



FLAME OF THE BORDER

By VINGIE E. ROE....

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W.N.V. SERVICE

THE STORY

CHAPTER I—Seeking death by throwing herself from the summit of Lone Mesa, to escape dishonor, at the hands of a drunken desperado, Sonya Savarin allows herself to be rescued by her suddenly sobered and repentant attacker. The girl is a self-appointed physician to the Navajo Indians, living on an Arizona sheep ranch with her brother Serge, his wife, Lila, and their small daughter, Baba. For a year she has been engaged to Rodney Blake, wealthy New Yorker, but her heart is with the friendly Navajos and she evades a wedding.

CHAPTER II—Sonya pulls Little Moon, wife of Two Fingers, a Navajo, through the crisis of an illness. Two Fingers is deeply grateful.

CHAPTER III

A Man Leaves and Another Speaks.

The little town, close on the border of the Reservation, was typical of all desert towns, lonely and bleak and washed continually with wind and sand. It held a store or two, a blacksmith shop, a tiny station on the railroad line, and the customary tanks of water. Sonya parked the car in front of the general store, and taking her handbag from the seat beside her, climbed out and entered. The store boasted two clerks besides the owner. This owner was a bland fat man by the name of Parks, a man whom Sonya disliked instinctively, but who never allowed anyone except himself to wait on her.

"Why, Miss Savarin!" he said unctuously, "what can we do for you? Like some nice fresh fruit? Got in some right good oranges and grapefruit this week."

Sonya spent some time in the store, buying a fair supply of the oranges, thinking of Little Moon, and of more staple things for Lila.

As she walked briskly about selecting this and that, there was the stir of arrival at the high board porch outside. Three men were coming in, and Sonya looked up from her work casually, as one does in such circumstances. Instantly she felt the annoying prickle of her skin, the odd anger that had seared her before, for one of the newcomers was the tall bronze man of Lone Mesa. The two with him were dark and rough men, of secret eyes and narrow lips, in appearance the worst of the Border types which Sonya knew, and she prided herself that she had seen them all in this man's country. Bad bombs, she told herself, after that first swift glance, fit companions to that drunken libertine who had dragged her from her horse on the top of Lone Mesa.

She strode forward, head up, eyes straight, and had to pass within five feet of the three men who had entered. As she did so she was conscious of the eyes, under the tilted hat-brim, on her face. It was as if a strong magnetic current pulled her in passing, as if some inarticulate power focused all its strength upon her that she might look aside. So strong and compelling was this that to save her life she could not help the flicker of her eyelids, the almost unbearable desire to turn and look. But she did not turn. Angry to her boot heels, both with her outraged memory and with herself, she walked to the door and out. So stirred was she within herself that she sat slumped in her seat, her hands thrust in her sweater pockets, and did not turn even when she heard Parks, or who she thought was Parks, come out across the porch with her box of supplies.

"Put them in back," she said, nodding over her shoulder, "and thanks."

As she reached for the gearshift she stopped in the act, arrested by a voice that was not Parks'. "Miss Savarin," it said, "can I speak to you a minute?"

Sonya straightened up and looked at the owner of the voice. Straight in the eyes she looked him, her mouth shut hard again.

And at that straight look she saw again the wild blue eyes under the level bronze brows that had stared down in her face as she hung to the dead root of the pinon stump on the windswept face of Lone Mesa.

But they were vastly changed. The black pupils that had spread so wildly over the blue of the iris that day were normal now, the expression anxious.

"Well?" she said thinly. "Why should you talk to me?"

"Why—why, just because it seems I must. I want to—to tell you—to ask you if— Can you believe me when I tell you that I've never had a minute's peace since that day on the Mesa? I've never forgotten your face—or your hands—or the wind blowing your hair up around your head when you hung—there. I'm a bad lot, Miss Savarin, and not fit to speak to you or look at you, but no matter what I am I've got to tell you this—that there's enough white man in me to make me live in hell because of what I did—or tried to do—to you. I'm on my knees to you. Not asking your forgiveness—that couldn't be—but just down in the dirt and wanting you to know it. That's all. Thanks for listening."

He took off his hat and turned sharply on his heel, and as Sonya threw in the clutch and roared away she was conscious of the two dark strangers and Parks in the shadow of the doorway intently watching them both.

