lunch and talked with as much zest as if they were still new acquaintances.

"Those awful cliffs!" she murmured, lowering her gaze from the colossal walls above her. "I cannot bear to look at them any longer. They overpower me!"

"Wait till you look down into the cañon," replied her husband. "In some ways it is more tremendous than the Grand Cañon of the Colorado—the width is so much narrower in proportion to the depth."

"What makes these frightful chasms?—earthquakes?"

"Water," he replied.

"Water? Not all these hundreds and thousands of feet cut down through the solid rock!"

"Every foot," he insisted. "Think of water flowing along in the same bed and

always washing sand and gravel and even boulders downstream—grind, grind, grind, through the centuries and hundreds of centuries.”

“But there is no water here, Tom.”

“Not now, and no chance of any this time of year, else I wouldn’t have brought you in here. A sudden heavy June rain up above there would pour down a torrent that would drown us before we could run three hundred yards. Imagine a flood roaring down that bumpy shoot-the-chutes.”

“I can’t! It’s too terrifying. Is that the way it will be if you get the water and dig the tunnel?”

“No. At this end, the tunnel may terminate any place from down here to a thousand feet up, but in any event far below the top. I hope it proves to be well up. The greater the drop to the level of the mesa, the more turbines could be put in to generate electricity.”

“That sounds so inspiring! But, Dear—” Genevieve looked at her husband with a shade of anxiety—“even if this project is feasible, do you feel you should carry it through?”

“You mean on account of Miss Chuckie and her father,” he replied. “I have considered their side of the matter, and even at the first I saw how—Listen, Sweetheart. No one knows better than you that I’m an engineer to the very marrow of my bones. My work in life is to construct,—to harness the forces of nature and compel them to serve mankind; and to save waste—waste material, waste energy—and put it to use.”

“Don’t I know, Tom!”

“Well, then,” he went on, “in the bottom of Deep Cañon is a river—waste waters down there beyond the reach of this rich but waterless land, down in the gloom, doing no good to anything or anybody, frittering away their energy on barren rocks. Why, it’s as bad as the way Ashton, with all the good qualities we now see he has in him—the way he dissipated his strength and his brains and his father’s money.”

“Ah, Dear! wasn’t it a splendid thing when he was thrown out of his rut of wastefulness?”

“Otherwise known as the primrose path, or the great white way,” added Blake. “It certainly was a throw out. I’m as pleased as I am astonished that he seems to have landed squarely on his feet.”

“What a marvelous change it has made in him!” exclaimed Genevieve. “Sometimes I hardly can believe it really is Lafayette. He is so serious and manly.”

“Good thing he has changed,” replied Blake. “If Miss Chuckie hadn’t told us he had made a clean breast of that bridge, I should begin to feel worried about—Do you know, Sweetheart, it’s the strangest thing in the world the way I feel towards that girl. It’s not because she is so lovely. Of course I enjoy her beauty, but that’s not it. If Tommy were a girl and grown up—that’s how I feel.”

“She is a very dear, sweet girl.”

“So are several of your friends—our friends,” said Blake. “This is different. The very first day we met her, there was something about her voice and face—seemed as though I already knew her.”

“She knew you, through what she had read of you. She warned me, in that frank, charming way of hers, that you were a hero to her and I must not mind if she worshiped you openly.”

Blake laughed pleasedly. “Isn’t she the greatest! And the way she chums with me! Wonder if that is what makes Ashton so sore at me? The idiot! Can’t he see the difference?”

“Lovers always are blind,” said Genevieve.

“I’m not,” he rejoined, his eyes, as he gazed down into hers, as blue and tender as Isobel’s.

The young wife blushed deliciously and rewarded him with a kiss.

“But about Chuckie?” she returned to the previous question. “You were going to tell me—”

“I am going to tell you something you will think is very fanciful—and it is! Do you know why I am so taken with that girl? It’s because she reminds me of my sisters—what they might have grown to be!... God!—” he bent over with his face in his shaking hands—“God! If only they had gone any other way than—the way they did!”

“My poor dear boy!” soothed his wife, her hand on his downbent head. “Let us trust that they are in a happier world, a world where sorrow and pain—”

“If only I could believe that!” he groaned.

Genevieve waited a few moments and with quiet tactfulness sought to divert him

from his grief: "If Chuckie reminds you of them, Dear—"

"She might be either—only Mary, the older one, had dark brown eyes. But Belle's were blue like Chuckie's."

"What a pure blue her eyes are—the sweet true girl! Why can't you regard her as your sister, and—and give over further thought of this irrigation project?"

Blake looked up, completely diverted. "You little schemer! So that's what you've been working around to?"

"But why not?" she insisted.

"I'll tell you. It is because I am so fond of Chuckie that I am determined to get water on Dry Mesa, if it is possible."

"But—"

"To make use of those waste waters," he explained; "to turn this dusty semi-desert into a garden; and to benefit Chuckie by doubling the value of her father's property."

"How could that be, when the farmers would divide up his range?"

"He owns five sections, Chuckie told me. What are they worth now? But with water on them, even without a single tree planted, they would sell as orchard land for more than all his herd; and he would still have his cattle. He could sell them to the settlers for more than what he now gets shipping them over the range."

"I begin to see, Tom. I might have known it."

"I'm telling you, of course. We're to keep it from them as a happy surprise, because it may not come off. There's still the question whether the water in the cañon—"

"But if it is! How delightful it will be to help Mr. Knowles and Chuckie, besides, as you say, turning this desert into a garden!"

"That valley is a natural reservoir site to hold flood waters," continued the engineer. "All that's needed is a dam built across the narrow place above the waterhole, with the dike for foundation. I would build it of rock from the tunnel, run down on a gravity tram."

"You've worked it all out?"

"Not all, only the general scheme. If the tunnel comes through high enough up

here, we shall be able to manufacture cheap electricity to sell. Just think of our settlers plowing by electricity, and their wives cooking on electric stoves.”

“You humorous boy!”

“No, I mean it. There’s another thing—I wouldn’t whisper it even to you if you weren’t my partner as well as my wife. I have reason to believe the creek bed above the dike is a rich placer. I’ve planned to take Knowles and Ashton in on that discovery—Gowan, too, if Knowles asks it.”

“A placer?”

“Yes, placer mine—gold washed down in the creek bed. But it’s a small thing compared with another discovery I’ve made. Up there—” Blake pointed up the steep ledges that he had climbed—“I found a bonanza.”

“Bonanza? What is that, pray?”

“A mint, a John D. bank account, a—Guess?”

“A gold mine! Oh, Tom, how romantic!”

“Yes; it’s free-milling quartz. We can mill it ourselves, and not have to pay tribute to the Smelting Trust. That’s romance—or at least sounds like it. You will pay for all the development work, in return for one-third share. I shall take a third, as the discoverer, and Chuckie gets the remaining third as grub-staker.”

“As what?”

“She is staking us with grub—food and supplies. If she had not sent for me to come and look over the situation, I should not have been here to stumble on this mine. So she gets a share.”

“I’m glad, glad, Tom! Isn’t it nice to be able to do fine things for others? I’m so glad for Chuckie’s sake, because, if Lafayette keeps on as he is doing now, he may win his father’s forgiveness.”

“What has that to do with Chuckie?”

“You and I know what she is, Dear; yet if she had no money, his father might insist on regarding her as a mere farm girl. He is as—as snobbish as I was when we were flung ashore by the storm, there in Mozambique.”

“I fail to see that it matters any to Chuckie what Ashton senior thinks.”

“Of course you don’t see. You’re as blind as when I—” the lady blushed—“as when I had to fling myself at you to make you see. The dear girl is as deeply in

love with Lafayette as he is with her.”

“No? She doesn’t show it. How can you tell?”

“You know that Mr. Gowan is desperately in love with her.”

“That stands to reason. He couldn’t help but be. Can’t say I like the fellow. He may be all right, though. Must have some good qualities—Chuckie seems to be very fond of him.”

“As fond as if he were a brother. No; Lafayette is to be the happy man—unless he backslides. We must help him.”

Blake nodded. “That’s another thing that hangs on this project. If it proves to be feasible, I can give Ashton a chance to make good as an engineer. I used to think he must have bought his C.E. Now I see he has the makings.”

“He can be brilliant when he chooses. If only he were not so—so scatter-brained.”

“What he needed was a jolt heavy enough to shake him together. It seems as though his father gave it to him.”

“That shock, and being picked up by Chuckie,” agreed Genevieve.

“We’ll help her keep him braced until the cement sets,” said her husband. “It’s even worse to let brains go to waste than water.”

“Far worse! What is the good of all your engineering—of all the machinery, yes, and all the culture of civilization, if not to uplift men and women? May the next generation work for the uplifting of all mankind, both materially and spiritually!”

“We might make a try at it ourselves,” said Blake. “As for the future, I know it will not be your fault if our member of the next generation fails to do his share of uplift work.”

The young mother placed her hand on her bosom, and sprang up. “We should be going back, Dear. Thomas will be wakening.”

CHAPTER XX

INDIAN SHOES

They returned along the shadowy bottom of the great gorge to the glaring sunshine of the open creek bed, where they had left the rod and level. Blake placed both upon one of his broad shoulders, and gave his wife the unencumbered arm to assist her somewhat hurried pace.

As they approached the dike her hasty steps quickened to a run. She darted ahead down to the camp. Thomas Herbert Vincent was vociferating for his dinner. Blake followed at a walk. He was only a father.

When he came down to the trees he found Isobel and Ashton alone. The girl's manner was constrained and her color higher than usual. Ashton, comfortably outstretched on a blanket with her saddle for pillow, frowned petulantly at the intruder. But Isobel sprang up and came to meet Blake, unable to conceal her relief.

"I was so glad to see Genevieve," she said. "You came back just in time." 233

"How's that?" asked Blake, his eyes twinkling.

She blushed, but quickly recovered from her confusion to dimple and cast a teasing glance at Ashton. "Baby woke up," she answered. "You may not know it, but babies cry when they fail to get what they want."

"He's getting what he wants—I'm not!" complained Ashton.

"I—I must see if Genevieve needs anything," murmured the girl, and she fled to the tent.

"I need you!" Ashton called after her without avail.

"How're you feeling?" inquired Blake.

Ashton's frown deepened to a scowl.

"Didn't mean how you feel towards me," added Blake. "I can guess that. My reference was to your head."

“I’m all right,” snapped Ashton. “Needn’t worry. I’m still weak and dizzy, but I shall be quite able to do my work tomorrow.”

“That’s fine,” said the engineer, with insistent good humor. “However, if you feel at all shaky in the morning, I can perhaps get Gowan, or maybe Miss Chuckie would like to—”

“No!” broke in Ashton. “She shall not! I will do it, I tell you.”

“Very well,” said Blake. He put down the level and rod, but retained the rifle. “Tell the ladies I shall be back before long. I am going to look for something I forgot this morning.”

Without waiting for the other’s reply, he returned up the dike slope and around the bend of the hill to where Ashton had been shot. That for which he was looking was not here, for he at once turned and started up the hill. He climbed direct to the place where the assassin had lain in wait.

The bare ledge told Blake nothing, but from a crevice nearby he picked out two long thirty-eight caliber rifle shells. He put them into his pocket and went over to scan the mesa from the top of his lookout crag. He could see no sign of the fugitive murderer. Down below the mesa side of the hill, however, he saw a man riding up the bank of Dry Fork, and recognized him as Knowles.

Trained to alert observation by years of life on the range, the cowman had already perceived Blake. He wheeled aside and rode towards the hill when the engineer waved his hat and began to descend. The two met at the foot of the rugged slope.

“Howdy, Mr. Blake,” greeted the cowman, “I thought I’d just ride up to see how things are coming along.”

“Not so fast as they might, Mr. Knowles. We have stopped for repairs.”

“Haven’t broken your level?”

“No. Ashton is laid up for the day with a scalp wound. We were shot at this morning from up there—other side of the crest.”

“Shot at, and Lafe hit?”

“Not seriously, though it could not well have been a closer shave. He says he will be all right by tomorrow,” said Blake, and he gave the bald details of the occurrence in a few words.

Knowles listened without comment, his leathery face stolid, but his eyes

glinting. When Blake had finished, he remarked shortly: "Must be the same man. Let's see those shells."

Blake handed over the two empty cartridge shells.

"Thirty-eight," confirmed Knowles. "Same as were fired at Lafe before. Kid and Chuckie showed me how a thirty-eight fitted the hole in Lafe's silver flask. About where did the snake crawl down the hill?"

"Not far from here. He could not have gone any considerable distance along the top or side. He was down and riding away when I reached the crags, and I had not lost much time coming up the other side."

"It'll take an Indian to make out his tracks on this dry ground," remarked the cowman. "We'll try a look, though, at his hawss's hoof prints. Just keep behind, if you don't mind."

He threw the reins over the head of his horse, and dismounted, to walk slowly along the more level ground at the foot of the slope. Blake followed, as he had requested, but scrutinizing the ground with a gaze no less keenly observant than that of his companion.

"Mighty queer," said Knowles, after they had carried their examination over a hundred yards. "Either he came down more slanting or else—"

"What do you make of this?" Blake interrupted, bending over a blurred round print in the dust between two grass tufts.

"*Sho!*" exclaimed the cowman as he peered at the mark. "That's why, of course."

"Indian shoes," said Blake.

"You've seen a thing or two. You're no tenderfoot," remarked Knowles.

"I have myself shrunk rawhide shoes on horses' hoofs when short of iron shoes," Blake explained. "This would make a hard trail to run down without hounds."

The cowman straightened and looked at his companion, his weather-beaten face set in quiet resolve.

"I know what's better than hounds," he said. "This is one badman who has played his game once too often. I'm going to run him down if it takes all year and all the men in the county. There's a couple of Ute bucks being held in the jail at Stockchute, to be tried for hunting deer. I'm going to get the loan of them. The sheriff will turn out with a posse, and we'll trail that snake, if it takes us clear over into Utah."

“We’ll have a fair chance to get him with Ute trackers,” agreed Blake.

Knowles shook his head. “Unless you’re particular to come along, Mr. Blake, I’d like you and Lafe to keep on with this survey. I’ve been worrying over the chance of losing my range, till it’s got on my nerves.”

“Certainly, Mr. Knowles. I shall go ahead in the morning, if Ashton is able to rod. It will be best, I suppose, for my wife and Miss Chuckie to remain close at the ranch until you make sure where this trail leads.”

“No; he’s a snake, but the Indian shoes prove he’s Western—He won’t strike at the ladies. Another thing, I’m going to give you Kid for guard.”

“He may prefer to join the posse.”

“Of course he’ll prefer that. You can count on Kid Gowan when it comes to a man hunt. He’ll stay, though, all right. I don’t want Mrs. Blake to think she has to stop indoors. With Kid on the lookout around your camp, the ladies can feel free to come and go any time between sunup and sundown, and you and Lafe can do what you want. There won’t be any more shooting, unless it’s by Kid.”

“Very well,” said Blake. “I’m not anxious to play hide and seek with a man who shoots and runs. When can we expect the rope and spikes?”

“That’s another thing,” replied Knowles. “Kid can be packing them and your camp outfit up to the cañon while you and Lafe are running your line of levels. He ought to be home by now. He was gone when the men turned out this morning. Soon as I get back I’ll send him up to camp with you. He can bring along Rocket, to be ready for a chase, providing we can find the brute. Queer about that hawss. Wanted to ride him this morning. Found he’d got out and gone off the way he used to before Lafe gentled him.”

While talking, the two men had returned to the cowman’s horse and started around the hill to the camp. They found Isobel and Genevieve and the baby all engaged in entertaining Ashton. Knowles briefly congratulated the wounded man, and led his pony down to the pool for a drink. Blake had seated himself beside his wife. She handed the baby to him, and remarking that she also wished to drink, she followed Knowles.

The cowman smiled at her reassuringly. “You’re not afraid of any more shooting, ma’am, are you?” he asked. “I’ve told your husband that Kid is to come up to keep guard. He will stay right along, unless that scoundrel is trailed down sooner.”

“Then I shall have no fear, Mr. Knowles.”

“You needn’t, and you and Chuckie can come and go just the same as ever. I don’t want your visit spoiled. It’s a great treat to all of us to have you with us.”

“And to my husband and myself to be your guests! I have quite fallen in love with your daughter, Mr. Knowles. If you’ll permit me to say it, you are very fortunate to have so lovely and lovable a girl.”

“Don’t I know it, ma’am!”

“So beautiful—and her character as beautiful as her face. How you must prize her!”

“Prize her!” repeated Knowles, his usual stolid face aglow with pride and tenderness. “Why, ma’am, I couldn’t hold her more in liking if she was my own flesh and blood!”

Genevieve suddenly bent down to hide the intense emotion that had struck the color from her face. Yet after a moment’s pause, she spoke in a composed, almost casual tone: “Then Chuckie is not your own daughter?”

“Not in the way you mean. Hasn’t she told you? I adopted her.”

“I see,” remarked Genevieve, with a show of polite interest. “But of course, taking her when a young infant, she has always thought of you as her own father.”

“No—what I can’t get over is that she feels that way, and I feel the same to her, though I never saw or heard of her till she was going on fourteen.”

“Ah!” Genevieve could no longer suppress her agitation. “Then she is—I’m sure that she must be—You said she came from the East, from Chicago?”

“No, ma’am! I didn’t say where she came from,” curtly replied the cowman.

The shock of his brusqueness restored the lady to her usual quiet composure. Looking up into his face, she found it as blank and impenetrable as a cement wall.

“You must pardon me,” she murmured. “I myself am a Chicago girl, so you must see how natural it is for me to hope that so sweet and beautiful a girl as Chuckie came from my city.”

“Chuckie is my daughter,” stated Knowles in a flat tone.

“If you will kindly permit me to explain. My husband—”

“Chuckie is my daughter, legally adopted,” repeated the cowman. “You can see what she is like. If that is not enough, ma’am, I can’t prevent you from declining our hospitality, though we’d be mighty sorry to have you and your husband leave.”

The tears started into Genevieve’s hazel eyes. “Mr. Knowles! how could you think for a moment that I—that we—”

“Excuse me, ma’am!” he hastened to apologize. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. You see, I’m kind of prejudiced along some lines. I’ve been bred up to the Western idea that it isn’t just etiquette to ask about people’s antecedents. Real Western, I mean. Our city folks are nearly as bad as you Easterners over family trees. As if a child isn’t as much descended from its mother’s maternal grandmother as from its father’s paternal grandfather!”

Genevieve smiled at this adroit diversion of the subject by the seemingly simple Westerner, and replied: “My father’s and mother’s parents were farm people. My husband worked his way up out of the Chicago slums.”

“He did?” The cowman could not conceal his astonishment. He looked curiously into the lady’s high-bred face. “Well, now, that sure is something to be right proud of—not that I’d have exactly expected you to think so. If you’ll excuse me, ma’am, I’m more surprised at the way you feel about it than that he was able to do such a big thing.”

“No one is responsible for what he is born. But we are at least partly entitled to the credit or discredit of what we become,” she observed.

“That’s good American doctrine, ma’am—Western American!” approved Knowles.

“It should apply to women as well as men,” she stated.

“It ought,” he dryly replied, and he jerked up the head of his pawing horse. “Here, you! I guess it’s high time we were starting in, ma’am. Kid may think he’s to lay over at the ranch until morning. We want to get him out here before dusk. I don’t reckon there’s any show of that snake coming back tonight, but it’s as well to be on the safe side.”

He walked up the slope towards the others, unbuckling his cartridge belt as he went.

“Sling on your saddle, honey,” he called to his daughter.

The girl sprang up from beside Ashton and ran to fetch her own and Genevieve’s

picketed ponies. Her father held out his belt and revolver to the engineer.

“Here’s my Colt’s, Mr. Blake,” he said. “I have another at home. You won’t need it, but I may as well leave it. We’re going to lope in now, so as to hustle Kid out to you before night. Just swap me that yearling for my gun. It wouldn’t seem natural not to be toting something that can make a noise.”

“Thomas never cries unless he needs attention,” Genevieve sought to defend her infant.

“Yes, ma’am. It’s a good thing he knows that much already. You have to make yourself heard to get what you want in the world generally, as well as in hostleries and eating-houses.”

Blake buckled on the cartridge belt, with its holstered revolver, and went to help saddle the ponies. Ashton watched him and Isobel narrowly. He was far from pleased with the familiarity of their talk and manner towards one another. Twice the girl put her hand on Blake’s arm.

In marked contrast to this affectionate intimacy, Isobel was distraught and hurried when she came to take leave of the wounded man. He had risen to his feet, and she could not ignore his proffered hand. But she avoided his gaze and quickly withdrew her fingers from his warm clasp to hurry off.

CHAPTER XXI

MADONNA DOLOROSA

Blake was cooking supper when, shortly before sunset, Gowan drove up to the waterhole, with a pony in lead behind the heavy wagon. Leaving the wagon with the rope and other articles of his load on the far side of the creek bed, he watered and picketed the horses, and came across to the tent with his rifle and a roll of blankets.

“Howdy, Mr. Blake. Got here in time for supper, I see,” he remarked as he unburdened himself. “Met Mr. Knowles and the ladies down near the ranch. They told me about the shooting.” He faced about to stare at Ashton’s bandaged head. “They told me you came mighty near getting yours. You shore are a lucky tenderfoot.”

Ashton shrugged superciliously. “The worst of it is the additional hole in my hat. I see you have a new one. Is that the latest style on the range?”

“Stetson, brand A-1.,” replied the puncher. “How does it strike you, Mr. Blake?—and my new shirt? Having a dude puncher on our range kind of stirred up my emulosity. They don’t have real cowboy attire like his at an ordinary shorthorn cow town like Stockchute—but I did the best I could.”

Blake made no response to this heavy badinage. He set the supper on the chuck-box, and laconically said: “Come and get it.”

“Might have known you’ve been on round-up,” remarked Gowan, with an insistent sociability oddly at variance with his usual taciturn reserve. “According to Miss Chuckie, you’re some rider, and according to Mr. Knowles, you can shoot. I wouldn’t mind hearing from you direct about that shooting this morning.”

Blake recounted the affair still more briefly than he had told it to Knowles.

“That shore was a mighty close shave,” commented the puncher. “But you haven’t said what the fellow looked like.”

