

**The Boss of the  
Double E**

**FRANK C. ROBERTSON**

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*This is the Story*

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THE ill-repute of the shiftless King Creek Coles has followed honest young Bert Cole ever since he first tried to get a start in the world. In Snowville one afternoon he is accused of theft, and Ike Blunt, local boss, essays to horsewhip him. Bert denies the charge and defends himself successfully with his fists. Then he evades pursuit by the deputy sheriff, and accepts the offer of a job from Linn Marshall, a wealthy rancher who had witnessed the fight. Cole now commences in earnest to prove his innocence. He falls foul of a rustling gang and becomes involved in a murder charge. After many exciting adventures and desperate fights Cole clears himself at last and marries the girl of his choice.

Mr. Robertson is an ingenious writer.—*John O' London*.

Full of adventure and thrills.—*Yorkshire Observer*.

A characteristically racy and eventful tale.—*Liverpool Post*.



*By the Same Author*

RIDERS OF THE SUNSET TRAIL

BRAND OF THE OPEN HAND

THE SILVER COW

THE BOSS OF THE FLYING M

\*THE BOSS OF THE TUMBLING H

THE HIDDEN CABIN

\*THE FOREMAN OF THE FORTY BAR

THE BOSS OF THE TEN MILE BASIN

THE FAR HORIZON

*\*Uniform with this Volume*

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# THE BOSS OF THE DOUBLE E

*by*

FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Author of "The Foreman of the Forty Bar,"  
"The Boss of the Tumbling H." etc.



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# CHAPTER I

## ACCUSED

BERT COLE was pleasantly conscious of the good appearance he made as he rode over the railroad crossing and looked down upon the one important street of Snowville. Chief, his fat little sorrel saddle horse, knew how to bow his neck and show off when in town, and Bert was the proud possessor of a brand new saddle and a gorgeous green shirt. The ensemble was designed to attract public notice.

Bert himself was not vain of his personal appearance. No one had ever told him he was good looking, and he only knew that as far as appearances went he did not need to fear comparison with other men. But he rather hoped his progress down Main Street to the livery stable would gain the attention it deserved. He was aware that no Cole from King Creek had ever ridden such a good outfit into town. In Bert's estimation the people of Snowville represented the most critical public opinion, and he saw nothing mediocre or shabby about the drab, squatty buildings with their flaked off paint and wind ruffled shingles. It did not occur to him that the unpaved, dirty streets, flanked by uneven board sidewalks reflected a lack of enterprise upon the part of the town's inhabitants.

"Looks like there was some excitement down there by the Mint," he murmured aloud, as he saw a crowd of perhaps fifty people milling about in the street in front of Ike Blunt's Mint Saloon.

He touched Chief lightly with the spurs, and the little sorrel broke into an easy lope down the street, but there was no one to take notice of the pretty little horse, the new saddle, or the green shirt.

Bert rode up to the edge of the crowd, and presently he got a man's attention. "What's it all about?" he demanded.

"Somebody's broke into Ike Blunt's store last Wednesday, an' stole some things. They've jest ketched the Finney kid with some o' the goods, an' Ike's goin' to punish him."

"What d'ye mean—send him to jail?"

"Naw. That don't do a skunk like that any good. Ike's goin' to give him a public horse-whippin'," said the man.

“Why, he can’t do that,” Bert protested. “He can arrest him, but he’d have to be tried an’ found guilty.”

“He don’t have to be,” the man sneered. “I reckon Ike can do as he pleases with him, an’ I don’t figger this thief will wanta make any complaints after Ike gits through with him.”

“Say, was the store robbed Wednesday night?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Well, they don’t claim Pat Finney done that, do they?” Bert demanded.

“Why, sure they do. Ike had just bought a dozen pair o’ buckskin gloves from a squaw, an’ they was all stole. Then a while ago this Finney kid showed up here wearin’ a pair o’ the gloves,” the man informed.

“Why—why—I can explain that,” Bert declared. He flung himself from his horse, and shouldered his way into the crowd.

In the centre of the crowd was the hitch-rack in front of the Mint Saloon. In a little cleared space stood a burly giant of a man with a long, pliable buggy whip in his hand. In front of him, backed against the hitch-rack, cowered a slim, yellow-haired young fellow of nineteen. Young Finney’s lips were drawn back from his teeth in a snarl, and his eyes glittered with a poisonous hate for the man with the whip.

“Git that undershirt off, an’ drape yoreself across that pole there,” Ike Blunt ordered, with a vicious swish of the whip through the air. The man was pretending to mete out justice, but the look on his brutal face showed that he was delighted to have an opportunity to exercise his innate cruelty.

“I never robbed yore damn’ store, I tell yuh!” the boy fairly shrieked.

“Strip that undershirt off him.” Blunt ordered, and two of his saloon employees stepped eagerly forward to obey.

“Just a minute, Mr. Blunt,” Bert Cole cried eagerly. “You’re makin’ a mistake, an’ I can explain that yuh’ve got the wrong man.”

“Yuh can?” Blunt’s cruel grin faded, and was replaced by a menacing scowl. The man was in no mood to be robbed of his pleasure.

“Yuh say yore store was robbed last Wednesday night?” Bert asked.

“Yes. What about it?”

“Keep yore mouth shut, Bert. They’ll be draggin’ you into this damn’ frameup, too,” young Pat Finney said.

Bert turned a surprised gaze upon the speaker. He had never thought young Finney had the stuff in him to take a licking when there was a possible way out. Nor could Bert see why Pat should fear to speak the truth.



“Draggin’ me? I should say not,” Bert protested. “Now look here, Mr. Blunt—last Wednesday Pat was with me all day. He stayed at our place the night before, an’ Wednesday I went up to the head o’ Cottonwood Creek with him to git his traps. It was late when we got ’em gathered up, so we stayed all night at his cabin up there, an’ come home the next day.”

“Le’s see them gloves you got on,” Blunt snapped.

Bert glanced quickly at the buckskin “squaw” gloves he had on his hands. His face crimsoned with anger as he realised that he, too, was being practically accused of being a thief.

“All right,” he said, drawing off the gloves, “there they are, an’ they’re just like Pat’s. We bought both pair last Wednesday from Widowboga’s squaw.”

“You did like hell!” the merchant retorted. “The linin’ in them gloves is exactly the same as the linin’ in the ones I had. All the difference yore talk has made is that I wear out two buggy whips instead o’ one.”

The appalling possibility that he might be publicly whipped as Pat Finney was on the verge of being whipped threw Bert into momentary confusion. He looked helplessly around the circle of faces and found no sympathy in any of them. With one exception they were grinning expectantly. The exception was Linn Marshall, the owner of the Flying M, the largest cattle outfit in the country. Marshall’s dark face was merely impassive, perhaps amused at this revelation of the frailties of his fellow men.

“Look here,” Bert exclaimed violently. “I’m tellin’ the truth about this thing, an’ anybody that says me or Pat Finney robbed this store is a liar. Hunt up Widowboga’s squaw if you want the truth. Or ask my folks. They know where we was”.

A roar of laughter greeted this defence. “Think, anybody would take the word of a King Creek Cole?” Ike Blunt said loudly. “Why, the whole shif’less outfit is thieves an’ liars.”

*Splat!* Bert Cole’s punch was so swift and unexpected that it found Ike Blunt’s unprotected jaw before any one saw it start.

The huge merchant and saloon keeper crashed headlong into the muck caused by his customers’ horses. Immediately afterward Blunt’s two employees, Bummer Kelly and Slant Wickison, made a concerted dive toward Bert.

Bert was jarred by a blow to the head from Wickison, but he beat Bummer Kelly to the punch, and the saloon bouncer measured his length on the ground. Whirling, Bert mixed it with Slant Wickison, the only one of the

three smaller than himself. In an instant Slant was on the defensive, giving ground until the crowd stopped his retreat. He tried to clinch, but a short jab that travelled no more than a foot snapped his head back, and he sank to the ground just as Ike Blunt rushed Bert with a bellow of fury.

Ike Blunt had long been considered the champion of Snowville. While he had been fighting regularly the reputation was perhaps deserved, but of recent years his reputation had been enough to make most men let him alone; and becoming lazy he had let his saloon bouncers handle the obstreperous characters whom formerly he had attended to himself. Yet he was a formidable opponent even yet with his more than two hundred pounds of bone and brawn. Against him Bert Cole seemed a stripling, though Bert stood five feet ten in his socks, and weighed a hundred and seventy pounds.

But Bert was far from being a novice in a fight. Shiftless the majority of King Creek Coles undoubtedly were, but they were given to athletic pursuits. There were no better horsemen anywhere than the five Cole brothers, and old Alf Cole himself had been a fighting man in his youth. He had imparted much of his skill to his boys. Many and many an hour had Bert spent in sparring and wrestling with his brothers, until he was the master of any two of them. And he had developed a punch that any heavyweight boxer might have envied.

As Blunt bore down with arms extended in fighting pose, Bert laughed. He stepped in toe to toe with the saloon keeper, caused Blunt to lead and miss. Then he was under the man's guard with a sickening punch to the stomach, and whipped over a right to the head when Blunt involuntarily doubled over.

He had Blunt going. The saloon keeper had already lost his wind, and was giving ground, while Bert's flying fists appeared to be landing everywhere. But Bummer Kelly was not yet through. The bouncer rushed in and landed a blow that sent Bert sprawling.

He was on his feet in an instant, but both adversaries were upon him. Into his mind came a savage determination to win, no matter what the odds. His brain seemed strangely clear. He took many a blow, but he contrived to make his opponents miss more than they landed, and occasionally he contrived to get one over himself; and when he landed the victim knew that he had been hit. Very cunningly he contrived to make them get in each other's way, and while they were untying themselves he did his most damage.

Snowville had never seen such a fight. Another one was going on at the same time, but it attracted little attention. Pat Finney had suddenly decided

to rush to the defence of Bert, but Slant Wickison had got up in time to engage him, and they were fighting furiously with the older man gradually wearing young Finney down.

Around and around milled the three main contestants, the crowd giving them room whenever it was needed, yet crowding in over the blood-stained ground in order to see.

Twice Bert was knocked down when Ike Blunt's wild blows happened to land in the right place, but each time he was up before Bummer Kelly could jump on him. Game as was the battle he was waging, defeat would have been inevitable had not Ike Blunt completely lost his wind.

"Stay with him, Kelly," he grunted, and stepped aside for a moment to pump the air back into his abused lungs. On the instant Bummer Kelly launched himself at Bert's back to bring him down.

Strategically it was a poor move. Instead of young Cole coming over backward Bummer Kelly's heels flashed through the air as he was thrown over Bert's head, and he came down with such force on the hard ground that he had no more fight in him.

Instantly Bert was upon Ike Blunt again. The saloon keeper gulped for air and raised his hands to meet the assault; but there was no more steam behind his blows, and his young antagonist had not slowed up in the least. Bert could afford to take chances. Purposely leaving an opening, he waited for Blunt to start a ponderous swing, side-stepped, and then came in with a punch just under the breastbone that left Blunt writhing in agony upon the ground.

An instant later Bert seized Slant Wickison by the collar and jerked him from the prostrate form of Pat Finney. He shook the man, jerked him around, slapped him twice, and then released him with a kick that sent the fellow plunging into the midst of the spectators. Then he faced the crowd belligerently, but no one wanted to accept his unspoken challenge. His gorgeous green shirt was in rags, and his entire front stained from a bloody nose. Both eyes were black, and his lips puffed out, but he was a dominant figure. He had at least won physical respect.

A few minutes before he had been just one of the disreputable King Creek Coles, whom no one ever took the trouble to treat with other than contempt. But now, no matter what their secret thoughts were, men would give him outward consideration.

"My Gawd, who'd ever thunk it?" one man marvelled aloud. "Think of Ike Blunt comin' a cropper like that at the hands of a Cole—an' not much more'n a kid at that."

“Ike’ll make him pay fer that,” his neighbour commented. “Watch him send Cole an’ the Finney kid over the road for robbery.”

The words carried to Bert and punctured the momentary elation he was feeling. He knew Blunt’s power, reputed to be greater than that of any other man in Summit County. And for the first time he realised how much he would be handicapped by being a King Creek Cole. He could not help having been born a Cole, but he suddenly resolved that they should not make him a jailbird for a crime he never had committed.

“Come on, Pat,” he said, “let’s git out o’ this.”

Before the fight the crowd would have blocked any move of his to escape, but now it parted to let him move through, with young Finney at his heels. He reached Chief and threw the bridle reins over the horse’s head.

“Where’s yore pony, Pat?” he asked his friend.

“Over yonder,” the boy pointed.

“Git him,” Bert said curtly. “I’ll ’tend to anybody that tries to stop yuh.” He was now in the saddle, and his hand rested on the handle of his gun. The crowd had surged back toward the saloon. It was uncertain as to what young Cole might do next, and no one was anxious to challenge him. Only one man stood his ground, and he now came forward with the same half satirical smile on his dark face. Bert watched him questioningly.

But Marshall did not take his hands from his pockets. “Don’t be a fool, Cole,” he said evenly. “Come out to my ranch. I’m here in a car, an’ I’ll be there before you arrive.” It was a command, and the cattleman turned away as though with full assurance that it would be obeyed.

Bert looked at the retreating back of the cattleman in astonishment, and then rode over to where young Finney had mounted his little bay pony. It had been in Bert’s mind to flee the county to avoid arrest and if any one attempted to stop him to fight. Now he hesitated.

He really knew little about Linn Marshall, but he was no worse off in that respect than other people. Marshall had come to the country five years before, purchased the largest ranch in the country, and attended to his own business ever since. He did not obey the orders of the local bosses, nor did he try to dominate others. But Bert knew that Marshall had never been on good terms with Ike Blunt.

“Which way do we go?” Pat Finney asked.

“To the Flying M,” Bert announced with sudden determination. He had a feeling that he was putting himself in Marshall’s power by taking that course, but against that he felt that he was on the verge of some stirring adventure, and in his reckless mood he was ready for anything.

## CHAPTER II

### DARK STRATEGY

YOUNG PAT FINNEY was voluble in his indignation against Ike Blunt as they rode along, but Bert Cole was strangely silent. For some time Bert had been aware in a vague way that his people were held in low esteem, but this was the first time it had been brought home to him that it was a handicap personally.

“Just what was yore idee in not tellin’ ’em where we was?” Bert asked suddenly.

“Why, I figgered it’d turn out just like it did. They’d accuse you, too,” was the reply.

“On account o’ the gloves?”

“No; I didn’t think o’ the gloves, but—but——”

“On account of the reputation of the Coles,” Bert grimly finished for him.

“I guess so,” young Finney admitted. “It’s hell, Bert, for you to be blamed for what yore brothers do. I know yo’re square. Maybe yuh didn’t know it, but I seen yuh make Clyde an’ Floyd turn loose a coupla Injun cayuses they’d swiped. But yuh couldn’t make nobody believe you was any better than the rest of ’em.”

“I suppose not,” Bert said bitterly. He recalled the incident, but not with any great degree of resentment against his brothers. For years he had known that they were petty thieves. Some finer fibre of his nature had kept him straight, even though they had argued that theft was necessary for them to live.

The life led by the King Creek Coles had filled Bert with dissatisfaction for years, but he had not realised until recently just what was wrong with it. Years before, Alfred Cole had located in King Creek Canyon, filing a homestead that included all the available farming land there, which covered about sixty acres of wild hay meadow, and perhaps forty more which it was possible to farm had there been water for it. But already the waters of King Creek had been appropriated by ranchers out in the valley.

Cole had never taken steps to acquire a water right, nor had he ever broken up the small amount of farmable land where he could at least have

raised grain. He managed to steal enough water to irrigate his hay meadow. By gifts and thefts he managed to get a few cows and horses, but the income was decidedly meagre, and would have been still worse had it not been that his wife, a spare, silent woman, raised a garden, and thus kept the table partially supplied.

As soon as the boys were old enough to work, Alf Cole retired. When he was not in Snowville playing endless games of "sluff," he was in the cabin smoking countless pipes of tobacco. But the oldest boys, Dave, Clyde, and Floyd, had little more enterprise than their father. They were born horsemen. When unbroken colts or outlaw horses were not available for them to ride, they went out and caught their neighbours' steers and calves to practise on; but despite their facility in this direction none of them were ever able to hold a job. They managed to get the hay crop put up each summer, but this was about the full extent of their earnings—except for such stealing as they managed to do, which was mostly of Indian ponies, animals of little or no value, yet extremely hard to obtain.

Old Alf chuckled at his boys' misdeeds, and his wife merely looked grim disapproval. Then, when Bert came along and refused to join the older boys, old Alf merely grinned with amusement, and his wife maintained her silence. Only by the marked respect she showed him at all times did Bert know that his mother approved of his actions. He suspected a latent strength of character under her grim exterior, but her time was taken up with her garden and the youngest son, Ashton, now a hulking young giant of eighteen. A horse once had kicked the young brother in the head; and that sad accident had left him with but half a mind.

For a long time Bert had been anxious to work, but no one would give him steady employment. There were times when the big cow outfits had to have extra hands, and then the Coles were in demand; but they were always discharged as quickly as possible. It was one of these jobs which had enabled Bert to buy his new saddle.

His honesty had been consistently overlooked. It was known that nothing was safe lying around loose where the Coles were, and he was watched just as suspiciously as his brothers. No distinctions were made. As yet nothing serious had been proved on the Cole boys—Dave had paid a couple of fines, and Floyd and Clyde had served two short jail sentences each, all of which amused them—but every rancher was looking for a chance to send them over the road for keeps.

These things Bert had dimly understood, but it had taken the affair in Snowville to make him realise that his name placed him outside the pale of respectable people. Now he stood accused of a theft of which he had no

knowledge, but no one would believe him. For the first time, however, he felt bitterness toward society. He rejoiced that he had been able to inflict physical injury upon Ike Blunt, who in some way seemed to stand for that society which would not give him a chance. A first-class criminal was in the making, unless something intervened.

An automobile came up with a rush from behind them. As it stopped they recognised Linn Marshall. With him was a girl. She wore no hat, having just obtained a marcel in Snowville's one beauty shop. Bert thought he had never seen anything as beautiful as this girl. A sport sweater with a smart red tie gave her a decidedly jaunty appearance. Her lips were parted in a smile, showing white, even teeth, but at sight of Bert's face they closed with a hint of repulsion.

"Whip up to that lava bowl just ahead there, and we'll wait for you," Marshall said. "There's an officer after you with a car."

The car rolled on, and the two boys spurred up to the best speed Pat's pony could make.

"Who is she?" Bert asked. The young hobo trapper, though having been in the country only a couple of years, was in many respects better acquainted than was Bert.

"The flapper with Marshall?" Pat grinned. "She's his sister. Been here nearly a year. Ain't you ever seen her at dances?"

"I don't go to many dances," Bert muttered. He had liked to dance, but being refused by two girls out of every three he asked to dance had chilled his ardour.

"I been around a little, an' I know this dame sure does outclass the rest of the local talent," Pat said.

Glancing back, Bert saw a streak of dust coming along the road behind them, undoubtedly the officers. But a moment later they had entered the great lava bowl through which the wagon road twisted. In the bottom, on a fill that had been put in to decrease the grade, the Marshall car was waiting.

"Hide your horses behind those rocks there, and get in with us," Marshall directed.

Bert hesitated. He had little mind to give up Chief and his new saddle, but knowledge that he would soon be overhauled by the officers caused him to obey the order. Presently they climbed into the back seat, and the car started slowly up the grade. Young Finney looked back eagerly toward the pursuing car, but Bert's gaze was largely fixed upon the back of a most delicious-looking neck.

Once the girl turned around, and Bert looked away in embarrassment, acutely conscious of his swollen and painful face.

“Gee, they’re a-tearin’!” Pat ejaculated, as the other car suddenly shot down the winding road into the lava bowl.

“We will be in a minute,” Marshall said unconcernedly. Now that he was on comparatively level ground again, his car picked up speed and the two youths were treated to the fastest ride of their lives. By the time the other car came in sight again, Marshall had a lead of more than a mile.

“Wonder if they know we’re in here?” Pat asked.

“Sure they do. They couldn’t have helped seeing you there in the back when we came out of the bowl,” Marshall said.

They were now in a country of ruination. Half of the ground was covered with lava rocks in all kinds of weird formations, through which the road twisted and turned in all sorts of crooked curves, but always in the general direction of the Flying M ranch lying against the foothills ten miles ahead. It was a road for skilled driving.

Marshall was slowing down. “You boys jump out, and be careful to leave no tracks. Hide in the lavas here till that car goes by; then walk back and get your horses,” he directed. “Come on to my ranch immediately, but keep away from the road.”

“Just what’s the idee, Mr. Marshall,” Bert demanded.

“I’m trying to keep you from going to jail, that’s all. Possibly in gratitude for you licking Ike Blunt,” Marshall said crisply; and both boys jumped out of the car.

“Linn, what’s the meaning of this strange adventure,” Lucy Marshall demanded, as they resumed the speedy pace. “I never knew you were a law-breaker before.”

“I’m not breaking the law, my dear. It’s not a crime to overtake two young fellows on the road and give them a ride, is it?” Marshall smiled.

“But you knew that young ruffian had been fighting. You knew he was accused of theft, and you say he is one of the notorious King Creek Coles. Why should you help him?” the girl insisted.

“From perfectly selfish motives, I assure you.”

“Then I’m ashamed of you,” the girl said.

“I’ve let you know, Sis, that I have been subject to all sorts of annoyances for the last two years. I believe Ike Blunt is at the bottom of it. So for one thing it did my soul good to see that bully get such a licking, and, believe me, he got a good one. This Cole can fight.”



“How old is he?” Lucy asked curiously.

“About twenty-one, I should say.”

“You don’t really expect him to show up at the ranch, do you?”

“I really couldn’t say,” her brother replied. “I can hardly comprehend a Cole turning down anything in the way of help, however. So I think he’ll be here.”

“And what will you do with him—you can’t keep him hidden for ever.”

“I won’t try if I find out he is guilty. But whatever other things he may have stolen, I’m sure he didn’t break into Blunt’s store. I saw his face when he was accused of it, and there was too much surprise there,” Marshall stated matter-of-factly.

“And then what?” the sister persisted. “You said you had selfish motives.”

“I’m going to give him a job,” Linn laughed.

“I don’t understand. He comes from bad people, and is a thief if not a burglar. Why do you want him? Surely you can find better men,” Lucy protested.

“I haven’t told you much about it, but I have been losing a lot of cattle lately.”

“But what has that got to do with young Cole?”

“A thief to catch a thief,” Linn said laconically.

“You think you can trust him?”

“I can trust him to get in touch with the crooks without delay,” Linn said sardonically. “If it’s the Coles who are stealing my cattle they’ll be tickled at having one of themselves on the ranch. If it’s other people they won’t be long in getting young Cole to act as a spy for them.”

“But how——?”

“I’ll know who to watch. Now I don’t,” Linn stated.

There ensued a period of silence.

“Linn, do you think it fair to this boy to deliberately place him in the way of temptation?” Lucy demanded.

“Why not? He’s a King Creek Cole. He’d soon be in trouble anyway.”

Marshall drove the car into his own yard, stopped for his sister to get out, and proceeded to put the car away in the garage. Lucy started toward the house and then changed her mind as she saw the car that had followed them from Snowville begin to turn into the ranch. She returned to the small gate in the picket fence that protected the yard, and waited.

There were four men in the car, and they all leaped out as the car came to a stop. The local deputy sheriff, who was also marshal of Snowville, strode ahead of his cohorts with blazing indignation.

“What’ve yuh done with them burglars, Marshall?” he boomed, as the ranchman came from his garage.

“Burglars? Surely, Mr. Goddard, you don’t expect to find burglars here,” Marshall said quietly.

“Yuh’re damn’ smart, an’ all that, but this is one time yuh stepped on yoreself,” George Goddard said heavily. “It’s the law yuh’re buckin’ now. Where are they?”

“You think there are burglars on my place?”

“We seen ’em in the back seat o’ yore car,” Goddard said threateningly.

“Oh, well, then, have a look,” Marshall invited.

The four men strode across to the garage, and then came back to where Linn had joined his sister.

“All they is to it is we take them fellers back to town or we take you,” Goddard bullied.

“Good,” Linn said crisply. “I’ve been wanting you to make a break that would let me get a chance to take you into court. Too much authority has gone to your head.”

The officer was noticeably taken aback. “Well, I’m goin’ to search yore place,” he said.

“Help yourself,” Linn agreed.

Led by Goddard the men looked all through the outbuildings, and around the haystacks. They were convinced that the men they sought were hidden somewhere about the place. Failing to find them Goddard started toward the house.

“Hold up!” Linn snapped. “You’re gone far enough. You don’t enter my house without a warrant.”

Goddard stopped in perplexity. “Then they’re in there, eh?” he said maliciously.

“Who are you referring to?” Linn countered.

“Young Cole an’ the Finney kid, o’ course.”

“Lucy, I wonder if he don’t mean those two boys who rode with us about a quarter of a mile back along the road?” Linn said wonderingly.

“It might be,” Lucy said noncommittally.

“Look here, miss, what become of ’em?” Goddard roared.

“Why, they left the car miles back along the road,” the girl said, and had to smile at the look of baffled fury on the officer’s face.

“You people’ll pay fer this trick,” the man thundered, shaking his fist at Linn. Then climbing into the car with his escort he turned around and drove back toward Snowville.

“Linn, won’t this mad trick get you into trouble?” Lucy asked anxiously. “You have interfered with an officer.”

“I’d like nothing better than to have Goddard explain in court where he was when Ike Blunt was going to whip the Finney boy,” Linn answered.

“I’ve seen a fight coming with that crowd for a long time, and it might just as well begin now as later,” he added.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PARIAH

“WELL, they’ve done come an’ went an’ gone,” young Pat Finney chuckled, as from behind a protecting wall of lava the two boys watched George Goddard’s car on its way back to town.

“What I’m ’fraid of is it’ll git the Marshalls in trouble,” Bert worried.

“We should worry about them. Marshall’s got money, an’ anybody with money don’t need to worry in this country,” Pat declared.

“Mebbe not,” Bert agreed without conviction. “Anyway, we’ll just drift over to the Flyin’ M an’ see what Marshall has on his mind.”

Not being sure that all the posse had returned to Snowville the boys waited until dark to approach the ranch, and then they advanced circumspectly. Finally, however, Bert knocked discreetly on the front door of the bunkhouse.

“Come in,” boomed a voice.

A moment later Bert and Pat were squinting through the lamplight at the men sprawled in various poses in the comfortable and clean bunkhouse.

“H’lo, Pat—who’s the animated sausage yuh brought with yuh?” demanded a lean young puncher, looking up from the pair of socks he was darning.

“Hello, Tom Chill,” Pat grinned. “This here is Bert Cole—the lad who licked Ike Blunt an’ two of his bouncers this afternoon,” Pat introduced.

“Aw, quit yer kiddin’,” Chill grinned.

Bert, keeping in the background, saw that Marshall had not told the men about the fight. He was later to learn that Marshall always kept strictly aloof from his men except where business was concerned. As a system it worked fairly well, but its weakness was that the rancher failed to get that personal loyalty from his men which the old-time cattlemen valued so much.

“You one o’ them King Creek Coles?” demanded a middle-aged man who was seated behind a table that seemed to serve as a desk.

Bert liked neither the speaker nor the tone of his voice. The man’s pale blue eyes crackled with suspicion, and the upper lip, covered with a closely

trimmed light brown moustache was lifted from a set of powerful but uneven teeth.

“I am,” he answered evenly. “I’m a King Creek Cole.”

A silence fell over the room. Mort Cupples stared icily over his desk at the battered young rider. Then, “G’wan up to the house—Linn wants to talk to yuh,” he said.

“That’s the foreman,” Pat said, when they were outside. “I stayed here a couple o’ weeks last winter trappin’ coyotes. He’s purty damn’ tough, so yuh wanta look out for him.”

“I will,” Bert promised readily.

A few minutes later the boys were standing awkwardly inside a better furnished room than either of them had ever seen.

Lucy Marshall was sitting on a piano bench with her hands folded gracefully across her lap. She leaned forward and gazed at Bert levelly. For a moment he stood the calm scrutiny, which did not degenerate into a stare, and then he shifted uneasily.

Marshall motioned them to a couch. “You fellows both maintained your innocence to-day,” he stated. “Frankly, I think you were lying, but——”

Bert Cole was on his feet, and heading for the door.

“Wait,” Marshall snapped. “I am giving you a chance.”

“I don’t want any chance from a man who calls me a liar,” Bert said.

“One moment, please.” The girl was speaking, and Bert paused with his hand on the door knob. “My brother didn’t mean that,” she said. “He told me not long ago that he helped you escape because he was convinced that you hadn’t robbed that store. He merely made that remark to stir you up.”

“Well, he did,” Bert said.

“It was foolish of me,” Marshall acknowledged. “I wanted to see how you would take it. I do believe you were telling the truth. Now sit down and tell me what we can do to make other people believe it.”

Reluctantly Bert returned to the couch. Pat began volubly to explain the origin of the charge. “It was all on account o’ them gloves we bought. Blunt had kept out one pair for himself, an’ the linin’ was exactly like that in the gloves we got. Must ’a’ been he bought his from Widowboga’s squaw, too.”

“Then it should be easy to prove the truth by getting the squaw,” Lucy said. “She’ll help you, won’t she?”

“I dunno,” Pat said despondently. “Yuh can’t git nothin’ outa ’em. They just shut up like clams.”

“And you can prove an alibi only by your folks?” Linn said to Bert.

“All I need is time to git back on the reservation and find that squaw,” Bert said.

“I apologise for what I said just now,” Linn said. “Would you like to have a job riding?”

“Steady?” Bert asked eagerly.

“Yes, steady.”

Bert’s eyes were gleaming. A steady job riding was the one thing he wanted. He had trained himself for it; knew that there was no better man in the country than himself; yet always he had failed to get steady work.

“I’d like nothing better, Mr. Marshall, an’ I’ll do my work,” he said earnestly.

“All right; you can go to work in the morning,” Linn said.

“What about Pat?” Bert asked.

“Well, I can use him around the place,” Marshall said, after some hesitation.

“But we’ll have to git ourselves clear of this other thing, won’t we?” Bert asked.

“I don’t think it will be necessary,” Linn smiled bleakly. “I’ll go into Snowville in the morning and have a talk with Ike Blunt. I’m inclined to think he’ll drop the charges. If he don’t we’ll try to clear you.”

“I certainly appreciate it, Mr. Marshall,” Bert said feelingly.

“That’s all right. I’ll go out to the bunkhouse with you, and explain things to Mort Cupples,” Linn offered.

The next morning Bert became a full-fledged cowpuncher. Immediately after breakfast he was assigned a string of six saddle horses, and given a bed.

“I want you to go with Tom Chill to rep fer us on Sheepshead Mountain,” Mort Cupples said. “The main outfit over there belongs to old Enoch Cole. He’s a relation o’ yours, ain’t he?”

“Yes, he’s my uncle—but I never met him,” Bert answered.

“Well, I guess there ain’t nobody crazy about knowin’ the damned old hog,” the foreman sneered.

A few minutes later Bert and Tom were almost ready to travel. Pat Finney came up grinning. “Somebody wants to see yuh over the other side the granary,” he announced.

Wonderingly Bert went around the high building and found Lucy Marshall waiting for him. Feeling that there had been a mistake made, or

that Pat was playing a joke, he started to turn back, when the girl called.

“Just a minute, please.”

He was painfully conscious of his torn shirt and bruised face as he faced the girl in her fresh, morning house dress.

