The Desert's Price

By William MacLeod Raine

CHAPTER XIV—Continued

—17—

"Fellow got me—while I was comin' down the canyon," Phil whispered. "We fixed it, Wils an' I did—that I was to come for help if he got caught. He was at the other end of the park lookin' up brands when I heard the shootin'. I lit out. Get help to him quick."

The message given, Phil fainted.

By the bedside of the wounded boy they held a hurried council. Doctor Sanders had to be brought and a posse to be raised. But it was essential that help be got to Wilson McCann without delay. Many valuable hours would be lost before Dominick Rafferty could be reached to guide an armed party into the hills.

"If I only knew the way," Stone lamented. "But I'd never find the place."

Instantly Julia caught his meaning. "You'd go alone—if you could?" she cried. "Then I'll take you. I've been there."

She had flashed from despair to sparkling life. Her tortured soul craved the chance to do something for the man she loved beleaguered in the hills.

"You wouldn't be afraid to go with me?"

"No."

"Then we'll start right now."

To make sure, Stone questioned Phil as to the exact location of the hidden valley in relation to Guadaloup canyon. For there was a chance that Julia's memory might fail at the critical moment.

Ann started for the Circle Cross and Doctor Sanders at the same time Julia and Stone took the trail in the opposite direction. It had been Phil's own request that Ethel stay with him as nurse until the doctor came.

The parting between Ann and her Texan was not dramatic.

"You'll be careful, won't you?" she asked.

His brown hand met hers in a strong grip. "I sure will."

"I'll look after him," Julia promised.

"And we'll take care of Phil," Ann said. "Good luck."

Driven by her fears, Julia would have set too fast a pace if Stone had not moderated it.

"What do you think? Will we get there in time?" she asked.

"That's a question I can't answer, Miss Julia. I'll say this: Wils McCann is a sure enough fightin' buckaroo. If they didn't get him at the first jump he's liable to stand 'em off quite a while. You never can tell."

"If he only hadn't gone—if he'd waited and taken a posse," she cried.

"I'll say 'Amen!' to that," he agreed. "But don't you worry. We're liable to find him kickin' real lively. Wils is six-foot of wildcat an' he'll take a lot of killing. If he's had half a chance for a getaway I'll put my money on him. He's a better man than Carl Gitner any day of the week."

It was two hours past noon when they reached Guadaloup canyon.

"Not far now," the Texan told Julia cheerfully, glancing at the sun. "We'd ought to be there before dark."

"What's your plan?" she asked.

"Haven't any. We'll have to go up the gulch. If we get in we'll see what develops."

"I was thinking that maybe I could ride on and ask to see Mr. Gitner. If he knew a posse was on the way he wouldn't dare to do anything." With a question she voiced another thought in her mind, quaveringly: "Do you think Jas is with him?"

"Now, don't you worry about that either. We don't know a thing about it. Like as not he isn't."

"I thought if I could get to talk with Jas—"

"We'll see how that works out. I don't reckon you'll get a chance. This is mighty serious business. It wouldn't surprise me if the rustlers had lit out for Mexico. Now they've been located they won't stick around long, for they know they'd be smoked out soon as a posse can get to 'em."

The directions given by Phil, together with Julia's recollection of the country, guided them straight to the gulch up which the trail to Dunwig's ranch led. They fell into single file. Julia thought she ought to go first because she was a woman and would not be attacked, but the Texan absolutely refused to consider such an arrangement.

"You're goin' up into the park only because I'm scared to leave you alone down here," he told her with a smile. "Do you reckon I can hide behind you an' hold my haid up afterward?"

They traveled the whole length of the gulch unchallenged, passed through the narrow exit, and entered the grassy valley beyond.

"Looks like the birds have flown," Stone suggested after a long look around.

Even as he spoke there came the sound of a shot, and after it a rattling volley of them.

Julia, much excited, pointed to a small puff of smoke in the upper end of the park. "Look! Look!" she cried.

"You wait here," Stone ordered as he gave his horse the spur and galloped forward.

After a moment of indecision the girl followed.