“He wore ordinary range clothes,” replied Blake. “I couldn’t see him behind the rocks, and caught only a glimpse of him as he went around the ridge. His horse was much the same build and color as Rocket.”

The puncher stared at Ashton with his cold unblinking eyes. “You shore picked out a Jim Dandy guide, Mr. Tenderfoot. According to this, it looks mighty like he’s gone and turned hawss thief. Mr. Knowles says your Rocket hawss has vamoosed. If he’s moving to Utah under your ex-guide, it’ll take some lively posse to head him. What d’you say, Mr. Blake?”

“I think the man is apt soon to come to the end of his rope—after dropping through a trap door,” said the engineer.

Gowan looked at him between narrowed eyelids, and paused with upraised coffee cup to reply: “A man that has shown the nerve this one has won’t let anyone get close enough to rope him.”

“It will be either that or a bullet, before long,” predicted Blake. “The badman is getting to be rather out of date.”

“Maybe a bullet,” admitted Gowan. “Never any rope, though, for his kind.—Guess I’ll turn in. It’s something of a drive over to Stockchute and back with the wagon, and I got up early. You and Ashton might go on watch until midnight, and turn me out for the rest of the night.”

“Very well,” agreed Blake.

The puncher stretched out on his blankets under a tree, a few yards from the tent. Ashton took the dishes down to sand-scour them at the pool, while Blake saw that everything damageable was disposed safe from the knife-like fangs of the coyotes.

“How about keeping watch?” asked Ashton, when he returned with the cleansed dishes. “Shall I take first or second?”

“Neither,” answered Blake. “You will need all the sleep and rest you can get. Tomorrow may be a hard day. Turn in at once.”

“If you insist,” acquiesced Ashton. “I still am rather weak and dizzy.” He went to the tent and disappeared.

Blake took the lantern and strolled across to the wagon, to look at the numerous articles brought by Gowan. He set the lantern over in the wagon bed on top of what seemed to be a heap of empty oat sacks, while he overhauled the load. It included three coils of rope of a hundred feet each, a keg of railroad spikes, two

dozen picket-pins, two heavy hammers, a pick and shovel, and a crowbar.

The last three articles had not been ordered by Blake. The puncher had brought them along, apparently with a hazy idea that the descent of the cañon would be something on the order of mining. There were also in the wagon two five-gallon kerosene cans to use in carrying water up the mountain, a sack of oats, Gowan's saddle, and two packsaddles.

In shifting one of the packsaddles to get at the hammers, Blake knocked it against the sack on which the lantern had been set. The lantern suddenly fell over on its side. Blake reached in to pick it up, and perceived that the sack was rising in a mound. He caught up one of the hammers, and held it poised for a stroke. From the sack came a muffled rattle. The hammer descended in a smashing blow.

The sack rose and fell as if something under it was squirming about convulsively. But to Blake's surprise it did not fall aside and disclose that which was making the violent movement. The squirming lessened. He grasped an outer corner of the sack and jerked it upward. It failed to flip into the air. The lower part sagged heavily. The squirmer was inside and—the mouth of the sack was tied fast.

Blake looked at it thoughtfully. After some moments, he placed the sack where it had lain at first, and upset the keg of spikes on top of it. He then carefully examined Gowan's saddle; but it told him nothing. He shook his head doubtfully, and returned to camp.

Going quietly around to Gowan, he set down the lantern close before the puncher's face and stopped to light a cigar. Gowan stirred restlessly and rolled half over, but did not open his eyes. Blake smoked his cigar, extinguished the lantern, and quietly stretched out on the edge of the sleeper's blankets. In a few moments he, too, was asleep.

About two o'clock Gowan stirred and rolled over, pulling at his blankets. Instantly Blake was wide awake. The puncher mumbled, drew the blankets closer about him, and lay quiet. Blake went into the tent and dozed on his own blankets until roused by the chill of dawn. He went down for a plunge in the pool, and was dressed and back at the fireplace, cooking breakfast, when Gowan started up out of his heavy slumber.

"Yes, it's getting along about that time," Blake called to him cheerfully. "You might turn out Ashton. He has made as good a night of it as you have."

Gowan had been staring at the dawn, his lean jaw slack. As Blake spoke, he snapped his mouth shut and came over to confront the engineer. "You agreed to call me at midnight," he said.

"My apology!" politely replied Blake. "I know how you must feel about it. But I hope you will excuse me. I saw that you, like Ashton, needed a full night's sleep, and so did not disturb you."

The puncher looked away and muttered: "I'm responsible for you to Mr. Knowles. He sent me here to guard you."

"That is true. Of course you will say it's owing to no fault of mine that we have come through the night safely. Well, we have a big day's work before us. May I ask you to call Ashton? Breakfast is ready."

At this the puncher sullenly went to rouse the sleeper. Ashton came out rubbing his eyes; but after a dip in the pool, he declared himself restored by his long sleep and ready for a day's work. During the night his bandage had come loose. He would have tossed it away, but Blake insisted upon re-dressing the wound. He did so with as much skill and almost as much gentleness as had his wife.

When Blake and Ashton left the camp, the puncher was leading the horses across to load their first packs. The two levelmen walked briskly up the valley, carrying only enough food and water to last themselves until evening, when Gowan was to have the camp moved to the top of High Mesa.

Beginning from his bench-mark at the foot of the mountain, Blake carried the level line slantingly up the ridge side. The work was slow and tedious, since the telescope of the level could never be on a horizontal line either higher or lower respectively than the top and bottom of the thirteen-foot rod. This necessitated setting-up the instrument every few feet during the steepest part of the ascent.

They saw nothing of Gowan, who had chosen a more roundabout but easier trail. At midmorning, however, they were overtaken by Genevieve and Isobel and Thomas Herbert Vincent Leslie Blake. Knowles had started for Stockchute to seek the aid of the sheriff and his Indian prisoners. The ladies divided the ascent into several stages, riding ahead of the surveyors and resting in the shade of a rock or pine until the men had passed them.

Near noon, when the levels had been carried up close to the top of High Mesa, Gowan rode down to the party to inquire where the new camp was to be pitched.

"I've brought up a lot this trip," he stated. "I can fetch the rest by sundown, if I don't have to meander all over the mesa with these first packs."

“Where did you leave the packhorses?” asked Blake.

“Up along the cañon where Ashton shot his yearling deer,” answered the puncher. “It’s about half way between that gulch where you say you’re going down and the bend across from the head of Dry Fork Gulch.”

“We’ll camp there,” decided Blake. “It is on the shortest trail to that gulch, and you’ll not have time to get your second load farther before dark.”

The puncher started back. But Isobel, who had come riding up with Genevieve, called out to stop him: “Wait, Kid. It is almost noon. You must take lunch with us.”

“Can’t leave those hawsses standing with the packs, Miss Chuckie, if they’re to make another trip today,” he replied.

“Suppose you unload them and come back along the edge of the cañon?” suggested Blake. “We shall knock off soon and all go over to give my wife her first look at the cañon. We can eat lunch there together.”

To this Gowan nodded a willing assent, and he jogged away, with a half smile on his thin lips. But that which pleased him had precisely the opposite effect on Ashton. He did not fancy sharing the companionship and attention of Miss Knowles with the puncher. As this interference with his happiness was due to Blake, he showed a petulant resentment towards the engineer that won him the girl’s sympathetic concern. She attributed his fretfulness to his wound. Blake made the same mistake.

“You’ve done quite enough for the morning, Ashton, with that head of yours,” he said. “We’re over the worst now, and can easily run on up to the camp this afternoon. We shall knock off for a siesta.”

“Needn’t try to make out I’m a baby!” snapped Ashton.

“Leave your rod here,” went on Blake, disregarding the other’s irascibility. “I’ll take the level. It may enable us to see the bottom of the cañon.”

He started on up the slope beside his wife’s pony. Ashton was somewhat mollified when he saw Isobel linger for him to walk beside her horse. She was carrying the baby, who, regardless of scenic attractions, had fallen asleep during the long climb from the lower mesa. The sight of the child clasped to her bosom awakened all that was highest in his nature. Concern over his wound had sobered her usual gay vivacity to a look of motherly tenderness.

“Do you know,” he murmured during a pause in their conversation, “you make

me think of pictures of the Madonna!”

“Lafe!” she protested, blushing and as quickly paling. “You should not say such a thing. It is lovely—a beautiful thing to tell me; but—but I do not deserve it!”

“Madonna!—my Madonna!” he murmured in ardent adoration.

“Oh, please! when I’ve asked you not to!” she implored. “It is not right! I—I am not!—” Tears glistened in her soft eyes. She bent over to suppress a sob that might have awakened the sleeping infant.

Ashton gazed up at her, wonder and contrition mingling with his deepening adoration. “Forgive me, Miss Chuckie! But I meant it—I feel it! I never before felt this way towards any girl!... I know I have no right to say anything now. I am a penniless adventurer, a disgraced, disinherited son, a mere cowpuncher apprentice; but if, by next spring, I shall have—”

“Oh, see. They’re getting such a long way ahead of us!” exclaimed the girl, urging her pony to a faster gait.

The animal started forward with a suddenness that left Ashton behind. He made no effort to regain his position beside the girl’s stirrup. Instead, he lagged farther and farther in the rear, his face crimson with mortification and anger. As his chagrin deepened, his flush became almost feverish and there was a suggestion of wildness in his flashing eyes. It was as though his passion was intensifying some injury to his brain caused by the concussion of the bullet on his skull.

CHAPTER XXII

A REAL WOLF

When the loiterer came over the second ridge into view of the booming chasm in the top of the plateau, he saw the others down near the brink. The baby had been laid on a soft bed of pine needles, and Blake was leading the ladies down to look over into the abyss, one on each arm.

Ashton's chagrin flared into jealous hate. He felt certain that the girl was quite capable of strolling along the extreme edge of the precipice without a trace of giddiness. Yet now she was clinging to Blake even more closely than was Genevieve. There was more than apprehension in the clasp of her little brown hand on the engineer's shoulder. Her cheek brushed his sleeve.

The anger of the onlooker was so intense that he did not see Gowan riding towards him from the left. The puncher dismounted and came forward, his cold gaze fixed on Ashton's face.

"So you're beginning to savvy it, too," he remarked.

Ashton confronted him, vainly attempting to mask his telltale look and color with a show of hauteur. "I never discuss personal matters with acquaintances of your stamp," he said.

"That's too bad," coolly deplored Gowan. "Maybe you've heard the saying about cutting off your nose to spite your face."

"What do you mean?"

"If you want to go it alone, I can't stop you," replied the puncher. "Needn't think I'm sucking around you for any favors or friendship. If this was my range, I would run you off it so fast you'd reach Stockchute with your tongue hanging out like a dog's. That's how much I like you."

"The feeling is fully reciprocated, I assure you," rejoined Ashton.

"All right. Now what're we going to do about him?—each play a lone hand, or make it pardners for this deal?"

“I—fail to understand,” hesitated Ashton.

“No, you don’t,” jeeringly contradicted the puncher. “It’s a three-cornered fight. You see it now, even if you have been too big a fool to see it before. We can settle ours after. But I’m free to own up to it that you’re a striped skunk if you won’t work with me first to get rid of him. Look at him now—and him married!”

Ashton’s flush deepened to purple. “Married!—yes, married!” he choked out.

“Right alongside his wife, too!” Gowan thrust the goad deeper. “You’d think even that brand of skunk would have more decency. Not that his wife is any friend of mine, like she is yours. But for a man with such a wife and baby ... with Miss Chuckie! The—”

Gowan ended with a string of oaths so virulent that even Ashton’s half-mad anger was checked.

“You may be—er—I fear that we—Perhaps it’s not so bad as it appears!” he stammered.

“Bah!” disgustedly sneered the puncher, and he strode on ahead, leaving Ashton torn between rage and doubt and terror of his own furious jealousy.

The others continued to stand on a flat ledge that here formed the lip of the cañon. Genevieve was trembling with awed delight. Her husband and the girl appeared more calm, but they were drinking in the grandeur of the tremendous gorge below them with no less intense appreciation of its gloomy vastness.

Upstream, to their left, the precipices jutted so far out from each wall of the cañon that they overlapped, a thousand or fifteen hundred feet from the top. But downstream the upper part of the chasm flared to a width that permitted the noonday sun to penetrate part way down through the blue-black shadows.

“O-o-o-oh!” sighed Genevieve, for the tenth time, and she clung tighter than ever to the strong arm of her husband. “Isn’t it fearfully, fearfully delightful? It makes the soles of my feet tingle to look at it!”

“That tickly feeling!” exclaimed Isobel. “I often ride up here to the cañon, I do so love to feel that way! Only with me it’s like ants crawling up and down my back.”

“O-o-o-oh!” again sighed Genevieve. “It—it so overpowers one!”

“It’s sure some cañon,” admitted her husband. “That French artist Doré ought to have seen it.”

“If only we had a copy of Dante’s *Inferno* to read here on the brink!” she whispered.

“It always reminds me of Coleridge’s poem,” murmured Isobel, and she quoted in an awed whisper:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man,
Down to the sunless sea.

“Fortunately for us, this is a cañon, not a string of measureless caverns,” said Blake. “It can be measured, one way or another. If I had a transit, I could calculate the depth at any point where the water shows—triangulate with a vertical angle. But it would cause a long delay to send on for a transit. We shall first try to chain down at that gulch break.”

Genevieve shrank back from the verge of the precipice and drew the others after her.

“Dear!” she exclaimed, “I did not dream it was so fearful. One has to see to realize! You will not go down—promise me you will not go down!”

“Now, now, little woman,” reproached Blake. “What’s become of my partner?”

“But baby—? If you should leave him fatherless!”

“Better that than for him to have a father who is a quitter! Just wait, Sweetheart. That break looks much less overwhelming than these sheer cliffs. You know I shall not attempt anything foolhardy. If it is not possible to get down without too great risk, I shall give it up and send for a transit.”

“Oh, will you?” exclaimed Isobel, hardly less apprehensive than his wife. “Why not wait anyway until you can send for your transit?”

“Because I cannot triangulate the bottom within half a mile upstream from where the tunnel would have to be located. That roar and the wildness of the water wherever we can see it is proof that it is flowing down a heavy grade. At the point where I triangulated it might be above the level of Dry Mesa, and way below the mesa here at the tunnel site.”

“You could triangulate at the first place where the bottom can be seen, beyond here,” suggested Genevieve.

“Suppose it proved to be lower than Dry Mesa, wouldn’t that still leave us up in the air?” he asked. “Like this—”

He pulled out his notebook and drew a rough sketch.

“I see, Dear,” said his wife. “When do you plan to go down?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Can you wait until we come up from the ranch?”

“Yes. Mr. Knowles will no doubt be back by then. He can bring you out early.”

“We shall come early, anyway,” said Isobel.

“Of course!” added Genevieve. She drew a deep breath. “I shall see the place before you attempt to descend.”

Her husband nodded reassuringly and looked around to where Gowan and Ashton stood waiting, several yards from one another.

“About lunch time, isn’t it?” he remarked. “Mr. Gowan will wish to be starting soon to bring up his second load.”

At the suggestion, the ladies hastened to spread out their own lunch and the one brought by Blake. When called by Isobel, Gowan came forward to join the party, with rather less than his usual reserve in his speech and manner.

Ashton was the last to seat himself on the springy cushion of brown pine needles, and he sat throughout the meal in moody silence. Blake and the ladies attributed this to the fatigue of working through the long hot morning while suffering from his unhealed wound. He repulsed the sympathetic attentions of the Blakes. But he could not long continue to resist the kindly concern of the girl. After lunch she made him lie down in the shade while she bathed his wound with a good part of the small supply of water remaining in the canteens.

Gowan had been asking questions about the work. Blake explained at some length why he considered it necessary not only to descend into the cañon but to carry the line of levels down along the bed of the subterranean stream to this point opposite Dry Fork Gulch. When Isobel drew apart with Ashton the puncher did not look at them, though his eyes narrowed to slits and his mouth straightened.

“You shore have nerve to tackle it, Mr. Blake,” he commented. “Everything alive

that I know of that's ever gone down into Deep Cañon hasn't ever come up again, except it had wings."

"We'll prove that the rule has an exception," replied Blake, smiling away the reawakened apprehension of his wife.

Gowan shook his head doubtfully, and strolled down the slope to peer into the cañon. The level was directly in his path, set up firmly on its tripod, about six feet from the brink. The puncher stopped beside it to squint through the telescope.

"You'll have one—peach of a time seeing anything through this contraption down there," he remarked. "I can't see even right here in the sun."

"The telescope is out of focus," explained Blake. "Turn that screw on the side." Gowan twisted a protruding thumbscrew. "Not that—the one above it," directed Blake.

"Can't stop to fool now," replied the puncher. "I've got to hustle along."

He started hastily around between the level and the precipice. The toe of his boot struck hard against the iron toe of the outer tripod-leg. He stumbled and sprawled forward on his hands and knees. Behind him the instrument toppled over towards the brink.

Genevieve cried out in alarm at Gowan's fall. Her husband sprang to the rescue—not of the puncher, but of the level. It had crashed down with its head to the chasm, and was sliding out over the brink. Blake barely caught it by the tip of one of the legs as it swung up for the plunge. He drew it back and set it up to see what damage had been done to the head. Gowan watched him, tight-lipped.

"This is luck!" exclaimed the engineer, after a swift examination. "Nothing broken—only knocked out of adjustment. I can fix that in half an hour. She struck with the telescope turned sideways. You must have set the clamp screw."

The puncher's face darkened. "Wish the—infernal machine had gone plumb down to hell!" he growled. "It came near tripping me over the edge."

"My apology," said Blake. "I spraddled the tripod purposely to keep it from being upset."

"Oh, Kid, you've hurt yourself," called Isobel, as the puncher began to wrap a kerchief about his hand. "Come here and let me bandage it."

"No," he replied. "Two babies are enough for you to coddle at one time. I've got

to hit out.”

He turned his back on Blake and hurried up to his horse. The engineer followed as far as the nearest tree, where he set up the instrument in the shade and began to adjust it.

“Good thing she has platinum crosshairs,” he said to Ashton. “A fall like that would have been certain to break the old-style spiderweb hairs.”

Ashton did not reply. He was absorbed in a murmured conversation with Isobel. Blake completed the adjustments of the level and stretched out beside his wife to play with his gurgling son. A half hour of this completed the two hours that he had set apart for the noon rest. He placed the baby back in his wife’s lap and stood up to stretch his powerful frame.

“How about it, Ashton?” he inquired. “Think you feel fit to rod this afternoon? Don’t hesitate to say no, if that’s the right answer. I expect my wife and Miss Chuckie, between them, can help me carry the line as far as the camp.”

“I can do it alone,” interposed the girl. “Let them both stay here and rest all afternoon.”

“No, Miss Chuckie. I can and shall do my work,” insisted Ashton, springing up with unexpected briskness for one who had appeared so fatigued. “It is you and Mrs. Blake who must stay here to rest—unless you wish to keep us company.”

“Might we not go to the new camp and put it in order?” suggested Genevieve.

“What if that outlaw should come sneaking back?” objected Ashton. “It seems to me you should keep with us.”

“He would not trouble us,” replied Isobel.

“Yet if he should? Anyway, Blake and I saw a wolf up here the other day.”

“A real wolf! Where?”

“Yes,” answered Blake. “Over in the ravine the other side of the head of Dry Fork Gulch.”

“He may attack you,” argued Ashton.

The girl laughed. “You’re still a tenderfoot to think a wolf wouldn’t know better than that. Wish he didn’t! It would mean the saving of a half dozen calves this winter.” She flashed out her long-barreled automatic pistol and knocked a cone from the tree above Blake’s head with a swiftly aimed shot.

Blake caught the cone as it fell and looked at the bullet hole through its center. "Unless that was an accident, I should call it some shooting," he remarked.

"Accident!" she called back. "Stand sideways and see what happens to your cigar."

"No, thanks. I'll take your word for it. Just lit this one, and I've only a few left. By by, Tommy! Don't let the wolves eat mamma and the poor little cowlady!"

He picked up the level and started off at a swinging stride. Ashton followed several paces behind. His face was sullen and heavy, but in their merriment over Blake's banter, the ladies failed to observe his expression.

They rested for a while longer. Then, after venturing down for another awed look into the abyss, they rode along, parallel with the stupendous rift, to the place selected for the new camp. As Gowan had brought up the tent in one of the first packs, the ladies pitched it on the level top of the ridge.

"This is real camping!" delightedly exclaimed Genevieve, as they set to gathering leafy twigs for bedding and dry branches for fuel. "How I wish we could stay all night!"

"We can, if you wish," replied Isobel.

"Can we, really?"

"Our men often sleep out in the open, this time of year. We shall take the tent for ourselves. Won't it be fun! But will Thomas be all right?"

"I can manage with what I have until tomorrow afternoon."

"How long do you think they will be down in the cañon?" the girl inquired.

Genevieve shuddered. "I wish I could tell! If only Tom finds that he cannot get down at all, how thankful I shall be!"

"And—Lafe!" murmured the girl.

"It is possible that they may be unable to do it in one day," went on Genevieve apprehensively—"Down, down into those dreadful depths, and then along the river, all the way to where the tunnel is to be, and back again, and then up the awful cliffs! Surely they cannot finish in one day! Of course they will succeed—Tom can do anything, *anything*! Yet how I dread the very thought—!"

"We must prepare to stay right here on High Mesa until they do finish!" declared Isobel. "It will be impossible to go back to the ranch tomorrow if they are still in that frightful place! Kid will have to take the hawsses down to the waterhole. He

shall go on home, and tomorrow morning fetch us cream and eggs and everything you need. They will have to be told at the ranch; and if Daddy has returned, he will come up to help and be with us.”

“You dear girl! The more I think of this terrible descent, the more I dread it. I feel a presentiment that—But I must try to be brave and not interfere with Tom’s work! It will be a great comfort to have your father with us.”

“Daddy will surely come if he has returned. Isn’t he kind and good? He couldn’t have done more to make me happy if he had been my own real father!”

Genevieve smiled into the girl’s glowing face. “Yes, dear. Yet I am far from surprised, since *you* are the daughter he wished to make happy. I was more surprised to have him tell me you were adopted. You have never said a word about it.”

“I—you see, I did not happen to,” confusedly murmured the girl.

“Chuckie Knowles is not your real name,” Genevieve gently reproached her.