“Mr. Cole,” she said tremulously, “I want to warn you. I can’t give you any details, but you are going to be in great danger.”

“I am?” he asked in amazement. “Oh—on account of that burglary in Snowville?”

“No. Nothing to do with that. But the only way to play safe is for you to be—perfectly honest. Don’t—don’t listen to anybody’s crooked propositions.”

He saw that she was in earnest. “Well, really, Miss Marshall, I hadn’t thought o’ listenin’ to anythin’ o’ the kind,” he assured her.

“Then don’t. I know you are a—that you are—that you were——”

“A King Creek Cole,” he finished for her calmly. “I’ve been hearin’ a lot about that lately.”

“I—I didn’t mean to give offence,” Lucy said hastily. “But I know they’ll try to get you involved in crooked deals and—and I want you to keep straight.”

Somehow she looked younger and less experienced than she had done the previous afternoon, and then she had looked adorable.

“I’ll do my best to stay that way,” he promised simply.

Their eyes met and clung. The girl forgot the bruised, beaten face, and saw only the innate honesty in his steady, gray eyes. Impulsively she extended her hand.

“I believe you, Bert. And when you say you’ll stay that way I believe that you have always been straight—that the things they say about you are not true.” Suddenly confused by her emotional outburst, she released her hand and ran toward the house.

But she had left behind her a most amazed and startled young man. The touch of her fingers had been like a galvanic shock. And her expression of faith had stirred him to a depths of his nature.

“Hell, I couldn’t go crooked after that,” he murmured.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PROVING OF A PROPHECY

FOR a week Bert Cole had been riding on the Sheepshead Mountain roundup, and nothing of moment had happened except the usual routine of the occasion. Bert was happy at having a regular job, and his eye was keen for Flying M cattle. Much keener, it seemed, than Tom Chill's. There were not so many of them, to be sure, but Tom usually overlooked the few there were.

That, of itself, was somewhat mystifying to Bert; but there were other things which also hinted of strangeness. Sheepshead Mountain was almost a closed range. Soda River made a wide belt around both sides and one end of it, and the other end was guarded by an impassable cliff which ran from the river almost to the Double E ranch, the property of Enoch Cole.

Few strange cattle could get in there, and old Enoch saw to it that few of his own got out. The roundup should have been a very simple procedure; but it was not because the air was full of suspicion and unexpected enmity.

Enoch Cole did not appear, and Bert quickly learned that his uncle was confined to the house with an ailment whose nature Bert did not learn. But his foreman, Swede Anderson, was much on the job. A big, bony, tireless man, he set a pace which it took a real man to follow. Anderson seemed to have plenty of men of his own, but the number of reps was unusually large, and entirely out of proportion to the number of cattle belonging to their outfits.

From the first Bert observed that few of the reps were inclined to submit to Anderson's authority. More than once he saw little groups of them talking things over some place instead of carrying out Anderson's orders. He was aware that Anderson knew it, for the foreman nearly always sent his own men back to comb the country the second time. And, so far as Bert knew, he made no complaint. One of the men who was inclined to sluff his work was Tom Chill.

Bert was not long in picking out the men chiefly responsible for the loafing. The principal one was a man he had known slightly for a couple of years, though never had he actually exchanged words with him. Babe Colatta had ridden for several outfits since coming to Snowville, and he was a tophand. He was also a gambler and a gunman, and when not working,



most of his time was spent in Ike Blunt's saloon. He was handsome, quick, and graceful in his movements, and domineering. Just now Colatta was riding for a small cattle outfit known as the Hammer Brand, owned by Gord and Gus Leach. Colatta, it seemed to Bert, did everything in his power to hinder Anderson's work.

Then one day Bert happened to become separated from his partner for the day. Losing sight of the other riders, he turned back toward a brushy ridge which he was sure had been neglected. In a little cove he suddenly encountered a bunch of twenty or so cattle. They were breathing hard, and he guessed that they had just escaped from some rider. In a moment he had whooped them out, and started them down the draw toward the rodeo. Almost at once he noted that none of them wore the Double E brand. Most of them had the Hammer Brand.

He was trying to puzzle out the reason for this when there came the report of a rifle, and a bullet passed by unpleasantly close to his nose.

He gave a yell of warning, and continued with the cattle, but the next shot was even closer than the first. There was no mistaking now that somebody was sniping at him, and if he continued with the cattle he would be hit. He abandoned them and took to the brush.

He was riding a buckskin horse that day, and as he loped through the timber out of sight it occurred to him that Swede Anderson had also saddled a buckskin that morning. Had somebody mistaken him for Swede?

At any rate he determined to find out who that somebody was. As soon as he was out of sight he turned down the ride at a breakneck pace, and presently turned back at about the point where he judged the cattle would have drifted if left alone.

He had not thought of men being after the cattle, but barely in time to avoid detection he brought Buck to a halt as he saw two men turning the cattle back. He recognised them instantly as Gus and Gord Leach. Neither man had been seen at the roundup.

Completely perplexed, Bert watched the men driving the cattle back, and then he was startled by another shot not far below him. He realised quickly that he was not the intended victim of that shot, for Babe Colatta, Tom Chill, and another rep by the name of Jarvis were in plain sight, and they were firing as a signal for the Leach brothers to stop.

Bert watched the men come together and talk. There was no chance for him to get close to them without being seen, but after twenty minutes of conversation the Leach brothers rode away toward the bridge over Soda

River, and the other three men turned down toward the rodeo. The cattle had vanished into the brush, and no effort was made to find them.

Bert needed no second sight to tell him that there was something wrong about the affair. Every critter found on that ridge should have been driven to the rodeo that afternoon. He was remembering Lucy Marshall's warning that he would be approached with crooked proposals. So far nothing like that had happened, but he wondered how long it would be. The sensible thing was to ride on about his business; but he had a burning desire to find out just why the cattle had not been gathered in. Indeed, he wondered how such a comparatively large bunch should happen to be there with no Double E's among them.

Half a mile from where he had been watching he rode out and joined the three men. Tom Chill, he observed, was nervous. Jarvis looked peevish; but Babe Colatta only honoured him with a cold, calculating glance.

"You fellers see anything of a bunch of Hammer brands up that way?" Bert asked easily.

"No," Jarvis answered gruffly.

"Funny thing. I was siftin' 'em out o' the brush when all at once lead commenced to fly all around me. Considerin' it an' invitation to leave 'em be, I did. Couldn't pick 'em up afterward," he explained.

He saw Tom Chill looked anxiously toward Colatta.

"Didn't you see anybody?" Colatta demanded.

"Later on I did. I saw Gus an' Gord Leach."

"The hell yuh did? Anybody else?" Colatta rasped.

"Only you fellows."

"Yuh must 'a' been dreamin' things, because Gord an' Gus are at the ranch," Babe Colatta declared.

"Funny, when I'd 'a' swore I seen you three fellows talkin' to 'em just a few minutes ago," Bert grinned.

Babe Colatta's hand flashed out and seized the buckskin's bridle rein, jerking it to a stop. The other men halted also.

"There's just one thing that's more dangerous than spyin' on me, an' that's shootin' off yore mouth about it," Colatta gritted. "Right now I'm tempted to scatter yore brains."

"Go ahead," Bert invited calmly. "I know yore reputation as a gunman, but I'm willing to back my own speed in a showdown."

Babe Colatta's jaw dropped. Defiance was the last thing he had expected. Certainly he had never looked for it to come in such a cool

manner.

“Yuh see,” Tom Chill broke in hurriedly, “I told yuh this kid was all to the good. Damn it, he licked Ike Blunt, Bummer Kelly, an’ Slant Wickison in a fist fight. Linn Marshall himself seen him do it. Now he don’t back down from you. Give him a chance.”

Colatta’s hand had been resting on the handle of his gun, but he brought it away slowly. “You’re a King Creek Cole, ain’t yuh?” he demanded.

“Yuh’re damn’ right, I am,” Bert said evenly, “and proud of it.”

“I’ve never had any use for yore tribe, but they may be better men than I think,” Colatta said slowly. “What do yuh think about old Enoch Cole?”

“I don’t know him,” Bert answered.

“Yore folks have allus been poor an’ hard up. Old Enoch is rich. Did he ever offer to help yuh out with a cent?”

“He never did.” Bert knew nothing of the feud between his own father and Enoch Cole, but he did know that Alf Cole hated his wealthy brother, and never spoke of him except with sarcasm.

“No; and he never helped anybody else out. Instead, he always hogged everything in sight. Yuh ain’t got no cause to love him,” Colatta said.

“I don’t.”

“Then we’ll let yuh in on something good,” Colatta declared with the air of one granting a great concession. “There’s a big scheme in the wind that’ll make thousands o’ dollars fer everybody that’s in on it. Not piker stealin’s like you fellers have always pulled off. There’s big men in it, an’ a lot of ’em. Don’t think we’re givin’ you the details till we know we kin trust yuh, but the first step in our campaign is to have old Enoch an’ his foreman arrested fer stealin’ cattle.”

“I see. They’ll be accused of rustlin’ these outside cattle that don’t show up in the rodeos,” Bert said.

“Something like that,” Colatta agreed. “Now that yuh know what’s up we wanta know where yuh stand. Do yuh go in with us an’ keep yore mouth shut—or what?”

Bert wondered how Lucy Marshall had known that he would be tempted this way—or was he tempted? He was smiling gently, and none of them guessed the resentment that was surging through him. Possible profits did not occur to him at all, but the idea that they thought he would yield to the first crooked proposition put up to him was worse than a reflection upon his honour; it was an insult to his intelligence.

At the same time his common sense warned him to be prudent. A flat refusal meant an immediate gun fight with Babe Colatta. And even if he should be fortunate enough to beat Colatta to the draw one of the other men would probably get him. In a way Tom Chill had been his partner for the past week, and Bert felt a repugnance to fighting with him. Chill was rather likeable; weak rather than vicious. Yet if he agreed to go in with the outlaws he was justifying their belief that a King Creek Cole was inherently crooked. Worse than that, he would be making a mock of Lucy Marshall's faith in him.

"It's a big thing, Bert," Tom Chill wheedled. "There'll be fifteen or twenty thousand dollars in it for everybody, won't there, Babe?"

"I don't know. It'll depend on how much we can grab," Colatta said curtly. "But there's this fer yuh to understand: You take orders absolutely, an' no back talk goes. Do you understand that?"

"I think I do," Bert murmured. "Who do I take the orders from?"

"From me for the present," Colatta rasped.

"All right. What do we do next?"

"We ride down an' tell Swede Anderson we combed the country up here thoroughly, an' there's nothin' here. An' you keep yore mouth shut," Colatta said tersely, and spurred his horse forward.

Bert dropped in behind with Tom Chill. He had passively agreed to become an outlaw, or so they understood. But in his mind the thought was raging that some day he was going to frustrate whatever plan the outlaws had in mind. And as he looked at Babe Colatta's slim, straight back he had a premonition that some day or other he was going to have to shoot it out with that man.

In the meantime his job was to find out as much of the outlaws' plans as he could.

He knew better than to try to question Colatta or Jarvis, or to quiz Tom Chill when they were present.

"I been tryin' to git Babe to take yuh in ever since we got here," Tom said in a guarded voice. "He was afraid yuh didn't have nerve enough, but I reckon yuh showed yuh had to-day. Man, do yuh know that yuh was right ready to say, 'Good mornin', Peter!' when yuh talked back to Babe? Nobody else in this country would dast do it. It was all right this time fer a bluff, but don't yuh ever go tryin' it again or he'll git yuh." The advice was earnestly given.

"Is he as poisonous as all that?" Bert asked with interest.

“He’s worse. Wait till yuh see him in action with a gun. You can fight all right, I reckon, but Babe don’t use his fists.”

Low as their voices had been Colatta looked around, and Bert knew that he had heard.

Bert and Tom waited in the background while Colatta blandly explained to Swede Anderson that they had seen no cattle.

Anderson listened with grave attention, but only nodded when Colatta had finished. Anderson was little given to words, and Bert noticed that Babe Colatta was not altogether at ease. The gunman did not like people to be too non-committal in his presence.

Bert slept little that night. Men were rolled up in their blankets all around him. How many of them were honest men, how many crooks, he wondered? He knew that Babe Colatta had not accepted him absolutely, and he felt sure that Colatta would have other members of his gang watching him. Not knowing who they were he would have to be most circumspect. He felt, too, that Colatta would not forgive him easily for having talked back to him.

The next morning Swede Anderson surprised Bert by ordering him to help the horse wrangler with the cavvy that day. Babe Colatta was in hearing distance, and the gunman gave Bert a glance of warning. Bert nodded slightly and smiled, and Colatta rode away, apparently satisfied.

Bert was little surprised when Swede Anderson rode up to him a couple of hours later.

“I’ve been noticin’ you, young feller, an’ I see yo’re a hard worker,” Swede said. “I wish I could say as much for some of these other reps. As a matter of fact they haven’t got any business here at all if we wanted to keep ’em out. This is all private range. Did yuh know that?”

“No, I didn’t,” Bert said, wondering why Swede should vouchsafe the information to him.

“Yore uncle holds a ninety-nine year lease on this from the Government through an old Indian treaty, an’ we could keep these fellows out if we wanted to be ornery.”

“You know I’m a Cole, then,” Bert said.

“Certainly. One o’ the King Creek Coles. Frankly, I’m surprised to find yuh such a good hand. I understood they was plumb shif’less, but yo’re a tophand all right,” Swede said.

“I’ve tried hard to learn everything about this range business that I could,” Bert said modestly. “But this is the first time I’ve ever had a steady

job.”

“An’ if I follered orders yuh wouldn’t have that,” Swede grinned. “Mebbe yuh ain’t heard that old Enoch has give orders not to let any Cole on his land.”

“No, I hadn’t,” Bert admitted.

“Well, what he don’t know don’t hurt him,” the foreman said. “As long as you work like yuh have worked I won’t kick. But I am curious to know how yuh come to ride in yesterday afternoon with no cattle. I’d ’a’ swore there was some up there.”

So this was what the man had been driving at, and with a covert threat to send him home if he refused to talk!

“Didn’t Babe Colatta tell yuh?” Bert asked innocently.

“He did, an’ frankly I think he was lyin’. It wouldn’t be the first time that outfit has failed to bring in cattle, an’ I’m curious to know why.”

Bert looked at the foreman searchingly. Of all the men he had seen on this roundup he trusted Swede Anderson most. Should he take his uncle’s foreman into his confidence, or play the game alone? He suddenly decided that it was due Anderson to know what had been going on.

“There were cattle there,” he stated calmly. “Gord an’ Gus Leach brought them, an’ they shot at me when I tried to bring ’em in. Later, I met these other fellows an’ they told me to keep shut about it on pain of death.”

“Then, my Gawd, what’re yuh tellin’ me for?” Swede demanded.

“Because I’m tryin’ to be straight. My people have a bad reputation, an’ I’m tryin’ to live it down,” simply.

For a long minute Anderson was silent. “Kid, I believe yuh,” he said finally. “Anything else yuh want to tell me?”

Bert proceeded to tell exactly what had happened the previous afternoon, omitting only his own defiance of Babe Colatta.

“Kid, I appreciate this, an’ to keep yuh outa trouble I’m going to talk nasty to yuh whenever Colatta is around. I’ll admit I’m afraid of him. But to make it up to yuh I’m goin’ to do my damndest to get old Enoch to realise what a nephew he’s got. He needs an heir, an’ damned if I don’t think you’ll fill the bill,” Anderson said.

“I don’t want any of his money, but I do want people to know that I’m on the level,” Bert said candidly.

“Kid, I believe it. An’ between the two of us, we’ll put a kink in the plans of these damn’ crooks,” Anderson said, and rode away.

Visions of a complete vindication of the Cole name filled Bert's thoughts the remainder of the day. He permitted his mind to roam at large in the field of possibilities, not only of checking the schemes of the outlaws, but of winning the respect and admiration of Lucy Marshall. He had not thought of falling in love with her; he had been squelched too much to dream of aspiring to any one so fine as this educated, refined girl. But it was pleasant to think of her none the less.

That afternoon Swede Anderson failed to show up at the rodeo. While the work of cutting out went on two of his men slipped quietly away to look for him. They found his horse coming toward camp with the bridle reins dragging, and by following its tracks they found the foreman—with a bullet in his heart.

From their description of the place where Anderson was found, Bert knew that the foreman must have gone back to look for the bunch of Hammer Brand cattle the Leach brothers had brought to the range.

Bert looked surreptitiously at Babe Colatta, and found the gunman's eyes upon him in cold appraisal.

Every man was questioned, and each man seemed able to establish an alibi, but in Bert's mind it was a certainty that Anderson had been killed by either Babe Colatta, or the Leach brothers. And he knew that Colatta either guessed or knew that he had told Anderson about the cattle.

He was certainly getting mixed up in things, and he had some reason to believe that he might soon expect to meet Swede Anderson's fate.

## CHAPTER V

### THE BIG HOUSE ON THE HILL

THE roundup had swung in close to the Double E ranch when Swede Anderson was murdered. Four of his men took the body to the ranch, and the rest of the roundup crew sat around the fire behind the mess wagon in gloomy silence. The men were tired, but they did not care to roll into their blankets as early as usual. Violent death under most any circumstances can shake men's nerves.

With most of the crew Swede Anderson had been popular, and there were low murmurings which boded ill for the murderer if he was ever discovered.

It developed that Bert Cole had been the last man to see Anderson alive, or at least no one would admit having seen the foreman after he had talked with Bert. The other horse wrangler had seen him there, but had not exchanged words with him.

Bert had offered to accompany the body to the ranch, but the offer had been curtly declined by Hack Woolums, a puncher for the Double E, who had taken it upon himself to assume charge.

"I reckon the whole damned outfit will git a chance to talk when the sheriff an' the coroner gits out here," Woolums said. "I ain't above sayin' that there's been men on this roundup who have been makin' it tough fer Swede from the beginnin'," he added bitterly.

"The roundup ain't been on the level, an' I'll swear to that," Babe Colatta had spoken up evenly.

"Yeah, an' whose fault's it been?" Woolums demanded; then suddenly coloured up and turned away as he met Colatta's cold stare.

That night Bert chose his sleeping place with unusual care. If any one approached him in the night he felt sure they would have to make noise enough to wake him up. He was laying out his blankets when Tom Chill came up and joined him. No one else was close around.

"Fer Gawd's sake did yuh tell Anderson about them cattle?" Tom whispered.

"I reckon I'll do my talkin' to the coroner," Bert said blandly.

"Now don't git uppish with me, bo," Chill snarled. "It ain't healthy."



“Why, yo’re half scared to death right now that this crooked deal will come out, an’ yuh’ll be roped in,” Bert told this fellow calmly. “Yuh’re not lookin’ for trouble with me, an’ yuh know it.”

“By Gawd, you are a cool proposition,” Chill murmured. “An’ I don’t want no trouble. I come out here just to warn yuh to keep away from Babe. I don’t know whether he killed Swede or not, but I do know he slipped back to keep watch on you when Swede sent you with the cavvy.”

“Then I haven’t any doubt he killed Anderson,” Bert declared.

“Well, for Gawd’s sake keep yore opinions to yoreself,” Tom wailed. “Yuh can’t prove it, an’ Babe’ll git yuh shore as the world. On the other hand, there’s a big bunch o’ dough in it fer you if yuh’re in with us.”

“It’s a fine promise, but I don’t know a damn’ thing about it. How’m I to know it ain’t all bluff?”

“I don’t know, neither, but I do know there’s some big men in this. The only way they can make it work is to have quite a crew. That’s how you come to git in. I tried to git yuh in the beginnin’, but Babe didn’t think yuh had the stuff in yuh. Lord knows nobody ever dreamed yuh’d turn honest, an’ I don’t believe yet that yuh told Swede about them cattle,” Tom affirmed.

“He tried to git me to tell, all right,” Bert admitted. “Threatened to send me home if I didn’t. Said old Enoch Cole had give orders that none of my folks could come on his range. That looks like he might ’a’ guessed about them cattle, don’t it?” Bert said earnestly, as he suddenly saw a way to divert suspicion from himself for the time being.

“Sure it does,” Tom said, much relieved. “I’ll explain to Babe. Yuh know I’m kinda vouchin’ fer you, an’ it’d mean trouble fer me if yuh tried to throw us down.”

Here was an angle to the case which Bert had not considered. He was determined to fight Colatta and his gang with every means in his power, but it was going to be hard to get Tom Chill into trouble.

“Look here, Tom; is anybody else of this gang workin’ for Marshall?” he asked abruptly.

“Don’t let on to anybody that I told you, but Mort Cupples is.”

“I’m not so much surprised,” Bert said slowly. “In fact, I think I begin to see what we’re drivin’ at. It’s a big cattle-stealin’ plan, ain’t it?”

“Partly, but not all,” Chill affirmed. “O’ course, that’ll be our job when we git the orders, but the big money comes from somethin’ else. Honest, I

don't know what it's all about, but I do know that old Enoch Cole an' Linn Marshall is mixed up in it some way."

"Look here, Tom; don't yuh know this rustlin' an' so on ain't right—aside from the danger there is in it?" Bert argued.

"Now, damned if yuh ain't got me all suspicious of yuh again," Tom complained. "Yuh may be right at that. If I had it to do over I might lay out. But now I'm in, an' I've gotta stay, an' so have you. We wouldn't either of us live forty-eight hours if they suspected us."

"I guess that's right," Bert sighed. "An' I suppose the money will come in handy."

"That's the spirit," Tom applauded, and took his departure.

For hours Bert tried to figure out in just what way Linn Marshall could be concerned in the affair. Not as a member of Colatta's gang, he was sure. It must be then as a prospective victim. And there was another incentive for Bert to fight the gang. He owed Marshall a debt of gratitude for helping him escape from Snowville, and also for giving him his first chance to make good. Not only that, he had a deep feeling that to betray the man who paid him wages was one of the basest of crimes. And last, but not least, Linn was Lucy Marshall's brother.

His uncle was a different proposition. All his life he had been taught to sneer at any mention of Enoch Cole's name. His father, he remembered, had always taken a delight in making insulting remarks about Enoch. He recalled, with no idea of what it portended, that his mother had never liked to hear it. Sometimes she ventured to protest, but more often she drew her strong, erect figure up in silent, rigid protest.

Lately, Bert had begun to see his father as he was—a lazy, characterless man. Was it not possible that Enoch Cole had a reason for hating his brother? Whatever the merits of the family quarrel Bert was feeling a keen desire to meet this wealthy uncle of his, whom rumour declared to be a recluse and a miser. But he now knew that Enoch Cole would never see him if he knew in advance who he was. He determined to find some way to interview Enoch Cole in the near future.

His most pressing problem, however, was to decide upon the way he would treat Babe Colatta. The gunman might accept Tom Chill's explanation of his interview with Swede Anderson, but he doubted it. The man was more likely to demand a direct report, and he would not accept inferences as he had done before.

In a few short hours, also, he would be asked to tell his story under oath. He had to make up his mind now whether to tell the truth, or to stick to the

story of what he had led Tom Chill to believe had taken place between himself and the dead foreman.

If he told the truth he had not one scintilla of evidence to support it. The few members of the gang he knew would deny it, and he would be discredited. He would have made dangerous enemies without achieving any results. Clearly the proper thing to do was to pretend to be a faithful member of the gang until he found an opportunity to strike at it, and then strike hard.

Having made up his mind what to do, he turned over on his side and went to sleep.

When he awoke at daybreak the next morning he promptly rolled out and began to draw on his overalls. He had folded them under his head the night before, but as he shook them out he saw a scrap of paper pinned to the bottom of one leg. He sat back and gazed at it wonderingly. Despite his precaution some one had put that paper there during the night. Slowly he unpinned the paper and read the pencilled words:—

*A closed mouth is a sure sign of wisdom.*

He smiled. The warning could not have been more clearly given. He did not need a signature to tell him the paper had been attached to his pants leg by Babe Colatta. It was only a new evidence of the dangerous character of the man. It meant, however, that Colatta really did not anticipate any treachery from Bert.

While the rodeo was in progress that afternoon a deputy sheriff arrived with Hack Woolums with subpoenas for Bert, Joe Rain, who was the regular horse wrangler, and Babe Colatta. The inquest was to be held at the Double E ranch, and it was deemed that they would be the only witnesses required, since the men who had found Anderson's body were already at the ranch.

Bert could understand why he and Joe Rain should be called, since they were the last people to see Swede Anderson alive, but the summoning of Colatta was a puzzle. One rather thrilling prospect, however, was that he was pretty likely to see his eccentric uncle.

The Double E ranch buildings stood on a bit of elevated ground overlooking Soda River. On a bit of swampy ground next the river, perhaps a quarter of a mile from the ranch-house, was the ruins of an old fort. Back of the buildings stretched acre upon acre of hay land. With an abundant water supply available Enoch Cole had spared no effort to raise enough hay to winter his numerous cattle. There were barns and sheds of all kinds, and the low land along the river appeared to be pasture land; but Bert was mostly interested in the actual dwelling place of his uncle.

In the first place the house was set off from the other buildings by a high slab fence that surrounded it and was so carefully kept up that every knothole was covered. There was but a single gate, and it was a ponderous affair which could be locked and barred. The house itself, from outside the stockade, appeared to be a large, two-story affair with a sort of cupola in the top. And that was all that Bert got to see of it.

Anderson's body lay in a small house just outside the stockade, where the foreman had lived. Not far away was a long, wide bunkhouse. Men were strolling about the yard between the buildings nervously as the party from the range rode up.

The inquest, it seemed, was in progress in the smaller house. Bert was summoned inside immediately. He looked around the room curiously, and his gaze came to rest upon the features of the dead man. A lump came into his throat. He liked Anderson, and had the foreman lived things might have taken a far different turn.

There were six or eight men in the room, but the man Bert sought was not there. He had never seen Enoch Cole, but none of the men present answered his description at all. He was promptly sworn in and questioned.

"You are said to be the last man to see Swede Anderson alive," he was told. "Did he tell you where he was going?"

"He did not."

"What did he say to you?"

"I don't remember—everything," Bert said.

"Young man, you can't sidestep. Why did Anderson leave his work and come back to talk to you? He did talk to you, didn't he?"

"He did."

"And not to Joe Rain."

"No. I didn't see him talk to Joe, anyway."

"Then tell us why he did this peculiar thing. Something was in the air. He had some powerful motive for coming to see you. We know that. He went from there to his death. You are a fugitive from justice yourself. It looks bad. Now explain this thing if you can," was the order of the examiner.

"All right. I'll tell you what he had to say to me. He said my uncle, Enoch Cole, had given orders that none of the King Creek Coles could ride on his range. He said he liked the way I worked, and advised me not to let my uncle know I was here. That was why he put me to wranglin' horses," Bert explained.

The apparently candid, straightforward statement made an impression. He was questioned further, but he stuck to the statement, and refused to say that there had been anything else. He was excused.

Joe Rain was called, but his testimony failed to throw any light on the subject. Anderson had come out to where the horses were held to talk to Bert Cole, for he had not spoken to Joe.

“Let Colatta in,” ordered the sheriff, and the dark, good-looking gunman was admitted.

Colatta gave one swift glance around the room, and then was at ease. Bert sensed the uneasiness of the other men, even the coroner and the sheriff. Colatta was a more dominating personality than any of them. Then, suddenly, Bert began to think of his own affairs.

Linn Marshall had promised to have the charge of burglary dismissed, but it seemed that he had failed. True enough, Bert had not been arrested, but he had been told that he was a fugitive from justice, so doubtless he would be soon.

Colatta was being examined. Every man present was leaning forward with intense interest.

“You are said to be a killer, Mr. Colatta. Is that true?”

“I reckon I’ve been compelled to kill a few men in my time, but I’ve never been convicted of murder,” the man smiled.

“But with an avowed killer at large where an innocent man is shot down in cold blood you understand that it is natural for people to demand that that killer explain his whereabouts. Colatta, where were you when Anderson was killed?” The question snapped out like the crack of a whip.

“If I’m suspected of this murder, why didn’t you tell me so I could have had witnesses here to prove my alibi?” Colatta retorted coolly.

“Never mind the witnesses. You tell us where you were and we’ll check up on the witnesses, if there are any.”

By this time every one was completely absorbed in the examination of the colourful witness. Bert Cole had been slowly edging toward the door. He opened it gently until it was just wide enough for him to slide through. No one seemed to notice him. He slipped out, and gently pulled the door shut behind him.

He looked around cautiously. There were a score of men around the bunkhouse, ranch labourers mostly. They looked at him expectantly, but apparently he meant no more to them than any other witness.

“Anything important happened in there?” one man asked.

“They’re accusin’ Babe Colatta of the murder,” Bert answered cannily.

“Good Lord!” The fellow swung on his heels and hastened to spread the news.

Bert walked over to his horse. He had ridden Chief that day, and swinging on to the little sorrel, he circled the palisade. He had observed that the one gate was closed, or rather it stood ajar some six or eight inches, but there was a padlock on the heavy chain which fastened it, and on a huge block of wood which served as stool sat an unwinking old Chinaman. Bert sensed that it would be folly to try to talk his way past the Oriental, but he was determined to get inside that stockade.

The slabs were about twelve feet high, and the stockade had been built to secure privacy, with perhaps little idea that it would ever be needed for defence. Bert rode around to the side next the river, stopped his horse, and stood up in the saddle. It was an easy matter to reach up and grasp the top of a slab, and then draw himself to the top. But he had no more than done so than there was a shrill whistle from the glassed-in cupola on top of the huge, weatherbeaten house.

The Chinaman on guard at the gate leaped up as though some one had touched him with a lighted match, and in a moment he was running toward Bert, gesticulating and jabbering. Bert was surprised to see how powerfully the Chinaman was built. He was no longer young, but he was almost a giant in stature, and the muscles on his huge, bare forearms stood out like braided cables. And almost simultaneously with the whistle another Chinaman popped out of the back door of the house. This one was much smaller than the other, but the big meat cleaver in his hand made him a formidable-looking antagonist.

It was not an appealing-looking prospect, but after one careful look around, Bert seized the top of a slab firmly and let himself down—on the inside.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE MASTER OF THE BIG HOUSE

FOR a moment Bert hesitated about whether to draw his gun on the Chinamen, or try to dodge them. Since the big Chinaman carried a club that much resembled a pick handle, and the smaller one had his cleaver, a hand-to-hand conflict with them was anything but appealing. Bert took to his heels.

He was thankful now that the high, tight fence did keep the men on the outside from seeing what was going on, for he did not create a dignified spectacle by fleeing at top speed from the chattering Chinaman with the club.

He saw a door and made a bolt for it; but only to discover that it was locked. He abandoned that, and flashing around the end of the house, leaped upon a long porch or verandah. He could see two doors opening into the house there, but they, too, proved to be locked. He turned away from the last one just in time to avoid a mighty swing from the huge Chinaman's club.

As he continued his race around the house, he discovered that the only unlocked door was the one the Chinese cook had come out of, and this the man was guarding with his efficient-looking weapon. An endless race around and around the house promised to be barren of results. Furthermore, while it had been easy to get inside the stockade, there seemed to be no way to get out; and the Chinamen were not disposed to reason.

There was a window a few feet from the door where the smaller Chinaman stood, and Bert decided to take a chance on smashing through it. He wore his gloves, and bringing his hands and arms up to protect his face, he took a running jump, head first, into that window; preferring to have the falling glass strike his legs and body rather than his head, as it would do if he went into it feet first.

Above the crashing of glass and the splintering of wood arose the outraged cries of the Chinese servants.

Bert was on his feet instantly. Despite his care he was cut in several places. One large, pointed splinter of glass had dropped into his shoulder, and when he reached around to pull it out the blood gushed forth in a stream. And he had received several minor cuts, some of them on his head and face.