So he was in hell, was he? In the dirt, was he? Well, that was where he deserved to be, rotter that he was!

A tall man. Lean and built with unusual grace. Narrow hiped, broad shouldered, straight in the back. He wore a blue flannel shirt with pearl buttons and a dark hat, and there were belled spurs on his stitched boots. Cowboy stuff, yet she did not know of any cattle ranch in this wide sheep country where he might work.

Where did he come from? What was he doing in this part of the country? Why had he come round the curve of Two Fingers' hogan that day—on foot? She'd ask Two Fingers about that matter.

"Well," said Serge at supper, "it seems lonely without Rod. Good old scout. You're a lucky girl, Sonya."

"Am I?" said Sonya. "Sometimes I wonder."

"What? About Rod Blake? No finer man in this world! He's still young, and one of the best lawyers in New York; rich, partly by his own efforts, partly by family inheritance, of good blood and impeccable principles. I'm surprised at you."

"Yes. Well, maybe," said the girl. Lila looked at her across the table for a long moment with a strange expression in her eyes but said nothing. Later, as the two women washed the dishes and set the house to rights for the night, she looked at her again.

"Sonya, darling," she said calmly, "Rod Blake is not the man. I don't believe you love Rod, honestly, deep down, as a woman should love the man she marries. I haven't thought so for a long time, for nearly all

of this last visit of his."

A flame of loyalty flared up in Sonya.

"Piffle!" she said hotly. "Of course I love him, the old dear. Go on, put Baba to bed, and don't worry that yellow head of yours. By this time next year I'll be Mrs. Rodney Blake, riding around New York in a limousine—and you'll be darned lonesome out here without me."

"And how!" said Lila inelegantly but fervently. "I don't want to think about it."

"Then don't. There's a long time and a lot of things between."

How long and how many, measured by their importance, Sonya herself could not foresee.

The next day she rode over to Chee wash again and found Little Moon so much better that she was sitting up. And she found one of her enemies. This was Yellow Buck, a medicine man, who regarded her services to his people as a direct inroad on his territory and hated her accordingly. She was trying to replace his medicine and devil-chasing with the medicine in her saddlebags. She was all bad.

"Two Fingers," said Sonya when she was ready to leave that day, "who was that man who came here on foot the day my man came after me? Tall man with sun hair, sky eyes?"

Two Fingers shook his head. "No can say," he said. "Come here for other horse. His horse go bad."



"No Can Say," He Said. "Come Here for Other Horse."

Lila, I give him horse, go get next day. In corral now. Good horse. No see so good horse, ever. Come see."

Sonya swung up on Darkness and followed him around the hogan and up a little rise to where several brush-and-stick corrals stood among some low trees. There, in one of them, stood such a horse as she had not seen ever, either. Taller than Darkness, who was a fine specimen of native animal which the Indians called American horse, bright as new gold and of its color, though paler, this beauty was built with a grace and beauty that transcended description.

"My heavens!" said Sonya wonderingly. "My heavens! You're right, Two Fingers. No see so good horse ever. And this is not the one—"

She had almost said, "he rode on Lone Mesa," but checked herself.

"Well," she said instead, "I must be going. Long ride home. You take good care of Little Moon. I'll be back in three days."

So she jogged down Chee wash, her hat down over her eyes, smiling a little just in the joy of living and the beauty of the desert.

There was no one sick about, now that Little Moon was getting well, and she would do some of the things she wanted to do for herself for a long time. For one, she would go over and spend a couple of days with her friend Myra Little, on the Black Sheep ranch. She hadn't seen her for three months, and she was very fond of her.

She started early to avoid as much of the day's heat as possible, and made the long hard ride in good time, trotting into Myra's door yard

just as she was putting dinner on the table.

Myra, a tall, gaunt woman, deserted bitten of face and form but down fair inside her soul, was at her stirrup before she could dismount.

"My soul alive!" she cried catching the girl's hand, "now just isn't this a treat! Ah, Sonya, how glad I am to see you!"

She put her arm around the girl's waist and the two women entered the wide low ranch house where the savory smell of baked mutton and potatoes scented the warm air.

Potatoes scented around at the cool, deep room, so plain, so comfortable, where this courageous and intrepid Myra lived her hard working life. The meal steaming on the table was plain but good; hot bread, the mutton and potatoes, onions sliced in vinegar, and a can of fruit opened in her honor. Myra owned and ran the Black Sheep ranch.