“No, it is the pet name Daddy gave me. My real one is—Isobel.”

“Isobel—?”

“Yes. Daddy’s sister, in Denver, always calls me that. But here on the ranch—”

“Isobel—?” repeated Genevieve, with a rising inflection.

The color ebbed from the girl’s face, but she answered steadily: “Chuckie—Isobel—Knowles. I am Daddy’s daughter. I have no other father.”

“Is-o-bel—Is-o-bel,” Genevieve intoned the name musically. “It has a beautiful sound. I had a friend at school—Isabella—but we always called her Belle.”

The girl suddenly faced away from her companion, and darted to meet Blake and Ashton, who were bringing the line of levels up over the ridge.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE TEMPTATION

When the ladies explained their plans for remaining in camp on High Mesa, Blake gave a ready assent.

“All right, Jenny. It’ll be something like old times. Can’t scare you up any lions or fever, leopards or cyclones; but you may see that wolf.”

“I should welcome all savage Africa if it would rid us of this awful cañon!” replied his wife.

“Won’t you please give it up?” begged Isobel. “I am to blame for your coming here. If anything should happen to you, I—I could never forgive myself—never!”

Blake looked at the two lovely, anxious faces before him, and smiled gravely. “There you go again, and you have yet to see that gulch. But even if you find that it looks dangerous, you wouldn’t want me to let a little risk interfere with my work, would you? Think of the fools who climb the highest and steepest mountains just for sport. I am going down there because it is necessary.”

“But is it?” the girl half sobbed.

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“Someone must do it, sooner or later,” he replied, and he took his wife’s hand in his big palm. “Come, little woman, speak up. Do you want your husband to be a shirker and quitter?”

“Of course not, Tom. Yet one should be reasonable.”

“I have had enough experience in climbing to know not to attempt the impossible, Sweetheart,” he assured her. “The worst looking places are not always the most dangerous. I promise you to take only reasonable risks.”

“Have we time enough to look at the place this afternoon?” she inquired.

Blake glanced at the sun, and nodded. “The riding is good. We can get back long before dark. Ashton, you had better stretch out and rest.”

“No, I shall go with you,” replied Ashton, his lips set in as firm lines as Blake’s.

“You cannot go, Lafe, unless you agree to ride my pony,” said Isobel.

“I’m not going to have Gowan call me a baby again,” he objected.

“You will need all your strength tomorrow,” predicted Blake.

“You must ride,” insisted Isobel.

“Very well—to please you,” he agreed. “We shall take turns.”

Blake again looked at the sun. “As long as we are going, we may as well carry forward the line of levels. We can take long turns nearly all the way, so there will be little delay.”

“And I shall rod for you!” delightedly exclaimed Isobel.

“Only part of the time,” qualified Ashton with a sharpness that the others attributed to his zeal to serve her.

He filled his canteen from one of the cans of water brought up by Gowan, and rinsed out the mouths and nostrils of the thirsty ponies. This done, he and Genevieve mounted, and the party started off on a route parallel with the cañon, which here trended back away from the edge of the plateau.

They soon came to where the surface of the mesa was slashed with gulleys and ravines, all running down into the cañon. Blake swung away from the cañon, in order to head the worst of these ravines or to cross them where they were less precipitous. Presently, however, he struck in again towards the great rift along the flank of a high barren ridge. At last he led over the ridge and down to the side of a very large ravine where it pitched into the cañon at an angle little less steep than the descent of Dry Fork Gulch.

The line of levels, as Blake had foretold, had been an easy one to run. It was stopped on the corner of a shelf of rock that jutted out above the gorge. Having provided a soft nest for the baby, the four went out on the shelf and peered down the dizzy slope into the black shadows of the depths.

The two ladies drew back shuddering. Blake looked about at them and seeing their troubled faces, sought to quiet their dread.

“You have not looked close enough,” he said. “With spikes and ropes, the worst of this will be comparatively easy. There are ledges and crevices all the way down. You cannot see the lower half. When I was here with Gowan and Mr. Knowles, the sun was shining to the bottom. The lower half of the descent is

much less steep than this you see.”

Genevieve smiled trustfully. “Oh, if you say it is safe, Tom!”

“We shall take down the rope and all the spikes we can carry,” he explained in further reassurance. “At the worst places a spike and a piece of the rope will not only let us down safely, but can be left for our ascent.”

“Then it will be all right!” sighed Isobel.

“For him—yes!” broke in Ashton, his voice harsh and strained. He was cringing back, white-faced, from the edge of the gulch.

“Why, Lafe!” exclaimed the girl. “If Tom—Mr. Blake goes down, surely you can’t mean that you—”

“He’s used to climbing—I’m not!” Ashton sought to excuse himself.

“Oh, very well,” she said. “Of course it is not right to ask you to do it if you suffer from vertigo. I shall ask Kid to take your place. If he refuses, Daddy will do it.”

“That may mean delay,” remarked Blake. “If that scoundrel really is headed for Utah, your father may not be back for several days. Yet he asked me to settle this matter as soon as possible.”

“Then, if Kid will not go down with you, I shall,” declared the girl, her blue eyes flashing.

“No, no indeed, dear!” protested Genevieve. “It is simply impossible! You shall not do it!”

“I shall, unless Kid—”

“You shall not ask him!” interposed Ashton, his pale face suddenly flushing a hot red. “I am going down!”

“You will, Lafayette?” cried Genevieve. “That is very brave and—and kind of you!”

“But if you have no experience in climbing?” objected Isobel in a tone that transmuted the young man’s angry flush into a glow of delight.

“Don’t inexperienced climbers go up the Alps with guides?” he nonchalantly replied. “I can trust Blake to get me safe to the bottom. He will need me in his business.”

“Good for you, Lafe!” commended Blake.

It was the first time that he had ever addressed Ashton so familiarly. He accompanied it with the proffer of his hand. But Ashton did not look at him. He was basking in the frankly admiring gaze of Miss Knowles.

The party returned in the same manner that they had come out, for Isobel firmly refused to permit Ashton to walk. Blake allowed her to set the pace, and she chose such a rapid one that they reached camp a full half hour before sunset.

A few minutes later, as they were sitting down to a hastily prepared supper, Gowan appeared with the second load from the lower camp. Blake and Ashton sprang up to loosen the packs of the sweating, panting horses. The puncher swung down from his saddle, not to assist them, but to remonstrate with Isobel.

“Been expecting to meet you, all the way up, Miss Chuckie,” he said. “Ain’t you staying too late? You won’t get home before long after dark.”

“Mrs. Blake and I are not going down tonight, Kid,” replied the girl, and she explained the change of plans.

Gowan listened attentively, though without commenting either by look or word. When she had quite finished, he asked a single question: “Think your Daddy won’t mind, Miss Chuckie?”

“He will understand that we simply can’t leave here until Lafe and—Mr. Blake are safe up out of the cañon.”

“All right. You’re the boss,” he acquiesced. “Just write out a list of what you want. I’ll take all the hawsses down to the waterhole, and go on to the ranch. You can look for me back at sunup. The moon rises between three and four.”

“Genevieve, will you make out the list? Sit down and eat, Kid.”

“Well, just a snack, Miss Chuckie. Wouldn’t stop for that if the hawsses didn’t know the trail well enough to go down in the dark.”

“Have you seen any sign of the murderer?” inquired Ashton.

Gowan drained the cup of scalding hot coffee handed to him by Isobel, and answered jeeringly: “Don’t worry, Tenderfoot. He won’t try to get you tonight. If he came back today, he saw me around. If he comes back tonight, he won’t think of climbing High Mesa to look for you.”

Blake came to the puncher with a list written by himself and his wife on a leaf from his fieldbook. Gowan folded it in his hatband, washed down the last mouthful of bread and ham that he had been bolting, and went to shift his saddle

to Isobel's pony, the youngest and freshest of the horses. In two minutes he was riding away down the ridge, willingly followed by the four other horses. They knew as well as he that they were returning to the waterhole.

As the campers again sat down to their supper Isobel paused with the coffeepot upraised. "Genevieve," she inquired, "did you put cream on the list?"

"Why, no, my dear. It did not occur to me."

"Nor may it to Yuki. He will be sure to send eggs and butter, but unless he thinks to save tonight's cream—I'll run and tell Kid."

Ashton sprang up ahead of her. "I'll catch him," he said, and sprinted down the ridge.

Racing around a thicket of scrub oak, he caught sight of Gowan more than an eighth of a mile ahead. He whistled repeatedly. At last Gowan twisted about in the saddle, and drew rein. He did not turn back, but made Ashton come all the way to him.

"Well, what's wanted?" he demanded.

"Cream," panted Ashton. "Miss Chuckie says—tell Yuki."

"Shore pop, I'll bring all there is," replied Gowan. Ashton started back. "Hold on," said the puncher. "I want to say something to you, and here's the chance."

"What is it?"

"About him. I want you to keep a mighty close watch tonight."

"But you said that the murderer would not—"

"*Bah!* What does he count in this deal? It's this engineer. I've been chewing it over all afternoon. Miss Chuckie is as innocent and trusting as a lamb, spite of her winterings in Denver, and she's plumb locoed over him, reading so much about him in the reports."

"Still, it does not necessarily follow—"

"Don't it, though!" broke in the puncher. "Guess you didn't find it any funnier than I did seeing her hanging onto his shoulder."

"Curse him!" cried Ashton, his jealousy flaring at the remembrance.

"Now you're talking!" approved Gowan. "That shows you like her like I do. You're not going to stand for her losing her fortune."

“Her fortune?”

“By his flooding us off our range.”

“Ah—as for that, I have been thinking it over. She told me Mr. Knowles owns five sections. If water is put on them—Western Colorado fruit lands are very valuable, you know.”

“That’s a lie. Water can’t make five sections worth a range like ours. But supposing it could—” the puncher leaned towards Ashton, his eyes glaring with the cold malignancy of a striking rattlesnake’s—“supposing it could, how about us letting her lose her good name?”

“Good God!” gasped Ashton. “It can’t come to that!”

“Can’t it? can’t it? Where’s your eyes? And him a married man! The—” Gowan cursed horribly.

“You really believe it!” cried Ashton, convinced by the other’s outburst.

“Believe it? I know it!” declared Gowan. “If you thought half as much of her as I do—”

“I do!—not half, but a hundred times more!”

“Yes, you do?”

“I swear it! I’d do anything for her!”

“Except save her from him.”

“No, no! How can I? Tell me how!”

The puncher bent nearer to the half-frenzied man. “You’re going down that gulch with him. Suppose a spike gets knocked out or a rope breaks or a loose rock gets pushed over?”

“God!” cried Ashton, putting his hands over his eyes. “That would be murder!”

“*Bah!* You’d make a dog sick! Willing to do anything for her—except save her from him! And nothing to it but just an accident that’s just as like as not to happen anyway.”

“But—murder!” shudderingly muttered Ashton.

“Murder a skunk,” sneered Gowan. “If saving her from him isn’t a case of justifiable homicide, what is? Don’t you get the idea? Just a likely accident, down there where nobody can see.”

Ashton dropped his hands, half clenched, to his sides. Beads of cold sweat were gathering and running down his drawn face.

“I can’t!” he whispered. “I—I can’t!”

“Not if I agree to get out of the way and give you clear running?” tempted Gowan.

“You would?”

“Yes. You see how much I like her. You rid her of him, and I’ll let you have her for doing it.”

Ashton shuddered.

“Think it over—and watch him mighty close tonight,” advised the tempter.

A red flush leaped into Ashton’s face. Gowan struck his spurs into his horse’s flank and loped away.

Ashton stood motionless. The puncher disappeared down the mountain side. The twilight faded and darkness closed down about the tortured man. He stood there motionless, his convulsed face alternately flushing and paling, his eyes now clouding, now burning with rage and hate.

When at last he returned to the camp he kept beyond the circle of firelight. Hurriedly he rolled up in his blankets for the night, muttering something about his head and his need of rest for the next day’s work. The others accepted the explanation without question. They formed a cheerful domestic group about the fire from which he was shut out by his passion.

The ladies withdrew into the tent at an early hour. Blake strolled around the camp until after nine o’clock, but finally came with his blankets and companionably rolled up near Ashton. He was soon fast asleep. But Ashton lay tossing until after midnight. Weariness at last weighed down the lids of his hot eyes and numbed his tortured brain. He sank into a feverish sleep haunted with evil dreams.

CHAPTER XXIV

BLIND LOVE

At sunrise the harassed dreamer awoke to find Gowan gazing down at him somberly.

“You—you here?” he exclaimed, starting up on his elbow. “What is—” He checked himself and muttered brokenly, “I’ve been dreaming—horrible nightmares.”

“He’s down there overhauling his outfit,” said Gowan. “Hope you’ve thought the matter over.”

“My answer must be the same. I cannot do it, I cannot!” replied Ashton. He spoke hurriedly, as if afraid to linger on the thought.

“You can’t—not to save her and have me give her to you?” asked Gowan.

Ashton clenched his hands and bent over in an agony of doubt and indecision.

“You devil!” he groaned.

“What! Because I’m willing to give her up, in order to see her saved?”

“Why don’t you shoot him, if you’re so anxious?” queried Ashton.

“And hang for it,” retorted the puncher. “You can do it with an accident, and no risk. Anyway, that’ll make things easier for his wife—to have him meet a natural death. Won’t be anything said about why he was taken off. She hasn’t begun to suspect what’s going on between him and—”

Gowan paused, looked at the tent, and concluded: “I’ve done my part. I won’t say any more. But just you remember what I’ve told you. You won’t run any risk. Mr. Knowles hasn’t come back yet. There’ll be only them and me along, and we won’t be able to see you do it. Just remember what it will mean to her—just remember that—when you get him where a shove or a loosened spike—Savvy?”

He went to loosen the diamond hitch of the packs that he had brought with him

from the ranch. Ashton sank back and lay brooding until the girl came from the tent and called to inquire how he felt. Too wretched to care about his appearance, he rose and went over to her.

“Oh!” she exclaimed at sight of his haggard face. “You are ill!”

“Only an attack of indigestion and loss of sleep—something I often have,” he lied. “A cup of coffee will set me up. Don’t worry. I’m strong—head doesn’t bother me at all this morning, except a numb feeling inside.”

“I shall dress the wound at once, while the coffee is boiling,” she replied.

He would have objected. She silenced him with a look that acted on his chafed spirit like oil upon a burn. Her kind, almost tender voice and the soft touch of her fingers on his head soothed his anguish and seemed to counteract the poison instilled by Gowan. He began to doubt the puncher and the witness of his own eyes.

When Blake and his wife came to breakfast, Ashton was so cheerful that they hardly noticed the traces of haggardness that yet lingered in his face. Blake at once centered the attention of all by explaining his plans for the exploration of the cañon. In addition to the surveyor’s chain, a hammer, and the rope and spikes,—which were to be used only in making the descent,—he and Ashton were to carry the level and rod and a quantity of food. At the suggestion of Isobel, he agreed to take her father’s revolver and fire it at intervals, on the chance that the watchers above might see the flash of the shots and so be able to follow the progress of the explorers down in the depths.

Genevieve quickly thought out signals to be given in response. If at night, a torch was to be cast down into the chasm; if in the daytime, a white flag, made of a sheet sent by Yuki, was to be waved out over the brink. As the explorers might become confused in the gloom of the cañon bottom, the point of the bend opposite Dry Fork Gulch was to be marked by a beacon fire built on the verge of the cañon wall.

Blake had already arranged everything that he and Ashton were to take down with them. Immediately after breakfast the outfit was fastened on the packhorses, together with food, water and blankets for those who were to remain on the heights. The ladies were determined to keep above the explorers at all points where the rim of the cañon could be approached. Gowan was to fetch and carry for them and take the horses down to the pool for water at night.

Within half an hour after breakfast the party was jogging away from camp, fully

equipped for the great undertaking. Gowan was afoot. His horse, as well as the regular pack animals, was heavily loaded with stores. He walked with Isobel, who had insisted that Ashton should ride her pony. Blake strode along at his wife's stirrup, carrying his son in a clasp as tender as it was strong.

The engineer was the only cheerful member of the party. Even Thomas Herbert, that best tempered of babies, was peevish and fretful. He was instinctively reflexing the suppressed nervousness and anxiety of his mother. Gowan and Ashton were as gloomy in look and speech as the shadowy depths of the cañon. Isobel bravely sought to respond to Blake's confidence in the favorable outcome of the survey; but her smile, like Genevieve's, was forced and her eyes were troubled.

They reached the point of attack as the rays of the morning sun were beginning to strike down into the side gorge. This was as Blake had planned. He at once began to direct the preparations for the descent, himself doing the lion's share of the work.

A long detour to a point higher up the ravine offered an easy descent of its bottom to the place where it pitched steeply into the cañon. Blake preferred to take a short cut down the almost vertical side of the gulch. The three pieces of rope, each a hundred feet long, were knotted together and used to lower a grass-padded package containing all the equipment of the explorers except the level. The bundle was lodged on a broad shelf of rock, over two hundred and fifty feet down.

"Our first measurement," remarked Blake, as he subtracted from three hundred feet the length of the line left above the edge of the cliff. He jotted down the remainder in his notebook, and nodded to Ashton, who, with Gowan and Isobel, was holding the end of the rope. "You see why I had Mr. Gowan bring gloves and chaps and your leggins. We will make the line fast around that rock, and follow our outfit."

Ashton stared, slack jawed. "Really, you cannot mean—?"

"Yes. Why not?" asked Blake. "There's nothing to a slide like this except the look of it."

"Oh, Tom!" breathlessly cried Genevieve. "Are you sure—quite sure!"

"Sure I'm sure, little woman," he replied. "There's not the slightest danger. This is a new manila rope, and the package, with all those spikes in it, weighs as much as I do. That gives us a sure test."

“I might have known!” she sighed her relief.

“Still it does look a bit stiff for a start-off,” he admitted. “If Lafe prefers, he can go around and come down the ravine bed. I shall slide the line and be getting the outfit in shape for shooting the chutes.”

“How about the rope?” asked Isobel.

“You are to drop it to me as soon as I get down and stand from under,” directed Blake. He examined with minute care the loop and knot with which Gowan and Isobel had made the rope fast around the point of rock. Having satisfied himself that the knot was perfectly secure, he turned to his wife and opened his arms. “Now, Sweetheart! Wish us good luck and a quick journey!”

Gowan and Ashton drew back and looked away as Genevieve flung herself on her husband’s broad chest, unable to restrain her tears.

“Now, now, little woman,” he soothed, patting her shoulder. “There’s nothing to be afraid of, and you know it.”

“If—if only we could see you down there!” she sobbed.

“You will, part of the time, with your glasses. And you’ll be sure to see the flash of some of my shots. That’s all that I’m worrying about—you’ll be skirting along the cañon rim. Promise me you’ll not go near the edge except where the footing is perfectly safe.”

“Yes, Dear. I shall have Thomas to remind me to be careful. But you?”

“I shall have the thought of you both to keep me from being rash. Remember that.”

“You will not be rash, I know,” she answered, smiling up at him bravely. “You will go and come back to us soon. Now kiss me and Thomas. I shall not detain you from your work.”

“Spoken like my partner,” he quietly praised her.

Both by tone and manner he was plainly seeking to ease the parting to the calmness of an ordinary farewell. His wife responded to this, outwardly at least. Not so Isobel. From the moment he had turned to Genevieve, the girl had betrayed a rapidly increasing agitation.

He went to kiss his baby, who had fallen asleep during the last half mile of the trip and lay sprawled in the shade of a boulder. As he came back, Genevieve lingered beside the child, as if half fearful of watching her husband begin his

dizzy descent of the rope.

Isobel was standing close to the verge, her bosom heaving with quick-drawn breaths, her excited face flushing and paling in rapid alternation. Blake had pulled on his left glove, but had kept his right hand bare for her. As he held it out he looked up from the taut rope at his feet and saw her excessively agitated face.

“You have something to tell me—your voice—your eyes—”

“Why, Miss Chuckie!” he remonstrated, “you’re not going to break down now. You see how Jenny takes it. There’s nothing to fear.”

“Oh, but, Tom!” she panted, “you—you don’t understand! you don’t know! It’s not merely the danger! It’s the dreadful thought that if you—if you should not—come back—and I hadn’t told you!”

“Told me?” he echoed in hushed wonderment as her anguished soul looked out at him through her wide eyes and he sensed the first vague foreshadowing of the truth. “You have something to tell me—your voice!—your eyes!—”

“You see it! You know me!” she gasped, and she flung herself into his arms. Straining herself to him in half frantic ecstasy, she murmured in a broken whisper: “Yes! I am—am Belle! It is wicked and selfish to tell you; but to have you go down there without first—I could not bear it! Yet I—I shall not drag you down—disgrace you. Never that! I’ll go away!... Oh, Tom! dear Tom!”

He had stood dumfounded by the revelation of her identity. At first he could not speak; hardly could he think. His eyes stared into hers with a dazed look. But before she could finish her impassioned declaration of self-abnegation he roused from his bewilderment, and his great arms closed about her quivering body. He crushed her to him and pressed his lips upon her white forehead.

“Belle!—poor little Belle!... But why? Tell me why? All this time, and you never showed by a single word or look!”

“I did!” she sought to defend herself from the tender reproach. “I did, but I—I was afraid to tell.”

“Afraid?”

The girl’s face flamed scarlet with shame. She sought to draw away from him. “Let me go, Tom! oh, please, let me go! I am a selfish, wicked girl! I have done it! I have done it! Now there is no help for it! She must be told—all!”

“All?” he questioned.

“Yes, all, Tom! I cannot deny Mary! She saved me! I believe she is in Heaven. She could not help doing what she did. She could not help it, Tom—and she

saved me! I must give you up—go away; but I can never, never deny my sister!”

Blake swung half around with the quivering girl, and looked over her downbent head at his wife. Genevieve stood almost within arm’s-length of them. He met her gaze, and immediately pushed the girl out towards her.

“Listen, Belle,” he said. “It is all right. Here is Jenny waiting for you. She understands.”

Gowan, watching rigid and tense-lipped, with his hand clenched on the hilt of his half-drawn Colt’s, was astonished to see Mrs. Blake step forward and clasp Isobel in her arms. But Ashton did not see the strange act that checked the puncher’s vengeful shot. While the girl was yet clinging to Blake, he had turned and fled along the edge of the ravine, for the moment stark mad with rage and despair.