The two Chinamen were through the door and on his trail in a moment. Bert bolted for the nearest door, and hoped that it would not be locked. Apparently the abnormal precaution did not hold good inside the house, for it opened. He slammed it shut in the small Chinaman's face, and galloped on to the next room.

From room to room they dashed; the Chinamen having divided in an attempt to head their victim off. Barely eluding the big fellow, Bert found a stairway, and dashed up to a corridor from which several rooms opened. He could hear a high, querulous voice from somewhere above snarling inquiries.

Bolting into the nearest room, Bert was astounded at the number of great, easy, leather-covered chairs, the thick, soft rugs, and above all at the row upon row of books which encircled the room. It was the first time he had ever been in a library of any kind. He had no time to linger, however, for the big Chinaman was hard on his heels.

Spying another door Bert bolted into it, only to discover that it was a bathroom, with no door save the one through which he had just come.

With a triumphant screech the huge Chinaman made a lunge for the door. Bert whirled, whipped his left leg behind the Chinaman's knee, and brought the heel of his right hand up under the Oriental's chin with all the power of his arm. The great body of the yellow man described an arc backward, and only the thickness of the carpet saved him a cracked skull, for he came down fairly upon the back of his head.

With three jumps Bert crossed the library to the door through which he had entered. The other Chinaman had by this time entered, and now he was standing by another curtained entrance at the other side of the room, waving his cleaver, and hissing maledictions.

Behind the curtain Bert caught a glimpse of a stairway which he knew must lead to the cupola above. Some one was up there; the person who had first detected him on top of the palisade, and the person who was still spitting out inquiries. That person, Bert decided, must be his uncle, Enoch Cole.

Lowering his head Bert rushed the cleaver-wielding Chinaman. *Swish!* The atrocious weapon flashed through the air viciously, but Bert had dodged back just in time to escape decapitation. Before the Chinaman could swing the weapon again Bert seized him by the flanks and flung him bodily over his head, the Chinaman's position two steps up the winding stairway making it easier.



In a second Bert was racing up the stairway, and suddenly he was inside the cupola. It was larger than he had thought, being as large as a small bedroom. A single row of windows ranged all the way around it, and they were covered with light, chintz curtains which did not obstruct the view from within, but which made it impossible for any one outside to see in. There were various articles in the room, but in the centre of it was a huge wheel chair.

Inside the chair sat a shrivelled form with a face almost like a hideous mask. A gorgeous silk blanket covered the lower part of the body and the legs, but the thing which interested Bert most at the moment was a very businesslike revolver pointed directly at his heart, and which did not waver, even though it was held in a skinny, talonlike hand.

“Git your hands up,” snarled the mummy.

There was no choice other than for Bert to obey. One glance into the cold, gray eyes of the old man in the chair was enough to know that he would not hesitate to shoot if he were disobeyed.

“Take his gun, Pike,” the old man ordered, and the huge Chinaman, who had just come up the stairs, obeyed.

“Now, young fellow, who are you, an’ what have you got to say for yourself?” the old man sneered.

“I am Bert Cole of King Creek, an’ I’ve come to talk to you,” Bert answered.

The old man gave a start, and peered closely at the young rider. His eyes opened with amazement, and it was observed by Bert that his grasp on the big .45 loosened.

As for Bert, he did not need to be told that this was the uncle whom he had never seen. Sallow and withered was that face, yet it bore the Cole stamp. Vaguely it resembled Bert’s father, but much more it resembled Bert’s oldest brother, Dave; making allowance for the difference in age. Should Dave allow himself to be eaten up by an inward canker of soul he would probably be an exact duplicate in features of this old man when he became the same age.

Suddenly the old man’s eyes narrowed, and his whole attitude tensed. “Beggin’?” he rasped.

“Do I look like a man who would come beggin’—from you?” Bert demanded.

Again the strange look came over the old man’s face. “You don’t,” the old man croaked. “You look as much like your mother did at your age as it’s possible for a man to look like a woman.”

He was lost in reverie, and Bert glanced stealthily around for a chance to take advantage of it. But the moment he started to lower his hands he was prodded in the ribs by his gun in the hands of the huge Chinaman, whom Enoch Cole had addressed by the strange name, for a Chinaman, of Pike.

“Why *did* you come here?” old Enoch snapped out presently. “Didn’t you know that I’d forbid any of your breed ever coming on my ranch?”

“Yes, Swede Anderson told me that just before he was killed,” Bert replied. “I came because I want information. I found out that an outlaw gang is working on your range. Swede Anderson knew it, too. That’s why he was killed.”

“There’s an inquest bein’ held just outside. Why didn’t you tell it there?” the old man demanded.

“Because I couldn’t prove a thing, and because it would for ever end any chance I might have of beating that gang,” Bert said evenly.

Old Enoch was impressed. He sat musing for a few minutes, then he said abruptly, “Take down your hands, an’ set down.”

Bert found a chair and dropped into it, much relieved at getting his hands back in a normal position. He was still covered by the big .45, however, and the two Chinamen still stood unblinkingly at the head of the stairs.

“Do you know what I think?” Enoch went on. “I think you’re a member of that outlaw gang, an’ have come here to spy.”

“You’re not interested in what I have to say, then,” Bert commented.

“Damn it, yes; but I won’t believe a word you say.”

“All my life,” Bert began calmly, “I’ve been taught to hate you.”

The figure in the wheel chair stiffened, and a faint glow of angry colour came into the yellowed, parchment-like cheeks. “By—by your parents?” he choked.

“No. By my father. I never heard my mother speak a word against you,” Bert said truthfully.

The answer, for some reason, had the effect of somewhat mollifying the old man. “Well?” he grunted.

“Just recently I’ve come to understand that that may be partly why it is that nobody has any use for the King Creek Coles. Of course I know that dad an’ the older boys have been triflin’, an’ they ain’t always been particular about how they get a hold o’ things. What I mean is that dad’s hatin’ yuh that way may be the reason we was raised like we was. As for me, I’m gittin’ damned tired of bein’ thought unreliable an’ worthless.”

“So that’s how Alf has raised his family,” Enoch mused. “I guessed it long ago.”

“I don’t know what the quarrel was between you two, an’ I don’t care,” Bert went on. “I’ve started out to be straight, an’ to amount to something. But the way things have broke I’ve got to put that outlaw gang out of commission or be thought one of ’em myself.”

“You sure you ain’t one of ’em?” the old man was sneering again.

“They think I am one of ’em. They took me in because they thought a King Creek Cole would naturally take to it.”

“Just what do you think you’ll git out o’ me?” Enoch cried angrily. “Let me tell you something—no matter how much your father hates me it ain’t half as much as I hate him!”

“All I want is to know what this outlaw gang hopes to accomplish, so I’ll know what to fight,” Bert stated.

“How should I know? Think they’d come an’ tell me?”

“No. But with what you know, and what I know put together I think we could come close.”

Again Bert was subjected to a long scrutiny. “Something’s wrong, or Swede Anderson wouldn’t have been killed,” old Enoch mused. “He was a good man. Go on; tell me what you know.”

As briefly as he could and still make all vital points clear, Bert told all that had occurred to him from the time of his arrival in Snowville until he had dropped over the stockade fence.

“Not a very clean record you’re bringin’, young feller,” old Enoch commented when he had finished. But it was plain that the old man’s brain was occupied with other problems.

“I’m tellin’ you the truth. I could have doctored it up some an’ made it sound better,” Bert retorted.

“So you could. Your father could always fix up any kind of a lie an’ make it sound good,” Enoch said sarcastically.

Suddenly the old man’s eyes were turned toward the gate. “They went in, Pike,” he said. “You’d better carry me down to the library, an’ you had better stay up here if they want to arrest you for burglary,” he said to Bert.

“Can’t—can’t you walk?” Bert asked.

“I ain’t stood on my feet, nor been out of this house for two years,” old Enoch said grimly. “Stay here till I call you.”

The big Chinaman picked up the wheel chair and carried it down the stairs as easily as though it had been empty. And suddenly Bert found his

heart filled with pity for this lonely, crippled old man living alone here in this big house with two alien servants, loving no one, and eating his heart out with hatred, despite the money he had accumulated.

Glancing curiously around, Bert was surprised at the breadth of view that opened up before him from the cupola. No one, he saw, could possibly approach the ranch-house in daylight without being observed. There was scarcely a field in all the broad acres of the ranch that did not lie within the range of vision from the cupola, and Bert noted several telescopes and field-glasses lying about. No labourer could shirk without being seen by the sinister old figure in the cupola, and Bert guessed that this was the real reason for the cupola having been built.

He could hear voices in the library, and suddenly he decided to hear what was being said, if that were possible. He moved carefully down the winding stairway, but halted a few steps from the bottom as he saw the broad back of Pike just below him. The voices were all indistinct except one, and that Bert believed belonged to the blustering sheriff.

“The verdict had to be that Anderson came to his death at the hands of persons unknown,” boomed this speaker. “But that don’t mean we won’t eventually git the murderer. It was either Babe Colatta, or a nephew o’ yours—a King Creek Cole. The chances are it was young Cole.”

Bert could not hear what his uncle said, but the other man resumed speaking almost at once.

“What we can’t figger out is how this young Cole could leave his work long enough to follow Anderson an’ kill him. Joe Rain says he was never far away from the horses, but young Rain may be in on it, too. What do you think, Mr. Cole?”

Again Enoch Cole’s snarling, indistinguishable tones filled the room.

“What I want to know is how you stand with regard to this young feller. We understand that you don’t git along well with the other branch o’ the family,” said the sheriff.

Again Bert failed to catch his uncle’s words.

“I’m glad you feel that way,” went on the sheriff, “because this young feller is bad all the way through. They’re all purty worthless, but this one is worse than the others, because he’s smarter an’ more capable. He robbed Ike Blunt’s store not long ago, an’ then damned if he didn’t whip Ike an’ two of his best men with his bare fists.”

“Why don’t you arrest him?” Bert caught that inquiry.

The sheriff laughed. “Blunt would have give his boot straps to have landed him right after he got that lickin’, but a few days after that he slipped

us the word to go slow. You see, if he stays at large he's sure to do something a damned sight worse, and when we do get him we'll get him right. Ike would be a lot better satisfied if we could nab him for this murder, for instance, than just to send him up for burglary. I could have had him just a little while ago, but I let him sneak away thinkin' he was pullin' off a cute gitaway."

The sheriff was leaving, and Bert stole back up to the cupola. He was not to be arrested yet, but the charge still hung over him. If they failed to fasten some worse crime upon him they would have this to fall back upon. He realised that he was going to have to walk a very careful course if he kept out of trouble. But what concerned him most at that moment was his uncle's attitude. Even if the old man professed to be friendly how could he know that it was not merely hypocrisy designed to cover up his desire to inflict injury upon the King Creek Coles?

## CHAPTER VII

### A SHOOTING MATCH

“WELL, young man, you seem to have a genius for gettin’ into trouble. Burglary, assault and battery, possibly murder, and I don’t know what I could arrest you for after breakin’ into my house, but it would be something,” Enoch Cole said grimly, when he was carried back up to the cupola.

“Anyway, I’m glad to know the sheriff ain’t lookin’ for me.”

“Listened, eh? Well, I don’t know as I blame yuh. Do you suppose you could clear yourself of the charge of robbin’ Blunt’s store?”

“I’m sure of it—if I had the time.”

“Take the time. If it’s like you say you’ll have to do it right away. It depends on the testimony of an Injun squaw, an’ if you don’t git it while she can still be sure, her evidence won’t have no weight,” Enoch advised.

“But I’m more interested in this other matter,” Bert said.

“If you can prove you was tellin’ the truth about that matter I may be inclined to trust you, even though you are Alf Cole’s boy. Do that an’ then come back here. Pike will let you in, so you won’t have to climb over the fence an’ smash my windows,” the old man said harshly.

“But I’m workin’ for Linn Marshall,” Bert protested.

“Tell him I refuse to let you ride on my range. I’ll give Hack Woolums orders to that effect. Marshall will give you a layoff long enough to clear yourself of that charge—if you can.”

“But you don’t think I can?” Bert questioned.

“I don’t know.”

“What are you goin’ to do about Colatta’s gang bringin’ in them cattle on your range?” Bert insisted.

“I’ll tend to that, young man,” was the crisp answer. “Now you peel that rag of a shirt off an’ let Pike an’ Peck dress them cuts.”

Presently Bert was enjoying the most luxurious bath of his life, and the two Chinamen dressed his wounds with soothing ointments, and bandaged up the deep cut in his shoulder.

“How long have you been with Enoch Cole?” Bert ventured to address Pike.

“Plenty long time. One time China boys fleeze down on livee when tly catchee gold. Enoch come ’long, thaw China boys out—save ’em life. China boys stop ’long Enoch evah since,” Pike answered.

“I see,” Bert murmured. “You like Enoch purty good then.”

“Enoch much fine man,” Pike asseverated. “No woman evah makee fool f’ m Enoch.”

Bert laughed, and the big Chinaman grinned in return.

They brought him fresh clothes, and the only things he retained from his old outfit was his hat, boots, and gloves. When he was dressed he was summoned to have supper with his uncle. The old man was already at table, and he was a lonely looking figure in the big, cheerless room.

“I never thought to have one of Alf Cole’s boys at table with me,” the old man grunted. “But sit down.”

The food was served by Peck, and it was very good. “Uncle Enoch,” Bert said on impulse, using the title unconsciously, “why do you an’ dad hate each other so much?”

The old man’s soup spoon fell to the floor with a clatter, and his face became mottled with anger. “Why should I have anything in common with a waster an’ a scoundrel like your father?” he croaked. “I don’t want to talk about him. Don’t mention him to me. If it hadn’t been for him I wouldn’t be livin’ alone here with a couple o’ Chinks——”

He caught himself up abruptly, having plainly let slip far more than he intended. It was, perhaps, the first time that the old man had ever confessed to there being anything lacking in his lonesome existence.

Bert was wise enough to change the subject. “About those Chinamen,” he said softly. “Surely Pike an’ Peck are not their real names?”

“O’ course not. I don’t want to be bothered with their long three-part names, so I give ’em somethin’ handy to answer to,” Enoch muttered.

“Pike told me that you saved their lives,” Bert hazarded.

“They had a prospect hole that had been abandoned by white miners a few miles from here, an’ had been to town for supplies. Tried to cross the river on the ice an’ broke through. It was tremendously cold, with a stiff, piercin’ wind from the north-west. I happened to see ’em stumblin’ along—Pike carryin’ Peck—an’ finally they both went down an’ didn’t git up. I brought ’em in, an’ they’ve been with me ever since—nearly twenty years,” Enoch explained.

"I imagine they are a purty faithful bodyguard."

"Either one of 'em would kill a man before they'd let him harm me."

"I believe it. I know I had a close call from them, and I didn't mean to hurt you either," Bert grinned. "But somehow I'm mighty glad you've got them here, uncle. I can't help havin' a certain feelin' that yore life's in danger. I wish I knew what it was all about."

"I've had enemies ever since I've been here, an' I've managed to stay alive an' on top so far," Enoch said dryly.

When the meal was finished the old man rolled his chair back and started for the library. Bert arose and moved toward the stairway, the dining-room being on the second floor.

"Where you goin'?" Enoch snapped.

"To git my horse. I reckon I'll have to be movin'."

"Your horse has been attended to. You will sleep here to-night, an' leave in the mornin'," Enoch said peremptorily.

Bert followed the old man into the library, and obediently dropped into one of the big chairs. For an hour Enoch Cole talked—first of the range then of his books. Occasionally he asked a shrewd question to draw his nephew out, and Bert knew that the old man was trying to find out exactly what he knew.

Bert did not try to bluff or cover up his ignorance. Where the range and the cattle business was concerned he could hold his own and answer intelligently, but in the realm of books he was at a loss. He had gone to school some, had read such books as were handy, but he was completely swamped by the book knowledge which Enoch Cole had obtained.

He had heard enough from his father to know that neither he nor Enoch had attended school to any great extent, and Enoch's language was for the most part the vernacular of the cow camp; yet the man was well read, and possessed a tremendous store of knowledge.

Bert got up and walked about the room, running his fingers lightly over the leather backs of the books, or occasionally picking one up and turning the leaves gently. For the first time in his life he felt the urge to become a scholar; to know things—to aspire to the heights.

It was well for him that he could not see the cold, calculating glare in the eyes of old Enoch Cole when his back was turned. Otherwise, he would have left the place at once.

The two Chinamen put old Enoch to bed, and then they showed Bert a room with a clean, comfortable bed. Being young and healthy, and normally



fatigued, Bert soon fell asleep. But the bed was much softer than he was used to sleeping upon, and it was not many hours until he was awake. For a few minutes he tossed and turned without finding a satisfactorily hard place in the bed, becoming more wide awake every moment.

It was a bright, moonlight night, and he suddenly felt a desire to go up to the cupola and have a look around. Suspecting that the inmates of the house were light sleepers, he resolved to make no noise. He slipped out of bed cautiously, and into the corridor. He had to go past his uncle's room, and as he came even with the door he stopped involuntarily. The next moment something sharp pricked him in the back. He stood perfectly still, and then slowly turned his head. Behind him stood Pike.

The big Chinaman merely gestured with his head toward Bert's own room, and taking the hint Bert turned and walked back to it, the Celestial following him closely with the long, sharp knife at his back.

With a feeling of vast relief, Bert closed the door and dropped upon the soft bed. There would be no more night walking in the big, lonely house so far as he was concerned.

The next morning there was nothing in the inscrutable eyes of the big Chinaman to indicate that anything unusual had happened during the night. At breakfast Enoch Cole was morose and silent, and Bert was glad to get outside the palisade when Pike opened the gate to let him through.

He found that Chief had been well cared for, and he promptly saddled up and rode away to the roundup. It had swung back toward the other side of the range, and Bert did not join it until noon.

He had no more than reached the mess wagon than Hack Woolums came up to him. "I'm foreman now, an' you can't ride on this range," the man said. "After dinner take yore blankets an' git."

"All right," Bert agreed. "I suppose my uncle told you to tell me that?"

"He shore did," Woolums answered.

Bert turned to Tom Chill, who was listening. "Well, Tom, yuh see how it is. Looks like I'd have tuh drift."

"Yep. But I'll write a note to Mort Cupples tellin' him how it come about," Tom promised.

The cowboy strolled away to borrow pencil and paper, and when he finally handed the note to Bert he whispered, "Stop at Cedar Spring as you go out. There's somebody wants to talk to yuh."

"All right, I'll stop," Bert promised. "But what about that little bunch o' Flyin' M cattle we've collected. Shan't I take 'em along?"

“Guess yuh’d better,” Tom agreed. “I’ll tell Woolums, an’ help yuh drive ’em as far as Cedar Spring.”

There were only eighteen head of cattle in all, and Bert anticipated little difficulty driving them, even though he was obliged to turn the extra horses in his string loose with them. It was only a couple of miles to the Cedar Spring, and by the time they reached there the little band of mixed stock was trailing out nicely.

As they reached the cedars Bert was not surprised to see Babe Colatta ride out.

“Where was you last night?” the gunman demanded.

“I was hidin’ out from the sheriff,” Bert replied promptly. “I heard him say I was still wanted for robbin’ Blunt’s store, so I slipped out an’ beat it.” He wondered if Colatta did know that he had spent the night with Enoch Cole, but apparently the gunman accepted his story without question.

“I reckon you told a purty straight story down there,” the man remarked. “They had the nerve to insinuate that I killed Swede Anderson.”

“Well, they insinuated the same thing about me,” Bert said, with a forced laugh. “I’d like to know who did do it.”

“Yo’re not likely to have yore curiosity satisfied,” Colatta said cynically. The man turned sideways in his saddle, and deep-set black eyes studied the younger man’s face. He seemed to have forgotten Tom Chill’s presence.

“When Chill asked me to take you into the gang I wasn’t in favour of it, because I didn’t think you had the stuff in yuh,” he said deliberately. “I’ve been watchin’ you purty close, though, an’ I’m beginnin’ to think that yo’re all there. In fact, I’ve got a mind to make you my chief aid.”

Bert was struck by the ludicrous expression on Tom Chill’s face, but he waited for Colatta to go on.

“Understand, I’m not doin’ it right now; but if yuh continue to act right the place is yours.”

“What about Ike Blunt?” Tom Chill blurted.

“You keep yore bazoo outa this,” Colatta snapped.

“Is Ike Blunt at the head of this?” Bert demanded calmly.

“He thinks he is,” Colatta said after a moment’s thought. “He’s also determined to send you over the road, or hang something worse on yuh. That’s why it’s to yore interest to trail along with me.”

“But what am I expected to do?” Bert asked.

“What do you people expect to git outa yore uncle’s estate when he dies?” Colatta shot out.

“Huh!” The exclamation came from Bert with a jerk.

“Yore people have talked about it, ain’t they?” Colatta persisted. “So far as anybody here knows, yore dad is old Enoch’s sole an’ only heir—at law.”

“I suppose mebbe he is,” Bert granted, with an indifferent shrug. “So far as our folks are concerned, however, none of us are figgerin’ on it. I’ve heard my dad remark that old Enoch would will his money to found a home for orphaned polecats before he’d let any of us git a cent of it.”

“I reckon that’s right,” Colatta conceded. “Still, ain’t yore dad ever thought o’ tryin’ to bust the will?”

“He may have done, but I’ve never heard him say so,” Bert declared truthfully.

“I reckon he will, an’ I reckon old Enoch knows it. That’s why he fixed everything up the way he did. Yuh didn’t know, I reckon, that Linn Marshall benefits more from his death than most anybody else?”

“I certainly didn’t,” Bert said in astonishment.

“Well, he does. Old Enoch Cole has fixed up a deal with Marshall expressly to keep yore people from gittin’ anythin’ after his death.”

“How is that?” Bert was all suppressed eagerness; not because he minded any disposal that his uncle might make of his money, but because he felt that he was on the verge of finding out what the outlaw gang was after.

“Cole has willed his property to some charity—nobody knows just who or what it is—but he expects yore dad to attack the validity o’ the will. So to keep yore folks from gittin’ much even if they bust the will, he has arranged to have the Double E ranch, range, an’ cattle sold on long-time payments at his death. Linn Marshall has the option on it, an’ he paid damned high to git it, they tell me. But it’s strictly legal, an’ will make him a fortune when he does git it. It is all recorded so anybody that wants to can read it,” Colatta explained.

“Well, I’ll say he was lucky,” Bert breathed.

“I’ll say he is—if he gits it,” Colatta said grimly.

“Is—is our object to keep him from exercisin’ his option?” Bert queried.

“I see yo’re not asleep,” Colatta commended.

“But where do we come in if he don’t?”

“Marshall has got to be made to sell that option, or give it up some way. The screws are bein’ put to him in a number o’ ways right now, an’ there’ll be a lot more. We’re the people who are goin’ to git that option—an’ a lot o’ other things besides,” Colatta said.

“I still can’t see why drivin’ cattle on my—on the Double E range will help,” Bert murmured.

Babe Colatta suddenly whirled upon Tom Chill. “Look here, you,” he rasped, “this is beyond your depth. Git to hell back to camp, an’ keep shut about this business.”

Tom Chill was obviously disappointed, but he had not the slightest intention of disobeying Colatta’s orders. “I’m glad to see Bert comin’ into his own,” he said. “I know he’s got the nerve. S’long.”

“Never take such men altogether into yore confidence,” Colatta advised, as he watched the cowboy ride slowly away.

“Marshall has got to be broke,” he went on presently. “He’s in debt damned bad right now, on account o’ havin’ to borrow money to git that option, an’ he’s been havin’ hard luck ever since. An’ he’s goin’ to have a lot more. The plans are all made for the biggest bit o’ cattle rustlin’ that ever was pulled off in this country, an’ Marshall is goin’ to be the victim. Ike Blunt holds his paper, an’ Marshall will have to turn over the option to save anythin’ at all.”

“But my uncle hates Ike Blunt,” Bert said unthinkingly.

“Eh? How d’ye know that?” Colatta asked sharply.

“Why, I’ve always heard he did,” Bert said lamely.

“As a matter o’ fact, he does, but that won’t make no difference,” Colatta went on. “Blunt will have to make it right with all of us if he gits that option, an’ besides that there’ll be a big haul from Marshall’s cattle.”

“It looks big,” Bert said in simulated awe.

“But there’s a chance for it to be a damn’ sight bigger for some of us,” Colatta said, lowering his voice. “If Ike Blunt comes in on this he gits the biggest share. He’s sure to make trouble for you an account o’ that lickin’ yuh give him. You stick to me an’ it’ll be you an’ me instead o’ Ike Blunt who’ll be sittin’ purty on the Double E.”

“It sounds good,” Bert said tremblingly.

“But you’ve got to obey my orders,” Colatta said harshly. “No man ever disobeys me the second time. If I tell yuh to kill a man, I want yuh to do it.”

“I—I—hadn’t thought about killin’ anybody—but—but I guess I can do it if I have to,” Bert replied.

“All right. Now I want to see what natural ability yuh may happen to have. Do yuh see that tin can there just above the spring? Yeah? Well, when I count three we’re both goin’ to draw. You shoot at the can, an’ I’ll shoot at the water. Are yuh ready?”

“I guess I am,” Bert said. He understood that Colatta was trying to find out what skill he had with a gun in case they should ever be opposed to each other. Many hours of practice Bert had had when he was not able to hold down a steady job, and he had come to have almost a magic touch with his .45. But the present question was, should he uncover all his skill for Colatta’s benefit, or hold back enough to let the killer think himself the faster? He rather expected that Colatta would himself hold something in reserve, and he was much interested in knowing just how good Colatta was. The more Colatta talked the worse Bert hated him, and the feeling that some time or other he would have to shoot it out with the man grew stronger with every sentence the fellow uttered.

“One, two, three!” Colatta counted swiftly. Bert was watching covertly, determined to exactly equal his shot if he could.

*Bang!* The reports of the two guns came almost as one. Colatta’s bullet slapped against the water, sending a thin spray up over the bank where the tin can had been placed. But Bert’s bullet had knocked the can away before ever a drop of the water struck it.

“My Gawd!” Colatta’s astonishment was unfeigned. “Was that an accident?” he demanded.

“I think I can repeat,” Bert said modestly.

Colatta had suddenly turned morose and moody. To Bert’s surprise he did not ask to have the experiment repeated.

“Yuh’d just as well go now,” he said. “For the present take yore orders from Mort Cupples, but I want you to ride over to see yore folks an’ have a talk with yore dad. Tell him that old Enoch ain’t liable to live much longer, an’ that he’d better see a lawyer about contestin’ the old boy’s will.”

“All right,” Bert said meekly. Inwardly he was all atremble. There had been something sinister in Babe Colatta’s reference to old Enoch. Of one thing Bert was certain: if the outlaws should get their hands on the option which Linn Marshall held, Enoch Cole would not live long—if Babe Colatta could bring about his death.

Bert rode away. He had been detained much longer than he had anticipated, and his cattle and horses had long been out of sight. But overtaking them seemed a very minor problem at the time. The big thing was that it was up to him to foil the machinations of Babe Colatta and his gang. Whom could he trust, he wondered? Uncle Enoch? Linn Marshall? Not, he decided, until they showed some inclination to trust him.

## CHAPTER VIII

### LOST CATTLE

RIDING hard along the trail toward the bridge, Bert soon overtook his saddle horses, grazing on a side hill not far from the trail. But the cattle were nowhere in sight. Convinced that they could not be far away, he gave the horses another start along the way, and made a close search for the cattle. Soon he became convinced that he must have passed them.

Hastily roping and tying up two of the horses to keep the little band from getting away from him, he returned back along the trail in a frantic search for the cattle, until darkness compelled him to abandon it. He had seen nothing of the cattle, nor had he found any tracks. He knew cattle nature well enough to feel sure that the animals would not have wandered so far away of their own accord. He was compelled to believe that somebody had picked the bunch up while he was talking to Babe Colatta, and driven them away.

There was nothing he could do about it. He went back to where he had left his horses, and so many queer things had happened recently that he would not have been surprised to find them missing, but they were still there. Driving them along in the darkness was slow business, and it was ten o'clock by the time he reached the bridge across Soda River. He was still a long way from the Flying M ranch, but there was a small town called Bicknell only a quarter mile down the river. He decided to stay there that night and go on to the ranch in the morning.

He arranged for his horses to be tended, secured a room, had supper, and then looked into the one pool hall in the town. He had scarcely entered the place when he caught sight of a hulking, grinning figure against the wall, and gave an amazed start. Then he recovered his composure and moved swiftly toward the hulking youth.

"Ash," he said anxiously, "what're you doin' here?"

His younger, weak-minded brother greeted him with a friendly grin.

"Lookin' fer you, Bert," he reported.

"What's the matter? Has anything happened at home?"

"Nope. We just heard that yuh'd got a job with the Flyin' M, so ma sent me over there with yore clean clothes," Ashton explained.

“Then, why are you here?” Bert demanded.

“Well, they told me yuh was ridin’ over on the Sheepshead Mountain roundup, an’ a gal up there said yuh prob’ly needed yore clothes purty bad, so I started to take ’em over to yuh, an’ had just got this far,” Ashton grinned.

Bert had nothing but kindly feelings for this weak but harmless brother, but he wished that Ash hadn’t talked to Lucy Marshall. Ash would hardly raise her estimate of the King Creek Coles.

“Where’s the other boys, Ash?” he asked.

“Funny thing, Bert,” Ash laughed. “They heard about this Sheepshead roundup, an’ went over there to-day to see if they could git on.”

“Damn!” Bert swore heartily. He could see where their presence on the range that afternoon was very likely to lead to trouble, but there was no use to discuss it with Ash. He led his younger brother from the place, and they went to bed.

The next morning he sent Ash home with a note to his mother thanking her for the clothes she had sent, and promising to come home for a visit in a few days. Then he collected his string of horses and hurried on to the Flying M.

He turned the extra horses into a corral, and finding no one around to report to, reluctantly went up to the house and knocked on the door.

It was opened by Lucy Marshall.

“Oh, you here!” she greeted. “Is the roundup over already?”

“No, it ain’t—isn’t,” he said awkwardly. “Things came up that I had to leave. I—I’d like to explain to yore brother.”

“Linn has gone to Snowville, and Mort Cupples went with him. You’ll just have to take it easy till they get back,” she smiled.

“I was wonderin’ if I couldn’t git a layoff for a few days,” he said. “I’d like to go home.”

“Oh! For your clothes! Why, your brother was here yesterday with them, and I sent him over where you were.”

“I met him,” Bert said dully.

“Then—then surely you’re not going to lay off just because you don’t want to work? I know they’ve told Linn that you wouldn’t hold down your job—but I told him they were wrong.” Her tone sounded frankly disappointed.

“I won’t ask for a layoff if your brother needs me, but I’ve found out that they’re still holdin’ that burglary charge against me; an’ I wanted to find that

squaw we got the gloves from before it slipped her memory,” he explained.

The girl’s expression changed. “I don’t blame you,” she said. She was silent for a moment, while she gave him a long, searching look. He still bore a few scratches on his face, but he was much better looking than she had thought he would be. Furthermore, the honesty and candour in his eyes impressed her.

“Bert, they’re not treating you right,” she said abruptly. “Neither Linn nor any one else. They’re not giving you a chance. I know I shouldn’t tell you this, but the only reason Linn hired you was because he thought you would be crooked, and by watching you he could find out who the men are who have been stealing from him.”