CHAPTER XV

Homeward Bound

Wilson McCann knew that with the coming of dawn the storm would break upon him. The escape of Phil would drive the rustlers across the border. But there was no immediate haste. They would have thirty-six hours probably before a posse could arrive, and meanwhile they would take pains to destroy the man who had spoiled their plans.

It was not possible to find an ideal location for defense, but he chose a sand pit surrounded by boulders. Without a fire the night was chill. There were pinon knots near he could have lit, but he did not intend to start a smoke signal for his enemies.

The hours wore away slowly. He catnapped a little, but he dared not let himself get sound asleep for fear they might creep on him in the darkness.

Gray light sifted into the sky. A meadow lark piped up its gay chirrupy challenge. The jig-saw top of a white range showed above the opposite cliff. An agitated patch of greasewood brought him to a focussed attention until a coyote trotted out from its cover and ambled away on a search for breakfast.

Dawn was at hand. He ate a sandwich and drank from the canteen he had replenished at a spring.

"Soon now," he told himself.

He saw signs of life about the house. Smoke rose from the chimney. A man came out and went to the spring for water. Through his field glasses he presently saw others emerge. All carried rifles. They trooped to the corral, saddled horses, and rode cautiously into the pine grove. Evidently they wanted to make sure he was not hidden there. After a consultation they rode down the hillside and disappeared into a dip of the valley floor.

They came out of the shadowy dawn like wraiths of evil, not boldly riding grouped together but slinking, coyote fashion, through the mesquite that fringed the park walls. He counted them—one, two, three, four.

He watched them dismount and take their horses back of a clump of small pines. One by one they came out and

The Net Was Tightening. Wilson Knew the Enemy Was Drawing Closer.

disappeared into the chaparral. They had guessed he was in the boulder field and were creeping forward on a still hunt to find exactly where.

The net was tightening. Wilson knew the enemy was drawing closer. Once or twice he observed a slight rustling of greasewood or manzanita. But those stalking him kept well hidden.

Cool though he was, his pulses pounded. Inured to danger from early youth, he knew he had never been in as tight a place as this. The meadow lark flung out again its gay love song. He wondered if he would be alive tomorrow to hear that rising lilt and cadence.

The ping of a bullet whistled past. He ducked instinctively. From a clump of bushes three hundred yards away a puff of smoke thinned into the clear air. He watched that brush screen, but not steadily, since his glance had to sweep the whole field of vision in front and discover any suspicious object or any slightest unusual motion of vegetation.

Those surrounding him were all old-timers except Jasper Stark, and he had been brought up on the frontier. Wilson understood what that implied. They would take no unnecessary chances, would make use of their knowledge of the terrain to get him at a disadvantage if possible. The business of exterminating him might take many hours, but they were prepared to attend to it efficiently without undue loss. He held a strong defensive position in the sand pit flanked by boulders. That there would be no attempt to rush him out of it by a frontal attack in the open he was convinced.

The development of the day's campaign proved his conclusion a correct one. After the first shot there was no other for at least an hour. It was quite likely that the man who had located his position was communicating with the rest.

Waiting was a nerve-racking strain. The silence was ominous, yet every little rustling of twigs suggested that a foe might be lurking in the bushes there. His alert gaze continuously swept the landscape. Every bush of greasewood, every clump of mesquite fell under his keen observation.

A spurt of sand flew up beside him. He caught sight for a moment of a face peering over the edge of a rock and flung back instantly a bullet in answer to the one intended for him. The face was withdrawn.

From the right a shot sounded, and another from the left. They were fired from invisible rifles by invisible foes. Wilson shifted his position a few yards to get out of sight behind two flat-faced boulders.

The sun climbed higher. By noon the attackers had worked Wilson out of the sand pit and driven him from rock to rock. He had fired perhaps eight or nine times usually without actually seeing the persons at whom he shot. So far as he knew none of his bullets had scored a hit. His enemies were not taking chances. Their intention evidently was to force him from the cover of the rocks and pick him off as he dodged for the chaparral. The plan was one very likely to succeed, McCann judged.

By mid-afternoon it came on to rain mistily. He had reached the edge of the boulder field and within a few minutes must have been dislodged from his last stand in it. The rain gave him a respite.