He rushed off without a cry, and the others were themselves far too surcharged with emotion to heed his going until he had disappeared around a turn in the ravine. When at last, almost spent with exertion, he staggered up a ridge to glare back at those from whom he had fled, his bloodshot eyes could perceive only three figures on the brink of the gorge. They were kneeling to look over into the ravine.

His thoughts were still in a wild whirl, but the heat of his mad rage had passed and left him in a cold fury. He instantly comprehended that Blake had swung over the edge and was descending the rope down the almost sheer face of the ravine wall.

Now was the time! A touch of a knife-edge to the rope, and the girl would be saved. Would Gowan think of it?... Of course he would think of it. But he would not do it. He would leave the deed to be done by the man to whom he had relinquished Miss Chuckie. It was for that man to save her—to destroy the tempter and break the spell of fascination that was drawing her over the brink of a pit far deeper than any earthly cañon. He, Lafayette Ashton—not Gowan—was the man. He must save her—down there in the depths, where no eye could see.

CHAPTER XXV

THE DESCENT INTO HELL

Dangling like a spider on its thread, with a twist of the rope around one of his legs, Blake had gone down into the ravine, hand under hand, with the agility of a sailor. The tough leather of his chapareras prevented the rope from chafing the leg around which it slipped, and he managed with his free foot to fend himself off from the sharp-cornered ledges of the cliff side. In this he was less concerned for himself than for his level, which he carried in a sling, high up between his shoulders.

He was soon safe at the lower end of the rope, on the shelf beside the bundled outfit. He waved his hat to the down-peering watchers, and climbed a few yards up the ravine, to creep in under an overhanging rock. A few moments later the loosened rope came sliding down the steep descent, the last length whipping from ledge to ledge with a velocity that made it hiss through the air.

Blake was not disturbed by this proof of the cumulative speed of falling bodies. He came down and coolly set about his preparations for the descent of the gorge bottom. He unlashd the bundle and divided its contents. This done, he took a vertical measurement by going out towards the cañon along a horizontal shelf on the side wall of the gorge, until he could drop his surveying chain down the sheer precipice to a shelf almost a hundred feet below him.

Unaware of Ashton's mistake and furious flight, the engineer was proceeding with his work in the expectation that he would soon be joined by his assistant. He was not disappointed. As he returned along the shelf, after entering the measurement in his notebook, Ashton came bounding and scrambling down the ravine bottom at reckless speed. He fetched up on the verge of the break, purple-faced and panting. His mouth twitched nervously and there was a wild look in his dark eyes. But Blake attributed all to the excitement and exertion of the headlong rush down the ravine.

"No need for you to have hurried so, Lafe," he said. "I suppose you had to go farther around than I thought would be necessary. But I'd rather you had kept me

waiting an hour than for you to have chanced spraining an ankle.”

“Yes, you need me in your business!” scoffed Ashton.

“Your employer’s business,” rejoined the engineer. He straightened up from the packs that he was lashing together and gazed gravely at his scowling assistant. “See here, Mr. Ashton, this is no time for you to raise a row. We shall have quite enough else to think about from now on, until we are up again out of the cañon.”

“I’ve enough to think about—and more!” muttered Ashton.

“Understand? I’m not asking anything of you for myself,” said Blake. “You are doing this survey for your employer.”

“I’m here because of *her!*” retorted the younger man. “I’m here to make it certain that no harm is to come to *her!*”

Blake smiled. “Good for you! I hardly thought you were here for the fun of it. You are going to prove to us that you have the makings. We’re both working for her, Lafe. I don’t mind telling you now that I am planning to do something big for her.” He looked up the ravine wall, his eyes aglow with tenderness. “Belle! dear little Belle! To think that after all these years—”

“Shut up!” cried Ashton. “Stop that! stop it, and get to work! I know what you’re planning to do! Don’t talk to me!”

Blake stared in astonishment. “Didn’t think you were so sore over that old affair. I told you I had nothing to do about your father’s—”

“Don’t talk to me! don’t talk to me!” frantically cried Ashton. “You ruined me! Now her!”

“Lord! If you’re as sore as all that!” rejoined Blake, his eyes hardening. “Look here, Mr. Ashton, we’ll settle this when we get up on top again. Meantime, I shall do my work, and I shall see to it that you do yours. Understand?”

“Get busy, then! I shall do *my* work!” snarled Ashton.

Blake pointed to one of the three bundles that he had tied together. “There’s half the grub, the tripod and the rod. I can manage the rest. I’ve dropped a measurement to the foot of the first incline.”

He swung one of the other bundles on his back, under the level. The third, which was made up of railroad spikes and picket-pins, he sent rolling down the steep slope, tied to one end of the rope. He had driven a spike into a crevice of the rock. Hooking the other end of the rope over its head with an open loop, he

grasped the line and started to walk down the gorge bottom. As he descended he dragged the loose lengths of rope after him.

Ashton stood rigid, staring at the spike and loop. If the loop should slip or the spike pull out, he need only climb back out of the ravine—to her. But Blake's work was not the kind to slip or pull out. The watcher looked at the powerful figure backing rapidly down that roof-like pitch. One of the toes of the level tripod under the taut loop would easily pry the rope off the spike-head. He turned his pack around to get at the tripod—and paused to look upwards at the three tiny faces peering down over the brink of the cliff.

He slung the pack over his shoulder and grasped the rope to follow his leader, who had come to the narrow shelf from which another measurement must be taken. He made the descent no less rapidly and easily than had the engineer. He was naturally agile, and now he was too full of his purpose to have any thought of vertigo. Yet quickly as he followed, when he reached the shelf he found that Blake had already lowered the bundle of spikes over the cliff below and was reënforcing with a spike a picket-pin that he had driven deep into a crevice.

“Drop over the chain at that point,” curtly ordered the engineer. “Think you can climb back up this slope without the rope?”

“Yes,” answered Ashton, still more curtly.

Blake lifted the line and sent up it a wave that carried to the upper end and flipped the loop from the spike-head. He jerked the freed end down to him and knotted it securely to the picket-pin, while Ashton was making the third vertical measurement. He then lowered everything except the level in loops of the line, and wrapped a strip of canvas around the line where it bent over the sharp edge of the cliff.

Ashton laconically reported the measurement. Blake noted it in his book, and promptly swung himself out over the edge of the cliff. Again his assistant looked at the fastening of the rope; again he looked upwards at the three tiny down-peering faces; and again he followed his leader. The sun was glaring directly down into the gorge. Later they would descend into the shadows where no eye could perceive from above the loosening of the rope.

Blake cut off the line at the foot of the cliff and left it dangling. They would require it for their ascent. Another Titan step took fifty feet more of the rope.

There followed a series of steep pitches, which they descended like the first, unlooping the rope from spike-head after spike-head. The only real difficulty of

this part of the descent was the tedious task of carrying the vertical measurement down the slopes at places where even Blake could not find footing to climb out horizontally on either wall of the gorge to obtain a clear drop.

Always, as they descended, the engineer scanned the rocks both above and below, calculating where the gorge bottom could be reascended without a line. Whenever he considered the incline too smooth or too steep for safe footing, he drove in spikes near enough together to be successively lassoed from below with a length of line.

Had not the nature and condition of the rock provided frequent faults and crevices that permitted the driving of spikes, the descent must soon have become impracticable. But the engineer invariably found some chink in which to hammer a spike with his powerful blows. As, time after time, he overcame difficulties so great that his companion could perceive no possible solution, Ashton began to feel himself struggling against a feeling of reluctant admiration.

All his hate could not blind him to the extraordinary mental and physical efficiency displayed by the engineer. Never once did the steely muscles permit a slip or false step, never once did the cool brain miscalculate the next most advantageous movement.

They were now so deep that Blake had to shout his infrequent directions, to be heard above the booming reverberations of the cañon. Half way down they came to a forty-foot cliff. Blake made his preparations, and swung over the edge. Here was an opportunity. Ashton instantly bent over the knot of the rope.

Close before his eyes he saw the clearly outlined shadow of his head. He hesitated and straightened on his knees to stare up at the top of the gorge. He could no longer discern the three down-peering faces, but he knew that they were still there. And the sunrays still pierced down to him between the walls of the gorge. The shadows were farther down, in the lower depths. He must follow and wait.

When he slid to the foot of the cliff, Blake silently cut off the rope. There was still nearly a hundred and fifty feet left for them to use below. But they went down more than a thousand feet before they again had need of it. As Blake had foretold, the lower half of the descent was far less precipitous than the upper. In places the vertical measurements were carried down by rod readings, the level being set without its tripod on the points of rock where the previous readings had been taken. At other places Blake marked out horizontal points ahead on the gorge wall, and climbed to them with the chain.

All the time the reverberations of the cañon were becoming louder. Dark shadows began to gather along one wall of the gorge. The sun was no longer directly in line with the ravine, and they were now far down in the lower depths. Ashton's knees were beginning to tremble with weakness. They had brought no water, for they were descending to the river. The torment of thirst was added to the torment of his hate. He began to look with fierce eagerness for the opportunity to do his work—to accomplish the deed for which he had descended into this inferno. Then he could go up again, out of the roaring, reverberating hell about him, away from the burning hell within him.

The shadows were creeping out at him from the side of the gorge. The sunshine was going—it was flickering away up the opposite precipices. Now it had gone. All the gorge was somber with shadows. And below were the blue-black depths of the cañon bottom. Dread crept in upon his smoldering hate to sweep across its white-hot coals with chill gusts of fear.

But now they were come to another sheer cliff—the last in the descent. From its foot the gorge bottom inclined easily down the final three hundred feet to its mouth, where the river of the deep roared past along the cañon bed, its foam flashing silvery white through the gloom.

Here at last was the opportunity for which he had waited—here down in these dark shadows where no eye could see—here where no shriek or cry could pierce up to the outer world of light and sunshine through the wild uproar of the angry waters. He awaited the moment, aflame with pent-up fury, shivering with cold dread.

Blake dropped his chain from the cliff-edge and took the last vertical measurement—fifty-three feet. He smiled. The hardest part of the work was almost accomplished. He swung over the edge.

Ashton flung himself on his knees beside the triple knot that held the line fast to its spike. This time he did not hesitate, but began to tug at the rope end with fierce eagerness. He loosened one knot. The next was harder to unfasten. Blake had tied it with utmost secureness. At last it yielded to the tugging of his gloved fingers. He started to loosen the third knot. Suddenly the taut line slackened. With a stifled cry of rage, he paused to peer over the edge. Blake had slipped down the line so rapidly that he was already at the foot of the cliff.

Reaching back, Ashton jerked the rope from the spike-head, to cast it down on the engineer. A glimpse of the flashing water in the cañon bottom gave momentary check to his vengeful impulse. If only he had a drink of that cool

water! He was parched; his lips were cracking; in his mouth was the taste of dust. Must he stay up here on the dry rock while Blake went on down beside the foaming river to drink his fill?

As he paused, a doubt clutched his heart in an icy grip. All the way down that devil's stairway he had been witness to Blake's extraordinary resourcefulness and tremendous strength. What if he should find a way to clamber up the precipices? He had lowered everything before descending. There was nothing to fling down upon him—no loose rock or stone to topple over and crush him.

Chilled by that doubt, Ashton hesitated, his hands alternately tightening and relaxing their grip on the rope. What if the man should contrive to escape? There seemed no bounds to his ingenuity... No, he must be followed on down into the cañon and destroyed, else he would escape—he would come up out of this inferno, like the demon he was, and destroy *her*. He must be followed!... And the water—the cool, refreshing water!

His thirst now seized upon Ashton with terrible intensity. Rage, no less than the laborious exertion of the descent, had dried up his body with its feverish fire. Almost maddened with the torment of his craving, he looped the rope on the spike-head with reckless haste and slid down over the edge of the cliff.

As the line tautened with his weight it gave several inches, but he was too nearly frantic to heed. He slipped down it so swiftly that the strands burned his hands through the tough palms of his gloves. In a few moments his feet were on a level with Blake's head. He clutched the rope tighter to check his fall. An instant later he dropped heavily on the rock shelf at the cliff foot, and the rope came swishing down after him.

“God!” shouted Blake. Involuntarily he flung back his head and stared up the great gorge to the faraway heights where were waiting his wife and child.

But Ashton neither paused nor looked upward. Rebounding from his fall, he rushed down the slope to the river, with a gasping cry—“Water! water!”

For a time the engineer stood as if stunned, his big fists clenched, his broad chest heaving laboriously. Yet he was far too well seasoned in desperate adventure to give way to despair. Soon he rallied. He lowered his gaze from the heights to examine the cliff and the adjoining walls of the gorge. All were alike sheer and unscalable. The lines about his big mouth hardened with grim determination. He picked up the rope and began winding it about his mid-body above the low-buckled cartridge belt.

He arranged the coils with such care that he did not notice the condition of the end of the line until he had drawn in over eighty feet. Then at last he saw. Though he had not forgotten to wrap the line with canvas where it passed over the cliff edge, he had thought the strands must have been frayed through on a sharp corner of rock. Instead, he found himself staring at the clean-cut string-wrapped rope end that he had knotted to the spike.

For several moments he stood looking at it, his forehead creased in thought. What had become of the knot?... He could think of only one solution to the puzzle. He turned and gazed down through the gloom at the dim figure crouched beside the edge of the swirling water.

“Locoed,” he said pityingly—“Locoed.... Poor devil!”

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE GLOOM

When the engineer came down to the river, Ashton still crouched low, his dripping head close over the water, as if he was afraid even to look away from it. Blake rinsed out his mouth and stood up to sip slowly from his hat, while looking about at the awesome spectacle of the cañon bottom.

His first glance was at the swift-flowing stream. His eyes brightened and the furrows in his forehead smoothed away. The river was not as formidable as its tumult and foam had threatened. It could be descended by wading at the places where ledges and boulders along the base of the cañon walls failed to afford safe footing. He glanced up the stupendous precipices at the blue-black ribbon of sky, but only for a moment. His present thought was not of escape from the depths.

He bent over to grip the crouching man by the shoulder and lift him to his feet. Ashton writhed about and glared at him like a trapped wolf.

“Let go!” he snarled. “It was an accident! I didn’t mean to do it!”

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“Of course not,” replied Blake, releasing his grip but standing close that he might not have to shout. “It’s all right, old man—my fault. The knot slipped.”

“You own it! You own it’s your fault!” cried Ashton. “You’ve brought me down here into this hell-pit! We can’t get out! Lost! All your fault—yours!”

He made a frantic snatch and jerked the revolver from Blake’s holster. The engineer caught his wrist in an iron grasp and wrenched the weapon from him.

“None of that, old man,” he admonished with a cool sternness that chilled the frenzy of the other like a dash of ice water. “You’re here to do your work, and you’re going to do it. Understand?”

“My work!” repeated Ashton wildly.

“Yes, your work,” commanded Blake, his face as hard as iron. “We’re going to survey Deep Cañon down to the tunnel site. Your work is to carry rod. Do you get that?”

“Down the cañon?—deeper!”

“We can’t get back up here. There’s a place down there beyond the tunnel site where perhaps we can make it up the cañon wall.”

“A place where we—?” shrilled Ashton. “A place—Good God! and you stand here doing nothing!”

He whirled to spring out into the swirling water. Blake was still swifter in his movements. He caught the fugitive by the arm and dragged him back.

“Wait!” he commanded. “We must first carry the levels down to the tunnel site. You hear that? Stick by me, and I’ll pull you through. Try to run, and, by God, I’ll shoot you like a dog!”

The captive glared into the steel-white eyes of the engineer, anger overcoming his panicky fear.

“Let go!” he panted. “Don’t worry! I’ll do my work—I’ll do my work!”

“If you don’t, you’ll never get out of this cañon,” grimly rejoined Blake. He released his hold, and started up the slope, with a curt order: “Come along. We can rod down the slope.”

Ashton followed him, silent and morose. The instrument was screwed to its tripod, and a line of levels from the foot of the last vertical measurement was carried down the slope to the cañon. The last rod reading was on a ledge, three feet above the water, at the corner of the gorge. Blake considered the reading worthy of permanent record. They had measured all the many hundreds of feet down from the top of High Mesa to these profound depths. With his two-pound hammer and one of the few remaining spikes, he chiseled a cross deep in the surface of the black rock.

That mark of the engineer-captain, scouting before the van of man’s Nature-conquering army, was the sign of the first human beings that had ever descended alive to the bottom of Deep Cañon.

When he had cut the cross, Blake took out his Colt’s, and, gazing up the heights, began to fire at slow intervals. Confined between the walls of gorge and cañon, each report of the heavy revolver crashed out above the tumult of the river and ran echoing and reechoing up the stupendous precipices. Yet long before they reached the rim of those towering walls they blurred away and merged and were lost in the ceaseless reverberations of the waters.

Blake well knew that this would happen. But he also knew that the flash of the

shot would be distinctly discernible in the gloom of the abyss. As he fired, he scanned the verge of the uppermost precipices. After the fourth shot he ceased firing and flung up his hand to point at the heights.

“Look!” he shouted. “They see! There is the flag!”

Ashton stared up with wide, feverish eyes. From an out-jutting point of rock on the lofty rim he saw a tiny white dot waving to and fro against the blue-black sky. The watchers above had seen the flash of the revolver shots and were fluttering the white flag in responsive signal. Though on the world above the sun beat down its full mid-afternoon flood of light, the two men in the abyss could see stars twinkling in the dark sky around the waving fleck of white.

Blake fired two shots in quick succession, the agreed signal that told the flag was seen. He then calmly seated himself and began to add together the vertical measurements taken during the descent of the gorge. But Ashton groaned and flung himself face downward on the rough stone.

Blake soon finished his sum in addition, and the result brought a smile to his serious face. He checked the figures with painstaking carefulness, and nodded, fully satisfied. Replacing book and pencil in the deep pocket of his shirt, he opened one of the packages of food. When he had laid out enough for a hearty meal, he looked at Ashton. The prostrate man had not stirred.

“Come, Lafe,” he called encouragingly. “Time to eat.”

Ashton lay still and made no response.

Blake raised his voice—“Come! You’re not going to quit. You’re going to eat. You must keep your strength to fight your way through and up out of here—to *her!*”

Ashton sullenly rose and came to sit down on the rock beside the outspread food. He was silent, but he ate even more heartily than his companion. When they had finished, Blake swung his pack and level on his shoulder, fired one shot, and stepped out into the swift but shallow river. Wading as far downstream as he could see to read the rod in the twilight of the depths, he set up the tripod of his instrument on a rock and took the reading given him by Ashton.

The survey of the cañon itself had begun. Unappalled by the awful height of the mighty precipices on either side, undaunted by the uncertainty of escape, heedless of the gloom of the deep, of the tumult and rush and chill of the icy waters, the engineer boldly advanced to the attack of this abysmal stronghold of Primeval Nature, his square jaw set in grim determination to wrest from these

hitherto inviolate depths that which he sought to learn. Whatever might follow, he must and would unlock the secret of the hidden waters. Afterwards might come death by slow starvation or the quick dashing down from some half-scaled precipice. That mattered not now. First must the engineer perform his work,—first must he execute the task that he had set himself for the conquest of the chasm that was likely to prove his tomb.

Vastly different in purpose, yet no less resolute than the engineer, Ashton joined zealously in the grim battle with the abyss—for battle it soon proved to be. Only in places was the subterranean river shallow and easy to wade. More often it foamed in wild fury down steep rapids, to fling itself over ledges into black pools; or, worst of all, it swirled deep and arrowy-swift between fanged rocks where the channel narrowed.

Wading, swimming, leaping from rock to rock, scrambling up and down the steep precipice foot, creeping along narrow shelves,—stubbornly the explorers fought their way deeper through that wild passage. Chilled by the icy waters and bruised by many a slip on loose stones and wet, water-polished rocks, ever they carried the line of levels down alongside the torrent, crossing over and back from side to side, twisting and turning with the twists and bends of the chasm. And at every stand Blake jotted down the rod readings in his half-soaked book with his pencil and figured the elevation of each turning point before “pulling up” his instrument to move on downstream to the next “set up.”

At the end of every half hour he fired a single shot to signal their progress in the depths to the watchers above. But never once did he stop to look up for the flag. Occasionally he was required to help Ashton through or over some unusually difficult passage. For the most part, however, each fought his own way. The odds were not altogether in favor of the older man. He was hampered by the care of the instrument, which must be shielded from all blows or falls. The rod, on the contrary, served as a staff and support to Ashton, alike in the water and on the rocks.

Some time before sunset the waning light in the cañon bottom became so dim that Blake was compelled to cease work. He took a last reading on a broad shelf of rock well above the surface of the water, joined Ashton on the shelf, and began firing the revolver at five-minute intervals. After the fifth shot he at last perceived the white dot of the flag far above on the opposite brink of the chasm. He fired two shots in quick succession, and calmly sat down to open one of the soaked packages of food.

Ashton did not wait to be bidden to supper. He fell to on the food and ate ravenously. Blake did not check him, though he himself took little and carefully gathered up and returned to the package every scrap of food left at the end of the meal. As Ashton lay back on the rock he squirmed from side to side and groaned. His bruises were so numerous that he could not find a comfortable position.

“Cheer up!” grimly quoted Blake. “The worst is yet to come.”

He stretched himself out on the rock-shelf and, regardless of the sullen resistance of the younger man, drew him into his arms. Chilled to the marrow by his frequent icy drenchings, Ashton was shivering in the cold wind which came down the cañon with the approach of night. But Blake’s massive body and limbs were aglow with abundant vitality. Warmed and sheltered from the wind, the exhausted man relaxed like a child in the strong arms of his companion and quickly sank into the deep slumber of overtaxed nature.

Blake lay awake until the narrow strip of sky that showed between the vast walls of rock deepened to an inky blackness thickly sprinkled with scintillating stars. The light of a watchfire flamed red far above on the opposite rim of the chasm wall. To the man below it was like the glow of human love in the chill darkness of the Unknown. With a gesture of reverent passion and adoration, he put his fingers to his lips and flung a kiss up out of the abyss. Then he, too, relaxed on the hard rock and sank into heavy sleep.