Bert paled. It seemed hard for him to draw his breath. He was both hurt and angry. He had felt gratitude toward Marshall for giving him a chance to prove himself, but the rancher had only meant to use him in a despicable way.

“It—it was a mean thing to do,” the girl went on. “Don’t blame Linn too much, though. He knew you only by reputation—or rather the reputation of your folks—and he lacks the intuition, or instinct, to judge a man at sight. Perhaps that is exclusively a woman’s gift.”

Her smile was drawing some of the poison from his mind. “Have you still got some confidence in me, Miss Marshall?” he asked eagerly.

“Oodles of it,” she affirmed.

The gratitude in his eyes worked a strange upheaval in her mind. She seemed to understand him perfectly; knew that he was fighting a lonely, bitter battle, and knew that nothing could so help him to carry on the fight as confidence and encouragement.

With sympathy for him stabbing her like a knife, she reached out her hands. He took them, and they looked into each other’s eyes in bewilderment. And suddenly they lost all perception of things as they were, and became only man and woman swept by elemental passion. His arms went about her, and he strained her to him hungrily. The girl’s eyes were nearly closed, yet when he stooped to kiss her, her lips responded to his own with sudden fervour.

Abruptly they sprang apart. “My Gawd!” Bert murmured, appalled at the way he had lost his head. The girl was looking at him as though he were some freak she had just seen for the first time.

“Why, you—you——” She was unable to finish, and with the rich colour suddenly flooding her cheeks, she fled into the house.



She did not know whether she was happy or angry. That she, the educated Miss Marshall, should fall in love with a despised King Creek Cole was unthinkable. She had tried to help him a little by offering her sympathy, and he had done this!

But Lucy was inherently fair. She knew that she was as much to blame as he was. She had been carried away by mysterious forces within her own nature, and the same thing had happened to him. What strength he had! He might be primitive and uneducated, but certainly no other man of her acquaintance had ever been able to move her so much. The truth of the matter was she did not know what to think of him, or of the incident that had occurred. She was quite sure she was angry with him, but she had the disquieting feeling that under similar circumstances it might easily occur again.

Bert took the affair much more to heart. It seemed to him that with almost criminal foolishness he had alienated the one person who believed in him. It was unpardonable, and it was clear that he could no longer remain at the Flying M. Yet—she had at first responded.

He made his way to the bunkhouse, and there discovered Pat Finney doubled up with laughter.

“Wow! Yo’re a wiz,” chortled Pat. “Huggin’ an’ kissin’ the boss’s hightoned sister in broad open daylight! They don’t wanta tell me there’s no energy in a King Creek Cole.”

“Aw, shut up,” Bert growled.

“Gee, that was great,” Pat continued to chuckle. He approached a snubbing post that happened to be standing in the yard, and held out his arms yearningly. “O-ooh, how I loves yuh,” he babbled. “Won’t sweetie give um l’il tiss? Oo will! Oh, oh, sweetums!” His arms went rapturously around the post and loud smacking sounds came from his lips.

“Dry up, dang yuh, or I’ll do worse than Ike Blunt threatened to,” Bert said acidly.

“Say, where yuh goin’?” Pat demanded, as he saw Bert pick up the sack of clean clothes he had left in the bunkhouse only a few minutes before.

“Home,” Bert answered shortly. “I can’t stay here any more.”

“My Gawd, it looked to me like yuh was sittin’ purty,” Pat retorted.

“There’s plenty o’ reasons why I’m through,” Bert said curtly. “In the first place Marshall just hired me because he thought I was crooked. Then I got fired off the roundup over there an’ had to come home. On top o’ that I started out with a bunch o’ Flyin’ M cattle an’ plumb lost ’em on the way.”

“But when he finds out how things stand between you an’ his sister he won’t fire yuh,” Pat said gently. “He’ll kill yuh.”

“Well, I’m leavin’,” Bert said determinedly. “I ain’t outa the picture yet; I’m just takin’ on a bigger job.”

“My Gawd, what have yuh got on now?”

“Marshall was right when he thought I’d be approached by a gang o’ crooks. They’ve been after me already. They think I’m in with them, but I’m goin’ to beat their game, or—or know the reason why.”

“Has it got somethin’ to do with that murder over there the other day?” Pat asked.

“Quite a lot. I know who killed Anderson, Pat, an’ I know he plans to kill some more people. Incidentally, he intends to break Linn Marshall. Nobody would believe me, Pat, but that fellow an’ his gang is what I’m out to fight.”

“Ike Blunt got anythin’ to do with it?” Pat queried.

“Unless I’m guessin’ wrong he’s the head o’ the gang that’s after Marshall,” Bert stated. He did not think it necessary to mention old Enoch Cole to Pat.

“An’ we’re leavin’ here?” Pat asked.

“I am. There’s no call for you to quit a good job.”

“I’m with yuh, Bert,” Pat asserted. “Yuh been a damned good friend to me, an’ I stick to yuh. If you quit I do.”

Nor could the youngster be dissuaded. Bert was touched by his friend’s loyalty; but he was also shrewd enough to find out that Pat had grown tired of cleaning out stables around the Flying M ranch, and longed for a life of greater freedom.

Presently, at Bert’s request, Pat went to the house and informed Lucy that they were leaving.

“Not—not quitting?” she exclaimed.

“That’s what Bert says,” Pat grinned laconically.

“But he mustn’t do it. He has set out to show people that he can hold down a job. This will make them think he don’t want to work,” the girl protested.

“I dunno, I’m sure,” Pat said. “Yuh can lay to one thing, though, lady: Bert ain’t like the rest o’ the King Creek Coles—he’s honest as the day is long, an’ he ain’t lazy.”

“But why should he quit?” Lucy wanted to know. “He can go away until he proves himself innocent of robbing that store and then come back. You

tell him that I'll take it upon myself to tell Linn why he had to go, and I'll tell Linn that I gave you both permission to stay away until you find that Indian squaw."

"All right, lady, you fix it up so we can come back to work if we want to," Pat said. "We'll let Bert think he's quittin' if he wants to, an' then when we can come back I'll spring it on him that we've still got our jobs."

"All right," Lucy agreed. "And tell him that Ike Blunt is trying to get him mixed up in something crooked for revenge. Blunt promised Linn not to arrest you boys as long as you were both working here, so you both want to be careful when you leave here."

"We'll be careful all right," Pat promised. "An' there's just one thing more, lady. There's a bunch o' crooks tryin' hard to bust yore brother, an' Bert has got his neck bowed to prevent 'em doin' it. No matter what happens, or what they say, you just remember that's what he's workin' for."

"But I don't understand," the girl said.

"I can't tell yuh any more," Pat declared. "Anything else yuh want me to tell Bert?"

"No-o, I guess not."

That ended the interview.

"What did she have to say?" Bert asked when Pat came back to the corrals.

"She said to tell yuh that no matter what happened she'd believe in yuh till the last gasp," Pat lied glibly.

"She did?" Bert was half minded to go back to the house, but decided against it. She had not sent for him, so doubtless she intended her message to be enough.

Several times that day Pat grinned with pleasure as Bert began to whistle.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE GANG MAKES SURE

BERT COLE was beginning to think there was a most determined jinx on his trail. He and Pat Finney had diligently ridden the Indian reservation for two days in search of the squaw from whom they had bought their gloves, only to learn eventually that Widowboga and his squaw had gone to visit their cousins on the Wind River reservation, and would be gone all summer.

"That just about puts the kibosh on us," Pat Finney lamented, for the first time giving way to a spirit of pessimism.

"Well, there's nothin' to keep you from driftin'," Bert pointed out.

"Will you come?"

"No; I've changed my mind about all that. I'm goin' to stick. If Blunt has me arrested I'll stand trial. But I'm goin' back an' throw in with Babe Colatta, an' I figger that'll make Blunt lay off a while."

"If I was poisoned on bad whisky I wouldn't use carbolic acid for an antidote," Pat declared.

"You don't have to."

"Hell, I'm stickin' with yuh, Bert. If you wanta join up with the crooks I'll throw in with 'em, too."

"I'm not sure they'd take you in. There's one thing more we might do about this glove business, but I've got to git back. That puts it up to you."

"I knowed there was a joker," Pat said.

"I didn't let Ike Blunt keep them gloves of mine. Now you take 'em an' visit all the stores where these squaws are likely to buy the linin' for their gloves. When yuh find a piece that just matches it find out if the storekeeper remembers sellin' any to the Injuns. This is purty gaudy an' they may remember," Bert said.

"Aw, hell, why not just plead guilty?" demanded Pat, to whom the idea did not appeal. Yet in the end he set out on his errand, and Bert returned home.

Only his mother and Ash were at home, and Bert was rather glad of it. He contrived to send Ash away on some errand, and then asked his mother to sit down and talk with him.

Mrs. Cole clearly showed her surprise, but she wiped the dish water from her hands and dropped into a chair.

“Mother, did you ever know Enoch Cole?” Bert asked her.

Mrs. Cole’s weatherbeaten face showed a tinge of colour. “I knew him before I married your father,” she replied. “Why?”

“How is it he made so much money, while dad couldn’t even make a livin’?”

“I reckon he was a smarter man than your father, an’ he had more hustle.”

“Yet I’ve heard dad say that he might have been worth as much as Enoch if it hadn’t been for something that Enoch done,” Bert persisted. “Do you know what it was?”

“What do you want to know for?” his mother demanded. “All them things happened years ago, an’ they can’t be changed.”

“Ma, I stayed all night with Enoch Cole not long ago. He hates dad just as bad as dad hates him, but somehow I gathered that he don’t hate you—though he does hate us boys, an’ has give orders that none of us can ever ride on his range. I can’t help but think he thinks he’s got a real grievance against dad. I want to know if you know anything about it,” Bert urged.

He half regretted having opened up the subject as he saw the pain in his mother’s face.

“You’re remindin’ me o’ things I’ve been tryin’ fer years to forgit,” the woman said in a strained voice.

“If it hurts yuh, Ma, I’ll say no more about it,” Bert said kindly.

“However did Enoch come to let you stay all night with him?” Mrs. Cole asked. “His foreman run the other boys off the other day.”

“He run me off, too; but he told me to come back if I could prove I was innocent of robbin’ Blunt’s store. I failed to do that, but I’m goin’ back there anyway, because I think his life’s in danger. Somehow—though he’s a queer, cranky old codger—I like him,” Bert said.

Mrs. Cole’s eyes seemed to brighten. “It would be funny,” she mused.

“What would?” her son asked.

“If he should take a likin’ to you.”

“He ain’t. Don’t git it wrong, Ma. There’s no danger of him ever leavin’ me any money if that’s what yo’re thinkin’ about. I understand he’s got that all fixed up. But I do know he’s in danger, an’ if I could make him trust me I might could save him, an’ do somethin’ else that I want to do mighty bad. But—but you know our reputation?”

"I do know it," Mrs. Cole said grimly. "I know what Alf an' the other boys have done. Poor Ash ain't done nothin' bad because he don't realise. But you—you've been straight, Bert. I know it. Lots o' times I wanted to tell you how proud I was of yuh, but I couldn't.

"Words didn't come easy, an' then there was yore father allus tellin' me that you'd turn out as crooked as the rest if yuh was let alone. I wanted to show him that he was wrong, an' so I never said nothin' to you. I knew, somehow, that you'd always be honest."

Bert was amazed at this revelation. He was used to his father's perpetual cynicism, but he had never suspected this fierce, secret pride of his mother.

"I'm awful glad we had this talk," he said. "An' don't you ever worry about me goin' crooked. I may go to the pen, or I may get killed, but if I do it'll be because they beat me. Never because I turned crooked."

"Son, yo're in trouble, an' it's somethin' besides bein' accused o' robbin' Ike Blunt's store. Can't you git out of it—leave the country or somethin'?" his mother begged.

"They'd say it's because I had to go. I'd leave under a cloud, don't you see? No, I'm goin' to fight it out right here, win or lose."

Mrs. Cole bowed her head. "I reckon you're right, Bert," she acknowledged. "If you can make somethin' of yourself, you kin mebbe do somethin' with the other boys. They're only weak, an' their father has trained them to be what they are. Sometimes, Bert, I wish——" She stopped abruptly, and in a moment the look of bitter hatred passed from her face.

Bert had long known that his parents had little use for each other, but he had taken it, as well as the reputation of the King Creek Coles, as a matter of course, without ever suspecting that they might actually hate each other.

"One thing more, Ma," he said. "Does dad figger on gittin' any of Enoch's property—when he dies?"

"If he can git any lawyer who will try to break Enoch's will on commission, he will mebbe. He ain't got much pride," Mrs. Cole said listlessly.

Presently Bert got up and started to leave the room.

"Yuh goin' back to the Flyin' M or to your uncle Enoch's?" his mother asked.

"I'm goin' back to the Flyin' M first, an' I don't know where I'll go from there," he told her.

For the first time in many years his mother kissed him, but she did not try to dissuade him from taking any course that he thought best. Her

confidence was only less inspiring to him than Lucy Marshall's had been.

He had his doubts about the wisdom of going back to the Flying M, but he had to establish a point of contact with range affairs somewhere, and Pat had told him that Lucy had insisted that he come back to work.

He was eager to see the girl again, and yet the thought of meeting her set him to trembling. Pat's message, which he did not dream of being fictitious, caused him to think that she did not resent what had occurred at their last meeting. He even dared to hope that if he could establish his good name he might aspire some day to ask her to marry him. He was young, honest, and ambitious, and if he could thwart the outlaws' plan to break her brother, he felt he would be entitled to a hearing at least.

It was after dark when he reached the Flying M ranch. He tied Chief to a post and went into the bunkhouse before unsaddling. Mort Cupples looked up with a scowl as he entered. As none of the other men knew him at all well they merely nodded or kept silent.

"Hell of a time to be takin' a layoff," Cupples growled.

"I had to do it," Bert said evenly.

"Well, come on up to the house with me an' we'll see what Linn has to say about yuh goin' back to work," Cupples said, as he heaved himself to his feet and got his hat and went out the door.

To Bert's surprise the foreman led the way toward the corrals instead of the house.

"You damn' near raised hell by stayin' away like this," the man said when he knew that no one could overhear them. "Don't you know it ain't wise to be chasin' off when everythin' is all set for the big deal?"

"Then you know I'm in with the gang?" Bert asked. "I had a letter, but I didn't git to give it to you."

"Yes, I know. An' Babe Colatta's purty sore to hear about you leavin' here," Cupples said irritably.

"Well, what's up, anyway?" Bert demanded.

"Hell, I don't know. I've had everything ready for the big haul as far as I can do it, but I ain't got the word yet. It seems that old Enoch Cole has kinda smelled a mouse an' raised hell with our plans. But Babe sent word that you was to come to Snowville an' see him just as quick as yuh got back. That's why I want to git yuh away before Marshall knows yuh're here," Cupples explained.

"What has Cole done?" Bert asked eagerly.

“The damned old cuss has sent word to all the cattlemen around here that he’s heard he’s been suspected o’ cattle stealin’, an’ he’s invited ’em to come in an’ hold another roundup.”

“I kinda gathered that that was exactly what we wanted,” Bert hazarded.

“Hell, it was. Now there ain’t a damn cowman, except the Leach boys, who’ll bother to do it. An’ Gord an’ Gus don’t dare say nothin’.”

“So that makes us change our plans,” Bert said. Secretly he was highly elated. He felt sure that it was his warning to Enoch Cole which had caused the old man shrewdly to suspect what the outlaws were after, and take this effective means to spike their guns, by inviting them to do the very thing they had wanted to force him to grant them.

“I don’t know what Babe’s got up his sleeve, but we’ve got to act quick or it’ll be too late,” Cupples said. “Anyway, you’d better straddle yore hoss an’ git back to Snowville to-night.”

“An’ will you fix it so I can have my job back here if Marshall learns I’ve been here?” Bert requested.

“Hell, yore job’s safe,” Cupples said with a leer. “Babe fixed that for you several days ago. The day yuh left Sheepshead Mountain, in fact.”

“I don’t savvy that at all,” Bert said in perplexity.

“Yuh wouldn’t. I’ll tell yuh, though,” the foreman said with a low laugh. “Marshall hired you so that by watchin’ you he could keep an eye on the cattle thieves, because he figgers yo’re shore to git in with ’em. He was fool enough to tell me that as well as Ike Blunt when he asked Ike to lay off yuh till he could git somethin’ on yuh, too.

“So to make him sure that he hadn’t made any mistake, they started yuh home with that bunch o’ cattle the other day. O’ course you suggested bringin’ ’em yoreself, but somebody else would if you hadn’t. Then Babe stopped yuh there at Cedar Spring, an’ while yuh was talkin’ he had somebody hike the cattle back the other way. The next day Tom Chill is sent over here an’ he lets it out about you startin’ with the cattle. You don’t git in till that mornin’, an’ yore brothers are seen on the range that day, so there yuh are. The fact that you takes a layoff right after that all helps. Marshall would bet his last dollar right now that you an’ yore brothers swiped that bunch o’ stock.”

Bert had somehow suspected something of the sort after he had lost the cattle, but hearing the details of the trick explained made him feel murderous. He had, he felt, fallen an easy victim to Babe Colatta. Nor could he see how he could ever clear himself with Linn Marshall.



And undoubtedly the rancher would tell his sister. She had believed him to be a victim of circumstantial evidence before, but would her faith in him be strong enough to discredit this affair?

It hurt to think that Marshall would be willing to keep him on the payroll for such a purpose, and after hearing it the idea of continuing to work there was almost unbearable. He was glad to go to Snowville or any other place to get away from the Flying M, and he was eager again to meet Babe Colatta.

At the same time he realised that he might have to return. He could not afford to quarrel with Colatta until he knew exactly what the outlaws planned to do. If Colatta ordered him to return to the Flying M he might have to do it. Above all things he had to keep his head clear.

## CHAPTER X

### A QUAGMIRE OF DOUBT

THERE were few lights yet burning in Snowville when Bert again rode down its broad main street, but from within the saloons came sounds of drunken hilarity. Leaving the bridle reins dragging, Bert strode up to the door of the Mint Saloon, and after a moment of hesitation, stepped inside. Perhaps a dozen men were in the saloon. Bert gave them a swift, appraising glance, and then strode toward the bar, where Slant Wickison stood wiping glasses.

Wickison licked his suddenly dry lips, and the hand holding the towel dropped below the level of the bar. At the same time he jerked his head toward the rear of the room where Bummer Kelly was at the moment dealing a hand of poker.

“Never mind reachin’ for a gun,” Bert said coolly. “Is Babe Colatta around here?”

A look of relief crossed the bartender’s face. “Bummer, tell Babe that young Cole wants to see him,” he requested.

Bert suddenly found himself the cynosure of every eye in the saloon. A moment later Bummer Kelly came out of the door of a side card-room where he had vanished, and motioned to Bert.

“Right this way, young feller, if yuh wanta see Babe,” he said.

For a minute Bert hesitated. This was Ike Blunt’s stronghold, and he had ample evidence of Blunt’s hatred for him. Nor had he any illusions about Babe Colatta’s friendship. Yet he knew they hoped to make use of him, and they were selfish enough to forgo their revenge until they had used him.

As he walked down the room he was conscious of the sensation he created. He was the man who had whipped Ike Blunt, the bully of the country, and now he was walking boldly into Blunt’s den. Bert smiled grimly. At least they had to respect him in one way. Heretofore he had been only one of Alf Cole’s no-’count boys.

He paused for a moment at the door of the card-room while he surveyed the four men at the small card table. Besides Blunt and Babe Colatta there were the Leach brothers. He noted Blunt’s bull neck swell up with baffled anger, but Colatta greeted him with a smile and a nod. Gus and Gord Leach, squat, heavy set, ordinary looking ranchers, were only curious.

“Come in, Kid,” Babe invited, and as Bert walked in he signalled for Bummer Kelly to close the door.

There was a whisky bottle and glasses on the tables, but no cards.

Bert ignored the chair the gambler indicated. “Did you tell Mort Cupples to send me here?” he asked.

“I sure did. Where have you been? Seems to me I told you to stick at the Flyin’ M.”

“Yuh see, I didn’t like the idea of Ike Blunt here havin’ anythin’ on me so I went out an’ got some evidence that would clear me if he ever made any breaks to have me or Pat Finney arrested for that store robbin’ he accused us of,” Bert said coolly.

Ike Blunt shoved back his chair angrily. “You damn’ pup, I’ll show yuh I \_\_\_\_\_”

“Set down!” Babe Colatta’s voice cut like a razor, and the big saloon keeper, still puffing belligerently, dropped back into his chair.

“The damn’ striplin’ needn’t think he can come here an’ run it over me because he happened to be lucky the other day,” he raved. “If I said the word he couldn’t git outa here alive, an’ you know it.”

“That’s where yo’re wrong, Ike,” Colatta retorted coolly. “Me an’ this kid could wipe out yore whole joint.”

Blunt subsided, mumbling angrily under his breath.

“Did yuh get what yuh went after?” Colatta asked Bert.

“I always do,” Bert said evenly. “I’m ready to stand a trial if Brother Blunt wants to start anything.” He felt that now he had started he had just as well throw as big a bluff as possible.

“I guess yuh see now, don’t yuh, Ike, that I was right about this kid. He’s got the brains of old Enoch Cole, an’ the nerve to go with it. We need him,” Babe Colatta said.

“All right, take him,” Blunt thundered angrily.

“I want it understood that he gits his share,” Colatta persisted. “I plan for him to play one of the most important parts in this deal.”

“Yuh’re a fool to trust him,” Blunt snorted.

“All right. Then we’ll call the whole deal off,” Colatta said with icy menace.

“No, no. Go ahead with it,” Blunt said hastily. “But how can yuh trust a Cole?”

“So far as that goes, how can I trust you—or you me?” Colatta demanded coldly.

“Before we go any further, I want to know what I git out of this?” Bert put in boldly.

The other three men looked at Colatta expectantly, but the gambler only smiled.

“Would ten thousand dollars be about right for probably a week’s work?” Colatta asked.

“Who pays it to him?” Blunt snorted.

“I pay half an’ you half,” Colatta said easily. “You can pay the kid a thousand dollars now on account.”

“I—I’ll see him in hell first,” Blunt roared.

“Did it never occur to you that we could git along nicely without yuh in this at all?” Colatta murmured.

“You couldn’t git Marshall’s option,” Blunt said. The man was puffing heavily, as though from great physical exertion.

“Don’t be too sure even about that,” the gambler told him quietly.

“I don’t want any money now,” Bert said to end the dispute. “I just want to know what I’m expected to do.”

“Yo’re expected to help us rustle about fifteen hundred head of Flyin’ M cattle,” Colatta said. “That will break Marshall, or so near it that he’ll have to sell his option on Enoch Cole’s property to Blunt here. See?”

“Yes, I see. But how can that many cattle be stolen, an’ what good will that option be if—if Enoch Cole should happen to live fifteen or twenty years. He’s only sixty-five, you know.”

“He’ll not be livin’ long,” Babe Colatta said grimly. “As for the rustlin’, you don’t have to worry about that. You won’t even see them cattle. I want you to go back to work for Linn Marshall. He’ll be watchin’ you every minute. I want you to send word to your brothers to meet you a couple of miles from Marshall’s house at midnight, forty-eight hours from now.”

“Why drag my brothers into it?” Bert demanded.

“Because we need ’em. If they have to be hired, Blunt will give yuh the cash,” Colatta said smilingly.

“Like hell!” the saloon keeper retorted.

“Marshall will see you leave, or Mort Cupples will,” Colatta went on unflustered. “Thinkin’ that yuh’re out to steal somethin’ he’ll follow you with all his men. While they’re away my outfit slips over an’ gits the cattle.”

“Fifteen hundred cattle in a single night? It can’t be done,” Bert objected.

“Don’t you worry about that. Marshall has been losin’ cattle. He’s not much of a cattleman, an’ he depends on Mort Cupples. Mort has had him put all his big, dry stuff in a sort of herd, an’ right now they’re keepin’ ’em down on Soda Point, next tuh Soda River, because the range dries up there early, an’ they’re gittin’ it while the gittin’ is good. An’ that is right where we want them cattle to be,” Colatta explained.

“All right,” Bert said suddenly. “I won’t ask no more questions.”

“All right. Let’s everybody have a drink to the success of the big coup,” Colatta laughed.

As Bert tasted the liquor he eyed Ike Blunt sharply. Plainly the saloon keeper hated him, and feared Babe Colatta. Yet greed made him reconciled to anything the gambler-killer recommended.

“Yuh’ll sleep with me to-night, Kid, an’ I’ll tell yuh more about what yo’re to do,” Colatta said, when they put down the glasses. He gave Gus and Gord Leach a few curt instructions—*notwithstanding* that he was supposed to be working for them—and then he led Bert out through a back door.

“We’ll put yore horse up, an’ then go to my room,” he told Bert.

Distasteful as was the prospect of spending the night with a murderer like Colatta, Bert made no remonstrance. Presently they were in Colatta’s room in Ike Blunt’s hotel.

For ten minutes the gunman chatted lightly about various matters, and then he suddenly slipped with noiseless tread over to the door and flung it open. He was plainly a little surprised not to find an eavesdropper.

“I have to watch Ike Blunt,” he apologised. “Now we’ll talk.”

“You mean that the talk in there was just to fool Blunt,” Bert said softly.

“Yes. Son, that option is the big thing. The range lease has got over sixty years yet to run—it was a ninety-nine year lease old Enoch got, an’ it is worth a fortune of itself. But there’s another thing, too, comin’ up that old Cole himself don’t know about. There’s goin’ to be a big dam an’ reservoir put in there by the old fort, an’ it’ll back water clear back over the town of Wayan, the county seat. The town’ll have to be moved, an’ the natural town-site is right where old Enoch’s buildin’s stand. An’ when the town is built there it’ll be the centre of an awful big chunk of country. Snowville, an’ these other jay towns won’t be nothin’. D’ye git the point?”

“But how do you know all that?” Bert demanded.

“Ike Blunt, bein’ in politics, has some high-up friends. He found out about the reservoir from them. The rest anybody can figger out,” Colatta replied.

“Then yuh’ve got some other scheme to git that option from Marshall, an’ the cattle stealin’ don’t go through. Is that it?” Bert asked.

“Yuh guessed it about right,” Colatta agreed. “There’s just one thing more I want to tell yuh about the scheme we worked out with Blunt, though mebbe yuh’ve guessed it. That option is no good as long as old Enoch is alive. I’m supposed to loll the old codger as soon as Blunt gits the option.”

Bert was horrified by the coldbloodedness of the man’s manner, but he managed to restrain his feelings.

“What did yuh think of him when yuh stayed all night there?” Colatta shot out suddenly.

That time Bert betrayed his surprise. “Why, I—I—don’t know. He’s purty feeble,” he blurted.

“Exactly. He can’t live long anyway, so what’s the use o’ killin’ him?”

“Then you don’t mean to—to——”

“Not a bit of it. Listen, Kid: you an’ me are goin’ to be pardners,” Colatta whispered earnestly. “I’m goin’ tuh git that option from Marshall an’ yo’re goin’ to be old Enoch’s heir. Between us we’ll have it all.”

“Me? I don’t git that,” Bert said, frankly puzzled.

“I tell yuh. You go down to old Enoch Cole an’ tell him about this reservoir, an’ about this whole thing. Tell him that I’ve been hired to murder him, an’ when the time comes I’ll confess it to him. If he don’t change his will an’ make you his heir he ain’t human,” the gambler whispered.

Despite his dislike for Colatta Bert was thrilled. In a way it would be taking advantage of the old man, but if he did not accede to Colatta’s plans he realised that the gunman would not hesitate to murder Enoch. It seemed to be a simple way out of the problems so far as Uncle Enoch was concerned, but there was still the Marshall trouble to be considered.

“How will you go about gittin’ the option from Marshall?” he queried innocently.

“I’ll git it,” Colatta said confidently. “The rustlin’ will have to go on as scheduled. You’ll play the part just as we talked it over there in the saloon. You’ll meet yore brothers an’ take ’em over the Eight Mile Pass, an’ then drop back to yore uncle’s the next mornin’. The cattle comin’ up missin’ will back up yore story, too. Blunt can’t hope to make a play for the option

till Marshall is convinced that he can't find his cattle an' will have to sell it. I'll simply make a deal with Marshall before Blunt does."

"Tell him where the cattle are in exchange for the option," Bert guessed excitedly.

Babe Colatta only smiled, but it was intended to convince Bert that he had guessed right.

They continued to talk for half an hour or more, and then went to bed. Presently Bert knew that his companion was asleep, but he himself was too excited to close his eyes. Certainly he had never expected to get on such intimate terms with any gang of outlaws, yet here he was lying side by side with the avowed leader, and apparently they trusted him.

But his own plan of action was far from clear. If he warned Linn Marshall of the proposed theft of his cattle that would be double-crossing Colatta and he had no means of knowing what revenge the gunman might try to take. And probably if he did that his uncle would pooh-pooh his story when he told it to him.

If he went ahead as Colatta suggested, he doubted if he could prevent Marshall from being robbed. He recalled that Colatta had refused to tell him where they intended to take the stolen cattle. Frankly, he could not see how they could possibly get away with so many cattle and hide them in such a short time; yet Colatta was not the kind of man to make any moves until he was certain of success.

And still another possibility that always loomed large was that it might be only a clever frameup of some kind of which he was the destined victim.

## CHAPTER XI

### A MIDNIGHT RIDE

BERT learned the next morning that his brother Dave was working on the Thirty-Three ranch for a few days, and as it was only about five miles from Snowville he rode there instead of going back home.

Dave was greatly surprised to see him. For a long time the boys had had little in common, and Dave rather resented his younger brother's silent disapproval of his actions. A stranger would never have dreamed of them being brothers. Dave was a small, bow-legged man, and wore a beard, which made him look more than his thirty years. As a rider and bronc fighter, however, Dave Cole was without a peer.

"Hallo, Buddy—how's the steady member o' the family?" Dave greeted jeeringly.

"Purty good, Dave. How're you?" Bert replied.

"Still workin' fer the Flyin' M?"

"I reckon I am—yet."

"Some people have all the luck," Dave said disgustedly. "I've been tryin' to git on there fer years."

"Didn't it ever occur to you, Dave, that the reason we never could hold jobs in this country was because nobody could trust us?" Bert asked.

"Why not? I'm honest," Dave declared righteously.

"You're not as bad as Clyde an' Floyd, I'll admit, but I can name half a dozen horses yuh've had that didn't belong to you. An' I know about them two big bunches of Injun cayuses you boys drove out of the country. So do other people, an' that's why they don't want to trust us with their property," Bert said.

"If yuh just come out here to preach a sermon, yuh better go back to Snowville an' hire a hall," Dave said angrily.

"I'm sorry, Dave. I didn't come out here to quarrel with yuh, but to ask yore help," Bert said humbly.

"Well, le's have yore troubles," Dave ordered.

"I want you an' the other boys to pretend to help me steal some cattle."

"Say, yuh tryin' to frame us up, or somethin'?"



“Not a bit of it. I just want you to meet me a couple of miles above the Flyin’ M ranch to-morrow night, an’ ride over the Eight Mile Pass down to Soda River, an’ across to Uncle Enoch’s,” Bert explained.

As he had foreseen, Dave was intrigued. “Do we pertend to steal them cattle from ole Enoch, or from the Flyin’ M?” he demanded.

“From the Flyin’ M.”

“Why not git away with a few?” Dave suggested.

“Because we’re goin’ to have a posse on our heels,” Bert said.

“Not so good,” Dave opined. “What if they ketch us?”

“We don’t wanta let ’em do it, but if they do we won’t have anythin’ stolen in our possession, so they’ll have to turn us loose.”