He slipped deeper in to the rock field, moving warily so as not to be caught unprepared. What the outlaws would do under the circumstances was uncertain, but he guessed they would follow him to the open expecting him to make a run for his life across the valley.

Not fifty feet from him, on the other side of a ledge of rock, a revolver boomed. He crouched, every sense keyed up, nerves taut.

A moan came to him, followed by a cruel laugh.

"You've got yores, Jas Stark," he heard a remembered voice say. "Thought you'd fix it for yoreself by givin' us away, didn't you? I'll learn you to try to play traitor with Carl Gitner."

Swiftly Wilson clambered up the rock ledge and looked over. The big Texan was standing straddled over the man he had just shot down and was sneering at him.

"You always was a white-livered coyote, Jas, an' you got what was comin' to you. When they find yore body, if they ever do, they'll think Wils McCann bumped you off. I'm figurin' on gettin' him too muy pronto."

From his place on the shelf above Wilson spoke in a low hard voice. "Then get busy, you murderer, an' come a-shootin'."

Gitner looked up, snarling. The eyes of the two met in deadly combat for a fraction of a second before the revolvers began to roar.

Of the number of shots fired Wilson lost count. In the smoke he saw the face of the Texan, distorted with rage and pain, sinking down to the ground. He kept on throwing bullets at the man till his revolver was empty, for the outlaw had not stopped firing.

Wilson reached for the rifle he had laid beside him. But there was no need to use it. Gitner had fallen across the body of the man he had shot. He lay, limp and lax, arms outstretched, no sign of life in him. Cautiously McCann descended, never lifting his eyes from the prone body after one swift glance round to make sure none of the other rustlers were in sight.

Gitner was dead. Not a flicker of life remained in him, not a muscle still twitched. Wilson dragged the body from where it lay on that of Jasper Stark.

The eyes of the wounded man fastened on those of McCann.

"He shot me from behind while I wasn't expectin' it," he explained feebly. "I'm dyin' fast."

Wilson lifted his head and offered him a drink from the canteen, but Jas-

He Understood the Shudder That Went Through Her Slender Body.

per rejected the water with a weak gesture of the hand.

"No use. I'm done for," he said. "Listen. I've been a bad lot. Seems like I never got a square deal. Anyhow, I went bad. But tell Jule I'm no rustler. Gitner brought me here an' I couldn't get away somehow. The cards was stacked so I had to take a hand."

"I'll tell her."

"Tell her . . . Gitner shot Dad an' you that day. . . . Nobody knew it, but the old man fired Carl that mornin' . . . Claimed he'd been a bad influence over me. I was with Carl when he shot Dad, but was scared to tell . . . an' Dad hadn't treated me white."

A shout at the edge of the boulder field brought Wilson to attention. He answered the call, for he recognized the voice of Stone. Presently the Texan stood beside them looking down at the dying man.

"You shoot him?" he asked.

"No. Gitner did it, from behind."

Jasper confirmed this.

The sound of light footsteps brought Wilson round, gun in hand. Cautiously he circled a big boulder, and stood face to face with Julia.

"Thank God," she cried at sight of him, and her voice broke in a wail of gladness. "I was afraid. I thought maybe—"

Her hands went out to him in a little gesture of weak reaction from the strain, and somehow they were in each other's arms.

For a moment Julia rested, trying to control her sobs. After the long strain she felt a touch of hysteria. She had been afraid, desperately afraid, that she would find him stark and lifeless; and behold! he was warm and strong, ready to love and to be loved.

Her grip tightened round him convulsively. "I saw them, as I came across the valley—three of 'em—riding hard for the canyon. I thought they had—I thought—"

He understood the shudder that went through her slender body. A swift leap of joy throbbed his pulses. This dear girl cared for him. Down through all the ages her sweet brave soul had come to meet and mate with his. This was his first instinctive reaction; the next was that she must be prepared for the tragedy awaiting her.

Gravely he looked into her eyes. "I have bad news. You must have courage."

Her mind flashed to the truth. "Jasper!"

"Yes. He's been badly hurt."

"Not you." It broke from her in a cry of horror.