Ashton was the first to waken. The wind had changed, and he was roused by the different note in the ceaseless roar of the river. He stared up at the star-jeweled sky. It was still intensely black; yet the gloom of the depths was lessened by a vague pale illumination, a faint shadow of light that might have been the ghost of a dead day. He thought it was the gray dawn, and sought to roll over on his rock bed away from the sheltering embrace of Blake. The engineer was still deep in profound slumber. His big arm slipped laxly from across the moving man’s breast.

The change of position wrung a groan from Ashton. Every muscle in his body was cramped, every bruise stiff and sore. Not until he had turned and twisted for several moments was he able to rise to his feet. The vague ghost light about him brightened. He gazed upwards. He did not notice the tiny flame of the fire that told of the anxious watchers above. Out over the monstrous black wall of the abyss was drifting a burnished silver-white disk.

“The moon!” he groaned. “Only the moon! To wait here—with him!—with

him!”

He looked down at the big form of the sleeping man, and suddenly all his pent-up rage burst its bounds. It poured through his veins in streams of fire. He stared about in fierce eagerness in search of a weapon. Blake lay upon the hilt of the revolver; the level rod lacked weight and balance. But the heavy hammer—a blow on the upturned temple of the sleeper!—

With the cunning stealth of madness, Ashton took up the hammer and crept around back of Blake’s head. He straightened on his knees, and peered down at the calm, powerful face of the engineer.

What if he was a veritable Samson, this conqueror of cañons? Where now was his power? Sleep had bound fast his steel muscles, had numbed his indomitable will and locked his keen intellect in the black prison of unconsciousness.

The avenger hovered over him, gloating. Now at last was come the opportunity—the perfect opportunity, down in these uttermost depths, in the secret night time. The world above slept—and he slept. Never should he waken from that sleep; never should he rouse up in his evil strength to escape out of the abyss and bring ruin to her!

Lightly the hammer swung over and downward, measuring the curve of the stroke. It lifted and poised. Again it swung down; and again it lifted and poised. The blow must be certain—there must not be the slightest chance of missing.

Each time the heavy steel head stopped a full two inches short of the upturned temple—but each time its shadow fell across the eyes of the sleeper. He stirred. The hammer whirled up, gripped in both hands of the kneeling man. The sleeper turned flat on his back, with his face full to the light. A quiver ran through the tense muscles of the avenger. Had the eyes of the sleeper opened, had their lids so much as fluttered, the hammer must have crashed down.

But it was the sleeper’s lips that moved. As it were by a miracle of acuteness, the tense nerves of the other’s ear caught the whispered words through the roaring of the river—“*Jenny! Son!*”

The hammer hurled away out into the swirl of the foam-flecked waters. The avenger flung himself about, face downward on the rock.

“God!” he sobbed, in an agony of remorse. “Forgive me, God! I cannot do it! I am weak—unfit!... Not even to save her!—not even to save her!”

He writhed in the anguish of his love and rage and self-abasement. He had

failed; he was too weak to do the deed. But God—Would God permit that evil should befall her?

He struggled to his feet and flung up his quivering hands to moon and stars and black sky in passionate invocation—“O God! You say that vengeance is Yours; that You will repay! Take me, if You will—I give myself! Only destroy him too! Save her! save her!”

Again Blake stirred, and this time he opened his eyes. Ashton had sunk down in a huddled silent heap. Blake gazed up at the watchfire on the heights, smiled, and turned over to again fall asleep.

CHAPTER XXVII

LOWER DEPTHS

Beetling precipices shut off the direct light of the moonbeams and left the abyss again in dense darkness long before the coming of the laggard dawn. Blake slept on, storing up strength for the renewal of the battle. Yet even he could not outsleep the reluctant lingering of night. He awoke while the tiny flame of the watchfire still flickered bright against the inky darkness of the sky.

Ashton had fallen into a fitful doze. The engineer stood up and silently groped his way to and fro on the shelf of rock, stretching and limbering his cramped muscles. He wasted no particle of energy; the moment he had relieved his stiffness he stretched out again. He lay contemplating that flame of love on the heights until it faded against the lessening blackness of the sky and the rays of the morning sun began to angle down the upper precipices.

He rose to take out two portions of food from the single pack in which he had bound up all the provisions. The portion for Ashton was small; his own was smaller. He roused the dozing man and placed the larger share of food in his hand.

“Don’t drop it,” he cautioned. “That’s all I can let you have. We must go on rations until we can see a way out of this hole.”

Ashton ate his meager breakfast without replying. The fire within him had burned to ashes. He was cold and dull and dispirited. He had failed. He would have been willing to sit and brood, and wait for God to answer his prayer.—But his waiting was not to be an inert lingering in the place where he had failed.

The moment the down-creeping daylight so lessened the gloom of the depths that Blake could take rod readings, he plunged over into the stream, with a curtly cheerful command for Ashton to prepare to follow. Too dejected even to resist, the younger man silently obeyed. When Blake signaled to him through the dimness, he held the rod on the last turning-point of the previous day, and lowered himself from the shelf down into the stream.

The evening before, the water at this point had come up to his waist. It was now only knee-deep. His surprise was so great that in passing Blake he broke his sullen silence to remark the fact and ask what could have caused the change.

“Melting of the snow on the high range,” the engineer shouted in explanation. “Takes time for it to run down the cañon all these miles. River probably still falling. Will begin to rise about noon. Faster we get along now, the easier it will be. Hustle!”

Ashton responded mechanically to the will of his commander. For the time being his own will was almost paralyzed. The reaction from his long-sustained rage had left him dazed and nerveless. He had sunk into a state of fatalistic indifference. He moved quickly downstream from turning-point to turning-point, driven by Blake’s will, but with a heedless recklessness that all Blake’s warnings could not check.

Within the first hour he twice stumbled and went under while wading deep reaches of the river, and once he fell from a ledge, bruising himself severely and knocking a splinter from the rod. Half an hour later he lost his footing in descending a swift and narrow place that would have been impassable at high water. Had not Blake been below him he would never have come out alive.

The engineer leaped in and dragged the drowning man to safety, after a desperate struggle with the torrent. But in the wild swirl, both the food-pack and the rod went adrift. The moment he had rescued his companion, Blake rushed away downstream, leaping like a goat from rock to rock. He at last overtook the rod, caught in the eddy of a pool. Of the pack he could find no trace. He returned to Ashton and silently handed him the rod.

There was no need for him to admonish. The loss of all the food and the narrowness of his escape had sobered the younger man. He resumed his work with a cautious swiftness of movement that avoided all needless risks yet never hesitated to encounter and rush through the dangers that could not be avoided. In this he copied Blake.

All the time they were advancing down the angry torrent, deeper and deeper into its secret stronghold,—creeping, crawling, leaping, wading, swimming—step by step, turn after turn, wresting from the abyss that which the engineer was resolved to learn, even though he should learn, only to perish.

The day advanced. Steadfastly they struggled on down the bed of the river, twisting and crossing over with the winding course of the chasm; now between beetling precipices that shut out all sight of the blue-black sky; now in more

open stretches where the Titanic walls swung apart and the glorious hot sun rays pierced down into the very depths to warm their drenched bodies and lighten their heavy spirits.

Ashton had long since lost all count of time. His watch had been smashed in his first fall of the day. But Blake seemed to have an intuitive sense of time. At fairly regular intervals he fired a shot to tell the watchers above the extent of their progress. Sometimes the answering flag-signal could be seen waving from the rim of the cañon. But in many places those above could not come near the brink to look over.

The approach of midday found the bruised and weary fighters struggling through one of the narrowest reaches of the cañon. The precipices jutted out so far that the lower depths seemed more cavern than chasm, and the river swirled deep and swift between sheer, narrow walls. Twice Ashton was swept past what should have been the next turning-point, and Blake, unable to see the figures on the rod, had to guess at his readings.

At last the precipices swung apart and showed the sky at a twist in the cañon's course that was the sharpest of all the turns the explorers had as yet encountered. As Blake came wading down past Ashton, along the inner curve of the bend, he stopped and pointed skywards. Ashton raised his drooping head and peered up at the rim of the opposite wall. From the brink a dense column of green-wood smoke was rising into the indigo sky.

“One more set-up,” shouted Blake.

Three minutes later he took a reading on the water and on a point of rock at the angle of the cañon-side around which the river swung in its sharp curve. Three more minutes, and the two battered fighters stood together on the last bench of that tremendous line of levels, with torn and rent clothing, sodden, gaping boots, bodies bruised from head to foot—bleeding, weary, but victorious! They had finished the work that Blake had set out to do.

He held up the now-soaked notebook for Ashton to see the last penciled elevation on the wet paper.

“Two thousand, forty-five!” he shouted. “Over five hundred feet above that bench in Dry Greek Gulch! Water, electricity!—Dry Mesa shall be a garden!”

Ashton stared moodily into the exultant face of the engineer.

“Are you sure of that?” he asked. “How do you know that God will let you climb up out of this hell of stone and water?”

“There’s the saying, ‘God helps those who help themselves,’” replied Blake. “I’m going to put up the best fight I can. If that doesn’t win out, I shall at least have the satisfaction of not having quit. If you wish to pray, do so. The sooner we start the better. From now on, the water will be rising.”

“I prayed last night,” said Ashton. He added somberly, “And now we are both going to the devil.”

“No,” said Blake, with no less earnestness. “There is no devil—there is no room for a devil in all the universe. What man calls evil is ignorance,—his ignorance of those primeval forces of nature which he has yet to chain; his ignorance of those higher qualities in his own nature which, if known, would prevent him from wronging others and would enable him to bring happiness to himself and others.”

“You say that!” cried Ashton. “You can mock! You do not believe in hell!”

Blake smiled grimly. “What do you call this?—But you mean a hell hereafter. I believe this: If, when we pass into the Unknown, we continue to exist as individual consciousnesses, then we carry with us the heaven and the hell that we have each upbuilt for ourselves.”

“God will not let you escape,” stated Ashton. “You will pass from this hell of water into the hell of fire and brimstone.”

“Have it your own way,” said Blake. “I lived one summer in Death Valley. The other place can’t be much hotter.”

He climbed up the ledges and planted the level firmly on its tripod above the high-water mark of the spring floods. He called down to Ashton: “Hate to leave the old monkey up here; but it will serve as a memento of our present visit, when we come down again to locate the tunnel head.”

“How can it be that we shall ever come down again?” replied Ashton. “It is impossible—for we shall never go up.”

Blake jumped down the ledges to him and pointed to the column of smoke on the lofty heights.

“Look there,” he said. “That is where we are going, if there is any possible way to go. An optimist would stand here and wait, certain that wings would soon sprout for him to fly up; a pessimist would sit down and quit. An optimist is a fool; a pessimist is a worse fool.”

“And which are you?” asked Ashton.

“I am neither. I am a meliorist. I am going to face the facts, and then fight for all I’m worth. What’s more, you’re going to do the same. Come! We’ve still got some clothes left, the rod for you to use as a staff, this rope, the revolver, and seventeen cartridges. It’s fortunate we have any. We’ve got to signal that we are going on down the cañon, instead of back up.”

“We may as well stay and die here. But since you prefer to keep moving, I have no objections,” said Ashton, with ironical politeness.

Blake promptly stepped into the water and led the way to the next shelf of rock. Here he fired a shot. Going a few yards farther along the rocks, he fired again. Three times he fired, at intervals of two minutes. Then the white dot of the flag appeared on the precipice brink directly up across from him.

“Once more, and we’re sure they understand,” he said.

Advancing a full hundred yards on down the cañon, he fired the fourth shot. Very soon the fleck of white flaunted on the rim a little way beyond them.

“They understand!” cried Blake. “Trust Jenny to use her head! Now catch your breath and tighten up. We’re going to move!”

He started, and Ashton followed close behind. It was the same rough, fierce game of leaping, crawling, wading, swimming,—battling with the river, the rocks, the ledges. But now they were no longer checked and halted by the alternate stoppings for set-ups and turning-points, and no longer was Blake encumbered with the care of the level. There was nothing now to hinder or delay them except the natural obstacles of their wild path down the bed of the torrent.

Blake could give all his thought to picking the best and quickest way through rapids and falls, over the water-washed rocks and along the side ledges. And he could give all his great strength to helping his companion past the hard places. In return Ashton gave such help as he could to the engineer, many times when a steadying hand or the outstretched rod rendered easier a descent or the fording of some swift mill race in the stream.

At the end of the first quarter-mile Blake had fired a shot, and again at the second quarter. After that he waited longer intervals. He considered it advisable to husband the few remaining cartridges.

The river was now rapidly rising. But every inch of added depth found the two fugitives much farther down the cañon. In two hours they advanced thrice the distance that they had covered in the same time before noon, and this despite the increasing depth and force of the river.

The pace was so hot that Ashton was beginning to stumble and slip, but Blake kept by him and helped him along by word and deed. He asserted and repeated a dozen times over, that they were nearing the place where an ascent of the precipices might be possible. At last they rounded a turn in the winding chasm, and Blake was able to point to a break in the sheer wall on the Dry Mesa side, where the precipices were set back one above the other in a Cyclopean stepladder and their steeply-pitched faces were rough with crevices and shelves.

“Look!” he cried. “There’s the place—there’s our ladder up from hell to heaven!”

Ashton soon lowered his weary head. He stared dully downstream to where a fifty-foot cliff extended across from side to side of the cañon like a dam.

“Part of the wall slid in,” he stated with the simplicity of one who is nearing exhaustion.

“That shall be our bridge to the ladder,” shouted Blake. “It’s all sheer cliff along here at the foot of the break, but the ledges run down sideways to the top of the cross cliff. We shall soon be lying up there, high and dry, getting our second wind for the run up the ladder.”

The engineer spoke confidently, and felt what he spoke. But as they struggled on down the turbulent stream to the cross cliff, the light left his face. From wall to wall of the cañon the great mass of fallen rock stretched across the bottom in a sheer-faced barrier, broken only by a tunnel barely large enough to suck in the swelling volume of the river.

Blake came down close to the intake, scanning every foot of the cliff face for a scalable break or crevice. There was none to be found. He climbed along the cliff foot to a low shelf beside the roaring tunnel, and stood staring at the opening in deep thought. Even while he looked, the swelling volume of the river filled the tunnel to its roof. Blake peered at the fresh watermark twenty feet up the face of the cliff, and bent down beside Ashton, who had stretched out to rest on the shelf of rock.

“There’s only one thing to it, old man,” he said. “We must dive through that tunnel.”

“Through that hole?” gasped Ashton. “No! I’ve done enough. I shall stay here.”

“To drown like a rat in a rainwater barrel!” rejoined Blake. “Look at that watermark. The tunnel is now running full. Inside a quarter-hour the river will be up over this ledge. It will keep rising till it reaches that mark, and it will not fall

until after low water.”

“What do I care?” said Ashton hopelessly. “Go to the devil your own way. I’d rather drown here than in that underground hole. Leave me alone.”

Blake considered a full half minute, looked up the cliff face, and replied: “Perhaps it’s as well. I shall do the best I can. But first I want to tell you I’ve wiped out all that past affair. You are another person from that Lafayette Ashton. We stand here almost face to face with the Unknown. One or both of us may soon go out into the Darkness. As we may never meet again, I wish to tell you that you have proved yourself, even more than I hoped when I saw you come rushing down the ravine to join me. You have proved yourself a man. Good-by.”

He held out his hand. But Ashton turned his face to the wall of rock and was silent. After a time he heard the sound of Blake’s worn heels on the outer end of the shelf. His ears, attuned to the ceaseless tumult of the waters, caught the click of the protruded heel-nail heads. There was a brief pause—then the plunge. He looked about quickly and saw Blake’s hands vanish in the down-sucking eddy where the swollen waters drew into the now hidden intake of the tunnel.

A cry of horror burst from his heaving chest. Blake had gone—Blake the iron-limbed, iron-hearted man. He had conquered the river—and now the wild waters had seized him and were mauling and smashing and crushing him in the terrible mill of the cavern. Beyond that underground passage, it might be miles away, the victor would fling up on some fanged rock a shapeless mass that once had been a man.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Ashton again turned his face to the rock and groaned. God had answered his prayer. Now must he pay the price. If only he could force himself to lie still while the rising waters brimmed up over the ledge and up over his head and face. He was tired—tired! It would be so peaceful to lie and rest under the quiet waters.

But the first ripple that crept over the surface of the shelf brought him to his feet with the chill of its icy touch. He climbed to a shelf higher up and again stretched himself full length on the rock. To lie still and rest was heavenly.... It was too good to last. The water crept after him up the ledge. This time he could climb no higher.

He sat erect and waited, still resting, until the flood rose to his chin. Then he stood up, leaning on the battered level rod. The water rose after him, creeping with relentless stealth from his thigh to his waist, from his waist to his chest. It would soon be lapping at his throat, and then—he must begin to swim. Life was far stronger within him than he had thought. His strength had come back. Blake was right. A man should fight. He should hold fast to hope, and fight to the very last.

Something swept from side to side along the face of the cliff above him. It tapped the rock close over his head. He looked up and saw a rope. He could not see over the rounded brink of the cliff, but he had no need. There was a rescuer above him who knew his desperate situation. Could it be Blake? Surely not! He must have perished in the frightful vortex of the tunnel.

The rope swung lower. Now it was within reach. Ashton made a clutch as it swept over him and caught its end. He gave a tug. At once the line slackened down to him. He felt something in his palm, twisted between the rope strands. He looked and saw that it was a piece of folded paper. He opened it and found written a terse sentence in Blake's bold clear hand:

Tie rod to line and climb.

Why should he tie the splintered level rod to the rope? Of what possible use could it be in climbing the precipices? But even while Ashton asked himself the questions he obeyed Blake's directions. The water lapped up over his chin as he tied the knot. He pulled heavily on the rope. It gave a little way, and then tautened. He reached up and began to climb, hand over hand, with desperate speed.

Another desperate clutch at the rope—still another

Thirty feet above the water his strength was almost outspent, but he struggled to raise himself one more time, and then another. To pause meant to slip back and perish. Another upward heave. The rope here bent in over the rounding cliff. Hardly could he force his fingers between it and the rock. Yet if only he could get his knee up on the sharp slope! He heaved again, his face purple with exertion, the veins swelling out on his forehead as if about to burst.

At last! his knee was up and braced against the rock. Another desperate clutch at the rope—another heave—still another. The cliff edge was rounding back. Every upward hitch was easier than the one before. Now he was scrambling up on toes and knees; now he could rise to his feet.

The line led across a waterworn ledge and downward. Ashton peered over, and saw the senseless body of Blake wedged against the other side of the ledge. About it, close below the arms, the line was knotted fast.

Ashton stared wonderingly at the still, white face of the unconscious man. It was covered with cold sweat. A peculiar twist in the sprawling left leg caught his attention. He looked—and understood. Panting with exertion, he staggered down the ledges of the lower side of the barrier to where the river burst furiously out of the mouth of the tunnel.

Hurled by that mad torrent from the darkness of the gorged cavern straight upon a line of rocks, all Blake's strength and quickness had not enabled him to save himself from injury. Yet he had crept up those rough ledges, dragging his shattered leg. Atrocious as must have been his agony, he had crept all the way to the top, had written the note, and flung down the rope to rescue his companion.

There was no vessel in which Ashton could carry water. He had no hat, his boots

were full of holes, he must use his hands in scrambling back up the ledges. He stripped off his tattered flannel shirt, dipped it in a swirling eddy, and started back as fast as he could climb.

Blake still lay unconscious. Ashton straightened out the twisted leg, and knelt to bathe the big white face with an end of the dripping garment. After a time the eyelids of the prostrate man fluttered and lifted, and the pale blue eyes stared upward with returning consciousness.

“I’m here!” cried Ashton. “Do you see? You saved me!”

“Colt’s gone,” muttered Blake. “But cartridges—fire.”

“You mean, fire the cartridges to let them know where we are? How can I do it without the revolver?”

“No, build a fire,” replied the engineer. He raised a heavy hand to point towards the high end of the barrier. “Driftwood up there. Bring it down. I’ll light it.”

“Light it—how?” asked Ashton incredulously.

“Get it,” ordered Blake.

Ashton hurried across the crest of the barrier to where it sloped up and merged in the precipice foot. The mass of rock that formed the barrier had fallen out of the face of the lower part of the cañon wall, leaving a great hollow in the rock. But above the hollow the upper precipices beetled out and rose sheer, on up the dizzy heights to the verge of the chasm. Contrasted with this awesome undermined wall, the broken, steeple-sloped precipices adjoining it on the upstream side looked hopefully scalable to Ashton. He marked out a line of shelves and crevices running far up to where the full sunlight smiled on the rock.

But Blake had told him to fetch wood for a fire, that they might signal the watchers on the heights. He hastened up over the rocks to the heaps of logs and branches stranded on the high end of the barrier by the freshets. Every year the river, swollen by the spring rains, brimmed over the top of this natural dam.

Yet not all the heaps lying on the ledges were driftwood. As Ashton approached, he was horrified to see that the largest and highest situated piles were nothing else than masses of bones. Drawn by a gruesome fascination, he climbed up to the nearest of the ghastly heaps. The loose ribs and vertebræ scattered down the slope seemed to him the size of human ribs and vertebræ. He shuddered as they crunched under his tread.

Then he saw a skull with spiral-curved horns. He looked up the cañon wall, and

understood. The high-heaped bones were the skeletons of sheep. In a flash, he remembered Isobel's account of Gowan, that first day up there on the top of the mesa. Not only had the puncher killed six men; he had, together with other violent men of the cattle ranges, driven thousands of sheep over into the cañon—and this was the place.

Sick with horror and loathing, Ashton ran to snatch up an armful of the smaller driftwood and hurry back down to the center of the barrier. He found Blake lying white and still. But beside him were three cartridges from which the bullets had been worked out. At the terse command of the engineer, Ashton ground one of the older and drier pieces of wood to minute fragments on a rock.

Blake emptied the powder from one of the cartridges into the little pile of splinters, and holding the edge of another shell against a corner of the rock, tapped the cap with a stone. At the fifth stroke the cap exploded. The loosened powder of the cartridge flared out into the powder-sprinkled tinder. Soon a fire of the dry, half-rotted driftwood was blazing bright and almost smokeless in the twilight of the depths.

“Now haul up the rod,” directed Blake, and he lay back to bask in the grateful warmth.

Ashton drew up the level rod and came back over the ledge. He found that the engineer had freed himself from the last coils of the rope and was unraveling the end that had been next his body. But his eyes were upturned to the heights.