“What do we git out of it, then?” Dave wanted to know.

“I shouldn’t be surprised if we didn’t git on the good side of Uncle Enoch, an’ mebbe git him to change his will,” Bert said diplomatically. “But there’ll be twenty dollars apiece in it for you three boys even if my plans go wrong. Here’s your twenty now.”

“Better let me have the other boys’ money too,” Dave said, as he pocketed the twenty-dollar bill which Bert had accepted from Babe Colatta for that purpose. But Bert knew his brother too well for that.

“It’ll be just as safe in my hands as yours,” Bert said dryly.

“I ort to have more fer quittin’ my job here,” Dave argued.

“Well, I’ll pay you another twenty if I pull through all right,” Bert said wearily. “If I fail, or anything happens to me, you boys can divide what little money I’ve got. But Chief an’ my saddle goes to Ash.”

“Say! What the hell yuh talkin’ about? Is—is there goin’ to be a lot o’ danger in this?” Dave demanded.

“Not for you. But I won’t be with you all the way. Somethin’ might happen to me after I leave you,” Bert said.

He refused to satisfy Dave’s curiosity, and after explaining in detail just what his brothers were to do he took his leave. He was sure they would not disappoint him. Their love of adventure, if nothing else, would make them show up at the appointed time.

A few hours later he was back at the Flying M, where he proceeded to catch up another horse in order to give Chief a much-needed rest. He had dinner with the ranch crew, and after that was over he went up to the house to get the ordeal of reporting to Marshall over and out of the way.

He was rather relieved that Lucy was not present when he was shown into his employer’s study, even though he hungered for a sight of her.

Marshall looked up with a frown. "Young man, I wanted to give you a chance to make good," he said severely. "So far you haven't appreciated it. I suppose you weren't to blame for being sent home from the roundup, but you should have stayed here until I said you could have leave of absence."

"I suppose that's right," Bert admitted. "But I did want to clear myself of that charge in Snowville, an' yore sister——"

"Well, did you git the evidence?" Marshall broke in.

"No, I didn't. The squaw had gone for the summer, but I left Pat Finney on the trail of other evidence," Bert said.

"H-m, well, we'll see. I believe I'll keep you working here on the ranch instead of with the cattle until I see what kind of a man you really are."

"All right, Mr. Marshall. I don't blame you. After the way I lost that bunch of cattle the other day, I suppose you wouldn't feel safe havin' me on the range."

"What bunch of cattle?" Marshall asked, but Bert knew that the rancher knew perfectly well what he was referring to.

"To the one I started home with from the other side of Soda River," Bert answered. "A fellow stopped me to talk, an' when I went on I couldn't find the cattle, though I hunted till dark for 'em."

"Very careless, to say the least," Marshall remarked.

Bert saw the futility of trying to make a defence, and moved toward the door. Until that moment he had been undecided whether or not to take the rancher into his confidence, but he knew that Marshall would not believe a word said, and would probably interfere with his plans. He must play a lone hand.

As he walked down the hall from Marshall's study he suddenly came face to face with Lucy. The girl gave a start, and the colour faded from her face.

"I—I—came back, Miss Lucy," he faltered. "After what Pat told me I had to. I—I want to——"

She did not permit him to finish his statement that he wanted to make good with them. "You want to steal some more of our cattle, I suppose," she said cuttingly, and darted into another room.

For a moment he stood half dazed. The girl's outburst had fairly stunned him. But in a moment his brain cleared, and he became angry. She had sent word to him that no matter what happened she would trust him, and yet she believed the first accusation made against him.

As he stumbled toward the bunkhouse, he, for the first time, gave serious consideration to the matter of joining Babe Colatta in real earnest. No matter how honest he was people would not believe it. To fight Colatta alone, as he would have to do it, was dangerous in the extreme, and with little prospect of reward, even to the extent of clearing his name. On the other side was money to be made, and he had learned the bitter lesson that money, more than anything else, meant respectability.

The mental conflict was soon ended. No matter what the price he must pay, he knew that he could not turn crooked.

He worked in the fields the remainder of that day, and the next. He saw very little of his employer, and nothing at all of Lucy. Mort Cupples came riding in late in the afternoon, and once he contrived to pass a word with Bert as the latter was unharnessing the team he had been driving that day.

“Yuh all set fer to-night?” the foreman asked.

“Yes, my brothers will be waitin’ for me at eleven o’clock,” Bert answered. “Everything all right at yore end?”

“Yep. I’ve sent the whole damn’ crew up on the other end o’ the range to watch the cows an’ calves, except Tom Chill.”

“Say, Mort, where are they plannin’ on takin’ them cattle anyway?” Bert asked eagerly.

“Search me,” the foreman grinned. “Anyway, there won’t be no danger o’ you runnin’ into ’em up there in Eight Mile Pass.”

Bert realised that it was useless to try to pump the man for information.

He caught up Chief, put the sorrel in a stall, and fed him some oats—a thing he would not have dared to do had he been really going to steal cattle that night. He turned in early, and as the fagged-out ranch hands were usually in bed by nine o’clock, there was silence in the bunkhouse long before the time he was to steal away, save for the snores and heavy breathing of the sleeping men.

Bert did not once close his eyes until it was time for him to slip away. He pulled on his clothes quietly, and slipped out of his bunk unnoticed. As it chanced to be near the door, and the door standing open because it was rather a sultry night, he had no trouble in getting out without arousing any of the sleepers; though he knew that Mort Cupples must be watching him. He threw the saddle on Chief, and rode away; knowing that within a few minutes Cupples would arouse Marshall and the other men, and the false chase would be on.

He found his brothers waiting at the appointed place, and to his regret Ash was with them.

“He wanted to come, so we let him,” Dave replied to his heated remonstrance.

The other three were able to take care of themselves, but Ash had a way of blundering into trouble. It was too late to try to change things now, however. Ash would not go home. In a way Ash’s presence would help, since there would be no discrepancy in numbers in case the posse got too close.

“Now you know what you’re to do, Dave,” Bert said anxiously. “Once the posse sights yuh just head for the pass, an’ ride as fast as yuh like. But if yuh can’t keep ahead remember there’s to be no shootin’. An’ if they ketch yuh just stick to yore story that you were on yore way to Uncle Enoch’s to meet me.”

“All right,” Dave grinned, “but we’ll show ’em some clean shirt-tails before they ketch us.”

Bert looked over their horses appraisingly. They were all well mounted, except Ash. The youngest of the brothers was heavier even than Bert, and his horse was small. Bert could only hope that the chase would not get too hot. Mort Cupples had promised to delay it as much as possible. He hoped the foreman would not forget.

Just then Bert caught the pounding of horses’ hoofs back along the road he had just travelled.

“All right, boys, be ready,” he warned, and rode slowly away into a deep coulee a few rods from where his brothers waited. He got off and placed his hand firmly over Chief’s nostrils.

Swiftly there came in sight a dozen hard-riding men. It seemed to Bert that Dave had gone to sleep. His elder brother, he knew, was one to get every possible bit of excitement there was to be got out of any adventure.

At last, however, his four brothers began to ride, and almost at the same moment he saw they had been discovered by the men behind.

For a moment Bert’s heart sank. His brothers were being pursued by men who were likely to shoot first, and demand explanations afterward, and he had lured them into it. If one of them should get killed he would feel like a murderer.

It was too late for regrets now. The posse swept by, and he was close enough to it to recognise Mort Cupples and Linn Marshall in the lead.

“There seems to be four of them, I think,” he distinctly heard Marshall call.

“An’ they’re shore as hell headin’ fer our cattle up in the pass. If we stay back so they won’t see us we’ll ketch ’em with the goods,” Mort Cupples called back.

Then they were beyond earshot. They were hardly out of sight when Bert swung back on his horse, crossed their trail, and headed for Soda Point at a steady, mile-eating lope.

A gang of rustlers were busy there that night, and he proposed to know what was going to be done with Linn Marshall’s cattle.

## CHAPTER XII

### AMBUSH

AN hour's riding put Bert Cole on the Soda Point range. It was a long, narrow stretch of range composed of a low but exceedingly rough range of hills flanked by flats, or valleys on either side, and running down to a point within half a mile of Soda River.

He had two possible ways of reaching the point; one to skirt the hills in the direction of Bicknell, the other to cut through a rough pass, and then follow a winding trail through the centre of the hills. The latter, though rougher, promised a more direct route, with a better chance of finding the rustlers no matter which way they decided to drive the cattle.

Once in the hills he had to slow up at times, letting Chief walk uphill, but making up for lost time on the down stretches or on the level. It was a fairly light night, but he saw no cattle; a not surprising fact because Cupples would have seen to it that the stock to be stolen were held in a reasonably compact bunch. Bert could not but reflect on the easy way in which Linn Marshall had been fooled by his foreman; letting Cupples play into the hands of the outlaws under pretext of protecting the cattle.

As distant glimmerings of approaching day began to appear over the tops of the far distant hills, Bert began to grow more uneasy and uncertain. Yet he was certain that the rustlers would have to take the cattle one way or another along Soda River.

Another thought struck him suddenly. Why had there been so much effort to plant cattle on the Sheepshead Mountain range?

It had always looked to him that that had been for the purpose of getting an excuse to bring riders on to that range, and he could not see how the rustlers would dare take cattle there which they proposed to steal, even though that was the roughest, most inaccessible range he knew. He could not believe even yet that they would try to hold stolen stock there permanently; but it did occur to him that some part of that range might be used as a temporary hiding-place for the stolen stock.

It was not more than a mile from the end of the point to the bridge across Soda River, and in another mile they could be out of sight in a heavily timbered canyon. He recalled that the approach to the bridge for over a

quarter of a mile each way was over gravel beds which would leave no tracks visible. Undoubtedly signs of the cattle crossing could be removed from the bridge.

That must be it, he decided. Long before this, no doubt, the cattle would have crossed and been out of sight. He regretted now that he had not chosen the other route, but he was sure that he could strike the trail of the stolen cattle at the edge of the farther gravel bed and follow it until he found them.

Then, suddenly, he came upon a large bunch of cattle—at least two hundred head, he guessed—and their actions showed that they had not been disturbed that night. The rustlers had overlooked a bet, he thought. It was yet too dark to distinguish the brands, but he knew they must be Flying M cattle. But a few minutes later he discovered another bunch; then another. As it grew lighter he saw that his immediate vicinity was thickly dotted with little bunches of cattle, and by now he could make out the earmarks. They were Flying M cattle sure enough, and big, dry stuff. Conviction steadily grew upon him that practically all of Marshall's dry stuff was right around him.

The rustlers had not been there!

There had been a slip-up somewhere, or—a frameup! Bert had grown chilly as he rode along, but now he felt an inward coldness that came from fear.

He had listened to a tale of proposed crime and believed it. There had been no crime. He was supposed at that moment to be fleeing from a posse led by Linn Marshall. If the cattle were not to be stolen what was the purpose of that midnight chase? Ike Blunt hated him, and Babe Colatta, he knew, had taken an instinctive dislike to him at first. Was this, then, their scheme to put him out of the way? Had they guessed his real intentions?

He had evaded their scheme personally, if that had been the case; but what would happen to his brothers? Instead of playing a lone, victorious hand against the outlaws he was completely and utterly swamped—not knowing what to do next.

“My Gawd, I was a fool to think I could outsmart Colatta, an' all that gang,” he murmured bitterly.

Presently, however, he began to think clearly once more. He had been fooled, he realised, but there were other things now to consider. The most important of all was to find out what had happened to his brothers.

He had told them to meet him at Enoch Cole's, and the logical thing to do seemed to be to go there at once. If they had got through all right things would be well; if not it would be up to him to go back and find out what had become of them.

He found himself wishing again that Ash had not been along. The other three boys could take care of themselves. Yet he felt somehow that there had come a crisis in the affairs of the King Creek Coles. If his brothers should be caught in some sort of a frameup he was sure that Linn Marshall would not hesitate to have him arrested for the cattle theft of which the rancher already believed him guilty.

For a short time he hesitated about which way to go to his uncle's, but finally decided upon the lower bridge, the one over which he had expected the cattle to be driven. His brothers were supposed to cross the river at the upper bridge, but it was about an equal distance to Enoch Cole's house.

It was broad daylight by the time he crossed the bridge, and he had still a number of miles to go. Chief had been ridden hard, and was tired. He kept the sturdy little horse at a jog-trot; and as he rode he found himself thinking of Swede Anderson. If Swede had not been killed, Bert felt sure that things would have turned out far differently. But Swede was dead, and upon Bert's shoulders had fallen the Double E foreman's unfinished task. Swede had given his life, and Bert had a depressing feeling that more murder was in the air.

He had crossed the main divide and was going down a steep, twisty ridge on the other side, when half a dozen horsemen suddenly appeared about the same distance up on a ridge just above him. They were close enough for Bert to recognise the men among them that he knew. And with four of the six he was acquainted.

Even before the men made hostile demonstrations, Bert knew that he was in for trouble. Nick Jarvis, whom he had frequently seen in company with Babe Colatta, was obviously in command. Tom Chill was the first to act. The outlaw jerked out his gun and sent a bullet in Bert's direction; but the range was too great for a revolver shot to do damage.

Jarvis appeared to issue a few curt orders, and then the men separated. Two of the men—men whom Bert was certainly surprised to see there—spurred their horses up the ridge at their fastest possible speed. Those men were Bummer Kelly and Slant Wickison, who, Bert knew, had no reason to love him.

The other four headed back down the ridge in an obvious attempt to cut Bert off as he went on down. Besides Jarvis himself there was Tom Chill, and two tough-looking punchers who were strangers to Bert.

Bert realised instantly that he was in a tight box. He could not hope to beat Kelly and Wickison to the divide, because their ridge was much straighter than his. Their horses also appeared to be comparatively fresh,



while Chief was jaded. It seemed equally impossible to beat the other men in a downhill race, for the ridges came together a short distance below, with an equal distance to go. It was either fight it out with them at close range, with the odds four to one, or turn off the other way and go plunging down toward the river through a veritable maze of spirals, columns and ledges of rock that became ever steeper until they ended in an almost sheer precipice just above the river.

Bert realised that he would have to abandon his horse if he chose this latter alternative, but the other course seemed simply suicidal. On foot on this rocky, blunt surface of the mountain he would stand some chance to elude his pursuers, or if he did have to fight them he could choose the battleground in a way to overcome some of the odds.

A moment after his enemies had divided he vanished from their sight down a slope which required all of Chief's surefootedness from the start to prevent a nasty fall.

The men had fired without ceremony; and unless they had been tipped off some way they should have thought him their friend. It meant that they had guessed his intention to break up their game, or else they knew that he was to be framed up and his presence here advertised the failure of the plan to work. It was the latter, he was sure.

In one way he was glad. No longer would he have to pose as a potential outlaw and a friend of Babe Colatta's. There was now an end to all dissimulation and prevarication. It was straight out, open warfare.

He had gone but a pitifully short distance, with Chief pitching and sliding desperately to keep his balance, before he struck a jump-off which no horse could cross. At almost the same moment he saw Jarvis and his party stick their heads up over the top of the ridge above him.

"Well, so long, Chief, old boy," he said softly, as he swung to the ground. Curiously enough, he was worrying as much about what would happen to the horse as about the outcome of the chase. If he should get killed that would be the end of it, he figured; but Chief might fall into the hands of cruel horsemen, and that would be terrible.

*Zip!* A bullet clipped the bark from a scrubby cedar a yard away.

Bert ran along the jump-off for a few feet, then caught the top with his hands and swung over. He dangled in the air for a moment, then dropped to a narrow little shelf six feet below. He came perilously near losing his balance and plunging to his death then and there, but recovered by digging his fingers hard against the rock.

In a moment he began edging around the shelf of rock, not knowing until he got around a corner whether he would find a way out or be completely trapped. To his relief he came to a place where the edge rounded out downward, and in a cleft of it was a rockchuck trail. He sat flat down and slid.

He shot downward with the speed of a bobsled on a slick hill for a hundred feet, and then ploughed up the soil with his boot heels as he shot out upon a steep little rim of grateful ground between the broken ledges of rock. Quite a cluster of scrubby cedars had found a foothold there, and Bert appreciated their protection as he looked for a means of further descent.

Presently he found a place where the rocks were broken and crumbled for a considerable distance downward. Without hesitation he began to scramble down through them, his natural strength and agility standing him in good service. It was not far now to the river, and he feared that if he went on he would come to a place that could not be negotiated, and where he would be exposed to the fire of his enemies.

He could hear them yelling above him, and learned that they were trying to get down to him. But Jarvis was again acting wisely, ordering his men to try to get down far to the side of where Bert had descended, in order to cut him off.

Apparently nothing was to be gained by moving farther, and Bert huddled down among the rocks and waited for developments. There was a chance that they would not find him at all, and he would be in a position to hold his own for a while if they did. If he could stay there until dark he might be able to sneak away, even though it would be a dangerous business, with the odds decidedly in favour of running up against something he could not get over.

The yells gradually ceased, and for nearly an hour Bert heard nothing but the occasional wild plunge of some dislodged rock which witnessed the persistence of his foes.

*Splat!* A bullet struck a rock within a foot of his hand and ricocheted away with a vicious whine.

Bert ducked, and glanced warily around. No one was in sight, but he guessed that the shot had come from a ledge above, and to the left of him.

He waited.

Presently he saw the muzzle of a revolver slowly appear, then the fingers of a hand showed up. Still Bert waited. Then, just above the gun appeared the top of a man's head, with one eye visible. The gun shifted slightly, and the eye began to squint as the man on the ledge sighted his quarry.

With only that triangular bit of human skull as a target Bert snapped up his gun and fired. The other man's gun exploded, probably from reflex action of his trigger finger. Apparently the man had been precariously balanced in order to get his shot, for to Bert's amazement the body slowly slid into view, and then tumbled down into the rocks not more than twenty feet from where Bert lay.

Bert felt himself grow deathly sick. No need to look to see if the man was dead. He had been forced to kill Bummer Kelly to save his own life; but his immediate reaction was to become nauseated.

Knowing that the shots would attract the others, and being sickened by the gruesome sight at hand, Bert plunged out and hurriedly made his way around the mountain in as near a horizontal line as he could.

He was sighted by somebody above him, for a bullet tore through the leg of his overalls. With a bound he was behind a sheltering rock—and face to face with Tom Chill!

## CHAPTER XIII

### HARD LUCK FOR THE COLES

FOR a moment the two men stood almost breast to breast; then, like a flash, Bert's gun came up with the deadly speed and precision acquired by natural dexterity and long hours of lonely practice.

Ordinarily the crack of the gun would have been simultaneous with the downward snap of the wrist, but for some reason Bert hesitated, even though he remembered that Tom Chill had professed to be his friend, yet had been the first one to fire on him a few minutes before.

He realised suddenly that Chill had not attempted to draw. The man's face was pale as a soda cracker, but he was keeping his hands away from his gun with what looked like rather grim determination.

"Ugh! Gurgle—gurgle—I—I shore thought, ugh, that I was killed," Chill got out huskily.

"Yuh came damn' near bein' at that, yuh skunk," Bert rasped.

"Honest to Gawd, Kid, I never meant yuh no harm. In fact, I saved yore life a few minutes ago if yuh only knew it," Chill protested.

"Yeah? When yuh took a shot at me, I suppose?"

"That was just when," Chill said stubbornly. "If I hadn't o' shot, yuh'd rode on into the bunch, wouldn't yuh?"

"I suppose I would," Bert admitted, as he realised the truth of the other man's statement.

"An' they'd 'a' shot yuh like a dawg," Chill declared. "Man, they been layin' fer yuh fer hours jus' to kill yuh. Ole man Cole seen us somehow, an' sent word fer us to clear off his place; an' then we met you. But honest, Kid, I had to go along. I wouldn't 'a' harmed yuh myself. I wish to Gawd I hadn't never got mixed up with the damn' crooked outfit."

"Why were yuh waitin' to kill me?" Bert asked wonderingly. "Ain't I a member o' the gang?"

"No, you ain't," Chill said sharply. "I don't know what yuh done, but I do know that Babe Colatta give orders to have yuh killed off. An' say, Kid, fer Gawd's sake don't ever give me away. Colatta would murder me in a minute, an' so would any of these other birds."

“You waited at the bridge for me an’ my brothers?” Bert asked.

“Yeah, we did—from midnight on.”

“An’ nobody come?”

“Nary a soul till ole Cole’s man told us to git out,” Chill declared energetically.

Bert digested this information rapidly. Instead of the cattle being stolen the outlaws had waited at the bridge to kill him and his brothers. For some reason or other his brothers had been turned back—possibly captured by Linn Marshall’s posse.

But though he knew Colatta and Blunt both hated him he felt sure that hatred alone had not caused them to go to all this elaborate trouble to have him killed. There was something else back of it all, he was sure. He wondered if Tom Chill knew what it was, and if so whether or not he could get it out of the man. At any moment some other outlaw might appear, and then it would be all off so far as learning anything from Tom Chill was concerned.

“Where was Colatta?” Bert demanded. “Was he supposed to steal the cattle?”

“I dunno where he was. I’m just tryin’ to save yore life because I don’t like to be a party to a cold-blooded killin’. Mebbe I hadn’t ort to offer to help yuh on account o’ yuh double-crossin’ us, but I couldn’t hardly stomach that hidin’ down there to shoot you fellers down without givin’ yuh a show.” Tom Chill argued with his conscience.

“Listen to me, Tom,” Bert said earnestly. “I did intend to stop this crime from goin’ through, but nobody knew it. Colatta asked me to have Marshall follow me an’ my brothers down here to my uncle’s, while Marshall’s cattle were bein’ stolen. I sent my brothers on that chase, an’ I come back to see where the cattle were bein’ took. They hadn’t been touched. Colatta was double-crossin’ me, an’ I believe he means to double-cross the whole outfit, Ike Blunt included. Hadn’t yuh better throw in with me?”

Tom Chill was badly agitated. The game had long before grown too strong for him, but fear had kept him bound to Babe Colatta’s cartwheels.

“When Colatta is outa the way I’ll come clean. Good Gawd! I never spent such a night in my life as last night, thinkin’ about mebbe bein’ tried an’ hung fer murder. But I’m scared o’ Colatta an’ Jarvis,” the man almost whimpered.

“But where is Colatta now?” Bert insisted.

"I don't know, Bert. He said the cattle rustlin' would have to be put off a few days, but he said he had another job on to-night. Gawd only knows what he'll do when he finds out you've got away."

Bert believed the puncher was telling the truth, and there was no use to expect any help from him so long as he stood in such mortal dread of Babe Colatta.

"I wish to Gawd you'd kill Colatta," Chill went on. "He just looks at yuh, an' yuh know he'd just as soon kill yuh as eat his breakfast."

"Why ask me? Why don't you tend to it yoreself?" Bert asked, being forced to grin at the other man's helpless attitude.

"Listen—there at Cedar Spring the other day I slipped back to try to see what happened between you an' Babe, an' I seen that shootin' match," Chill retorted. "Kid, I believe yuh've got a fifty-fifty chance o' beatin' Colatta on the draw, an' I hope to Gawd yuh do it."

"All I want is a chance to meet him," Bert said grimly.

"Well, first yuh gotta git away from here," Chill said, suddenly beginning to show some signs of confidence. "Look here; I went lower down than the others before I left my horse, an' I happened to find a sort of an old trail among the rocks up to here. Made by mountain goats or deer or somethin', I reckon. Git on my horse an' beat it. I'll take yours—an' I wish yuh luck."

"I'll go yuh," Bert said with relief. "An' if we both git outa this mess I hope I can do somethin' for you."

"Next time we meet it'll prob'ly be in hell or the penitentiary," Chill said gloomily.

"Yuh'll find a dead man back here a ways," Bert said, as they shook hands. "I had to git him to keep him from killin' me; but that guess o' yours may not be far off at that."

He crowded past the other and dropped down to the trail Tom Chill had discovered.

He found it possible to make fairly good time, though the trail was narrow and at all times dangerous. Then, with a gasp of relief, he came upon Chill's horse, and in less than a minute he was mounted and getting away from there. By judicious discrimination in choosing the trail he was able to keep under cover for half a mile, and then he knew that it would be futile for the outlaws to follow him.

He had no hesitation about where to go next. Enoch Cole might throw him out, but he at least meant to warn his uncle that his life was in danger.

He knew by this time that once Colatta or Blunt got their hands on the option, Enoch Cole would not live long.

Once off the mountain he gave Chill's gray horse the spurs, and took the most direct route to the habitation of the grim old cripple, who probably was watching his approach from the cupola.

As he dashed up to the padlocked gate and threw himself to the ground it was unlocked by the huge Pike.

"Enoch say come light up," the Chinaman said with a wave of the hand. Bert was met at the door by Peck, and a moment later he again confronted his uncle in the cupola.

"Did you kill anybody?" old Enoch amazed Bert by asking.

"Why—when?" Bert gasped.

"I saw six men ride away from the bridge down here, an' I saw 'em make some peculiar manœuvres up there on the mountain, an' now you come ridin' in here on a run on one o' their horses," the old cripple said tersely.

Certainly the old man's eyesight was still keen, and with those powerful glasses little could escape him.

"I did," Bert confessed. "I killed one of them, a man named Kelly."

"An' came to me for protection." Old Enoch's tone was almost a sneer.

"Not in the least," Bert retorted. "I'm leavin' just as soon as I warn you that yore life's in immediate danger."

"Yeah?" the old man asked sardonically.

Swiftly Bert sketched over what had happened recently, and the masklike face before him betrayed no emotion whatever. Only when Bert touched upon the proposed dam, and the rebuilding of the county seat on the ground occupied by his buildings did the old man betray even interest in the narrative. Then his glass swept the gracefully bending river, and the acres of low land on both sides of it appraisingly.

"It could be done—it will be done—some time," he remarked. "An' they'll pay me a fancy price when they do it."

"If you live," Bert said, rather brutally.

"I ain't dead yet, young man," Enoch said curtly. He seemed lost in thought at the prospect of adding more money to his many thousands. Bert watched him curiously, wondering if the man was really dead to most human emotions.

"I'm sure that Babe Colatta intends to have you put away as soon as he gits his hands on that option," Bert warned. "He could git in here, too, with

that gang of his. I did, yuh know.”

“An’ had to stick up yore hands,” the old man said dryly.

“No, young feller,” old Enoch went on presently, “yuh don’t impress me much. I did think for a while that you might be an improvement on your father, but I’ve changed my mind.”

“You think I’m lyin’ to yuh?” Bert broke out hotly.

“I do,” Enoch Cole said, unmoved. “I think those fellows I run off this mornin’ were your friends—some of ’em yore brothers, likely. I can read you like a book, young man. It’s a cumbersome, clumsy plan to try to work yourselves into my good graces an’ git me to change my will, but, by God, it won’t work!”

The old man’s voice had risen to a scream, and he was clawing angrily at the air with both skinny hands. His parchment-like face was mottled with futile anger.

“Git outa here, an’ don’t never come back,” he screamed. “I never want to see none of your breed again.”

With an effort of will Bert kept a grip on his temper, and turned to go.

“Even if you should be tellin’ the truth, what are yuh?” screamed the invalid. “A burglar, a cattle thief, an’ a murderer,” he ended, hissing like an angry cat.

“Well, take care o’ yourself,” Bert said, as he started down the stairs. He was shown out by the expressionless Chinaman, but he imagined he saw a ghost of a smile on Pike’s broad, yellow face as the Oriental fastened the big padlock behind him.

“The poor, misguided ole walloper,” Bert said feelingly as he mounted the gray horse. But his own conscience was clear. He had warned the old man, and if anything happened to him now it was Enoch’s own fault. That something would happen to him as soon as Linn Marshall parted with his option, Bert was certain.

But Marshall’s cattle had not been stolen—yet. It seemed to Bert that the rustlers’ golden moment for getting away with them had passed. If Marshall could only be warned and could be made to understand that Mort Cupples was crooked, he would be safe. But Bert had had enough experience warning people. What he had to do was find out what had happened to the remainder of the King Creek Cole boys, and then find out what impended relative to the killing of Bummer Kelly, or any other little crime that he might happen to be charged with.



He headed now for the bridge where Jarvis, Tom Chill, and the others had waited to murder him. Then swinging across the narrow lowlands along the river at a gallop, he entered the foothills, and drew his mount down to a reasonable speed as they moved toward the Eight Mile Pass.

Presently, in a little cove not far off the trail, he saw a tent or two and a mess wagon. That, he judged, was the Flying M cow camp. It occurred to him that very possibly these men here might have headed off his brothers the night before. There were no saddle horses about, but he saw a man moving about the mess wagon, evidently the cook. It occurred to Bert that it was after noon, and he was hungry. Here, possibly, was a chance to get something to eat and a little information at the same time.

As he rode up to the camp the cook greeted him with an amazed stare. Bert had seen the fellow a few times before.

“Hallo, Moser—what’s the chances fer a feed?” Bert inquired with a geniality he did not altogether feel.

“Yuh’ll git no grub from me, yuh dirty scum,” Moser retorted coolly, placing his hands on his broad hips.

Bert flushed angrily. “Don’t be too damn’ sure of that,” he said hotly. “I ain’t had a thing to eat since last night, so you git busy.”

The cook continued to stare belligerently until Bert suddenly whipped out his gun. Then he recognised his danger. Bert was naturally peacefully inclined, but his temper was beginning to be badly frayed by recent events, and the cook’s refusal to feed him was just the trifling thing to make it break altogether.

“All right,” the man said hastily. “I’ll set yuh out somethin’ to save my life, but if yuh shoot me dead I’m goin’ to tell yuh what I think of yuh—yuh low-down woman-stealer.”

“What? What’s that?” Bert demanded.

“I said it,” Moser returned sulkily. “A man who’d do a thing like that is too low-down to live. I hope they hang yuh.”

“Say, look here! What’re yuh talkin’ about?” Bert demanded.

“Aw, go to hell,” the cook rasped. “I ain’t no gunfighter, so I’ll have to cook fer yuh, but damned if I have to talk to yuh.”

Abruptly Bert put back his gun and leaped to the ground. The next moment his muscular fingers closed around the back of the cook’s neck with such pressure that the man emitted a squawk of pain.

“You change yore mind about talkin’ damn’ quick,” Bert ordered. “Was yuh foolin’ about that woman talk—or was some woman——”

“You know well enough that Linn Marshall’s sister was kidnapped last night, because you done it yoreself,” the cook blurted out.

Bert released his hold instantly. “Moser,” he said soberly, “I never dreamed of anything like that happenin’. I—I didn’t think it was possible. But I reckon now that I can guess who did.”

“Yuh mean to say you ain’t guilty? Aw, hell, o’ course yuh’d lie about it. But it’s too thin, bo. Gittin’ Marshall an’ all his men to chase them slick brothers o’ yours an’ you slippin’ back to git the girl. It was foxy all right, but it was a damn’ cowardly trick.” Evidently the cook felt that his helplessness gave him the privilege of saying exactly what he thought; and his features were more expressive of his scorn than his words.

Bert knew that the man was quite sincere. He turned away to think. The details of Babe Colatta’s elaborate scheming were becoming clear to him. The gambler had planned to use him to draw Marshall and his men away from the ranch. Then, of course, Colatta himself had ridden in and captured Lucy while she was alone and unprotected. Jarvis, and that part of the gang, had waited at the Soda River bridge to murder the Cole boys. Had that part of the programme gone through Bert realised that the bodies would have been hidden, and the blame for the kidnapping would have been upon them.

Babe Colatta could then have made a deal with Linn Marshall for the return of his sister. The option on Enoch Cole’s property would certainly be the price he would ask, and Marshall would not hesitate to make the transfer. Colatta could then profess to effect a rescue. The Cole boys would not return, and it would naturally be supposed that they had fled the country.