"Thank God, no. Gitner shot him treacherously."

"Where is he?"

"Come," he said, and he led her to the spot where her brother lay.

She went down on her knees, with a wailing sob, beside him. He was sinking fast, but he recognized her.

"Jule," he said faintly. "Gitner. . . got me . . . from behind . . . I . . . had it comin'."

The girl looked up quickly at Stone. "Can't you do anything for him?" she begged.

The Texan shook his head, but it was Jasper who spoke.

"No use . . . I'm going fast . . . He shot Dad, too, Gitner did."

The girl's arm pillowed his head tenderly. She forgot he was a ne'er-do-well and worse, that he had been discredited and disgraced. All she remembered was that he was her brother, the little boy with whom she had played and quarreled and made up, one around whom a hundred dear memories twined.

"I've been a . . . bad lot," he murmured. "If you'd—pray for me, sis."

She did, brokenly, with a heart from which welled love and tears.

Within the hour, peacefully, he passed away.

The two men were grateful to him. He had not told the whole truth. If he had been guilty of complicity in his father's death Julia would never know it now. She could not wear her heart out in bitter shame, since both of those who knew the facts were lying here dead. Her grief could be clean sorrow.

They carried the body of Jasper to the cabin and laid it on one of the bunks.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, while Julia lay sound asleep, worn out by her exertions and her sorrow, Dominick Rafferty and his posse reached Horse Thief park. Not till morning did she know that they had come.

While she was asleep their plans had been made. They would bury Gitner on the edge of the rock field and bring Jasper's body back to the Circle Cross. Meanwhile Stone and McCann would ride with her to the sheep ranch.

To her anxious inquiries Dominick reported Phil doing well.

After breakfast the three started homeward.

In Julia's grief there was an element of relief that at moments distressed her. For months she had been oppressed by fears and doubt and shame. These were gone. The end had come, and it was not so bad as she had dreaded. Wilson McCann had explained to her that her brother was not a rustler but had been brought there by Gitner and killed because he knew too much. She was anxious to believe this, to believe that he had been weak and not wicked. The conviction that he would have gone from bad to worse she pushed from her and refused to consider, but it was this feeling that made the loss of Jasper bearable. In the hour of his death at any rate he had come near to her and clung to the comfort she had to offer.

They rode through the golden dawn, for the most part in silence, below them lilac lakes of light in the shadowy hollows of the hills. Julia, riding knee to knee beside her lover, felt him very close to her. Words were not necessary to tell her with what a tender care his sympathy enfolded her. She knew that the barriers built between them had been swept away as though they had never existed.

Out of the fierce and ruthless desert he had come to her, bringing its strength and endurance, the deep-hidden tenderness and the imagination that transforms it from a devouring and rapacious Sahara to a fairyland of magic light and shadow.

She knew he would not speak to her yet while her grief was green. Today was to be for her dead brother. All the years to come were to be for him and her. Not even the eyes that met hers would tell the story that filled his heart, not until he felt the time had come.

Julia loved him for it, for the strength that held repressed the emotion of this straight-backed brown-faced rider of the plains.

Once only she yielded to the feeling that surged up in her. It was when they came to an opening in the hills and looked down on the Painted desert set in its rose and golden envelope of air.

"The morning of the world," she whispered.

He looked at his Eve, for one vivid moment the mask off. Their eyes fastened, plunged to the bottom of each other's heart.

"Of our world," she added, and in her dusky eyes was reflected the glow of the newborn day, warm, vital, sparkling with hope.

Wilson McCann drew a deep breath of joy. Never in all his hard years had he known a soul so radiant, so noble in its generous gift of living, as hers. She was to be his mate. She would bring to him all the warmth and color of her shining glory. The beauty of life flooded his being to the point of ecstatic pain.

His brown hand went out to hers in a strong grip.

"Yes, of our world," he murmured

[THE END.]

Political Party Symbols

The original use of the mule to signify the Democratic pary, and of the elephant for the Republican party is said to have been in a cartoon by Thomas Nast which appeared in Harper's Weekly of January 15, 1870. This cartoon showed the animals identified with the various political parties of the time escaping from a zoo.