“Look—the flag!” he said.

“Already?” exclaimed Ashton.

“Yes. No doubt one of them has been waiting on that out-jutting point.—Now, if you'll break the rod. We've got to get my leg into splints.”

The crude splints were soon ready. For bandages there were strips from the tattered shirts of both men. Unraveled rope-strands, burnt off in the fire, served to lash all together. Beads of cold sweat gathered and rolled down Blake's white face throughout the cruel operation. Yet he endured every twist and pull of the broken limb without a groan. When at last the bones were set to his satisfaction and the leg lashed rigid to the splints, he even mustered a faint smile.

“That beats an amputation,” he declared. “Now if you can help me up under the cliff, where you can plant the fire against a back-log—I want to dry out and do some planning while you're climbing up for help. I've an idea we can put in a dynamo down here, with turbines in the intake and in the mouth of the tunnel—

carry a wire up over the top of the mesa and down into the gulch. Understand? All the electric power we want to drive the tunnel, and very cheap.”

“My God!” gasped Ashton. “You can lie here—here—maimed, already starving—and can plan like that?”

“Why not? No fun thinking of my leg, is it? As for the rest, you’re going up to report the situation. They’ll soon manage to yank me out of this blessed hole.”

Ashton’s face darkened. “But that’s the question,” he rejoined. “Am I going to go up? Am I going to try to go up?”

Blake looked at him with a steady, unflinching gaze. “There’s something queer about all this. Isn’t it time you explained? When the rope came off that last cliff in the gorge and I saw that you had untied it before sliding down, I thought you were off your head. And two or three times today, too. But since we landed here—”

“Your broken leg,” interrupted Ashton—“it made me forget. You had saved me with the rope. I had to help you. Now I see how foolish I have been. I should have left you to lie here, and flung myself back over into the water.”

“Why?” calmly queried Blake.

“Why! You ask why?” cried Ashton, his eyes ablaze with excitement, his whole body quivering. “Can’t you see? Are you blind? What do I care about myself if I can save her from you? I shall not try to escape. You shall never go up there to work her harm!”

“Harm her? You mean put through this irrigation project?”

“No!” shouted Ashton. “Don’t lie and pretend, you hypocrite! You know what I mean! You know she could not hide how you were enticing her!”

Blake stared in utter astonishment. Then, regardless of his leg, he sat up and said quietly: “I see. I thought you must have understood when she told me, there at the last moment before we started. She is my sister.”

“Sister!” scoffed Ashton. “You liar! You have no sister. Your sisters died years ago. Genevieve told me.”

“That was what I told her. I believed it true. But it was not true. Belle did not die—God! when I think of that! It has helped me through this fight—it helped me crawl up here with that leg dangling. Good God! To think of Jenny waiting for me up there, and Son, and little Belle too—little Belle whom all these years I

thought dead!”

Ashton stood as if turned to stone. “Belle—you call her Belle? She told me—Chuckie only a nickname!” he stammered. “Adopted—her real name Isobel!”

“We always called her Belle—Baby Belle! She was the youngest,” said Blake.

“But why—why did you not—tell me?”

“I did not know. She did—she knew from the first, there at Stockchute. I see it now. Even before that, she must have guessed it. Yes, I see all now. She sent for me to come out here, because she thought I might be her brother.”

“You did not tell me!” reproached Ashton, his face ghastly. “How was I to know?”

“I tell you, I did not know,” repeated Blake. “At first—yes, all along—there was something about her voice and face—But she had changed so much, and all these years—eight, nine years—I had thought her dead. She gave me no sign—only that friendliness. I did not know until the very last moment, there on the edge of the ravine. I thought you saw it; that you heard her tell me. It seemed to me everybody must have heard.”

“I was running away—I could not bear it. I think I must have been crazy for a time. If only I had heard! My God! if only I had heard!”

“Well, you know now,” said Blake. “What’s done is done. The question now is, what are you going to do next?”

Instantly Ashton’s drooping figure was a-quiver with eagerness.

“You wish first to be taken up near the driftwood,” he exclaimed. “Let me lift you. Don’t be afraid to put your weight on me. Hurry! We must lose no time!”

Blake was already struggling up. Ashton strained to help him rise erect on his sound leg. Braced and half lifted by the younger man, the engineer hobbled and hopped along the barrier crest and up its sloping side. His trained eye picked out a great weather-seasoned pine log lying directly beneath the outermost point of the cañon rim. An object dropped over where the flag still flecked against the indigo sky, would have fallen straight down to the log, unless deflected by the prong of a ledge that jutted out twelve hundred feet from the top.

“Here,” panted Blake, regardless of the great pile of skeletons heaped on the far end of the log. “This place—right below them! Go back—bring fire and rope.”

Ashton ran back to fetch the rope and a dozen blazing sticks. Driftwood was

strewn all around. In a minute he had a fire started against the butt end of the log. He began to gather a pile of fuel. But Blake checked him with a cheerful—"That's enough, old man. I can manage now. Take the rope, and go."

When Ashton had coiled the rope over his shoulder and under the opposite arm, he came and stood before his prostrate companion. His face was scarlet with shame.

"I have been a fool—and worse," he said. "I doubted her. I am utterly unfit to live. If I were alone down here, I would stay and rot. But you are her brother. If it is possible to get up there, I am going up."

"You are going up!" encouraged Blake. "You will make it. Give my love to them. Tell them I'm doing fine."

He held out his hand.

"No," said Ashton. "I'd give anything if I could grip hands with you. But I cannot. You are her brother. I am unfit to touch your hand."

He turned and ran up the precipice-foot to the first steep ascent of the steeple-sloped break in the wall of the abyss.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CLIMBER

A day of anxiety, only partly relieved by those tiny flashes of light so far, far down in the awful depths; then the long night of ceaseless watching. Neither Genevieve nor Isobel had been able to sleep during those hours when no flash signaled up to them from the abysmal darkness.

Then at last, a full hour after dawn on the mesa top, the down-peering wife had caught the flash that told of the renewal of the exploration. As throughout the previous day, Gowan brought the ladies food and whatever else they needed. Only the needs of the baby had power to draw its mother away from the cañon edge. Isobel moved always along the giddy verge wherever she could cling to it, following the unseen workers in the depths.

On his first trip to the ranch, the puncher had brought Genevieve's field glasses—an absurdly small instrument of remarkable power. Three times the first day and twice the second morning she and Isobel had the joy of seeing their loved ones creeping along the abyss bottom at places where the sun pierced down through the gloom. They missed other chances because the cañon edge was not everywhere so easily approachable.

Many times the flash of Blake's revolver passed unseen by them. Sometimes they had been forced away from the brink; sometimes the depths were cut off from their view by juttings of the vast walls. Yet now and again one or the other caught a flash that marked the advance of the explorers.

Towards midday a last flash was seen by both above the turn where the cañon curved to run towards Dry Fork Gulch. Between this point and the sharp bend opposite the gulch the precipices overhung the cañon bottom. Carrying the baby, the two hastened to the bend, to heap up and light a great beacon fire of green wood.

Gowan followed with the ponies, cool, silent and efficient. From the first he had seldom looked over into the cañon. His part was to serve Miss Chuckie and her friend, and wait. Like Ashton, he had failed to surmise the real significance of

that tender parting between Blake and Isobel. His look had betrayed boundless amazement when he saw the wife of the man take the sobbing girl into her arms and comfort her. But he had spoken no word of inquiry; and every moment since, both ladies had been too utterly absorbed in their watch to talk to him of anything else.

At last the exploration was nearing the turning point. Genevieve and Isobel lay on the edge of the precipice near the beacon fire, peering down for the flash that would tell of the last rod reading.

Slowly the minutes dragged by, and no welcome signal flashed through the dark shadows. The usual interval between shots had passed. Still no signal. They waited and watched, with fast-mounting apprehension. Could the brave ones down in those fearsome depths have failed almost in sight of the goal? or could misfortune have overtaken them in that narrow, cavernous reach of the chasm so close to their objective point?

At last—"There! there it is!"

Together the two watchers saw the flash, and together they shrieked the glad discovery.

Genevieve rose to go to her crying baby. Before she could silence him, Isobel screamed to her: "Another shot!—farther downstream! What can it mean?"

Genevieve put down the still-sobbing baby and ran again to the verge of the precipice. Two minutes after the second flash there came a third, a few yards still farther along the cañon.

"They have changed their plans. They are going downstream," said Genevieve.

She caught up the long pole of the flag and ran to thrust it out opposite the point where she had seen the flash.

Gowan was preparing for the return trip up along the cañon to the starting point. At Isobel's call, he silently turned the ponies about the other way and followed the excited watchers. As he did so, the girl perceived a fourth flash in the abyss, a hundred yards farther downstream. She hastened with the flag to a point a little beyond the place.

When Genevieve had quieted the baby and overtaken Isobel, the latter was ready with a question: "You know Tom so well. Why is he going on down? He said that he would at once return after reaching the place where the head of the tunnel is to be."

“He must have seen the beacon,” replied Genevieve. “He could not have mistaken that. Something has forced him to change his plans. It may be they were swept down some place in the river that he knows they cannot re-ascend.”

“Oh! do not say it!” sobbed the girl. “If they cannot get back—oh! what will they do? How will they ever escape?”

“Is there no other place?” asked Genevieve. “Think, dear. Is there no break in these terrible precipices?”

“There’s a place where the wall slopes back—but steep, oh, so steep! Yet it is barely possible—” The girl’s voice sank, and she glanced about at Gowan. “It is just this side of where more than five thousand sheep were driven over into the cañon. That was four years ago. I have never since been able to go near the place.”

“Tom said that he rode all along the cañon for miles. You say it may be possible to climb up at that place. He must have seen it, and he has remembered it.”

“Then you think—?”

“I know that if it is possible for anyone to climb the wall, Tom will climb it—and he will bring up Lafayette with him.”

“Dear Genevieve! You are so strong! so full of hope!”

“Not hope, dear. It is trust. I know Tom better than you. That is all.”

“Another flash!” cried Isobel. “So soon, yet all that long way from the last! They are traveling far faster!”

“Yes, they have finished with the levels,” divined Genevieve. “We must hasten.”

Isobel called the news to the silent puncher, and all moved along to overtake the hurrying fugitives below. Though both parties went so much faster, Blake’s frequent shots kept the anxious watchers above in closer touch than at any time before.

At last they came to that Cyclopean ladder of precipices, rising one above the other in narrow steps, and all inclined at a giddy pitch far steeper than any house roof. Yet for a long way down them the field glasses showed their surfaces wrinkled with shelves and projecting ledges and creased with faults and crevices.

The party went past this semi-break in the sheer wall, and halted on the out-jutting point of the rim where the luckless flock of sheep had been driven over to destruction. No reference was made to that ruthless slaughter of innocents.

Gowan calmly set about preparing a camp. The ladies lay down to watch in the shade of a frost-cracked rock on the verge of the wall.

Already the time had come and gone for the regular signal of the revolver shot. The watchers began to grow apprehensive. Still their straining eyes saw no flash in the depths. A half hour passed. Their apprehension deepened to dread. An hour—they were white with terror.

Suddenly a tiny red spot appeared—not a flash that came and went like lightning, but a flame that remained and grew larger.

“A fire!” cried Isobel. “They have halted and built a fire.”

Genevieve brought the flag and thrust it out over the edge. The inner end of the pole she wedged in a crevice of the split rock.

“They have stopped to rest,” she said. “It may be that Lafayette is worn out. But soon I trust they will be coming up.”

She looked through her glasses. The fire was burning its brightest. She discerned the prostrate figure beside the ledge. She watched it fixedly. Soon another figure appeared in the circle of firelight. It bent over the first, doing something with pieces of stick.

“Look,” whispered Genevieve, handing the glasses to her companion, “Tom is hurt. Lafayette is binding his leg. It is broken or badly strained.—Oh! will your father never come?”

“Tom hurt? It can’t be—no, no!” protested Isobel. But she too looked and saw. After a time she added breathlessly: “It can’t be so bad! Lafe is helping him to rise.... They are starting this way—to the foot of the wall! They will be climbing up!”

“But if his leg is injured!” differed Genevieve.

Again they waited. Presently the fire scattered, and a streak of flame traveled across the cañon to a point beneath them. Soon the red spot of a new fire glowed in the shadows so directly under them that a pebble dropped from their fingers must have grazed down the precipices and fallen into the flames.

After several minutes of alternate peering through the glasses, Genevieve handed them back to Isobel for the third time, and rose to go to her baby.

“It is Tom alone,” she said, divining the truth. “Lafayette has helped him to the best place they could find, and now he is coming up to us for help.”

When she had fed the baby and soothed him to sleep, she laid out bandages and salve, set a full coffeepot on the fire started by Gowan, and examined the cream and eggs brought back by the puncher on his second night trip to the ranch.

Nearly an hour had passed when Isobel called in joyous excitement: "I see him! I see him! Down there where the sunlight slants on the rocks. Oh! how bravely! how swiftly he climbs!"

Genevieve went to take the glasses and look. Several moments were lost before she could locate the tiny figure creeping up that stairway of the giants. But, once she had fixed the glasses upon him, she could see him clearly. Isobel had well expressed it when she said that he was climbing swiftly and bravely. Running along shelves, clambering ledges, following up the crevices that offered the best foothold, the tattered climber fought his dizzy way upwards, upwards, ever upwards!

Rarely, after some particularly hard scramble, he flung himself down on a shelf or on one of the steps of the Titanic ladder, to rest and summon energy for another upward rush. His good fortune seemed as marvelous as his endurance and daring. He never once slipped and never once had to turn back from an ascent. As if guided by instinct or divine intuition, he chose always the safest, the least difficult, the most continuously scalable way on all that perilous pitch.

So swift an ascent was beyond the ordinary powers of man. It could have been made only by a maniac or by one to whom great passion had given command of those latent forces of the body that enable the maniac to fling strong men about like children. Long before the climber reached the top of that terrible ladder, his hands were torn and bleeding, the tattered garments were half rent from his limbs and body, his eyes were sunk deep in their sockets.

Yet ever he climbed, ledge above ledge, crevice after crevice, until at last only one steep pitch rose above him. A rope came sliding down the rock. A voice—the sweetest voice in all the wide world of sunshine and life—called to him. It sounded very far away, farther than the bounds of reality, yet he heard and obeyed. He slipped the loop of the rope down over his shoulders and about his heaving forebody. Then suddenly his labor was lightened. His leaden body became winged. It floated upwards.

When he came to himself, a bitter refreshing wetness was soothing his parched mouth and black swollen tongue; gentle fingers were spreading balm on his torn hands; the loveliest face of earth or heaven was downbent over him, its tender blue eyes brimming with tears of compassion and love. Softly his head and

shoulders were raised, and hot coffee was poured down his throat as fast as he could swallow.

He half roused from his daze. The swollen, cracked lips moved in faintly muttered words: “Leg broken—sends love—doing fine—project feasible—irrigation—no food—must rest—go down again.”

The eyes of the two ministering angels met. Genevieve bent down and pressed her lips to the purple, swollen-veined forehead. The heavy lids closed over the sunken eyes; but before he lapsed into the torpid sleep of exhaustion that fell upon him, the two succeeded in feeding him several spoonfuls of raw egg beaten in cream. He then sank into utter unconsciousness.

Flaccid and inert as a corpse, he lay outstretched on the grassy slope while they bound up the cuts and bruises on his naked arms and shoulders and cut the broken, gaping boots from his bruised feet. His legs, doubly protected by the tough leather chapareras and thick riding leggings, had fared less cruelly than his arms, but his knees were raw and bleeding where the chaps had worn through on the rocks.

CHAPTER XXX

LURKING BEASTS

The moment that he had helped haul the climber to safety Gowan had ridden away with the horses to the camp. He now came jogging back with the tent and all else that they had not been carrying with them in their skirting of the cañon edge. He unloaded the packs and hastened to pitch the tent.

As he was finishing, Isobel called to him sharply. "What are you doing there, Kid? That can wait. Come here."

"Yes, Miss Chuckie," he replied with ready obedience. But when he came down the slope to the little group, his mouth was like a thin gash across his lean jaws. He stared coldly at Ashton between narrowed lids. "Want me to help tote him up by the fire?" he asked.

"No!" she replied. "It is Tom! He is down there—his leg broken—and no food! You must go down to him."

"Go down?" queried the puncher. "What good would that do? I couldn't help him with that climb. He weighs a good two hundred." 350

"You can take food down to him and let him know that help is coming. You must!"

Gowan looked sullenly at the unconscious man. "Sorry, Miss Chuckie. It's no go. I ain't a mountain sheep."

"But *he* came up!"

"That's different. It's a sight easier going up cliffs than climbing down. No, you'll have to excuse me, Miss Chuckie."

The girl flamed with indignant anger. "You coward! You saw him come up, after all that time down in those fearful depths—after fighting his way all those miles along the terrible river—yet you dare not go down! You coward! you quitter!"

The puncher's face turned a sickly yellow, and he seemed to shrink in on himself. His voice sank to a husky whisper: "You can say that, Miss Chuckie!"

Any man say it, he'd be dead before now. If you want to know, I've got a mighty good reason for not wanting to go down. It ain't that I'm afraid. You can bank on that. It's something else. I'll go quick enough—but it's got to be on one condition. You've got to promise to marry me."

"Marry you?"

"Yes. You know how I've felt towards you all these years. Promise to marry me, and I'll go to hell and back for you. I'll do anything for you. I'll save him!"

"You cur! You'd force me to bargain myself to you!" she cried, fairly beside herself with righteous fury. "I thought you a man! You cur—you cowardly cur!"

Gowan turned from her and walked rapidly away along the cañon edge, his head hunched between his shoulders, his hands downstretched at his thighs, the fingers crooked convulsively.

"Oh!" gasped Genevieve. "You've driven him away! Call him back! We need him! He must go for help!"

The words shocked the girl out of her rash anger. Her flushed face whitened with fear. "Kid!" she screamed. "Come back, Kid! You must go to the ranch—bring the men!"

The cry of appeal should have brought him back to her on the run. It pierced high above the booming reverberations of the cañon. Yet he paid no heed. He neither halted nor paused nor even looked back. If anything, he hurried away faster than before.

"Kid! dear Kid! forgive me! Come back and help us!" shrieked the girl.

He kept on down along the cañon rim, his chin sunk on his breast, his downstretched hands bent like claws. She ran a little way after him; only to flutter back again, wringing her hands, distracted. "What shall we do? what shall we do?"

"Be quiet, dear—be quiet!" urged Genevieve. "You've driven him away. We must do the best we can. You must go yourself. I can stay and watch—"

"No, no!" cried Isobel. "The way he looked at Lafe!—I dare not go! He may come back—and I not here!"

She knelt to place her trembling hand on Ashton's forehead.

Genevieve looked at the setting sun. "There is no time to lose," she said. "Saddle my horse while I nurse Baby. I cannot take him with me down the mountain, in

the dark.”

“Genevieve! You dare go—at night?”

“Someone must bring help, else Tom—all alone down in that dreadful chasm—!”

“But you may lose the way! I will go!”

“No, no, you must stay, Belle. I saw his eyes. He may come back. I could not protect Lafayette, but you—There is no other way. I must leave Baby, and go.”

Wondering at the courage of the young mother, Isobel ran to saddle the oldest of the picketed horses. He was the slowest of them all, but he was surefooted and steady and very wise. When she brought him down the ridge, Genevieve placed the newly fed baby in her arms and went with the glasses to peer down the sheer precipices. There in the blackness so far beneath her the glowing fire illuminated an outstretched form. It was her husband, lying flat on his back and gazing up at the heights. Almost she could fancy that he saw her as she saw him.

But she did not linger. Time was too precious. She dropped him a kiss, and ran to spring upon the waiting pony. She did not pause even to kiss the big-eyed baby. The thirsty pony needed no urging to start at a lively jog up the slope of the first ridge. As he topped the crest and broke into a lope the sun dipped below the western edge of High Mesa. A few seconds later horse and rider disappeared from Isobel’s anxious gaze down the far side of the ridge.

“Old Buck knows the trail,” murmured the girl. “He knows he is headed for the waterhole. Yet if—if he *should* lose the trail!”

A spasm of fear sent her hand to the pistol hilt under the fold of her skirt and twisted her head about. She glared along the cañon rim. Gowan was still striding away from her. She watched him fixedly, her hand clutched fast on the hilt of her pistol, until he disappeared around a mass of rocks.

The whinnying of the horses after their companion at last drew her attention. They had not been watered since the previous evening. Cuddling close the frightened baby, the girl fetched a basin and one of the water cans, to sponge out the dusty nostrils of the animals and give each two or three swallows.

Then, when she had soothed the fretful child to sleep, she laid him in a snug nest of blankets between a rock and a fallen tree, and went to watch beside Ashton. He lay as she had left him, in a stupor of sleep and exhaustion.

Gradually the twilight faded. Stars began to twinkle in the cloudless sky. She

watched and waited while the dusk deepened. When she could barely see objects a few yards away, she stooped over the unconscious man and, putting out all her supple young strength, half dragged, half carried him up the slope to a hiding place that she had chosen, in under an overhanging ledge. There she spread pine needles and blankets on the soft mold and lifted him upon them, so that nothing hard should press against his wounds.

The fire had burned low. It was a full hundred yards away from the hiding place. She went to replenish it and take a hasty look down at that outstretched form in the depths. But soon she stole back to the sleeping man under the rock, going, as she had come, by a roundabout way in the darkness.

Night settled down close and dense over the plateau. The girl crouched beside the sleeper, her eyes peering out into the blackness, the drawn pistol ready in her hand. She could see only a few feet in the dim starlight. But her ears, accustomed to the dull monotone of the booming cañon, heard every sound—the click of the horses' hoofs, even the munching of the nearest one, the hoot of the owls that flitted overhead, the distant yelps and wails of coyotes.

An hour passed, two hours—a third. She crept around to replenish the fire. When she returned she heard the baby fretting. Swiftly she groped her way to him and carried him to the hiding place, to quiet his outcry. He sucked in a little of the beaten egg and cream that she had ready for Ashton. It satisfied his hunger, and he fell asleep, clasped against her soft warm bosom. She crouched down with him in her lap, her right hand again clasped on the pistol hilt, ready for the expected attack.