Bert realised then that he was perhaps wrong in thinking that Colatta personally had kidnapped the girl. Doubtless he was along to see that it was done right, but he would be careful to see that Lucy did not recognise him. Then he could appear in perfect safety as the girl’s rescuer, and all he would have to do would be to wait for old Enoch’s death. Bert had little or no knowledge of finance, but he knew that with the option in his possession Colatta would find some one to advance the necessary payments when the time came.

If Colatta himself had not actually kidnapped the girl, the probably guilty ones, Bert thought, were the Leach brothers. And—his heart gave a big thump at the thought—they would probably hide her on their ranch!

He turned toward the gray horse, his hunger suddenly forgotten. He was again in the saddle before he thought to ask what had happened to his brothers.

The cook was regarding him with a sneering smile on his lips. “Them brothers o’ yours,” he sneered, “are mighty lucky that they ain’t dead. I reckon the reason yuh’re here is because they failed to show up where they was to meet yuh. Well, the posse split up, an’ Marshall an’ the others on the fastest horses got around an’ headed ’em off. They might ’a’ got away at that, but one o’ their horses gave out, an’ the whole bunch had to surrender right down there in the road.”

Bert groaned as he thought of the consequences to them—and to his mother. Had it not been for Ash it would not have been so bad, but the poor boy was not responsible for his actions; and it was his fate mostly which would break Mrs. Cole’s heart.

“I reckon that kinda puts the fear o’ God inta yuh, don’t it?” the cook demanded malignantly. “Sort of a slip-up in yore little scheme. They’ll git yuh, all right. They sent back up here fer all the boys jest as soon as they found out what had happened down there, an’ there won’t be a ranch in the country that won’t be lookin’ fer yuh.”

Bert only looked at the man as though he was speaking in an unknown tongue.

“I reckon this’ll jest about wind up the King Creek Coles in this country, an’ a dam’ good thing it’ll be,” the cook said maliciously.

Suddenly Bert seemed to come to life. “Look here,” he jerked out, “you git busy with that meal.” He got off and stripped the saddle from his horse, watered the animal at a nearby spring, staked it on a patch of good grass, and then broodingly watched the reluctant cook prepare a meal.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A REBUFF—AND A DISCOVERY

If he was taken, Bert knew that he would be hanged for the killing of Bummer Kelly, even though they should fail to convict him of kidnapping. That was enough to make him go to any extreme to keep from being arrested. But he was even more desperately determined to retain his freedom because of a desire to find Lucy Marshall—and then Babe Colatta.

Every road and trail would be watched. That made daylight travel impossible unless positively forced to resort to it. It was that realisation which had caused him to remain at the Flying M cow camp. He knew that finding food was hereafter going to be a difficult proposition, and here was a chance to lay in a supply, and at the same time allow his mount to recuperate. In addition he could thus keep the cook from flying to the ranch with word of his whereabouts.

There was a chance that he might be followed from his uncle's ranch, so he kept an eye on the trail from that direction; but otherwise he felt the cow camp was about the safest place he could find for the immediate present.

His judgment proved to be correct, for no one came near the camp that day. With two square meals under his belt, and his horse rested, Bert felt some of his usual confidence returning to him. At dark he saddled the gray and took his departure.

"Don't burn too many blisters on yore feet, cooky, gittin' down to the Flyin' M to tell 'em I was up here," he jeered at the enraged cook, who had grown more and more furious as the afternoon wore on. Not only had he been obliged to cook for the supposed outlaw, but he had had to prepare rather an ample supply of food which young Cole had tied on behind his saddle.

"Laugh now, damn ye, but I'll laugh when I see yuh strung up," the cook shouted angrily.

All trails would be closed. That was the thought foremost in Bert's mind. He knew that the cook had expressed the state of mind of every rancher when he declared that they would lynch the man who laid violent hands on a woman far quicker than they would a murderer or a horse thief. There would

be just one place, however, where they would not be looking for him—at the Flying M ranch.

He had no illusions about the kind of reception he would get there. He was familiar with Marshall's cynicism by this time. The cattleman would never believe a thing he might say, and he would be ready to kill him on sight, believing that Bert had abducted his sister. Yet Bert was minded to have a talk with him.

There was a strong chance that Marshall would be out looking for his sister, yet the man would have to rest some time, and he might come home for that.

The gray horse was sweating freely when Bert pulled up just outside the Flying M fence. Concealing the horse as best he could, Bert made his way cautiously toward the ranch buildings. There were heavy shade trees back of the house, and these afforded a good screen both from the buildings and the road.

Perhaps a hundred yards from the trees Bert dropped down into the knee-high alfalfa he was walking through, as he heard the thump of horses' feet coming along the road. In but a few minutes he heard them ride up to the corrals and stop, and from the sound he judged there was nearly a dozen men. He had not ceased to crawl forward on his hands and knees, and as soon as the men stopped he got up and ran forward to the trees, stopping only when he found one close, to the house large enough to conceal him.

Almost immediately he saw a man coming up the walk toward the house. Inside the yard the man halted and shouted back to the men who were moving toward the bunkhouse. Apparently they had all unsaddled their horses, and turned them through a gate into the best pasture.

"Get all the sleep you can, boys, because to-morrow night we'll have to watch the roads while the others sleep," Marshall called.

"Yuh don't need to tell us that, Boss," one of the men called back.

Linn Marshall came on and entered the house. A few minutes later Bert ventured to press his face against a dining-room window for a swift look inside. Marshall was sitting at the table, with his back toward the window, and the woman who kept the house, a widow woman from Snowville, was placing food before him. Bert noted the dejected slump of the rancher's shoulders.

He could guess, too, by the concerned, sympathetic gestures of the woman, that Marshall had just told her of his failure to find out what had become of his sister.

Bert waited until the rancher was done eating, and he almost altered his resolution. He knew that he could not interview Marshall without grave risk, and it might do no good at all. On the other hand he was firmly convinced that Lucy could be found at the Leach ranch. It was a strong temptation to try to rescue her alone, and he meant to attempt it anyway if other means failed. But common sense told him the odds were almost insurmountable; the chances of failure too great. And if he made his solitary attempt and did fail, then Colatta's scheme would go through without a doubt.

Bert slipped around the house and tried a door. As he had surmised, it was unlocked. He slipped inside noiselessly, and saw a crack of light from under the door of Marshall's study. The housekeeper would be busy washing up the dishes in the kitchen, and he felt sure that there was no one else in the house.

He tried the door to the study gently, and made sure that it was unlocked also. Then he knocked on it softly.

"Come in," was the reply in Marshall's impatient voice. Bert thought there was even a note of hope in it, as though the man anticipated good news of some sort, yet feared it might be otherwise.

Bert threw open the door swiftly, stepped inside, and closed it behind him with his left hand.

A look of incredulous amazement came over the rancher's face, and his eyes darted towards the revolver he had taken off and laid on his desk a few feet away, for he had been standing eagerly in the middle of the room.

"Why, you—you——" Marshall certainly did not know just what to do, but he meant to do something.

"Just a minute, Mr. Marshall," Bert said quietly. "I want to have a quiet talk with you about Lucy. It won't do any good to try to rouse anybody else."

A satirical smile flitted over Marshall's thin face, but with a little gesture of surrender he dropped into a seat. "I hardly expected you to try to make a deal so soon—or to come in person," he said dryly. "Did the capture of your esteemed brothers make you nervous?"

"I came to volunteer some information that I think will help us to get Lucy back," Bert said, with such simple sincerity that for a moment a look of doubt came over Marshall's face.

"You're not going to try to bluff about this thing, are you?" Marshall retorted, his conviction that Bert was a crook returning.

"Not in the least," Bert returned. "I think I should have told you some things before, but I learned that you were firm in your belief that I was

crooked, an' I don't believe yet you'd have listened to me. Now you've got to."

"Yes?" Marshall asked sarcastically.

"In spite of the fact that there's a dozen men within calling distance," Bert retorted coolly. "I heard to-day that you suspect me of having kidnapped yore sister. I'd die before I'd do a thing like that, or I'd die to keep her from bein' harmed. But I do believe I know somewhere about where she is."

"How strange," Marshall sneered.

"I can't make you believe me now, but what I'm goin' to tell yuh will be proved to yuh in a few days. Babe Colatta will offer to rescue Lucy from the kidnappers if yuh'll turn over to him your option to purchase Enoch Cole's ranch an' range."

"So Colatta is in with you on this, eh?"

"Marshall, frankly, it's damned hard to keep from punchin' yore head, yo're such an obstinate fool," Bert retorted. "But I want yuh to keep yore head shut while I do tell yuh how this frameup was worked, whether you believe it or not."

Marshall was tremendously angry, and yet he sensed power and dignity about the young fellow before him which he had never suspected. After Bert went over and moved the gun from the desk, towards which Marshall was furtively moving his chair, the rancher remained reasonably quiet and listened with careful attention while Bert related the details of how and why the kidnapping had been effected.

One thing only Bert held back; that was any mention of Tom Chill. The puncher had befriended him, and he could not give him away.

"You don't expect me to believe that, do you?" Marshall asked, when Bert had finished.

"Yuh're a fool if yuh don't, but I wouldn't be surprised any," Bert said cuttingly.

"I was sure fooled in you," Marshall admitted. "You're an abler crook than I took you to be. However, I intend to have my sister rescued in the next twenty-four hours, and have you and your young friend, Finney, behind the bars with your sweet-scented brothers."

"You won't look for her down to the Leach ranch, then?" Bert asked bitterly.

"No. I see quite clearly that you are stalling for time. You hope to have us waste our time down there quarrelling with the Leaches while you move

my sister to a safer place. Well, it won't work. Now, how are you going to get away with it?"

"I'll try to rescue her alone."

"I thought so," Marshall smiled grimly. "Seeing that you are hopelessly caught you want to make a grand stand play at rescuing her in hopes of getting immunity. Well, the only immunity you'll get is this: if my sister is injured in any way, you'll hang. If you bring her in without injury or indignity, you'll get off with about twenty years in prison."

"All right. I'm not much surprised. I didn't expect you to show much sense," Bert rasped. "But when Colatta comes here with his proposition yuh may understand then what a fool yuh've been."

Marshall started to rise angrily to his feet, but for the first time that evening Bert's revolver came into play, and it was pressed against the rancher's stomach.

"Stay put," Bert whispered fiercely. "It's yore own fault that I have to truss yuh up an' gag yuh, but my feet are sore, an' I don't want to have to run when I leave here."

Ten or fifteen minutes later Bert Cole quietly left the house, and walked unhurriedly over to where he had left his horse.

"This is that, an' the next thing is somethin' else," he philosophised, as he swung into the saddle.

A sense of humour came to his rescue now to keep him from being completely overmastered by despondency. The joke, he reflected, was certainly on him. He had set out to salvage the soiled reputation of the King Creek Coles by being strictly honourable, and as a result of his actions the remainder of the Cole boys were in jail, and he was a fugitive from the law with almost every conceivable kind of crime charged against him.

"At least they'll have to admit that I'm a fast worker," he soliloquised grimly, as he rode along.

He headed unhesitatingly for the Leach brothers' Hammer Brand ranch, but he had not ridden far before he began to realise that such a move would have to be most carefully carried out. Assuming his guess was correct that Lucy Marshall was being held prisoner there, it would be no easy matter to ride in and bring her out. Gus and Gord Leach, he had reason to know, were not averse to taking a shot at a man on little or no pretext. Colatta also made his headquarters there, and in addition there would be present at least three of the men who had attacked him the day before.

Upon reflection he doubted very much if the outlaws would dare to keep the girl at the ranch-house at all. Very likely Colatta would not want to take



any one into his confidence besides Gord and Gus. Not only was there danger of too many men finding it out and trying to cut in on the profits, but neighbouring ranchers might drop in too frequently. Then, too, there was Ike Blunt. Bert believed that Babe Colatta was trying to double-cross the Snowville business man, and as soon as Blunt learned what had happened he would be down to the Hammer Brand ranch to find out why the original plan had miscarried.

The more Bert thought about it the more firmly he became convinced that the girl would not be hidden in the house. Gord and Gus were bachelors, and their house, though large, was hardly the place to keep a girl out of sight.

Eventually Bert decided to postpone his attempt to square matters with the outlaw gang. The thought of the indignities that Lucy Marshall might be suffering was maddening to him, and a vivid imagination pictured them as far worse than they perhaps were; but he realised that if he went down there at once he would surely come in conflict with the outlaws before he discovered where she was hidden, and he entertained no foolish belief that he was a match for a bunch of them.

The best he could do was to hide out somewhere close to the Hammer Brand ranch, and try to spy upon the people there, or, if unusually lucky, to catch one of the gang alone and try to make him tell what he knew.

Having made his resolve, the next thing was to carry it into effect. He knew that there was little chance to hide out close to the ranch. The best chance appeared to be to hide out on Sheepshead Mountain, overlooking Soda River, and the Hammer Brand ranch if it was possible.

He knew the topography of the country thereabouts only in a general way, but he knew that Soda River skirted the mountain at that point, and that right from the river the country rose high and rough. On the other side was a rolling plain that stretched away beyond Snowville. He believed that the Leach brothers' ranch bordered the river, and was comparatively level. If he had only thought to borrow one of Uncle Enoch's high-powered glasses, he reflected vagrantly, he might have been able to get a better line on things.

So, instead of riding directly toward the Hammer Brand ranch he headed for the bridge which he had crossed approximately twenty-four hours before. The road would be guarded at vital points, he was aware; but the only thing that worried him was the possibility that the bridge might be guarded. He crossed the main road carefully, taking down the wires of somebody's pasture to avoid having to follow it, and approached the bridge from down river.

He stopped suddenly as he heard what seemed to be the scuffling of feet on gravel, sounding only faintly above the gentle murmurings of the river. Presently he indeed verified it as being a bunch of cattle driven along the gravel bar on the other side of the stream.

Bert saw no place to conceal his horse except under the cut bank of the river. He urged the reluctant animal down over the bank until it stood in water almost belly deep. Even yet Bert's head projected above the top of the bank, but he could lean down, and he felt sure that the gray would be invisible against the background of the bank.

He could see the cattle scurrying by on the other side of the stream, and he counted six men driving them. The men were not shouting at the animals as they would do if the enterprise was a legitimate one; but he could hear the dull thumping sounds of doubled-up lasso-ropes coming down across bovine hips and ribs.

Then, suddenly, he heard a voice rise sharp and clear above the noise of the stream and the cattle. A voice that he could have identified anywhere as belonging to Babe Colatta.

"Go on back to yore bridge, Mort; we can manage from here," the gunman shouted, and Bert saw one man turn back.

So the outlaws were gathering in a few Flying M cattle after all, Bert realised. With Mort Cupples himself guarding the bridge to catch the supposed kidnapers it would be perfectly safe to drive the cattle across there, for even though some of them were missed Cupples' presence at the bridge would stifle any suspicion that they might have been driven that way.

Bert had a good eye for cattle, and he estimated that there were not to exceed a hundred and fifty head in the bunch. A sizeable haul, but nothing like the wholesale theft the outlaws had talked about.

Bert realised that he had small chance of beating Mort Cupples back to the bridge. Despising the treacherous foreman though he did, he knew that it would not do to take unnecessary chances with him now. And seeing the stolen cattle had given him another idea.

The presence of so many men here meant that there could not be so many left down at the Leach ranch. Perhaps he would never again have so good a chance to get down there and look around. Even if he could not find Lucy he would still be in a position to watch the procedure of the outlaws.

They must do one of two things with the stolen cattle—cross them back over the river some way to the Hammer Branch ranch, or hide them somewhere on the Sheepshead Mountain range. By getting to the ranch first Bert felt that he could find out if the cattle were put back across the stream

somewhere, and if not he would later be able to locate them on the other side.

Getting back across the river might be something of a job, yet in case of stern necessity he felt that a good horse could be made to swim it. It was worth the chance, he thought, and it did permit him to make an immediate effort to locate Lucy—the thing he most wanted to do.

When the cattle were out of sight he got his horse back up on the bank, and presently the gray horse was flashing through the night at a keen gallop, bearing a rider who, while leaning ahead anxiously as though the speed of the horse could not get him to his destination quick enough, was watchfully alert for anything that might attempt to check his progress.

## CHAPTER XV

### A SUDDEN DROP

BERT owned no watch, but he knew it was getting into the small hours of the morning when he approached the domicile of Gus and Gord Leach. He saw a light twinkling through a window, and for a moment he entertained a wild hope that Lucy Marshall might have been keeping a lamp burning to attract the attention of passers by. Realising the improbability of this, however, he decided that they must be early risers on the Hammer Brand.

Aware that men might be out doing chores around the stables, he was compelled to make his approach most cautious. Having already decided to attempt crossing the river if things went wrong, he made a wide circle about the house until he was approximately between it and the river.

The buildings were farther from the stream than he had thought, and the land between was another one of those volcanic wastes common to the country. All sorts of cuts and coulees, most of them impassable on account of the lava rocks, ran down to the river. In one of these coulees Bert fastened his horse by the simple expedient of placing the bridle reins between two lava boulders, and then he hastened back toward the house.

In a bachelors' hall, such as Gus and Gord kept, window curtains were of course unknown. Everything within the room where the light burned was nakedly exposed to any one who chanced to look in. Being far from the main road doubtless they felt safe from intrusion.

The first discovery Bert made was that the men in the room had not just got up—they had never been to bed. A listless card game was in progress, and four sleepy looking men sat around the oilcloth covered kitchen table, playing their cards perfunctorily.

Bert could see the faces of three of the men, and recognised them instantly. Between the two Leach brothers was the evil, animal-like face of Slant Wickison. But Bert was more interested in the fourth man, whose broad back he could identify as easily as he could the faces of the other men. Those wide shoulders, bull neck, and bullet head could belong to no one but Ike Blunt.

As Bert studied the expressions of the men he became aware of the uneasiness of Gus and Gord Leach at once, and later he believed that Blunt

himself was the cause of it. As he grew more and more curious, he drew closer to the window, but the thick walls of the house defied his efforts to overhear their conversation.

Suddenly Bert knew that he must, somehow, find out the reason for this all-night vigil, or rather what would happen as a consequence of it. He already had an idea of why Ike Blunt was there. Into Blunt's dull mind had penetrated the thought that Babe Colatta might be dealing to him from a crooked deck, and with characteristic directness he was waiting for Colatta and an explanation. Something of importance was sure to be said when Babe Colatta arrived, and it was very likely that even before that something might be said that Bert very much wanted to know.

He looked at the darkened windows speculatively. He was under no illusions as to the danger of the thing he proposed to do. If they caught him there he knew they would murder him without a moment's compunction unless he could fight his way out. But he knew, too, that he might never find such an opportunity again to find out the inner workings of the outlaw gang.

Still another thing that might work in his favour, he reflected, was the possibility of a row between Blunt and Colatta. Every pose and movement of Ike Blunt spelled belligerency. And Bert had remarkable confidence in his six-shooter.

He began to feel tentatively of a window in the rear of the house, and it went up with surprising ease and quietness. It was a great temptation.

Even if he decided that it would be unsafe to linger inside the house after daylight, he might be able to pick up some clues as to Lucy's whereabouts. She might even be gagged and bound in one of these very rooms!

At the thought of that he stuck one leg through the open window, and a moment later he was standing inside a darkened room. For a moment he stood stock still, trying to accustom his eyes to the gloom. It was dark enough, however, to throw every object in the room into obscurity, and he had to resort to feeling his way gingerly along the wall.

First he bumped into a bedstead. Feeling carefully over that he made sure that it was unoccupied. The room seemed to be jammed full of furniture, and in disgust at the slowness of his progress he struck a match. By its flash he perceived another door, and by the absence of light under it when the match went out, he decided that it led to another dark room.

Ensued another period of tedious exploration in the dark, and another lighted match. He chose one of the two doors in this bedroom, and a moment after turning the knob he saw a streak of light under a door in the darkness beyond. It was closer at hand than he had thought, and a very little

exploration revealed that he now stood in a little hall, or vestibule, with no less than three doors opening into it.

It was lighter in this place than it had been in the bedrooms, and Bert quickly discovered that most of it came from the top. Glancing upward, he made the discovery that the building was imperfectly ceiled, and quite a beam of light was coming from the lamp in the other room. It gave him an idea.

By standing on a bench he found in the cubby-hole he was able to reach the joists, and he carefully drew himself up through an opening between the boards over his head. The boards, he found out, were loose. Dust arose with every movement he made, and caused him to want to sneeze. He groped his way forward cautiously, for he was now directly over the room in which the men were playing cards. Then, despite his caution, his hand came down upon an old set of harness that had been stored there. The leather rolled under his hand, and worst of all there were sleighbells attached to the backhand.

*Jingle-jangle!* went the bells, with a terrific clanging, it seemed to Bert.

“What the hell was that?” boomed Ike Blunt’s startled voice.

There was a moment of intense silence, during which Bert crouched, fairly frozen with anxiety.

“Reckon it’s a wood rat up there among them old harness,” one of the Leach boys growled presently. “There’s lots of ’em around here.”

“Ugh! Hell of a place this is anyway,” Blunt rasped. There was a fluttering sound, and glueing his eye to a crack between the boards, Bert saw that the saloon keeper had thrown the deck of cards viciously to the table, from whence they had scattered in all directions.

The game was over, for the men all got to their feet.

“My Gawd, what a night!” Blunt said peevishly.

“I told yuh, Ike, that we’d just as well go to bed—that Babe wouldn’t be back till mornin’,” Gord Leach answered.

“Yeah, an’ when I got to sleep one o’ ye would have gone out an’ warned Colatta I was layin’ for him,” Blunt said angrily.

“But Babe ain’t double-crossin’ yuh, Ike,” Gord protested. “That damn’ Cole kid upset things a lot, but Babe’s out right now rustlin’ Marshall’s stock.”

“Well, he’s a damn’ fool if he is,” Blunt thundered. “Whoever kidnapped that gal, whether it was the Cole kid or Colatta himself had just one reason fer doin’ it—to trade her back to Marshall fer that option. Nothin’ can be

done till the gal's got back. Bad as I want that option, by Gawd, I don't want it at that price. If I could find out where she was I'd take her home."

"So would I," Gord acquiesced eagerly; but Bert Cole knew that the man was lying, and he could see that Ike Blunt suspected the same thing.

"The Cole kid took her—there's no doubt o' that *a*-tall," Gord went on.

"I doubt it like hell," Ike said peevishly, and lighted a big cigar. For a few minutes he paced up and down the room angrily.

"It's gittin' light—better stir up some breakfast, Gus," Gord directed his brother. "I believe I'll go throw the horses down some hay."

"I'll go with yuh," Ike Blunt declared. "Slant, you stay here."

The two men went out, and Bert considered the advisability of making his getaway. But he had really learned nothing except that Lucy was not being detained in the house. And when Babe Colatta arrived he felt sure there would be something exciting happen. He rather felt sorry for Ike Blunt, but he could see no way to help the man, and really the hoggish, brutal, vindictive saloon man was not a proper object of sympathy.

Unless they discovered his horse Bert felt reasonably sure that they would not dream of him being in the house. He had concealed the horse in the bottom of a rocky gully, and unless the animal made a lot of fuss by nickering he doubted if they would find it. It would be hard on the horse, but Bert's own position would be no sinecure. He determined to see the thing through.

By the time the men had eaten breakfast it was broad daylight. The aroma of hot coffee came enticingly to Bert's nostrils, and warned him of the discomfort that surely awaited him if he was compelled to remain in his unpleasant position. But it was too late to withdraw now, even had he wished to do so. By no chance could he hope to get across the open fields without being seen.

"Here they come!" he heard some one exclaim loudly.

While the men below were occupied in watching the newcomers Bert carefully moved a short, loose board in front of him until he had a space three by twelve inches to look through. Ike Blunt had reseated himself at the table, and was waiting sullenly for his chief confederate.

The door opened and four more men stalked into the room, with Babe Colatta in the lead. Unconsciously Bert's nerves began to tingle at sight of the man chiefly responsible for all his troubles.

"Hallo, Ike! How long you been here?" Colatta exclaimed.

"All night, by Gawd," Ike grunted.

“Ain’t they got no beds here?” Colatta queried, with mock solicitude.

“I didn’t want to go to bed—I wanted to stay up an’ talk to you,” Blunt said angrily. “You other fellers git to hell outa here while I talk to Babe alone.”

“I guess nix,” Nick Jarvis spoke up quickly. “Us fellers has been out ridin’ all night, an’ up the night before. We’re goin’ to eat an’ turn in. If yuh wanta talk go outside yoreselves.”

“Just what’s the trouble, Ike?” Colatta purred soothingly.

“I wanta know what about that Marshall gal gittin’ kidnapped?” the saloon keeper said heavily.

“Well, we can tell all we know about that without the boys havin’ to go out in the cold,” Colatta said suavely.

Bert by this time was able to identify the other three men. Besides Jarvis there was Tom Chill, and one of the punchers who had attempted to kill him on Sheepshead Mountain. He heard the fellow referred to as Sponsler. He was a bad-looking character with a black moustache which looked heavy enough to make the man stoop-shouldered. One man, Bert reflected, was yet to be accounted for.

“You kidnapped that gal,” Blunt charged abruptly.

“An’ what if I did?” Colatta challenged.

Bert saw the surprised look on the faces of several of the men. Even Blunt was taken aback, for he had evidently expected a denial.

“Well, why didn’t yuh go ahead with the reg’lar plan?” Blunt demanded.

“Because, friend Ike, yuh were tryin’ to hog too much,” Colatta replied coolly.

“Hell, I promised yuh all the cattle yuh could steal, an’ a cash bonus besides,” Blunt defended.

“One hell of a concession that was,” Colatta said sharply. “What did *you* have to do with the cattle rustlin’? An’ yuh figgered to make hundreds o’ thousands o’ dollars out of that deal, an’ only pay us a few measly thousands.”

Growls of assent came from the other men, with the exception of Tom Chill and Slant Wickison.

“But look here,” Ike Blunt blustered. “Without me you fellers can’t do a thing. That option has got to be got from Marshall in a perfectly legitimate way. It ain’t no cash an’ carry proposition. Marshall has got to transfer it of his own free will an’ accord. It won’t be legal if he does it under duress.”



“I savvy that quite as well as you do,” Babe Colatta said calmly. “Marshall is going to make the transfer freely.”

“To save his sister? Why, he’d move to set it aside the minute he got her back, an’ he’d send you over the road for kidnappin’,” Blunt scoffed.

“Young Cole kidnapped the Marshall girl, an’ if I git her back from him at the price of that option Marshall can’t kick back,” Colatta said evenly.

“So that’s the game, eh?” Blunt asked nastily. “Young Cole in with yuh on it, I reckon.”

“The poor fool thought he was,” Colatta smiled. “I don’t mind sayin’ that he messed things up some by tryin’ to play a sucker hand himself. That’s why we’ve been out after cattle to-night. If somethin’ does come up we’ll have the cattle, an’ you can come down on Marshall to take up his paper like we planned.”

“An’ if yuh can trade the gal like yuh figger, I don’t git a damn’ thing out of it, huh?” Blunt said, his avaricious little eyes gleaming under beetling brows.

“I’ll have to have money to finance the initial payments, an’ if yuh don’t raise a row I’ll let yuh in on it,” Colatta remarked quietly.

Blunt came to his feet with a roar. “Yuh damn’ double-crossin’ hound, I was afeered yuh’d do somethin’ like that!” he yelled. “By Gawd, I won’t have nothin’ to do with it.” He seized his hat and started for the door.

“Just one minute!” Babe Colatta’s voice rang out sharply, and Blunt paused reluctantly.

Slowly the gambler walked up to Blunt, and the colour as slowly faded from Blunt’s face before the deadly look in the killer’s eyes.

“Do yuh think for one minute I’d let you go to try to make a deal with Marshall for the return of the girl?” Colatta asked pleasantly. “I’d kill yuh before I’d let yuh do that. Understand this right now: you’re in this as deep as any of us. You plotted right along with us to rob Linn Marshall an’ murder ole Enoch Cole. You can’t play the virtuous citizen if anything breaks. You need us if yuh git a thing out of this; but we don’t need you.”

“I fail to see that,” Blunt argued, but he plainly was regretting his rashness in coming there to accuse Colatta.

“I’m goin’ to have that option in my name,” Colatta went on. “Neither Marshall nor the girl will ever suspect that I had a hand in kidnappin’ her. Young Cole will be the goat. Just as soon as Marshall finds out the girl can’t be recovered he’ll give up. But if he don’t we’ll git his cattle. An’ don’t

think for a minute that I can't git backin' once I git that option recorded in my name."

"That Cole kid may ball things up on yuh," Blunt went on. "Yuh'd better put him outa the way."

"I mean to," Colatta said coldly. "That is if we can git our hands on him. But if we can't we've got him for killin' Bummer Kelly, an' they've got him for kidnappin'. No danger of anybody believin' anthin' he might say."

"Well, yuh've treated me rotten, but I'll have to stand it, I guess," Ike Blunt said gloomily, and once more turned toward the door.

"Oh, no," Babe Colatta said politely. "Feelin' the way you do, I think we'll have to ask yuh to remain with us for some time."

Even Blunt understood the meaning of the cynical smile with which the killer accompanied the remark. In his anger at the thought of being held a prisoner by the men he had considered his underlings, he forgot his fear of Babe Colatta. He whirled, and his huge fist swung around so suddenly that Colatta was caught off his guard. The blow landed on the side of the killer's head with such force that Colatta was knocked clear across the room.

In an instant Blunt was jumped by Jarvis, Gus, Gord, and the man Sponsler. For an instant Slant Wickison stood aloof, and then as Ike flung men right and left, the fellow decided to come to the rescue of his master. He picked out Sponsler for his own, and for a moment the battle was not as uneven as the odds would make it appear.

Then Colatta was on his feet again. The fellow was consumed with a murderous rage, but he had not lost his head.

"Git in there an' help down him," he snapped at Tom Chill, and the puncher swiftly leaped to obey, while Colatta stood on the outskirts ready to bring his gun down upon Blunt's skull if the opportunity offered.

Overhead, Bert Cole was seething with excitement. There was little time to consider, but there seemed to be a chance to settle things right there if he was lucky, and the things they had done to him rankled deeply. He could not even attempt to guess how it would come out, but he determined to take a hand in the fight that was raging below.

He got to his knees, carefully pushed some boards apart far enough to let his body through, and then dropped—squarely upon Babe Colatta's back!

## CHAPTER XVI

### A SMOKE-CHOKED RIOT

THAT sudden drop had been witnessed by one person, and felt by another. Tom Chill, with his eye on Colatta rather than the man he was supposed to be fighting, had seen Bert Cole drop, and the descent of an angel from heaven could not have amazed him more. A sagging jaw, dollar-sized eyes, and limply swinging arms testified eloquently to his surprise, and made him an easy victim when one of Ike Blunt's wild swings came into his territory. It landed just under his ear, and for the time being Tom lost interest in the proceedings.

Babe Colatta had gone to the floor like a plummet, but there was metal in the man, and he proved a more formidable opponent than Bert had expected. Before Bert could master the man Nick Jarvis had seen him, and plunged forward like a football player. Bert had to rise to one knee to meet that assault, and even so he was knocked off Colatta by Jarvis, who was no mean antagonist himself.

In an instant three separate battles were raging in the dust choked room. On one side Ike Blunt, now puffing violently, was waging a battle with Gus and Gord Leach. At the extreme end of the room Slant Wickison and Sponsler were staging a relatively harmless bout, while Bert now had his hands full with Jarvis and Colatta.