She waited as before, silent, motionless, every sense alert. Another hour dragged by, and another. Midnight passed. Suddenly, on the ridge slope above her, one of the horses snorted and plunged. She raised the pistol. The horse became quiet. But something came gliding around the rocks, a low form vaguely outlined in the darkness. It might have been a creeping man. It turned towards the hiding place. The girl found herself looking into a pair of glaring eyes. She thrust out the pistol, with her forefinger pointing along the barrel. The darkness was too deep for her to aim by the sights.

Before she could press the trigger, the beast bounded away, with a snarl far deeper, far more ferocious than any coyote could have uttered. The girl did not fire. The wolf had seen the glint of her pistol barrel and had fled. He would not return. But she shuddered and drew the sleeping baby close as she thought of what might have happened had she left him alone in the nest between the rock

and the tree.

The precious, helpless child! He was of her own blood, the son of her strong, splendid brother ... of her brother, lying down there in those awful depths, helpless—in agony!...

CHAPTER XXXI

CONFESSIONS

A groping hand touched her arm; bandaged fingers sought to feel who she was. Behind her sounded a drowsy incoherent murmur. The snarl of the wolf had roused the sleeper from his torpor.

“Hush—hush!” she whispered. “It is all well. I am here by you. Lie still.”

“Isobel!” he murmured. “Isobel!”

“Yes, dear!” she soothed. “I am here. Rest—go to sleep again. All is well.”

“All is—?” He roused a little more. “You say—Then he is safe! They have brought him up—out of that hell!”

She could not lie outright. “He will soon be safe. By morning help will have come to us. As soon as the men can see to go down, they will descend for him. They will bring him up the way that you have shown us!”

Her voice quivered with pride of what he had done. She drew up his hand and pressed her lips tenderly upon the bandages.

Had the caress been a burn, he could not have more quickly snatched the hand away. He sought to rise, and struck his head against the overhanging rock.

“Where am I? Let me out!” he said.

“No, you must not! Lie still! You must not!” she remonstrated.

“Lie still?” he repeated. “Lie still! with him down there—alone!”

“But it is night—midnight. It will be hours before even the moon rises.”

“And he down there—alone! Help me make ready. I am going down to him.”

“Going down? But you cannot! It is midnight!”

“There is a lantern. I shall take that. It will be easier than in the daytime, for I shall not see those sickening precipices below.”

He sought to creep out past her. She clutched his arm.

“No, no! do not go! There is no need! Wait until they come. You have done your share—far more than your share! Wait!”

“I cannot,” he replied. “I must go down to him. I have no right to be up here, and he still down there.”

“You must!” she urged, clinging tighter to his arm. “You may fall. I am afraid! I cannot bear it! Do not go! Stay with me—say that you will stay with me—dearest!”

“Good God!” he cried, tearing himself away from her, “To let you say it—say it to me!”

“Dearest!” she repeated. “Dearest, do not go! There is no need! I cannot bear it! Do not go!”

“No need? My God! When I could fling myself over, if it were not for him! To have let you say it—to me—to a liar! thief! murderer!”

“Dearest!” she whispered. “Hush! You are delirious—you do not know—”

“It is you who do not know!” he cried. “But you shall—everything—all my cowardly baseness!” The confession burst from him in a torrent of self-denunciation—“That trip to town, when we went to fetch them, I lied to you about those bridge plans. It was not true that I found them. He handed them to me. He took no receipt. I looked at them and saw how wonderful they were. I stole them. My father had threatened to cast me off if I did not do something worth while. I was desperate. So I stole your brother’s plans. I copied them—”

“You know about Tom!” she interrupted. “But of course. You saw me tell him, there at the ravine.”

“I saw you put your arms about his neck and kiss him; but I did not hear—I did not see the truth. I believed—that is the worst of it all—I believed it possible that you—you—!... That devil Gowan.... But that is no excuse. Had I not already doubted you.... And I went down—down into hell, with only one purpose—to make certain that he never should come up again!”

“Dear Christ!” whispered the girl—“Dear Christ! He has gone mad!”

“No, Isobel,” he said, his voice slow and dead with the calm of utter despair, “I am not mad. I have never been mad except for a little while after you put your arms about his neck. No—For years I was a fool, a profligate fool, wasting my

life as I wasted all those thousands of dollars that I had not earned. I turned thief—a despicable sneak thief. At last the dirty crime found me out. I received a small share of the punishment that I deserved. Then you took me in—without question—treated me as a man. God knows I tried to be one!”

“You were!—you are!” she broke in. “This is all a mistake—a cruel, hideous mistake!”

“I tried to go,” he went on unflinchingly. “You urged me to stay. I was weak. I could not force myself to leave you.”

“Because—because!” she murmured.

“All the more reason why I should have gone,” he replied. “But I was weak, unfit. I lied to you and won your pity. You gave me the chance to stay and prove myself what I am. Down there, when he told me what I should have guessed—what I must have guessed had not my own baseness blinded me to the truth—when he told me he was your brother, I saw myself, my real self,—my shriveled, black, hellish soul. Now you see why I must go down again. I can never make reparation for what I have done. But I can at least go down to him.”

“You take all the blame on yourself!” she protested. “What if I had confessed my secret, there at the first, when Tom sprang down from the car and I knew him.”

“If you had told, then I should not have been tempted to doubt you, and I should have gone on, it might have been forever, with that lie and that theft between us—and I should not have been forced to see, as I now see, my absolute unworthiness of you.”

“Of me!” she cried shrilly, and she burst into wild hysterical laughter. It broke off as abruptly as it began. “Unworthy of me—of me? the daughter of a drunken mother, the sister of a girl who—” A sob choked her. She went on desperately: “You have told me all. But I—do you not wonder why I kept silent—why I denied Mary by my silence? You say you sought to harm Tom—down there. You did not know he was my brother. You thought he would harm me. Is it not so?”

“I doubted you!”

“Why? Because I failed to tell the truth. I feared to hurt him—to make trouble between him and his rich, high-bred wife. As if I should not have known better the moment I saw Genevieve! Dear sister! she knows all. But you—Either I should have spoken, or I should have hidden all my fondness for him. But I could not hide my love for him—and I was ashamed to tell.”

“Ashamed—you?”

“We lived in the slums. They told me my father was a big man, a man such as Tom is now. He was a railroad engineer. He was killed when I was a baby. Then we sank into the slums. My mother—she died when I was twelve. There was then only Mary and I and Tom. He could make only a little, working at odd jobs. Mary and I worked in a factory. Even she was under age. When I was going on fourteen there came a terrible winter when thousands were out of work. We almost starved.”

“You—starved!” murmured Ashton. “Starved! And I was starting in at college, flinging away money!”

“Tom tried to force people to let him work,” the girl went on drearily. “He was violent. They put him in jail. Soon Mary and I had nothing left. There was no work for us. We had sold everything that anyone would buy. The rent was overdue. They turned us out—on the streets.... I was too young; but Mary.... She found a place where I could stay. They were decent people, but hard....

“The weather was bitterly cold. She was taken sick. When the people with whom I was staying heard what she had done, they refused to help. I begged in the street. I was very small and thin. The—the beasts did not trouble me. Then, when Mary was very sick, I met Daddy. I begged from him. He did not give me a nickel and pass on. He stopped and made me talk—he made me take him to Mary.

“He had her moved to the best hospital.... It was too late.... I also had pneumonia. They said I would die. But Daddy brought me home just as soon as I could be moved. The railroad was then a hundred miles from Dry Mesa. But he kept me wrapped in furs, and all the way he carried me in his arms. Do you wonder why I love him so?... That is all. You see now why I shrank from telling—why I denied Mary.”

“She is in Heaven,” said Ashton—“in Heaven, where some day you will go. But I—I—” She could see no more than the vague blotch of his white face in the darkness, but his voice told her the anguish of his look. “He was right—your brother. He told me that we always take with us the heaven or the hell that we each have made for ourselves.... I have lost you.... You know now why I am going down to do the little that I can do.”

“You are going down?” she asked wonderingly. “You still say that you are going down? Yet I have told you about—Mary!”

“If you were she, I still would be utterly unfit to look you in the face. I shall go to the camp for the lantern. There were other gloves and some of my clothing.”

“They are all here.”

“Show me where they are, and get ready the lantern and bandages and a sack of food.”

“You are going down,” she acquiesced. “You are going to Tom. And you are coming up with him—to me!”

“That is too much. I doubted you. Where are those things? He is waiting down there alone.”

“Here is his child, my nephew,” she said. “Hold him while I go for what you need. Here is my pistol. The man who shot you, who twice tried to murder you—he is somewhere up here. He will not harm me. But you—If he comes creeping in on you here, shoot him as you would shoot a coyote.”

“The man who shot me? He is up here?”

“You have seen him every day since that first day I met you,” replied the girl. “His name is Gowan.”

“*Gowan?*”

“Kid Gowan, murderer! I saw his eyes as he looked at you, lying down there on the brink. Then I knew.”

“But—if he—Where is Genevieve? I cannot go and leave you alone.”

“You can—you must! He is a coward. He dare not follow you down that terrible place. No harm will come to me if you are gone. But if he comes back and finds you—do you not see that if he kills you, he must also kill me? But in the morning, when the others come—Oh, why hasn’t Daddy come? All this long time since you went down into the depths, and he not with us! If only he were here!”

“Genevieve?” again inquired Ashton.

“She has gone. She started down the mountain for help when Kid went away. I’m so afraid for you, dear! He may be creeping back now—he may be waiting already, close by here, in the darkness. But if he has not heard our voices, he will go first to where you came up, and then to the tent. Keep quiet until I return. Wait; here is cream and egg. Drink it all.”

When he had drained the bowl that she held to his lips, she crept away. Ashton

sat still, the warm, soft little body of the sleeping baby in his arms, the pistol in his bandaged right hand. In her excitement Isobel had forgotten his bound fingers. If Gowan had come on him then, he would have put the baby back in under the rock, and faced the puncher's revolver with a smile. What had he now to live for? He had lost her. She had not yet grasped the baseness of what he had thought and done. As soon as she realized ... And he could never forgive himself.

CHAPTER XXXII

OVER THE BRINK

Isobel came back to him, noiselessly gliding around through the darkness. She set down the bundle she was carrying, and hung blankets over the entrance of the little cave. She then lighted the lantern. He held out his bound hands. She unbound them enough for him to use his fingers, and taking the baby and the pistol, crouched down, with her ear close to the screening blankets, while he exchanged his tattered clothes for those she had brought to him.

There were also his change of boots and a pair of Blake's gauntlet gloves, into which he was able to force his slender fingers without removing the remaining bandages. Isobel had already bound up into a kind of knapsack the food and clothing and first-aid package that he was to take down to her injured brother. He slung it upon his back, and whispered that he was ready.

She nestled the baby in the warm blankets on which he had lain, wrapped a blanket about the lantern, and led him cautiously down to the brink of the chasm. Dark as was the night about them, it was bright compared with the intense blackness of that profound abyss. The girl caught his arm and shrank back from the edge.

"You will not fall? you are certain you will not fall?" she whispered.

"I cannot fall," he answered with calm conviction. "He needs me. I am going down to him. Besides, it will be easier with the lantern than if I could see below."

"Do not uncover the light until you are down over the edge.—Wait!"

She stooped to knot the rope that he had brought up from the depths, to the lariats with which he had been dragged up the last ledges. She looped the end about his waist.

"There," she said. "I shall at least be able to help you down the first fifty yards."

"God bless you and keep you! Good-by!" he murmured in a choking voice, and

he hastily crept down to slip over the first ledge of that night-shrouded Cyclopean ladder.

“Lafe!” she whispered. “Surely you do not mean to go without first telling me—I cannot let you go until—If you should fall! Wait, dearest! Kiss me—tell me that you—Oh, if you should fall!”

“I will not fall; I cannot. Good-by!”

The dim white blotch of his face disappeared below the verge. The line jerked through the girl’s hands. She clutched it with frantic strength and flung herself back with her feet braced against a point of rock. After a moment of tense straining, the rope slackened, and his voice came up to her over the ledge: “Pay out, please. It’s all right. I’ve found a crevice.”

She eased off on the line a few inches at a time, but always keeping it taut and always holding herself braced for a sudden jerk. At last the end came into her hand. She had to lie out on the rim-rock and call down to him. He called back in a tone of quiet assurance. The line slackened. He had cast it loose. The lantern glowed out in the blackness and showed him standing on a narrow shelf.

As Isobel bent lower to gaze at him, a frightful scream rang out above the booming of the cañon. It was a shriek such as a woman would utter in mortal fear. The girl drew back from the verge, her hair stiffening with horror. Could it be possible that Genevieve had lost her way and was wandering back to camp, and that Gowan—

Again the fearful scream pierced the air. Isobel looked quickly across towards the far side of the cañon. She could see nothing, but she drew in a deep sigh of relief. The second cry had told her that it was only a mountain lion, over on the other brink of the chasm.

When she again looked down at Ashton he was descending a crevice with a rapidity that brought her heart into her mouth. Yet there was no hurry in his quick movements, and every little while he paused on a shelf to peer at the steep slope immediately below him. Soon the circle of lantern light became smaller and dimmer to the anxious watcher above. Steadily it waned until all she could see was a little point of light far down in the darkness—and always it grew smaller and fainter.

Lying there with her bosom pressed against the hard stone, her straining eyes fixed on that lessening point of light, she had lost all count of time. Her whole soul was in her eyes, watching, watching, watching lest that tiny light should

suddenly shoot down like a meteor and vanish in the darkness. Many times it disappeared, but never in swift downward flight, and always it reappeared.

Not until the moon came gliding up above the lofty white crests of the snowy range did she think of aught else than that speck of light and of him who was bearing it down into the black depths. But the glint of moonlight on a crystalline stone broke her steadfast gaze. Before she could again fix it on the faint point of lantern light a sound that had been knocking at the threshold of her consciousness at last made itself heard. It was an intermittent clinking as of steel on stone.

She looked around, thinking that one of the horses was walking along the ridge slope with a loose shoe. But all were standing motionless in the moonlight, dozing. Again she heard the click, and this time she located the direction from which it came. She looked at the split rock on the edge of the sheer drop. From beside it she had peered down through the field glasses at the outstretched form of her brother, far beneath in the cañon bottom.

The sound came from that rock. She stared at the side of the frost-split fragment with dilated eyes. The crack between the loose outer boulder and the main mass showed very black and wide in the moonlight. Could it be possible that it had widened—that it was slipping over? And her brother down there beneath it!...

By setting wedge-shaped stones in the top of the cleft rock and prying with the crowbar, Gowan had gradually canted the top of the loose outer boulder towards the edge of the precipice. It had only to topple forward in order to plunge down the cañon wall. He was working as silently as he could, but with a fierce eagerness that caused an occasional slip of the crowbar on the rock.

Although the great block of stone weighed over two tons, its base was small and rounded, and the mass behind it gave him leverage for his bar. Every inch that he pried it forward, the stones slipped farther down into the widening crack and held the vantage he had gained. Already the boulder had been pushed out at the top many inches. It was almost balanced. The time had come to see if he could not pry it over with a single heave.

He did not propose to fall over after the rock. He turned his face to the brink, set the end of the bar in the crevice, and braced himself to heave backwards on the outer end. He put his weight on it and pulled. He could feel the rock give—the top was moving outward. A little more, and it must topple over.

Close behind him spoke a voice so hoarse and low-pitched with horror that it

sounded like a man's—"Drop that bar! drop it!"

With the swiftness of a wolf, he bounded sideways along the rim-rock. In the same lightning movement, he whirled face about and whipped his Colt's from its holster. His finger was crooking against the trigger before he saw who it was that confronted him. The hammer fell in the same instant that he twitched the muzzle up and sideways. The heavy bullet scorched the girl's cheek.

Above the crashing report rose a wild cry, "Miss Chuckie—God!"

Through the blinding, stinging powder-smoke she saw him stagger backwards as if to flee from what he thought he had done. His foot went down over the sharp edge. He flung up his hands and dropped into the abyss.

She did not shriek. She could not. Her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. Her heart stopped beating. She crumpled down and lay gasping. But the fascination of horror spurred her to struggle to her knees and creep over to peer down from the place where he had fallen.

Beneath her was only blank, utter darkness. No sound came up out of the deep except only that ceaseless reverberation of the hidden river. Twelve hundred feet down, the falling man had struck glancingly upon the smooth side of an out-jutting rock and his crushed body had been flung far out and sideways. It plunged into the rapids below the barrier and was borne away down the cañon. But this the girl could not have seen even in midday.

She looked for the red star of the distant fire where she knew her brother was lying. She could not see it. The point upon which the falling man had struck shut off her view. The other side of the split rock was where she and Genevieve had looked down through the glasses and seen Blake. She failed to realize the difference in the change of position. Her horror deepened. She thought that Gowan had hurled straight down to the bottom with all the terrific velocity of that sheer drop, and that he had plunged upon the fire and upon the dear form outstretched beside it, to crush and mangle and be crushed and mangled. The thought was too frightful for human endurance.

A long time she lay in a swoon, her head on the very edge of the brink. It was the wailing of the hungry, frightened baby that at last called her back to life and action. She dragged herself up around to the hiding place. The neglected baby was not easy to quiet. The cream had soured. There was nothing that she could give him except water. All the eggs that were left she had put in the knapsack that Ashton was carrying down to her brother. The baby now showed the full reflex of his mother's long hours of anxiety and fear. He fretted and cried and

would not be comforted.

The chill of approaching dawn forced her to rebuild the outburnt fire. The warm glow and the play of the flames diverted the child and hushed his outcry. Holding him so that he might continue to watch the dancing tongues of fire, the girl sat motionless, going over and over again in her mind all that had occurred since the tattered, bleeding, purple-faced climber had come straining up out of the depths.... It could not have happened—it was all a hideous dream.... Would they never come? Must she sit here forever—alone!

CHAPTER XXXIII

FRIENDS IN NEED

Because of the moonlight she did not heed the graying of the east. But the whinnying of the picketed horses roused her from the apathy of misery into which she had sunk. She stood up and looked along the ridge. A small roundish object appeared above the crest—then others. They rose quickly—the heads of riders spurring their horses up the far side of the ridge.

Singly, in pairs, in groups, the rescuers burst up into view and came loping down to her, shouting and waving. In the lead rode her father and the sheriff; in the midst Genevieve, between two attendant young punchers. In all, there were nearly two dozen eager, resolute men, everyone an admiring friend of Miss Chuckie, everyone zealous to serve her and hers.

The girl stood waiting beside the fire. She had tried to run to meet them and found that she could not move. The suddenness of their coming after all that fearful night of waiting seemed to numb her limbs.

They rushed down upon her, waving, shouting questions. Her father, on Rocket, was the first to reach her. He sprang off and ran to put his arm about her quivering shoulders.

“Honey! it’s all right now!” he assured her. “We’re here with everything that’s needed. We’ll soon yank him up out of that hole!”

The baby, frightened by the rush and tumult of the off-leaping riders, began to scream. Someone took him from the girl’s arms and handed him to his mother as she was lifted down out of her saddle. Isobel pressed her face against her father’s sweaty breast.

“Hold on, Miss Chuckie!” sang out one of the men. “Don’t let go yet. Where’s Gowan—Kid Gowan?”

She shuddered convulsively, yet managed to reply: “He—was trying to—to roll the rock down. Tom, my brother, is right below it. I heard and came to see. His back was to me. I could not shoot—I could not raise my pistol. When I spoke, he

whirled and shot at me. He—”

“Kid—shot at you?” cried Knowles. “At you? ’Tain’t possible!”

“He didn’t mean to. He fired before he saw who I was. Then he saw. He forgot everything—everything except that he had shot at me. He backed off—there—over the edge!”

A sudden hush fell on the excited crowd. One man went to peer down from the place to which the girl had pointed. He came back softly. “Same place where the last bunch of sheep went over,” he said. “Rest of us were pretty sick—ready to quit. He kept after them until the last ewe jumped. Said they’d gone to hell, where they belonged.”

“He’s the one that’s gone there!” said the sheriff. “Look at the way this boulder is pried loose, ready to roll over! Once heard tell that his real dad was Billie the Kid. Some of you mayn’t have heard tell of Billie. He was the coldest blooded, promiscuous murderer of them days when we used to drive from Texas to Montana and the boys used to shoot-up towns and each other just for fun. Well, this Kid Gowan has got Billie’s eyes and slit mouth. Can’t say I ever took to him, but seeing as how he was a crack-up puncher and Wes Knowles’ foreman—”

“That’s it! I can’t understand it—Kid has been almost like a son to me all these years!” complained Knowles perplexedly. He explained to his daughter. “You’re wondering why I didn’t come sooner, honey. Those Utes had been let go. We had to follow them up a long ways. When we got them back and put them on that trail from the waterhole, they found it led straight across the flats to where the horses and wagon had stood. There the tracks of the Indian shoes ended, and the tracks of shod hoofs led off into the brush. We followed them all the way ’round to the lower waterhole and up the lower creek to the ranch, and there they took us right to Rocket’s heels. The Jap said Kid had his saddle in the wagon when he came back from town, and he had a new hat. Mr. Blake did some hot shooting at that assassin on the hill. So, putting two and two together—”

“Oh, Daddy, I know—I knew when I saw him look at Lafe!”

“The—” Knowles choked back the epithet. “Yes, Mrs. Blake told us about that—and about her husband! Jumping Jehosaphat! Think of his being your brother! You must have been plumb locoed, to keep still about that! Why didn’t you tell us, honey?—leastways me, your Daddy!”

“I—I—But about Genevieve? Tell me. You could have come sooner if she—Was

she lost? I was sure that pony—”

“Better have given her a fast one. It came on so dark before he was half down the mountain that she was knocked out of the saddle by a branch. He went on down to the waterhole. She tried to catch him—couldn’t. Got lost and wandered all around before she got down to the waterhole and caught him. We had got to the ranch at dusk, and all the posse had turned in for the night. She came loping down the divide just after moonrise. We started as soon as we could rake up all the picket-pins and rope. Wanted Mrs. Blake to wait and come on later; but talk about grit! We simply couldn’t make her stay behind.”

Isobel thrust herself free from her father’s arms and darted out through the circle of rugged, earnest-faced punchers and cowmen to where Genevieve lay resting with the baby clasped to her bosom.