It was inevitable that the furniture should be smashed; and the first thing to be turned over was the big kitchen stove, which was practically red hot. Almost instantly the room filled with soot and smoke, while the coals ate into the dry floor boards, and licked at the waste material that cluttered the room.

Both Bert and Colatta were anxious to use their guns as they struggled, but neither man dared neglect the other's trigger hand long enough to use his own. Bert ignored Jarvis as much as he could while he concentrated upon keeping Colatta's hand away from his gun until he could find opportunity to use his own.

But in a few minutes every one in the room was choking and gagging. With a sudden, violent effort, Bert got free from both his antagonists, and immediately they were obscured by the smoke beyond recognition.

Somebody fired a shot, and instantly the place became more horrible than before, when no man knew when he might be the victim of a stray shot.

“Open the door—fer Gawd’s sake open a door,” some one bawled in terror.

Bert found a wall, and proceeded rapidly along it until he collided with somebody feeling along the other way. His hand came in contact with a huge, brushy moustache, and it needed no more to know that it belonged to Sponsler. Without more ceremony Bert aimed a blow at the place where he judged the jaw to be, and the man sagged to the floor.

He tangled with some one else immediately, and before he could get free from him other men had joined the tangle. It was not a fight now, but a wild scramble for the door. Some one had found it, for the others could feel the draught which was, however, fanning the flames into more fierce activity.

Finally Bert jerked free, and changing his course he felt for the door which led into the tiny vestibule. Fortunately he found it without difficulty, and a moment later the stale air of the bedroom which he had first entered seemed the sweetest thing he had ever taken into his lungs.

A moment later he slipped out through the window, and to his relief found no one on that side of the house. But he made another discovery immediately which filled him with genuine alarm. In the last scuffle he had lost his gun!

There was nothing left now but to run for it. The question was which way? To cut across the fields was surely to expose himself to a bullet, and probably to be ridden down before he could reach his horse. On the other hand he might make a short race to the stables, and hope to find a horse there to help him make his dash for liberty. The drawback to that was that he would have to go around on the other side of the house immediately, and perhaps run squarely into his enemies.

A strange sound brought him sharply to attention. Undeniably it was the roaring of a motor somewhere in the front yard. And a second later he heard the bark of a six-shooter. Stepping over to the corner of the building Bert saw an automobile picking up speed, with Ike Blunt humped over the wheel and Slant Wickison cowering in the back seat.

There were more shots, and Bert saw Blunt half rise in his seat, and the steering wheel wobbled madly. But in a moment the big saloon keeper had the machine under control again.

“By God, I nailed him! On yore horses, an’ after him, boys,” Bert heard Babe Colatta sing out.

“But we gotta put out the fire,” wailed a voice.

“Let the damn’ shack burn,” Colatta’s voice was much farther away.

Bert decided to wait where he was, though he retreated to the farther corner of the building to dodge around it if the need arose. A moment later Colatta, Jarvis, and the outlaw whom Bert had previously missed, appeared in sight, racing after the disappearing car. It was a hopeless race for them, Bert knew, unless Blunt was too badly hurt to drive, and such did not appear to be the case.

Without further hesitation Bert walked around the end of the building, feeling sure that the others would be occupied with the fire.

A well was situated within a few feet of the door, and as Bert peered around the corner he saw Gus Leach frantically drawing water, while his brother was deluging the flames. They were toiling mightily, and despite the vast amount of smoke that had accumulated, they seemed to be making progress. Sponsler, the man Bert had hit, was weaving about on his feet helplessly, and between buckets Gus and Gord were cursing him heartily.

Tom Chill was the only one Bert missed, but he had no time to stop and make inquiries for his friend. Despite the fire he decided against trying to reach the stables. He knew that he would surely be seen, and they would leave the fire long enough to take a shot at him. Had he not lost his gun he would have taken the chance, but now the best strategy seemed to be to try to sneak away without being seen.

It was a vain hope. He had not gone a hundred yards when a yell announced his discovery. It was the misguided Sponsler who had seen him, and Bert regretted that he had not hit the fellow harder. As he looked back over his shoulder he saw Sponsler raise his gun to fire, and he also saw Tom Chill suddenly appear and bump awkwardly into the fellow.

Bert took to his heels, but he was pursued not only by Sponsler, but by the Leach brothers, who apparently preferred to let their house burn rather than permit him to escape. He was running like a scared wolf, but somehow the country looked different by daylight than it had looked at night. He had very little idea just where he had left the gray horse. There were entirely too many lava-strewn coulees for him to be able to identify the particular one he wanted to reach.

Then he saw that Colatta and the other two men had given up their chase of Ike Blunt, and now they were riding furiously to head him off. With a wild burst of speed he gained a coulee and vanished from sight momentarily in its rocky wastes. His one chance was to lose his pursuers, and he instinctively headed for the worst-looking place he could see.

It worked against the horsemen, for they were obliged to double back in order to follow him, but the men on foot were more difficult to shake off. Gus and Gord had the advantage of knowing the draws better than he did.

But all the time he was working toward the river. He was rather a poor swimmer, but he knew there would be some brush along the river bank; and if it did fail to conceal him he meant to take to the river. Better to drown, he felt, than to fall into their hands.

Every now and then he was sighted by some of his foes, and each time he was, bullets splattered on the rocks around him. But since the entire river front at that point was composed of broken-up lava there was always either a hole to drop into, or a boulder to get behind; and so he worked his way steadily toward the river.

At last he struck the high-water level of the river, some hundred feet from the present bank of the stream. A thin line of willows had sprung up in the soil that had been deposited by the river and on the real bank the willows had attained considerable growth, and in some places hung far out over the water.

As Bert reached the shelter of the willows he heard a shout from down below, asking where he was. He was sure it was Jarvis's voice, and knew that the horsemen had circled around and gained the river bottom below him.

"He's up the river from where you are. Close in an' we'll git him," he heard Gord Leach shout in reply.

With great difficulty Bert worked his way through a big willow bush until the water was just above him. The river was narrower here than farther above, and the rapids, boiling over and around the huge black boulders in midstream made him shudder. He felt that there was not one chance in a million that he could swim it.

He let himself gently down into the icy water, his breath sharpening to a gasp at the shock. He found a strong, sturdy root just under the overhanging bank and clung to it. Down, down, down he dropped, and the water was lapping around his chin when his feet finally struck something solid. He found that he was very nearly concealed from above by the overhanging branches, but he could now distinctly hear the men closing in on him. Very likely, he thought, they would be watching the river to see if he was trying to swim across. It gave him an idea, and releasing one hand he sent his big hat sailing over the surface of the water for about forty feet. It struck the water, and then was whirled bobbingly away down stream.

It was but a short time until he was rewarded by knowledge that the ruse had worked.

“Look! Looky! There’s his hat!” yelled a man down stream. A couple of shots followed, and then he could faintly hear the mutter of voices as the men collected along the river bank.

His elation began to lessen, however, as he felt his whole body begin to grow numb. The cold was almost unbearable in his strained position. His footing was none too secure, and every few seconds a ripple would splash water over his head, taking his breath, and adding to his misery.

He knew that he could not hold out long, and the men along the river seemed in no hurry to leave. Then he suddenly realised that if he did not get out soon he would lack the strength to drag himself to the bank. Rather frantically he drew himself up a trifle, and was paralysed with fear when his feet shot out from under him until he was in a horizontal position. He kicked and churned the water furiously until once more his toes were on the slippery bottom.

“I damn near let go, an’ if I had I’d ’a’ been a goner,” he thought.

Just then he heard voices within a rod of him, and he held his breath agonisingly.

“That hat business might have been a trick. We’ve gotta be sure he ain’t hidin’ here in the brush,” he heard Babe Colatta state.

The bush above him was parted, some of the branches directly over his head were moved until they tickled his scalp. And then, after a moment of horrible suspense, the branches settled into their natural positions, and the men passed on.

Bert dared not wait long before making another attempt to get out of the water. This time, however, he went about it more carefully, and by dint of great exertion finally managed to drag himself up into the dry bush, where he crouched in a state of semi-collapse.

Ten or fifteen minutes passed before he dared to move enough to get an unobstructed view of the narrow strip of river bottom. No one was in sight, but he knew that Babe Colatta would be taking no chances, and the killer might post a man up in the rocks to watch. Cold and uncomfortable as he was he still did not dare to move.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE SECRET OF THE OUTLAWS

UNCOMFORTABLE as was the interior of a willow bush, for a man whose clothing was soaked with ice-cold water, it was preferable to becoming a target for some sniper among the rocks, and Bert at least had plenty to think about.

Had he accomplished anything at all, he wondered, by his rash actions at the Leach domicile? Judging from his present predicament it would seem not. And yet had he gone back to the bridge and crossed it in accordance with his original plan he might not have learned anything important, even had he got by Mort Cupples. And his presence at the Leach cabin had at least produced some unexpected results.

First in importance was the escape of Ike Blunt, after Colatta had determined to keep him detained until the deal with Marshall could go through. Bert knew that Blunt would surely have been defeated had he not interfered. Much depended now upon Blunt's subsequent actions.

The saloon keeper had protested against the abduction of the girl, and Colatta had feared to let Blunt go lest he try to make a deal with Linn Marshall by telling him who had taken his sister away. Yet Ike Blunt was implicated too deeply to make a direct accusation against his former accomplices. Neither did Blunt know where the girl was being held. It was impossible to figure out just what the various parties would do, but Bert was reasonably certain that the events of the previous night would at least hasten developments.

He wrung the water out of his clothes as best he could while he waited, and the sun gradually warmed him. By noon he felt fairly warm, though still vastly uncomfortable from the effects of the soaking he had received. He was also beginning to get uncomfortably hungry.

He had planned to remain where he was until dark, and then try to "borrow" a horse. He knew that they could not have failed to discover Tom Chill's gray by this time. Just what to do then he did not know, but the thought was running through his mind that if he could find Ike Blunt and tell the man exactly what he knew, he might persuade, or rather frighten the man into coming clean with Marshall. That would at least clear Bert and his brothers of the charge of kidnapping. On the other, Marshall would surely



organise a posse to go after Babe Colatta and his gang, and knowing Colatta as he did by this time, Bert shuddered at thought of what might happen to Lucy if the gambler was crowded to the wall.

It was perhaps one o'clock when he was brought to rigid attention by sight of a man making his way down through the rocks. The fellow came slowly, and at times stopped altogether. Then with a gasp of relief Bert recognised the man as Tom Chill. Chill carried a rifle under his arm, but Bert could not consider the puncher a foe.

At last Chill reached the green gravel strewn high-water line, and stood looking at the farther shore of the river with such a look of despondency upon his face that Bert wanted to laugh. The man came closer to the bank, and when he was within easy speaking distance Bert stepped out.

Tom's eyes bulged out grotesquely. "My Gawd an' thin gravy!" he ejaculated. "How many lives have yuh got anyway?"

"More than any cat," Bert said with a grin. "Have yuh got anybody else hangin' around close?"

"Nope, I'm alone. Babe thought there was a chance yet that yuh wasn't drowned, so he's had a man on guard. Sims stood it till noon, an' then it was my turn."

"Sims?" Bert queried. "Do I know him?"

"Yuh'd orta. Him an' Sponsler was with us when they tried to corner yuh over there on the mountains."

"I see. He was the one who didn't show up fer breakfast this mornin'," Bert remarked.

"Yeah; he stayed behind to keep the cattle quiet," Tom replied unthinkingly.

Bert filed that fact away in his mind for future reference, but thought it best not to pursue the subject further just now.

"Where's Colatta an' the rest?" he asked.

"They're all asleep, I reckon, except Babe an' Gord Leach. Babe has gone to Snowville, an' I don't know what become o' Gord," Tom answered.

"Then the cabin didn't burn?"

"No, they got the fire out, but it damn near got me," Tom said ruefully. "Just after I seen you droppin' from above, somethin' hit me an' put me out. I reckon I'd 'a' smothered 'f they hadn't doused me with a bucket o' cold water."

"Yuh was alive enough to bump Sponsler when he tried to take a shot at me," Bert reminded.

“Hell, I hate to see a nervy kid like you git yourself killed off,” Tom deprecated.

“About ready to throw in with me now, ain’t yuh, Tom?” Bert asked. “Yuh can see now that no matter what happens to me the end o’ the gang is in sight.”

“I dunno. Babe is a resourceful cuss, an’ I must say that the future don’t look a bit bright fer you,” Tom argued.

“You’d help git Lucy Marshall away from that gang, wouldn’t yuh?” Bert demanded, knowing that that would bring Tom if anything would.

“I would if I could, but I don’t know where she is. Honest, Bert, I didn’t know anythin’ about that when I talked to you last, an’ I didn’t know fer sure until this mornin’ that it was Babe who had kidnapped her. But o’ course it was him an’ mebbe Gus an’ Gord who pulled it off while we was waitin’ to kill you up there at the upper bridge.”

“But you must have some idea where they have her hidden?” Bert wheedled.

“I couldn’t even guess,” Tom asserted.

Bert felt that it was time now to revert to the cattle. “There ain’t many places where they could hide a girl with safety,” he asserted. “I’d make a guess that she ain’t far from where they planned to hide Marshall’s cattle. What do yuh think?”

The shot told. A dumbfounded look came over Tom Chill’s face, to be succeeded by an expression of comprehension.

“Do you know where we hid the cattle?” he demanded sharply.

“Of course,” Bert bluffed.

“I never thought about ’em keepin’ the girl there, but it’s possible,” Tom ruminated, after an interval of silence.

“Say, look here,” he blurted abruptly. “I’ve told yuh that I’d give a laig to git outa this mess, but how do I know I’ll be better off if I throw in with you. Gawd, yore life would be a damn’ poor thing to gamble on even though yuh have been lucky so fur.”

“Layin’ aside the fact that yuh’re sure to lose if yuh stick with Colatta, don’t it occur to yuh that it would be the straight, honest thing to do to help square up the wrong that outfit has done?” Bert argued.

“I guess yuh’re right,” Tom said after a moment’s silence. “But I’m damned if I can see what we can do. Even though Lucy Marshall should be up here in the cave, how the hell could we git her out.”

Bert's heart gave a mighty thump, but he managed to control his voice and speak matter-of-factly. "Tell me what yuh know about that cave," he said casually.

"I don't know much," Tom confessed. "To tell the truth I never was in it. Yuh wouldn't suspect it bein' there any more than yuh could tell at a glance that there was a ford up here where we crossed the cattle. It looks from the other side o' the river like they was just goin' to land on a narrer ledge o' solid rock where only a few could stand, but it makes a curve an' opens into the cave."

"Mean to tell me they figgered to keep cattle *in a cave*?" Bert cut in.

"They planned this for months," Tom declared. "Gus an' Gord sent their cattle down to Gentile Valley to be fed last winter, an' they baled all the hay they raised here. People thought they shipped the baled hay out, but they didn't. It's stored away in the cave to feed these rustled cattle—two hundred tons of it."

That was amazing enough of itself, but Bert wanted still more information. "But the cold," he protested. "Won't it be too cold for cattle to stand it there in the dark?"

"Yuh understand I've never seen it, but I gather that there's several passages in this here cave, an' some of 'em they say, opens out into a reg'lar old volcanic crater where the walls are straight up an' 'dicular. The cattle kin git in there to warm up an' ketch the sunlight."

Despite the fact that he knew the outlaws must have planned elaborately, Bert found it hard to believe that there was such a place as Tom Chill described. He was aware that the extent and roughness of the lava waste was far greater than he had judged it to be from merely a casual familiarity with it, but he had to see the cave in order to be thoroughly convinced.

"Which is the best way to git up to it?" he asked mildly, fearing that Tom might yet back out if he appeared too anxious.

"There's a trail down to it from the house where they hauled the hay, but I reckon a man might git up the river to the ford, an' then in that way," Tom replied.

"Then that's the way I'll try," Bert announced.

"I bet Gord Leach is in there, an' even if yuh should find Lucy there, how would yuh git her out?" Tom objected.

"You've got to help me, Tom," Bert said firmly. "Of course I wouldn't dare try it till dark, but yuh've got to git horses when we can reach 'em. Where's Chief? Did yuh find yore gray?"

“We found the gray, an’ yore sorrel is here on the place, but I don’t see how——”

“Can yuh let me have yore six-gun?”

“I would, only they’d miss it an’ want to know how I lost it,” Tom worried. “If I throw in with yuh now, an’ don’t show up again at the cabin it’ll bring ’em down on us. Doggone if I see what we can do.”

“Yuh’re right. All yuh can do is plant some horses for us, but you must do that. Couldn’t you sneak away after dark an’ bring Chief an’ some other horse down here? An’ while yuh’re about it, see if yuh can’t find my gun up there, an’ leave it with the horses?” Bert wheedled.

“I’ll try,” Tom Chill promised at last. “But if yuh don’t git out o’ this an’ I don’t think yuh will—I want yuh to do yore best to square me. I can’t see nothin’ but the penitentiary starin’ me in the face, no matter which way the cat jumps. If I could leave the country, but somebody would git me shore if I tried that.”

“Don’t yuh see, Tom, that if we can rescue Miss Marshall, an’ you will tell all you know, that it will expose this gang?” Bert argued.

“Mebbe so, but I won’t tell nothin’ till I know Babe Colatta’s outa the way,” Tom said stubbornly.

“If yuh’d only shot him this mornin’ instead o’ droppin’ on him it would have been different.”

Bert realised at last that he could get no more help from Chill, for the present at least; and he was anxious to explore the mysterious cave, where he was now convinced Lucy Marshall was held. He waited until Tom walked toward the bench above the waste, and then he set out to find the entrance to the cavern.

He found it exceedingly hard going most of the way. Where the river made a considerable bend, a ridge of lava came almost to the very verge of the stream. There was just room enough for a man to edge around the end of it, and a misstep would mean a plunge of fifteen feet or more into the water. Still clinging to the hope that Tom might manage to get the horses, Bert was trying to scout a way to get them back up to the ford, without having to go up on the bench at all, but he could find no way.

Then when he got around this highest of the lava backbones, he beheld the ford. Just before plunging into the rapids the river widened out over a smooth, rocky bottom with unexpected placidity. Above and below the bluff on the other side seemed barren and unscaleable, except for one narrow gash of a canyon that opened out directly at the ford.

Bert was far more interested in finding out what was on his own side of the stream, and almost at once he discovered the ledge of which Tom had spoken. Within a very short distance it made a sharp curve, and opened into the yawning mouth of a cave in the rocks.

From there on Bert moved with extreme wariness. Almost at once he came upon a sort of gate, which he knew must have been placed there to hold the cattle in. There was a slight draught blowing through, but the air seemed to be sweet and clean, and not excessively cold. Nor was it dark enough to require a light to see by after he had accustomed his eyes to the gloom.

As he moved on he found tiny patches of sky showing through crevices in the rocky roof, and turning a corner in the cave he saw a large patch of light directly in front of him, and he clearly caught the sound of cattle eating and trampling about among the rocks.

His progress was now snail-like. At any moment he knew that he might encounter one of the outlaws, and without a gun he would be at a sore disadvantage. Presently, however, he stood at the inner opening of the cave, and found the place to be approximately as Tom Chill had described it. Close at hand were many bales of hay, which obviously had been thrown down from above, and which were fenced off from the cattle by carefully placed boulders.

The cattle—Bert knew they must be of the bunch he had seen the rustlers driving the night before—were as content as cattle could be under the circumstances, naturally having a distaste for hay after running at large on green grass. The enclosure, Bert discovered, was even lower than the river, for he had been coming downhill through the cave, or rather, tunnel. The bottom of it had considerable soil among the rocks, and big bunches of wheat grass had grown up rather thickly. Most of the cattle were browsing gingerly upon the rank wheat grass in preference to the hay. There was even a little pond of water toward the centre.

The rustlers could not have asked for a better place in which to further their operations, but Bert was far more interested in finding out whether Lucy Marshall was being held somewhere along with the stolen cattle. The very thought of such an indignity made him see red.

After making sure that no one was in sight, he climbed over the barrier that protected the hay, and then began to climb from one bale to another until he was near the top of the pile. He was beginning to think that it was supremely ridiculous to imagine Lucy being anywhere near. No matter how

hardened the outlaws were, they would never bring a girl of such refinement to a place like this; and there was no place to keep her if they had.

But if she wasn't here, where could she be? The tormenting question confronted him like a blank wall. Then he observed that there was a space between the ricks of hay and the side of the enclosure. In order to see what was behind it he climbed to the end of a rick of hay bales which swayed perilously beneath his weight. Having been let down from the top and stacked on an uneven surface, they were anything but secure. As the whole pile began to sway Bert stopped and extended both hands to steady himself.

And then Gord Leach stepped out from around a corner of the hay pile some twenty feet below. The man carried a basket on one arm, and Bert saw that the contents were dishes which had recently contained food.

He knew now that Lucy Marshall could not be more than a few feet away, and that Gord Leach had been carrying food to her. But Bert was like a man paralysed. If he moved a muscle the pile of hay under him would begin to sway, and betray his presence, and against an armed man he stood no chance.

But on the very instant of his discovery something caused Gord Leach to look up. The basket clattered to the ground, and the man jerked out his gun.

"Come down, damn ye, come down!" he called triumphantly, as he drew a bead squarely upon the centre of Bert's breast.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A GIRL PASSES JUDGMENT

BERT came down. But first he threw up both hands in token of surrender; then rocked back upon both his heels, and shoved outward with all his might. And, as he had hoped, the bales in the rickety pile suddenly bulged outward, and that end of it collapsed.

Bert fell backward and heard a revolver shot ring out as he did so, though the bullet did not seem to come close to him. Then he bumped unceremoniously from bale to bale as he tumbled downward. But he was not hurt, and was on his feet as soon as he landed.

In an instant he was clambering rapidly over the helter-skelter mess of bales toward the place he had seen Gord Leach last. He saw that Gord had been knocked off his feet by the falling bales, but the man was getting up, and he still had his gun.

Realising that he could not reach Leach before the man got his gun into action, Bert suddenly swerved and took shelter behind a bale of hay which was precariously balanced on end. Crouching, he seized the heavy bale with the strength of desperation.

He felt two bullets plunk into his strange breast-work, but Leach might just as well have saved his shots so far as doing any damage that way was concerned. But the man had fired hastily, and he was still on one knee. Then Bert lunged forward, bringing the hay bale down upon the fellow's shoulder with all his own weight behind it.

Once more Leach was squashed to the ground, and with around three hundred pounds of hay and man on top of him, he stayed there.

Bert brought one foot around and kicked the gun out of the man's extended hand, and then stepped over and got it.

"Never mind movin' yet," he cautioned Gord, and stepped swiftly over to where a bale of hay had been opened for the cattle, and retrieved one of the wires. Returning, he kicked the hay bale from the man's back, and then proceeded, despite strenuous verbal remonstrance from the victim, to wire the fellow's hands firmly together behind his back. And to make doubly sure of the fellow's helplessness, he wired his ankles together.

He had thought he heard some one faintly calling while he was dealing with Leach, and as soon as he had finished he moved in the direction of the sound. For a moment he was puzzled, yet he knew that Gord Leach had just come from somewhere close at hand. Then he noticed where half a dozen bales of hay, apparently piled haphazardly, were really bracing each other. In a moment, he had found one that could be removed from the key position, and soon he was raising up a sort of door which did not, however, swing upon hinges.

“Lucy!” he called. “Lucy, are you there?”

“Yes. Who—who is it,” came the girl’s frightened voice in reply.

“It’s Bert Cole,” he answered. “I’ve come to help you git away.”

“Thank God!” the girl cried half hysterically.

“Now don’t blow up,” he begged her. “We’re still in a lot of danger.”

A moment later he was standing upright inside a cave, or grotto, in the rocks. Light streamed down through a crooked crevice in the roof, and he could see the contents of the place quite clearly. The floor had been strewn with hay, making a thick carpet, over which a large wagon cover had been thrown. There was a bed in one side of the room which had been made out on a thick pile of hay, another hay bale was covered with a blanket for a seat, and one or two more were scattered about the room. Also there was an oil stove turned down low in the back of the place.

These things Bert took in with one cursory glance, and then his eyes rested upon the hesitating figure of the girl. She was looking at him in a peculiar way which he could not comprehend.

“Was—was there a fight out there?” she breathed.

“Yes. But I’ve got the fellow trussed up till he’s as helpless as a blind kitten. Only thing is there won’t be no way for us to escape from here till dark. Somebody else may come, but I’ve got a gun, an’ I think I can handle ’em.”

The girl came slowly forward and looked up into his face with a puzzled, questioning expression. Impulsively Bert reached out to touch her, but she stepped swiftly back.

“I—I—don’t understand your game at all,” she said. “What kind of a trick are you trying to play?”

“Trick? I’m just tryin’ to git yuh safe home as soon as I can,” he answered in bewilderment at her attitude.

“Wouldn’t Linn scare?” she asked, and he thought he detected a sneer in her voice.



“I don’t know what he would do, but I’m anxious to git you home before they do scare him into something.”

Lucy slowly returned to the blanketed hay bale, and after a moment Bert followed her.

“You said, ‘Thank God’ when I told yuh I’d come,” he reminded. “What makes yuh act so—so—funny now?”

“I was glad to have it over with; that’s what!” she flamed. “Of course I could stand it myself all right—you haven’t mistreated me, an’ I’ve been comfortable enough in a physical sense, but I know how my brother must be suffering, and I supposed that you had either accomplished what you set out to do, or had decided that it was no use.”

Bert recoiled as though she had slapped him. It was a minute before he could organise his thoughts enough to speak.

“Why—why, yuh’ve got this all wrong,” he protested. “Surely yuh don’t think it’s me that’s been keepin’ yuh here?”

“I know it was,” she said emphatically. “Why, every time one of those men came here with my food I asked them when I’d get out, and they always answered, ‘When Bert gits ready.’”

“But don’t yuh see——”

“Oh, that isn’t all,” she cut in. “I overheard them talking outside here, and they said how smart Bert Cole was to pull off a trick of this kind. I even heard them give your reasons for doing it; something about keeping Linn from getting any of your uncle’s property. And they told how you had worked the thing by getting Linn and the men to chase those worthless brothers of yours while you sneaked back and—and got me.”

“Lucy! My God, you can’t believe that of me! Honest, do I look like a skunk of that kind? An’ would I come here an’ near git my head shot off tryin’ to help yuh if I was in with these birds?” he argued.

“You’re a King Creek Cole,” she said with an air of finality.

Suddenly Bert began to laugh. At first the girl only regarded him grimly, but presently something about his strange machinations invoked her puzzled interest.

“Bert, I’d like to believe that you were straight; honest, I would,” she said hesitantly, feeling her way for each word. “Yet there’s too much against you for me to believe that. But I’m sorry I made that last remark, as though you were to blame for being a King Creek Cole. I know it’s because you are one that has made you a crook, but the blame isn’t on you.”

“Thank you,” he said gravely, and she did not detect the mockery.

She would have said more, but the bitterness in his eyes somehow sealed her lips. It was, she thought rightly, the consciousness of failure, though not the kind of failure she suspected.

“Look here,” he said presently, “we’ve got to move out of here no matter what yuh think about me. This fellow outside has friends, an’ they’re liable to come here lookin’ for him at any minute. If yuh git home it means the penitentiary for them. An’ this pot-hole here ain’t the best place in the world for a man to be cornered.”

He went out and dragged Gord Leach into the cave, and proceeded to gag the man in hopes that it might afford a few more minutes respite at a critical time. Then he motioned the girl outside, and refastened the door and blocked it up, while she watched him with a strange, almost over-mastering interest.

He led the way out of the pot-hole and through the tunnel, the girl clutching timidly at his coat tail through the darkened tunnel.

“Why—why—it’s the river!” she exclaimed, as they came in sight of it.

“Yep. There’s a ford right there. Yuh want to remember that when yuh tell yore brother his cattle are in here,” Bert said.

They were then at the bottom of a path that was evidently used when the men came down from the house.

“This seems to be the only other trail in here, an’ I doubt if they could drive cattle over it,” Bert remarked. “I think they’ll have to cross ’em back over the ford to git ’em out.”

He was thinking of the roundup when Swede Anderson had been killed. He could see the reason for the foreman’s murder quite clearly now. At that time the outlaws had planned to get all Marshall’s big dry stuff at one drive. The big danger was that they would be caught while driving through Enoch Cole’s range. For that reason Gus and Gord had driven their cattle on the Sheepshead range, and Colatta and the other crooked reps had contrived to keep them from being gathered in the rodeos, so that an accusation of theft could be made against Cole’s outfit. Then, while a new roundup was on, and there was talk of Cole being arrested, that part of the range would be free, and the rustlers could use their driveway without molestation.

Something of this Swede Anderson must have guessed, and it had cost him his life.

Babe Colatta’s scheme to kidnap Lucy Marshall, Bert was convinced, had been conceived after Enoch Cole had ended the talk of rustling by inviting the cattlemen to come in and hold another roundup on his range if they entertained suspicions. Bert felt that he, personally, had been

responsible for that on account of what he had told his uncle; but in view of what had developed from it he was not congratulating himself.

He was anxious to get back over the lava backbone before any one arrived, and with the girl it was rather a risky business. She did not demur, however, when she saw the dangerous place they had to negotiate. She was as surefooted as Bert himself, and her nerve was as good.

When they were finally around the end of the ridge they sat down to rest.

"You're trembling," the girl accused.

"I suppose I am shaky," Bert confessed. "For one thing I ain't had anything to eat since I made Moser cook supper for me last night up in Eight Mile Pass."

Lucy looked at him searchingly. She could not understand at all, yet she felt that he was telling the truth.

"When will you get to eat again?" she asked.

"Lord knows. We'll have to hide out here till dark, an' then try to git some horses. I told Tom Chill that I would probably git you out of here today, an' asked him to have some horses down here, but I don't know whether he will or not."

"Tom Chill? Is he, too, an outlaw?" the girl asked.

"Tom? Of course not. Yore brother has all his men out huntin' for you, an' I happened to see Tom," Bert lied.

Again the girl felt her doubts arising. As she looked at the stalwart, clean-limbed young fellow before her she forgot his reputation and felt the same indefinable faith in him stealing over her, which once, to her shame and regret, had caused her to lose her head. She did not quite know, however, how to ask him to explain things after the hard statements she had made recently. And the evidence against him was so at variance with his present conduct, that the only possible explanation she could think of was that he was working an elaborate trick to make her think he was not responsible for her abduction.

Then, just when she was framing an inquiry that would give him a chance to formulate a defence if he wanted to make one, he prepared to move.

"You had better stay right here, Miss Marshall," he said. "Yuh'll be out of sight, an' they're not liable to look for yuh here. I'm goin' to see if I can't find a horse myself, in case Tom don't show up."

"And leave me here alone!" the girl exclaimed, before she thought.

“I’m sure yuh’ll be all right if yuh just keep out of sight till dark. Then, if I don’t come back, you keep on down the river for at least a mile, so yuh won’t be seen from the Hammer Brand ranch-house, an’ then cut across to the main road. There’s several ranches along there, an’ yuh’ll be all right at any of ’em. They’ll take yuh home,” Bert said, with forced cheerfulness, and strode away.

He was not anxious to look for horses at that hour, because it was entirely too dangerous; though there was a chance that he might be able to find Tom Chill still on guard. Mostly he wanted to get away from Lucy Marshall. She had shown him conclusively that he was still, and would always be as long as he remained where he was known, only a King Creek Cole.

Some things, he felt sure, he could explain to her, but all the charges massed against him would be too much for her credulity, and disbelieving him in one thing, she would probably discredit him in all. It was not worth the trouble.