“Dear! you poor dear!” she murmured, kneeling to stroke the head of the weary young mother.

“I shall soon be rested,” replied Genevieve. “How about Tom? Have you kept watch of him? Has he moved?”

The girl shrank back, unable to face her sister-in-law’s eager look.

“No—I—The fire—it—it disappeared, and I could not see.”

Genevieve smiled, and the reddening dawn lent a trace of color to her pale face. “It was a good sign. He could not have been suffering so much. He must have slept, and the fire died down.”

“Oh! you think that was it?” sighed Isobel. “I feared—”

She did not say what it was she had feared. As she paused Genevieve looked up into her agitated face and asked quickly: “But Lafayette? Is he still sleeping?”

“Yes, where’s Lafe, honey?” inquired Knowles. “We’ll have to roust him out to tell us just what way he came up.”

“Haven’t I told you?” cried Isobel, her head still in a whirl of conflicting emotions. Then, as tersely and quietly as her father would have related it, she told the bald facts of how Ashton had been wakened by the snarl of the wolf, how he had insisted upon going back to help her brother, and how he had gone down into the darkness, the pack and lantern slung over his shoulder.

“By—James!” vowed Knowles, when she had finished. “Any man on the Western Slope say that boy’s not acclimated, he’d better look for another climate

himself.”

“Gentleman,” the sheriff addressed the exclaiming crowd, “you heard tell what the little lady had to say about her husband and this Lafe Ashton going down into Deep Cañon, where no man ever went before. Now Miss Chuckie has told us again how Ashton climbed up here, where no man in this section had a notion anything short of a mountain sheep could climb. Well, what does the gritty kid do but turn round and climb down again—in the dark, mind you! They’re down there now, both of them—down in the bottom of Deep Cañon. We called them tenderfeet, that day when Mr. Blake honored our county seat by sidetracking his palatial car. Boys, down there in that hole are the two nerviest men I ever heard tell about. One of ’em has a broken leg. The other has broke the trail for us. I ask for volunteers to go down with me and yank ’em up out of there. Gentlemen, who offers?”

Instantly the crowd surged forward. Every man shouted, whooped, struggled to thrust himself ahead of the others and force the acceptance of his services on the sheriff.

“Hold on, boys!” he remonstrated. “Just hold your hawsses. I didn’t ask for a stampede. You can’t all go down. Last man over might get in a hurry to catch the first, and start a manslide.”

“I vote we set a thirty-year limit,” put in one of the younger punchers.

This raised a clamor of dissent from the older men.

“Tell you what,” shouted another. “Let Miss Chuckie cut out the lucky ones.”

“That’s the ticket—Now you’re talking!” Every man shouted approval, and fell silent as Isobel sprang up from beside Genevieve.

“Friends!” she exclaimed, her eyes radiant, “it’s such times as these that makes life grand! I believe six of you would be enough, but I’ll make it ten. First, I’m going to bar everyone who has a wife or children.”

“That doesn’t include me, honey,” hastily protested her father.

“Then you come in the next—none over thirty-five nor under twenty.”

A groan arose from some of the youngsters, but the older men took their disappointment in stolid silence. She went on with calm decisiveness: “Now those of you that have done any considerable mountain climbing afoot this summer, please step this way.”

Two members of a recently disbanded surveying party, four punchers who had tried their luck at prospecting on the snowy range, and three wild horse hunters sprang forward in response to the request.

“That’s enough,” said the sheriff. “I’ve got to own up to being forty. But I’m leading this here posse, and I’ll eat my hat if I can’t outclimb anything on two legs in this county. String out your ropes, boys, and pass over all them picket-pins. We’ll need a purchase now and again, I figure, hauling up Mr. Blake. Hustle! Here’s the sun clean up.”

Under the brusquely jovial directions of their leader, the lucky nine divested themselves of spurs and cartridge belts, tied themselves to the line at intervals of several feet, and promptly started down the dizzy ledges. The others helped them during the first fifty yards of descent with the line that Isobel had drawn up after it had been cast loose by Ashton. They then gathered along the brink, enviously watching the descent of their companions into the shadowy abyss.

Genevieve came to where Isobel and her father crouched beside the others. “Thomas will not let me put him down, Belle,” she said. “I see you left the glasses beside the rock. If Lafayette has reached the bottom safely—”

“If—safely!” echoed Isobel. “Daddy, you look—quick, please!”

Knowles hastened to skirt along the brink to where the little field glasses lay at the near side of the split rock. The two followed him, Genevieve smiling with pleasant anticipation, Isobel trembling with doubt and dread. The cowman stretched out on the rim shelf and peered over.

“Um-m-m,” he muttered. “Can’t see anything down there. Too dark yet.”

“Look straight below you,” said Genevieve.

“Hey?—Uh! By—James! Well, if that ain’t a picture now! These sure are mighty fine little glasses, ma’am. I can see ’em plain as day.”

“Them?—you say ‘them,’ Daddy?” cried Isobel.

“Sure. Come and look for yourself. Guess Lafe is fixing Mr. Blake’s leg.—Which reminds me, honey, that before we left the ranch, Mrs. Blake had me send for that lunger sawbones that’s come to live at Stockchute. He’ll be here, I figure, before or soon after the boys get Mr. Blake up into God’s sunshine.”

“Brother Tom, Daddy—you mean my Brother Tom!” joyfully corrected the girl as she took the glasses.

“Well, you’ve got to give me time to chew on it, honey. It’s come too sudden for me to take it all in.” He stood up and gazed gravely at the smiling mother and her comforted baby. “Hum-m-m. Then that yearling is my Chuckie’s own blood nephew. Well, ma’am, what do *you* think of it, if I may ask?”

“Can’t you make it ‘Jenny,’ Uncle Wes?” asked Genevieve.

He stared at her blankly. “But I didn’t adopt him, ma’am—only her.”

“He is the brother of your dear daughter, and I am his wife. Come now,” she coaxed, “you must admit that brings me near enough to call you ‘Uncle Wes.’”

“You’ve got me, ma’am—Jenny. I give in, I throw up the fight. That irrigation project now—Chuckie’s brother can have anything of mine he asks for. Only there’s one thing—you’ve got to make that yearling say ‘Granddad’ when he talks to me.”

“O-oh!” cooed Genevieve. “To think you feel that way towards him! Of course he shall say it. And I—Will you not allow me to make it ‘Daddy’?”

He could not resist her enticingly upturned lips. He brushed down his bristly mustache, and bent over awkwardly, to kiss his new daughter.

“Thought you were one of those super-high-toned ladies, m’m—Jenny,” he remarked.

The cultured child of millions smiled up at him reproachfully. “What! after I have been with you so long, Daddy? But it’s true there was a time—before Tom taught me that men cannot be judged by mere polish and veneer, or the lack of polish and veneer.”

Isobel, all her doubts and fears allayed, had risen from the precipice’s edge in time to hear Genevieve’s reply. She added eagerly: “Nor should men be judged by what they have been if they have become something else—if they have climbed up—up out of the depths!”

“Belle! dear Sister Belle! Then he has proved it to you? Oh, I am so glad for you! He has proved to you that he has climbed—to the heights.”

“To the very heights! I must tell Daddy. Give me Thomas. See, he is fast asleep, the poor abused little darling! Go and watch them, and our climbers. They are going down like a string of mountain sheep.”

Genevieve placed the baby in his aunt’s outstretched arms and went to look into the abyss through the field glasses. Isobel drew her father away, out of earshot of

the down-peering group of men. She stopped behind the tent, which Gowan had pitched part way up the slope of the ridge.

“You want to talk with me about Lafe, honey?” surmised Knowles, as the girl started to speak and hesitated.

Her cheeks flamed scarlet, but she raised her shyly lowered eyes and looked up at him with a clear, direct gaze. “Yes, Daddy. He—he loves me, and I—love him.”

“That so?” said Knowles. His eyes contracted. It was his only betrayal of the wrench she had given the tender heart within his tough exterior. “Well, I figured it was bound to come some day. I’ve been lucky not to lose you any time the last four years.”

“You—you do not say anything about him, Daddy.”

“Haven’t you cut him out of the herd?” he dryly replied. “That’s enough for me, long as I know he’s your choice and is square.”

“He has nothing; he is very poor.”

“He’s got the will to work. He’ll get there, with you pushing on the reins. That’s how I size him up.”

“But, Daddy, he told me he had been bad, very bad.”

Knowles searched the girl’s face, with a sudden up-leaping of concern—that vanished as quickly before what he saw in her clear eyes.

“Might have expected it of you, honey. You stand by him. You’ve got sense enough to know what it means when a man thinks enough of a girl to tell her the wrong things he has done. I was wild, too, when I was a youngster. There was a girl I thought enough of to tell. She wasn’t your kind, honey. It came near sending me to the devil for good. You know better. No girl ought to be fool enough to hitch up with a man to reform him. But if he has already taken a brace and straightened the kinks out of himself, that’s different.”

“He has come up, Daddy—out of the depths.”

Knowles only half caught her meaning. “Sure he climbed up. That proves he has the grit and the nerve. He had proved that even better, going down at the other place. Put any man down there, and he’d make a try to get out. No, the real test was his going back down again. He might have come up just for himself. But going down again—that’s the proof of what’s in him; that’s what proves he’s

white!”

“Dear Daddy!... But I’m afraid. He thinks he has been too bad ever to—to marry me. I’m so afraid he’ll go away and leave me!”

The cowman straightened up, his eyes glinting with righteous indignation.

“What! Go ’way and leave you?—when you want him to stay? By—James! He’s going to stay! Don’t you worry, honey. He’s going to stay, if I have to rope and hogtie him for you!”

The girl stared into the frowning face of her father. There was no twinkle in the corner of his eyes. He was absolutely serious. For the first time in over two days her dimples flashed. Her eyes sparkled with merriment. Her lips parted. But she checked the gay laugh before it could burst out.

“Oh!” she reproached herself. “How could I? And they still down there—and Tom suffering!”

“Tom?” repeated Knowles. “Thomas Blake—your brother! That’s why you got me started reading all those reports and engineering journals. You guessed it.”

“It did not seem possible. Yet I could not help hoping.”

“Things do happen our way—sometimes,” qualified Knowles. “Mrs. Blake—Jenny—says Lafe brought up word that the project can be put through. I meant to fight. But now—he is your brother, and he has done something no man ever before thought could be done—he has surveyed Deep Cañon. He has me beat. I’ve told Mrs.—Jenny straight out.”

“I know he will do what is right by you, dear, dear Daddy.”

“He’s your brother, honey. That settles it.”

CHAPTER XXXIV

RECLAMATION

Even with the mutual assistance that they could give one another, and with the certain knowledge that the descent was possible, the rescuers had no easy task following the trail “broken” by Ashton. Their very numbers prevented them from going down as fast as he had gone. On the other hand, those on the upper part of the life-line could steady their companions over ledges and down the steeper crevices, while the leaders helped the ones who followed by hammering footholds in the rock and at the very worst places driving in picket-pins to hold the extra ropes brought down for the purpose.

Still, Deep Cañon was Deep Cañon—the ladder it offered was a ladder of Titans. Many long hours of waiting passed after the rescuing party disappeared among the shadows less than a third of the way down the steep-sloping precipices, before they came struggling upwards again into view of the anxious watchers on the brink. The sun had circled well over into the western sky.

There was yet a thousand feet for the rescuers to clamber, hauling and pushing up in their midst the heavy body of the injured engineer. All during the first half of the ascent Blake had made the task as easy as he could by the strenuous exertion of the great strength still left in his arms and his sound leg. But at last the bandages that bound his broken leg had chafed in two on the rough ledges; and even his iron nerve had not long been able to withstand the torture of the twisting break.

He now dangled helpless in the sling by which they had secured him. Half the time he was mercifully unconscious; the other half his jaw was set rigid and his lips were compressed to stifle his groans of agony. Whenever possible Ashton climbed beside him, striving to ease the roughness of the ascent.

A full hour before they reached the top, the thin-faced consumptive surgeon arrived from Stockchute with his splints and medical case. Waited upon by Isobel and Genevieve, he was fully recovered from the exertion of his ride when at last the panting rescuers came toiling up to the brink.

Eager hands dragged the unconscious engineer to the top and carried him to where the surgeon sat waiting. A few of the watchers lingered to help the rescuers over the rim; then they, too, hurried away to see if Blake had survived that terrible ascent. For the last two hundred feet he had looked like a dead man. There was no cheering. Deep Cañon had been conquered; but it was yet to be seen whether the victory had not been won at a disastrous cost.

The sheriff and his nine men sank down on the grassy slope, gasping, outspent. Ashton collapsed in their midst. He was more than outspent; he was utterly exhausted. The instant he had seen Blake lifted over the rim-rock, he had given way to the strain of his frightful exertions. When a man sent by Isobel came hurrying to the rescuers with water and coffee, Ashton was unable to move or speak. The man had to hold him up and pour the coffee down his throat.

One by one, the sheriff and the others staggered up and went to join the silent group about Blake. No one left that circle of watchers. They were waiting for the result of the surgeon's efforts to resuscitate the unconscious man. It was a desperate fight. But the surgeon had won a place in the forefront of his profession before the white plague had driven him from New York to this health-giving wilderness. He knew all the latest, most wonderful methods of resuscitation. And he had for assistants two who loved and were loved by his patient.

When at last the announcement was made that the engineer had come out of his swoon and probably would live, the sheriff and all the members of the posse not employés of Knowles prepared to ride down to Plum Creek ranch for the night. The cowman ordered his men to go down with the party, to water the horses and bring back food and water for the camp. The surgeon had said that his patient could not be moved for many days.

But before the party rode off, each man, from the sheriff to the youngest of the punchers, came to where Ashton was still lying on the grass, and took his limp hand in theirs. They did not grip it, for the tattered glove and shredded bandages were wet with blood; nor did they put into speech what they thought of him. A gruff word or two of fellowship and parting was all they gave him. Yet he saw and knew that he had won his place among these reddest blooded of all red-blooded men.

When one of his fellow employés came to him, leading Rocket, he sought to summon strength enough to rise, but found that he could not even turn on his side. He had driven his body to superhuman efforts. He must now pay the price.

At his request, he was lifted up on Rocket, but he could not hold up his head, much less his body. They laid him again on the grass, and told Knowles his condition, before they rode off.

The cowman fetched the surgeon, who felt the pulse of the exhausted man, gave him a pellet, and hastened back to Blake. In a few moments Ashton's feeble, racing pulse became calm and slow, the wild whirl of his thoughts lulled. He sank into profound slumber.

When he awoke the sun of another day was just clearing the great white peaks of the snowy range. He was outstretched on a soft bed of blankets spread over a thick layer of pine needles. Above his face sloped the roof of a small tent. He had been cared for—but there was no one watching at his bedside. He thought he understood, and smiled in bitter resignation.

When he moved, racking pains shot through his stiff muscles. Only the renewed life that surged through his veins enabled him to turn and twist and bend until the pains subsided to a dull aching and he was able to command his limbs. His hands were swathed fast in bandages. He tore them off with his teeth until the fingers were free enough for use. After much effort, he succeeded in forcing his swollen feet into his boots.

In the midst Yuki, the Jap cook, appeared before the low entrance of the tent and sank down on his knees to set a trayful of food beside the occupant. He hissed a pleasant, "Good morning, Mistah Lafe!" and was gone before Ashton could reply. The aroma of hot coffee and the savory smell of chicken broth forced Ashton to forget all else than that he was famished. Besides the coffee and broth, there was a nogg of eggs and thick cream slightly flavored with whiskey. He drank one liquid after the other with the greediness of a starving man; nor did he stop until he had drained the last drop of all three. He could have followed with a hearty meal of solids, but the fluids were enough to stimulate him to renewed energy.

He crept out of his tent and looked around. Up where they had carried Blake from the precipices stood a larger tent. Near it, under a low-growing pine, the surgeon lay rolled in a blanket, fast asleep. Some distance away, in the other direction, Yuki and two of the ranch hands were building a stone fireplace. Beyond them were picketed three horses, the nearest of which was Rocket.

Ashton stood up and started rapidly towards the big rawboned horse. Within a few yards, however, his pace slackened. He faltered and stopped to look back at the larger tent. After a pause, he turned about and slowly approached the tent.

As he drew near he heard a murmur of voices barely distinguishable above the booming of the cañon. Again he faltered and stopped and stood hesitating. The open front of the tent faced at right angles to his line of approach. As he hesitated, he saw Isobel's head appear, veiled in the loose meshes of her chestnut hair. She looked about towards him, and drew back with a startled little cry.

He turned away to go to Rocket. A quick heavy step sounded behind him. Knowles had sprung out of the tent and was striding to overtake the retreating man.

"Hold on, Lafe," he ordered. "Where you going?"

Ashton faced him with quiet resolution. His eyes were dark with misery, but his once lax mouth was strangely like Blake's in its firm full lines.

"There's only one thing for me to do, Mr. Knowles," he replied. "I am going away. Your daughter will understand why."

"How're you going?" asked the cowman, his face impassive.

"I traded with Miss—Miss Knowles for Rocket. Didn't she ever tell you?"

"Don't matter if she did. Rocket wasn't her hawss to trade."

"Then, unless my pony is up here, I shall walk down as far as the ranch," said Ashton. He added with bitter humiliation: "It's well I have learned about Rocket in time. I've done enough, without adding horse thief to the list. I would have started at once, but I could not leave until I had asked about Mr. Blake. I wished to thank him for all that he has done for me."

"All that he—!" echoed Knowles. "If you want to know, it was a mighty narrow squeak. But we pulled him through. He's awake now and says he's doing fine. He wants to talk to you."

"I should like very much to do as he wishes, Mr. Knowles, but I—cannot bear to—meet her. You may realize that it is hard enough at best."

"*Sho!* If that's all," readily reassured the cowman, "I'll ask Chuckie to go out and hide in the bushes."

"But I could not allow that, you know."

"Then I figure you've got to come anyhow. Can't let you go off without saying good-by to him and Jenny."

"Jenny?" repeated Ashton.

“It’s all in the family now,” explained Knowles. “Tom has been telling us how he’s got that irrigation project all figured out in his head. He was saying what he and Jenny had planned to do for us even before Chuckie let out her secret. Come on and hear the rest.”

“I fear I must ask you to excuse me, Mr. Knowles. I—”

“No, you don’t,” rejoined the cowman. “After what you’ve done you can’t make me believe you’re afraid of anything. You’ll come and face it out before you go.”

The misery in Ashton’s eyes deepened, and his lips tightened.

“Very well. Since you put it that way, I shall do as you wish, sir.”

When he followed Knowles around to the door of the tent, Isobel, who was hastily braiding her loose hair, drew back into the far corner and averted her face from him. But Genevieve met him with a radiant smile and motioned him to kneel down beside her husband.

Blake, with one thick arm crooked about his sleeping son, lay with his eyes closed. His big square face was drawn and pallid, but there was a smile lurking in the corners of his mouth. As Ashton knelt beside him he looked up and lifted his free hand.

“You wouldn’t take it—down there,” he said.

Ashton flushed. “You know why.”

“You’ll take it now,” said Blake, with quiet confidence.

“I will. I am going away,” replied Ashton as he held out his bandaged hand.

The big palm closed over it in a clasp as gentle as it was strong.

“No, Lafe. I’ve got hold of you now. I can’t let you go. I need you in my business. We’re organizing the Belle Mesa Irrigation and Development Company.—How do you like my new name for Dry Mesa? Mr. Knowles puts in the reservoir site in exchange for water on his other land, a tenth share in the company, and a royalty of half the gold we placer out of the reservoir bed. As Jenny is to put up all the capital, she and I will take the lion’s share. That will leave a tenth for you and a tenth for Belle.”

Ashton sought to draw his hand away. “It is very good of you, Mr. Blake. But I cannot accept—”

“Yes, you can. You can’t help yourself. Besides, I’ve an idea a man always does better by his work when he has a stake in the undertaking. You’re to be our

Resident Engineer, you know.”

“Resident Engineer?” repeated Ashton, paling and flushing. “Mr. Blake, I—I— It’s impossible that you can mean—”

“Make it ‘Tom’! You’ll have to brush up on mining engineering, too. There’s the bonanza.”

“Oh, yes, Tom!” exclaimed Genevieve. “Tell him about the gold mine.”

“I was going to keep still about it till I had the apex located,” he said. He looked full at Ashton. “But there’s no one here that the secret will not be as safe with as it is with me. Besides, it’s all in the family. I found the vein a thousand feet up the chute of Dry Fork Gulch. We will name it the Genevieve Lode. There are six of us here, counting Tommy. Each of us gets a sixth interest.”

Ashton was now pale. “Mr. Blake—Tom, I cannot! If I were fit to stay and work for you—as an axman—anything!—”

Blake’s eyes twinkled. “Then your sixth will have to go to Belle.”

“Mine too, Tom,” hastily put in Knowles.

Blake looked down solemnly at his youthful heir. “Hear that, Tommy? Guess we’ll have to pull out, too, and make it half and half to the ladies.” He looked up at Ashton with a swift change from mock to real gravity. “We’ve got to begin by installing a turbine power-plant down here. Where will I find another engineer with nerve enough to go down these cliffs? I need you, Lafe.”

“I am very sorry, Tom.” Ashton drew his hand from Blake’s wearied clasp, and rose.

Isobel slipped past him and stood with her arms outstretched across the entrance of the tent. There was a dimple in each of her blushing cheeks; her eyes were radiant with tenderness and love.

“No, you can’t get away!” she declared. “Don’t you see how we’ve got you corralled?”

“That’s what,” confirmed Knowles. “I promised her to rope and hogtie you if you made a break.”

Ashton was gazing into the girl’s eyes, his own shining with reverent adoration.

“Isobel?” he whispered.

“Let us go up on the ridge and look out over our mesa,” she murmured.

“Wait a moment, dear,” interposed Genevieve. “Lafayette, I wish to tell you that as soon as Tom and I return to Chicago, we shall go to your father. I feel certain that when he hears—”

“No, no!” begged Ashton. “You must wait. Promise that you will wait. I have only begun to make a beginning. Wait until I see if I can—” He straightened and looked at Isobel, his head well up, his eyes as resolute as his mouth. “Wait until I have proved what I am.”

“Come,” said Isobel. “We’re going to look at our dry mesa that we are to reclaim and make into a garden with the waste waters of the depths.”

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