He had been the craziest kind of a fool to fall in love with her, he reflected bitterly. The best thing he could do was to get out of the country, as his mother had once advised, and try to begin life over again.

But before making that attempt there was one thing he intended to do for the good of the country—that was to seek out Babe Colatta and have a final settlement with the cold-blooded wretch who had caused all this trouble to come to pass. Colatta’s death, he felt sure, would disclose the truth about the kidnapping, and that would liberate his brothers. More than that he could not hope for.

## CHAPTER XIX

### A MAN ACCEPTS THE VERDICT

MORE time had elapsed than Bert had thought, but he was thankful for the approach of darkness; being now only feverishly anxious to have the whole thing over with as quickly as possible.

He could see nothing of Tom Chill, so he slipped cautiously down along the river until he was near the place where he had had his perilous adventure that morning. There he crouched down to watch, and await the coming of nightfall.

He could not see Lucy from where he was, but he felt sure that he could see any one who happened around in her direction, so if she needed protection he could get there. And that was as close to her as he wanted to be.

The tedious period of waiting passed at last, and he went back up the river to where he had left Lucy. The girl was still there, and she came toward him eagerly. Her face gleamed whitely through the dusk.

“Oh, I’m glad you’ve come back,” she said. “I wasn’t much scared when those three masked men took me from home that night, and I kept my courage there in that cave, because I felt that it would be only a matter of a few days. But out here I’ve been—oh—scared!”

“Nothing has happened, has there?” he asked.

“Just a while ago I heard guarded voices from the other side of this lava ridge, and I knew they had discovered that man. The thought that I might be found and taken back there simply terrified me,” she confessed.

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” Bert assured her. “We’ll beat it down the river an’ see if Tom Chill has brought those horses.”

They moved as rapidly as they could, and presently they were past the worst of the rocky waste. There were trails coming down to the river from the bench land above, and there was considerable grass. It was a pasture, Bert was sure, and doubtless it was down one of these trails that Colatta, Jarvis, and Sims had come to head him off that morning.

Suddenly he stopped, and his nerves gave a jerk. He had seen several dark objects looming up just a little farther down—horses, they seemed to be.

“Stay here,” he whispered to the girl, and pushed her farther into the shadows. He went on alone.

Presently he made out two horses—and a man.

“That you, Tom?” he called softly.

“Uh-huh.” The reply came with a gulp.

Bert stepped forward and recognised his own Chief horse, and Tom’s gray. “Good work, Tom,” he said. “You got the horses, an’ I got the girl.”

“So I just heard,” Tom said. “Babe has come back. They’ve found Gord tied up there in the cave, an’ hell’s a-poppin’. My Gawd, Bert, there’s death in the air to-night, an’ I wish my ma had me.”

“Are they huntin’ for us?” Bert inquired.

“Not for long. That damned old uncle of yours has played more hell with Colatta’s plans than even you have. They’re goin’ over there to wipe him out to-night,” Tom declared.

“They’re what?” Bert’s nerves were tingling with excited anxiety.

“Well, Babe’s been gosh awful busy to-day, it seems,” Tom explained. “First he went to Snowville, an’ found out that Ike Blunt had been shot up purty bad even though he was able to drive his car home. Ike was out of his head, or pretended to be. Anyway Babe got scared that Ike might die an’ give everythin’ away to sorta square hisself in the next world. So Babe hiked over to the Flyin’ M to try to make the dicker with Marshall for that option.”

“Go on. Hurry up,” Bert ordered crisply as Tom seemed disposed to hesitate.

“Well, he found that old Enoch Cole had beat him to it. The old duffer had been over or sent over, an’ bought that option back from Marshall.”

The explanation for that, Bert reasoned, was Enoch’s information concerning the proposed building of the dam that would flood the county seat. Foxy old Enoch!

“Of course he had to pay Marshall a handsome bonus, so he told Marshall that the men who had kidnapped his sister would soon send in a demand for a big ransom, an’ he made Marshall believe that the only way to git her back was to have the cash ready to pay it,” Tom went on. “An’ to cinch it he sent the amount of the bonus along in hard cash. At least twenty-five thousand dollars, Babe is sure.”

“But how can it help Colatta now to kill my uncle?” Bert wondered.

“Babe laid his cards on the table up here at the cabin a while ago, because he had to have the support of the gang,” Tom stated. “He admitted that he had to talk turkey with Marshall. He told Marshall flat out that he

could git his sister for him, but that if Marshall didn't git back that option an' transfer it to him that he'd never see Lucy again."

"Damn him!" Bert gritted.

"He made Marshall promise to go to old Enoch's an' give him the money back, an' try in every way he could to make Enoch give him back the release. Marshall promised to turn over everything he owned if need be, because he's just about crazy over what's happened to Lucy," Tom said.

"But what good can it do Colatta now?" Bert puzzled. "He won't dare to stay here after his crookedness an' crime comes out."

"Marshall will be there when Colatta arrives. There'll be a row, an' Colatta will murder old Enoch. The release of that option will be there, an' it will be destroyed. Marshall will then have his chance to sign the option over to Babe. Then Marshall gits his. Babe grabs this cash that Marshall will have took with him, an' it will look like old Enoch an' Marshall have killed each other. Babe figgers you'll be blamed for kidnappin' the gal, an' he'll be sittin' purty."

Bert had to admit that Babe Colatta was resourceful and ruthless to the last. And the man's schemes might even yet go through.

"You gittin' away with the girl was sure a bad break for him," Tom went on. "But he had to take the gang an' git down there before Marshall got away, see? An' they kinda figger that Lucy will still believe it was you who kidnapped her."

"She does," Tom said glumly.

"Well, Babe ordered us to take a short look around for yuh anyway, after they found Gord. That give me a chance to come down here, an' on my way I hung my rope on this sorrel," Tom said.

"An' now yuh're goin' back an' go with 'em?" Bert asked.

"Me? I know I've been a damn' coward, Bert, but I couldn't stomach this night's work. I'm through," Tom announced.

Bert stepped over and removed Tom's saddle from the gray and put it on the sorrel. "You can ride bareback better than Lucy can," he replied to Tom's unspoken question.

"But—but——"

"I want you to take her home," Bert said quietly. "When you git there you had better git what men you can trust an' go on to Enoch Cole's."

"What about you?" Tom blurted.

"I'll be all right. Lucy thinks I kidnapped her, an' I've made her believe that you're straight. If you keep yore mouth shut you won't be in any danger

for a while, an' if it does come out you'll be let off for getting her safely home," Bert said cheerfully.

"By Gawd, Bert, this is tough on you, but I can't see no better way," Tom said earnestly. He held out his hand and Bert took it. Then Bert turned away and went back to the girl.

"That's Tom Chill all right," he told her. "He's got horses, an' he'll git yuh home all right."

"And you?" she asked beseechingly.

"I'm stayin' here," he said curtly.

A sob rose in the girl's throat. She had hoped against what appeared to be insurmountable evidence that he would be able some way to clear himself; but his actions now clearly indicated that her first guess had been correct—that finding the game was up, he was trying to cover his tracks by releasing her himself. The fight at the cave was merely claptrap for the purpose of deceiving her.

Frantically fighting back her sobs, she turned toward Tom Chill.

Bert remained in the shadows until they rode away, and then he turned up one of the trails that led toward the Leach ranch-house. It was now so dark that he had little fear of detection, though he made his approach carefully. Once he heard some one shouting an order, and he dropped flat on his stomach. A few minutes later he heard a number of men riding away.

"Tom! Oh, Tom!" he heard a man call loudly. Then the horsemen rode on toward the river. Evidently their business did not admit of delay, and they were not waiting to find Tom Chill.

Bert arose and hurried to the stables. There would surely be a horse of some kind there, he thought, and he was right. There was one horse in the stable, but it obviously had been ridden hard—no doubt by Babe Colatta that day.

The outlaws had plenty of horses, and after a moment's deliberation Bert mounted the tired horse, and rode out in the horse pasture. He drove up a number of horses, and selected the one that looked the best to him. He was well pleased to find his own saddle hanging in the barn, and he felt that his judgment of horseflesh had been vindicated as soon as he mounted the big, rangy bay he had chosen.

For an instant he had considered trying to find something to eat inside the house, but with lives at stake there might not be a minute to lose. He searched out the trail that led down to the concealed crater, and urged his mount along it.



Where the path led down to the ledge at the mouth of the tunnel the horse had almost to stand on his head, but Bert knew the outlaws were accustomed to riding back and forth that way, and he felt no alarm.

The horse waded most of the way across the river, but several times was compelled to swim for a short distance. The current was not rapid, and they reached the other bank in good shape. The only way out was through the gashlike canyon, but the way was strange to Bert. He knew he could find his way across the mountain to his uncle's place, but the outlaws might know some short cut that would cause him to arrive too late. He urged the big bay on at the fastest pace compatible with safety, for he could take no chances on being left afoot.

He was thinking hard as he rode. How did Colatta know that Linn Marshall would be there? His mind reverted to the horse he had found in the barn. It had been ridden fast, rather than a long time, he was sure. And Babe Colatta could never have covered all the ground he was supposed to that day on one horse without killing it. The explanation was simple. Colatta had ridden to Bicknell and hired a car, in which he had gone to Snowville, thence to the Flying M ranch, and finally back to where he had left his horse.

That meant that it could have been quite late in the afternoon when he left the Flying M. There was small chance that Marshall could have left at once, a good chance even that he would not want to undertake such a mission until dark. And it was a great deal farther from the Flying M to Enoch Cole's ranch than it was straight through the hills from the Hammer Brand ranch to the same place.

The chances were greatly in favour of Marshall still being there when Colatta arrived. Bert only wished that his own chances for being on time were as good.

He tried to anticipate Colatta's murderous strategy, but it was only guesswork. First, there was the question of whether he would be admitted or not. Bert felt reasonably sure that Colatta would try to get in alone as a business visitor, and would depend upon his own prowess to dispose of his victims. His men would be left outside to see that there was no interference from Cole's men, and to cover the retreat.

If not admitted, Colatta would doubtless force a way inside anyhow. The mere matter of killing a Chinaman or two would not deter him.

Occasionally Bert's fingers would spasmodically grip the handle of his gun. Of one thing he was certain: before the night was over either he or Babe Colatta would be dead.

## CHAPTER XX

### WHERE ALL TRAILS CONVERGE

OLD ENOCH COLE had built his house on the hill in order to have a perfect view over all his domain, but the most powerful of his telescopes could not penetrate the darkness that settled down while his nephew was riding frantically from the outlaw hangout at the volcanic pot-hole beyond Soda River. So it was that the old man saw nothing of the silent night riders who circled the lower end of his fields and approached the ruins of the old fort on the river, where they dismounted to conceal their horses, and then crept furtively up toward the big house on the hill.

Strangely enough, the old invalid was less in a mood to keep a careful watch than he had been for many a day. For the first time in years, with the exception of the night Bert Cole had spent there, the big house had other occupants than the proprietor and his Chinese servants.

The visitor who was to spend the night was Judge Giles, an attorney from Wayan who, perhaps, had come closer to being a friend to the lonely old cattleman than any other person, though his relations with Cole had always been strictly professional.

It was Giles whom Cole had summoned to go as an emissary to get back the purchase option from Linn Marshall, and the lawyer had been glad to do it. He had protested against it from the first. Though Cole had stated that his sole motive in wanting to rescind the agreement was because he had learned of the increased value of the property on account of the proposed reservoir, Giles knew there was something else back of it. Not only had Cole insisted that he stay all night to perform certain urgent legal duties, but he had noticed at once the old man's strange, new, mellow mood.

The lawyer had smiled grimly when Linn Marshall arrived shortly after dark, trying to get the option back. He chuckled when old Enoch told the visitor that the county seat would surely be built upon the very ground they then occupied.

“So that was why you two birds took advantage of my sister's misfortune to make me give up that option,” Marshall said angrily. “I begin to think now that maybe you had a hand in that, too. I've heard of your unscrupulous methods, and a nephew of yours was the kidnapper.”

“Are you sure of that?” old Enoch asked mildly.

“Sure of it? I know it. He pulled it off with the aid of those rotten brothers of his, and that crook Colatta,” Marshall flamed. “Colatta visited me to-day, and brazenly admitted it. He says that the only thing that can save my sister’s life is for me to assign that option over to him. That’s why I’ve brought your money back. I know you’re heartless, so I’m prepared to turn over everything I’ve got to get it.”

“I’m sorry for you, but I can’t think the option is what they want,” old Enoch, said. “You’d better keep the cash.”

“If you won’t call the deal off I’ll leave this thirty thousand dollars in bills, and tear up your cheque. Then I’ll attack the legality of the agreement I made with Giles on the grounds of fraud. You had material knowledge which you didn’t disclose, and besides I was under duress on account of my sister,” Marshall threatened.

“You try that, Marshall, an’ I’ll break you,” old Enoch said angrily. “Another thing: my nephews *didn’t* abduct your sister!”

“I know better than that,” Marshall declared. “But if that’s what’s bothering you, for the sake of my sister I’ll agree not to prosecute if you’ll help me get her back safely. But I want to know quick, because I’ve got to get back home. I had car trouble all the way over here, and I’m late. My foreman came with me to guard this money, and he’s working on the car now, but he’s not much of a mechanic. So I can’t stop here all night.”

Marshall would have been amazed could he have known that Mort Cupples was responsible for all the car trouble they had had.

“I had Judge Giles here arrange for bail for my nephews,” Enoch stated.

“Yet all the time you’ve been pretending to hate the King Creek Coles!” Marshall raged. “By God, sir——”

He paused as the huge Chinaman called Pike appeared in the library door.

“One man likee come in,” Pike stated impassively. “He name he say Colatta.”

The three white men looked at each other with most astonished expressions. Old Enoch was the first to speak. “I think,” he said, “we’d better have the gentleman in.” At the same time his skinny hands moved under the blanket that covered his wheel chair, and cuddled the revolver that he always kept concealed there.

The big Chinaman returned to the gate, and unlocked the padlock that fastened it. The man waiting quietly outside slipped through the gate, and

Pike turned to again fasten the lock. The next moment the Chinaman slithered to the ground as a rubber hose, loaded with buckshot, descended upon his head.

Babe Colatta stepped softly back to the gate and gave a low whistle. Six men emerged from the shadows of the stockade, but they did not enter.

“When I git to the house an’ deal with the other Chink, all of you but Mort had better come in. You, Mort, wait out here an’ keep an eye on that bunkhouse down there. They’re not likely to hear a revolver shot inside the house, but if they start up this way, any of ’em, you shoot,” Colatta directed.

The man walked across the yard as gracefully as a cat, and knocked gently on the door. It was opened by Peck, who perhaps knew a visitor was expected, and in another moment this Celestial also lay unconscious.

Colatta proceeded tranquilly up the stairs, guided by the lights to the library. He found Enoch Cole waiting for him alone.

“Well, sir, isn’t it a little late in the evening to be making calls?” Enoch demanded.

“Where’s Marshall?” Colatta demanded tersely.

“Marshall? Marshall?” Enoch stalled.

“Don’t trifle with me, old man,” Colatta said curtly. “You know who I am, an’ yuh ought to know that I don’t stand for any funny business. I know Marshall is in here because I was just talkin’ to his foreman.”

“I see,” Enoch said grimly. “Well, Marshall is up in the cupola—with my other guests.”

“What other guests?” Colatta demanded nervously.

“Really, they retired to keep from meeting you, so I hardly feel free to disclose their names,” old Enoch said sarcastically.

Colatta started to step briskly across the room, to where Enoch was backed up almost against the wall. When he was in the centre of the room, however, old Enoch held up a skinny hand.

“Close enough, Colatta,” he snapped. “I know your reputation an’ I don’t trust yuh. Ever since yuh stepped across that door I’ve had yuh covered with my gun. Now what do yuh want?”

“I want yuh to turn that option back to Marshall,” Colatta breathed in a voice that choked with baffled anger. Expert gunman that he was, he dared not try to beat a man who had only to press a trigger.

“You do?” Enoch sneered. “Well, I’ll tell you like I’ve just told Marshall—it can’t be done.”

“Old feller, yuh’re outa luck,” Colatta rasped. “Mebbe you have got me covered, but yore two China have been done away with, an’ yore house is crowded with my men.”

The two men measured glances for a moment. Then old Enoch’s uncovered hand came down smartly upon a bell fastened upon the arm of his chair. Colatta grinned sardonically, and Enoch knew that neither one of his servants would answer.

“All right,” Enoch surrendered. “Call the men down from the cupola. Judge Giles is still here, an’ he can fix it up for everybody concerned.”

It was no part of Babe Colatta’s plan to have Enoch Cole capitulate. Both Cole and Marshall were slated to die that night, and also any one else unfortunate enough to be in that house. He wanted Marshall to live long enough to sign over the option to Ike Blunt. He had given over getting it in his own name, but he meant to get back to Snowville before news of the killing got out, and force all he could out of Blunt, and this, with the stake he expected to get his hands on that night, would at least pay him for his trouble. And Blunt’s name on the assignment would automatically stop that gentleman’s mouth. Within forty-eight hours Babe Colatta planned to be on his way, with a stake of not less than fifty thousand dollars. It was not what he had hoped to get, but it was better than nothing.

But he felt that he had better dispose of Enoch Cole before he started negotiations with Marshall and this judge. He turned toward the stairway, but instead of calling to the men up there he called to his own men, whom he could now hear below. “Come up here, boys,” he called. But he had turned only to cover the fact that he was reaching for his gun. As his finger closed upon the handle he whirled and drew.

Old Enoch had been taken off his guard. When the killer turned away the old man’s feeble hand had let the heavy gun drop down against his thigh and he was helpless. But just before Colatta pulled the trigger they were both startled by the sudden, sharp reports of two almost simultaneous shots from the gate to the stockade.

Colatta fired, and the withered old figure in the wheel chair slumped forward, though the killer’s hand had moved a little at the interruption so that his aim had not been quite true.

Colatta leaped to the door. “What’s wrong out there? Who fired them shots?” he demanded.

“Damned if I know,” answered Gus Leach, the man closest at hand.

“Watch that stairway,” Colatta snapped, and rushed downstairs where Gord Leach and Sponsler still waited.

“Who fired them shots?” he demanded again.

The next moment he had his answer, as a door burst open and Bert Cole appeared.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE LAST OF THE KING CREEK COLES

WHILE BABE COLATTA'S gang was circling around to the ruins of the old fort, Bert Cole was urging the rangy bay to its best speed, straight down the mountain, and right through the fields to the house on the hill.

He had looked eagerly for a light shining from the cupola of the big house, knowing well that it would be visible for miles around. He had just reached the lower side of the corrals when he saw a light suddenly shine forth from there. That light, he felt sure, was neither casual nor accidental. It meant that some sort of crisis was approaching inside the big house. He hoped that he would not be too late.

He tied the bay horse in the shadow of a great haystack, and hurried forward on foot. Anxious though he was to come to grips with the outlaws, he knew better than to make a straight, open approach to the little gate in the stockade. If the outlaws were inside they would surely have a guard there. Nor did he think it advisable to arouse the men in the bunkhouse, who were surely in bed by this time. He was not forgetting that he was on forbidden ground, and that there was a price on his own head. He could take no chances on the stupidity of sleepy men. What must be done, he must do alone.

He ran a short distance through a calf pasture, and approached the stockade from the end. For that reason Mort Cupples did not see him; nor did he at once see Mort when he looked toward the gate. He moved cautiously along the upright timbers until he was not more than two rods from the gate. Then he saw a figure standing just inside the gate. Something about it looked queer. The man was in Pike's place, but it looked as though the gate was ajar. Why would Pike be out there at that time of night anyway?

He took two more stealthy steps, then the figure moved.

"Hands up there," a voice rasped, and Bert recognised Mort Cupples's gruff tones.

The man was swinging in behind the gate-post, and Bert caught the flash of a gun. It left him no choice but to get the man if he could. The two blinding flashes came closely together, but nothing struck Bert. He saw his man stagger backward, and he was inside the gate by the time Cupples fell.

Then Bert discovered the inert body of the huge Chinaman, and he knew that he had to deal with a gang already in possession of the house. The Chinaman had fallen in a most uncomfortable position, and from a sense of instinctive kindness Bert reached down and moved the yellow man. Something dropped from Pike's hand as he did so, and Bert picked it up. It was the key to the big padlock.

Obeying a sudden, swift impulse, Bert closed the gate, and fastened the ponderous lock. The key he dropped into his pocket. The shots, he hoped, might arouse the men in the bunkhouse. The outlaws would try to get away, no matter what happened to him, and they would make a rush for the gate. If they were balked here they might, in their confusion, not be able to get out until the ranch hands arrived.

Then he dashed to the house, and broke in just in time to answer Babe Colatta's query.

The moment he had looked forward to for so long had arrived dramatically—and it was over before the other men in the room could draw a breath. There was no time for taunts or challenges. Each man knew the intent in the other's mind. Each grasped his gun at the first recognition of the other. It was a question of skill and co-ordination.

A strange feeling of blankness filled Bert's mind. He knew but one thing, that in another instant his life might be cut off. It was as though all trains of thought in his mind were sidetracked mysteriously to allow one primitive instinct to function. Of its own volition, it seemed, his wrist snapped the big .45 into position, and his finger pressed the trigger. Back of it, of course, was consummate skill acquired by long practice.

The room resounded with the crash of the two guns. Babe Colatta crashed full length to the floor like a severed tree from its stump, blood oozing sluggishly from a bluish hole between his eyebrows.

Bert Cole came down more slowly; his knees buckled as his will sought vainly to control his body, but come down he did upon his hands and knees. For a moment he swayed there like an animal with its throat cut, while blood trickled down from his temple and dripped from his jaw.

"Killed each other, by Gawd!" Gord Leach half moaned. "We gotta git outa this."

"We gotta git what we can an' beat it," Sponsler averred. "Grab that money, boys. Babe's done for," he yelled. A moment later he was following the others up the stairs determined to overlook no loot.

Bert's brain was beginning to clear. The bullet had had no worse effect upon him than an unusually hard blow, as it glanced along his skull. But his



returning senses warned him that he was in no condition to oppose his enemies. Instinct told him to play 'possum. He fell on his face with a dull thud.

Sponsler's shrill yell of warning had caused Nick Jarvis to leap for the handbag that lay upon a library table where Linn Marshall had placed it when he came in. And, since it contained the money which he was trying to give back to Enoch Cole, and which Enoch had refused to receive, it had been left there. Jarvis tore the bag open with some difficulty, and then whooped with joy as he saw its contents.

"C'mon, fellers, we got enough," he said, and dashed towards the stairway.

As the men crowded together at the head of the stairway Linn Marshall opened fire upon them from above. The unfortunate Sponsler had arrived in time to get a bullet through the arm. Preferring to get away rather than fight, the outlaws got in one another's way on the stairs, and most of them rolled to the bottom in a wild scramble. They were up instantly and plunging for the door. Linn Marshall was still shooting, but in his excitement his shots were going wild.

As the last outlaw got outside Bert staggered to his feet. "Drop that gun an' throw up yore hands," Marshall cried.

"The gate's locked, an' they'll be stumped for a minute. It's our chance to nail 'em," Bert said.

Marshall's jaw sagged. The situation was beyond him, but somehow he felt that he was making a mistake.

Suddenly from outside came a chorus of profane, angry voices.

"Search the Chink fer the key!" Jarvis roared. And while the others were bending frantically over the inert Chinaman Jarvis raced along the stockade with the handbag. He was in the shadows and presented a poor mark.

Utterly disregarding Marshall, Bert stepped outside. "Hands up, gang!" he ordered. "The game's off." He was aware that one man was sneaking away, but he had to watch the others, and this one had still to find a way to climb over the stockade.

"Want some help?" yelled a voice from outside.

Bert could scarcely believe his ears, but that voice was surely that of his brother Dave.

"Yes. Surround this place. Shoot anybody that tries to git out," Bert yelled back.

"We—we give up," one of the men at the gate called.

“Come over here with yore hands up,” Bert ordered, and the men obeyed. At Bert’s curt command Linn Marshall, still half crazed from the rapid flow of events, took their guns.

Bert went over to the gate and unlocked it, first calling out to the men outside. All the men in the bunkhouse were, of course, there. But not only were all the Cole boys there, but to Bert’s amazement young Pat Finney was also present.

“There’s one man still loose. We’ve got to git him,” Bert said, as half a dozen of the men filed in. But a moment later Nick Jarvis profanely called out that he surrendered.

A few minutes later the dejected-looking bunch of outlaws were herded into the dining-room of the big house.

Bert left them there, and went into the library where Judge Giles was at that moment giving the stricken old man in the wheel chair a drink of whisky. Linn Marshall followed him.

“I’m sorry I was late, uncle,” Bert murmured. “I heard to-night that Colatta intended to murder you an’ Marshall here to-night, but I couldn’t git here any sooner.”

“It’s all right, boy,” the old invalid said weakly. “I noticed when yuh was here before that yuh kinda yearned for all these books. How’d yuh like to have ’em?”

Bert licked his dry lips. Somehow, he had the feeling that those books had in them the things he wanted—the things that would give him the place in the world that he instinctively felt he was qualified to fill.

“I’d certainly like them,” he answered wonderingly.

“They’re yours. So’s everything else I own. Giles here will tell yuh all about it when—when—we fixed it all up to-day.”

Bert’s uncomprehending gaze turned towards the lawyer.

“It’s true, young man; your uncle has made you his sole heir,” Giles answered.

“But why?” Bert blurted out. “He hates the King Creek Coles.”

“Not any more,” the old man spoke up feebly. “Mebbe yore mother will tell yuh—some day—why I changed my mind. She was here. She told me—that you were straight. She brought young Finney along to prove—that yuh hadn’t robbed Blunt’s store. I never thought yuh did. Just as well, though—that he found the storekeeper who had sold a bolt of glove linin’ to half dozen different squaws—an’ that Widowboga’s squaw was one of ’em.”

“Mother was here?” Bert asked incredulously, as the old man paused from sheer weakness.

“Yes. She come here to make me see—what a fool I’d been. Too long a story to tell now, but me an’ yore mother was goin’—to git married. Yore father was a gambler. Me an’ him was left some money. We got this ranch an’ lease together. He wanted it all or none, an’ I agreed to gamble with him for it. I won.”

He had to rest, as his head sagged lower and lower, but so dramatic was his story that no one present felt any inclination to speak and break the thread of his thoughts.

“Alf lied to yore mother. He made her think I’d cheated him, an’ to punish me she married him. He never loved her, an’ when he found out that she still loved me, he tried to make life hell for her—an’ I reckon he did. He even tried to make crooks of his kids, because he——”

He had a coughing spell and could not go on. But now many things were clear to Bert. At last he understood his mother’s dreary life, and the silent, grim satisfaction she had taken when she knew that he could not be corrupted. How glad he was that he had not failed her. If only he could keep his brothers straight!

Old Enoch seemed to read his mind. “Since yore mother was here I’ve quit holdin’ malice against yore dad. There’s just one thing I want yuh to do for him. Make his whole life a failure by keepin’ them brothers of yours straight. Yuh’ll be able to do it now because yuh can keep ’em to work.”

Bert knew that he was right. All the King Creek Coles needed was steady employment—the thing that had been denied all of them.

“I’ll do my best. Uncle Enoch, an’ I’ll work for you as long as you want me. That is—unless—well, yuh see I’m still in kinda bad.”

“Yuh won’t be workin’ for me, son, because I’m on my way over the big hump,” old Enoch said grimly. “An’ with my money back of yuh, you can fight clear of anythin’.”

Bert felt a wave of sympathy for the grim, lonely old man again sweeping over him. “Yuh’re not goin’ to die, uncle,” he protested. “An’ yuh won’t be so lonely from now on.”

“I’m done,” the old man said weakly. “Where’s Pike an’ Peck?”

At the words the huge Pike stepped forward. His slant eyes were still a little blurred from the effects of the blow from the blackjack, and he walked a little unsteadily. But he went straight toward his master with the faithfulness of a dog.

“Take me up to the cupola, Pike,” the old man directed, and the big Chinaman picked him up, chair and all, and carried him up the stairs.

A minute later Pike came down and carried Peck back up. The smaller Chinaman was just beginning to recover consciousness.

“Boss man say nobody come up,” Pike stated.

“Bert, ole kid, it looks like yuh was in luck,” young Pat Finney said with sudden enthusiasm, which died out as suddenly as he saw the look on Bert Cole’s face.

An awkward silence ensued, and then there was a commotion below, and a dozen new arrivals forced their way inside.

“Look here,” Linn Marshall burst out, “everybody in the country seems to be coming here, but I want to know where my sister is.”

“I’m coming just as fast as I can,” came a clear, feminine voice.

“Lucy! You—here, too!”

“Tom Chill told me what was up to-night as soon as we got away from the Leach ranch,” the girl explained, when she had freed herself from her brother’s embrace. “So we hurried on to Bicknell and got these men and three cars. But we seem to be late.”

“It doesn’t matter as long as I’ve got you back,” her brother said brokenly.

Lucy came straight to Bert Cole. “Will you forgive me, Bert, for doubting you?” she asked humbly. “Tom has told me everything, and I understand now that you were our friend all the time.”

“Don’t hang back, Bert,” Tom Chill spoke up. “I’ve been a dang’ coward, but I’m through now. I ain’t held nothin’ back. I’ve told her how they tried to frame that cattle stealin’ on you, an’ how they planned to kill you an’ yore brothers so that the kidnappin’ of Lucy here could be blamed on yuh, an’ how yuh was forced to kill Bummer Kelly that day.”

Lucy was standing meekly before Bert, and yet there was a challenging look in her eyes.

“I said once that if I ever got cleared of this mess that I’d ask you to marry me, even if I wasn’t nothin’ but an ignorant cowpuncher,” he whispered into her ear alone. “I’m clear, it looks like; so I’m askin’ yuh?”

“Bert, you can’t propose to me here before all these men,” the girl said with a blush. “But when you do ask me, I’m going to say yes.”

“Boss man—him dead,” Pike spoke up impassively from the cupola stairs.

“And you are now the owner here,” Judge Giles told Bert.

“What?” Lucy demanded.

“By the terms of Enoch Cole’s will Bert Cole becomes the sole heir to his property,” the lawyer repeated. “Incidentally”—he turned to Linn Marshall—“there is a bag kicking around here with considerable money in it that belongs to you.”

“If—if—I have anything to do with it,” Bert said hurriedly, feeling that it was hardly a time to talk business, and yet a matter which could not be neglected, “Mr. Marshall’s option will stand. He was forced to release it by unfair means.”

“I’ve been a fool, but I won’t be a hog,” Marshall said quickly. “I’ll cash the cheque for the amount I paid for that option, but I won’t take the cash.”

“But you must,” Bert insisted.

Lucy pressed his hand. “Don’t argue,” she said. “He’s too stubborn to do anything with. But he’s a good fellow, and a good business man, and we may need his help or advice one of these days, and you can pay him for it.”

Lucy’s use of the intimate pronoun gave Bert the thrill of his life. His arm went about her waist with a proprietary gesture, and he looked Linn Marshall steadily in the eye. This was the time for Marshall to declare himself.

“Well, I didn’t expect to lose my kid sister as soon as I got her back again, but I’m game,” Linn declared.

Bert knew that he would never have trouble with his future brother-in-law.

He turned to his brother Dave. “I want you to go an’ bring mother down here,” he said. “An’ tell dad to sell that place up there as quick as he can, an’ for what he can git. We’ll take care of him, but from here on there’ll be no King Creek Coles.”

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[The end of *The Boss of the Double E* by Frank Chester Robertson]