"Oh, Sonya," said Myra happily. "I just can't tell you how good it is to see you! It's been a long time since we had a talk, and I'm just goin' to lay off the whole afternoon for the matter. Come on, Sonya, let's go an' rest."

Sonya followed her into the darkened room beyond, which served as the best room of the house. On its walls were astonishing paintings of the desert land in oils; rich, true, glowing canvases that would have drawn their crowds in any gallery of the world. These were Myra Little's romance, her unsatisfying draught of beauty, her outlet for that inner fineness which found so little chance in the stark service of the sheep.

Always they struck Sonya anew with their austere magnitude, and always as now she stood before them marvelling.

"It's a shame, Myra," she said now, shaking her head, "that these pictures can't be hung in New York. Maybe some day when I'm there I'll see about the matter."

"You goin' there, Sonya? Takin' a trip?" asked Myra quickly.

"No," said Sonya, "and yes. No trip. Going to stay, I guess."

"What?" The word came quick and sharp. Sonya moved uneasily, nodded. "I think so," she said, turning to look at Myra gravely. "When a woman is engaged to marry a man, she goes where he lives, doesn't she?"

"Why, I didn't know—"

"No, it isn't public property, but I am, Rodney Blake, an old college friend of Serge's. Fine man."

Myra stood silent, searching Sonya's face with her clear gray eyes.

"Why, Sonya," she said presently, "how will we all ever do without you? And yet that's only selfishness. It will be fine for you. You've lived so fast and deeply in this desert that it's only right you go back where you belong, get the rest an' life that's comin' to you. You deserve it."

"Well—maybe. But now let's sit down and visit. We haven't had a real talk-fer for months and months."

Sonya heard that the Brights still farther over east had a pair of twins, and that Sam Savina, notorious border thief, had been found just across the Rio Grande crucified, a grim Mexican warning to his kind.

Also that the Servant of the Lord was creeping in to the Black Sheep that very night on one of his constant journeys. The two bits of news seemed to suggest each other, the crucifixion and the gentle, half-mad old man who rode the desert country year in, year out, in the effort to save souls. Sonya had seen him a time or two before.

In her turn she told Myra of the sickness of Little Moon, of Mr. Ratter and the children he had gathered in from Blue Hand-wash, and finally of the man of Lone Mesa and what had happened that day on the wind-swept top of the table land.

"My heavens!" said Myra breathlessly as she visioned the girl hanging on the face of the precipice, "why did you take that jump?"

Sonya flushed.

"Why? Do you think I'd care to live after—after being the plaything of a drunken renegade? I?"

"What did he look like?" asked Myra curiously. "Was he a cowboy?"

Sonya considered.

"Well, he was dressed like one, yet I wondered what outfit he could work for, since we're all sheep over there, you know. And he was good to look at. Tall and slim build, with the strangest long blue eyes I ever saw. Odd eyes that could change in a second. They were fierce at first, like a hawk's, restless and selfish. They made me furious just to look at them. And then, when he saw I was in real earnest about—about—this thing—they turned perfectly terrible with anxiety, like a man's who sees a child dying and can't help, if you see what I mean. Well, anyway, it's ancient history, and I hope I never lay eyes on him again, the good-for-nothing. And now tell me about yourself. How's the ranch goin'?"

It was twilight when they came out into the ranch yard, and some one was coming into the round stockade corral where the big tanks shimmered with sweet waters from the well under the windmill. This was a strange creature if ever there was one, that sat leaning on his little gray burro, ready on a moment and having a third ahead of him—a thin, stooped figure in rusty black garments that bore about them something of the dignity of chance and serenity. A wide-brimmed black hat sat squarely on the head of long white hair that fell in dusty ringlets to his shoulders. The tired burro drank as if finished, and the master stepped off the one he rode, standing patiently beside it while it sated its thirst.

Myra laid down her pan and went toward this new man, her hand extended.

"Hello, sir," she said. "Very glad to see you. There's plenty of feed in th' barns yonder. Put y' your stock an' come on in. I'll soon be ready."

"Good day, my daughter," said the old man, shaking hands with her. "I'm glad to be here, too. The road is long sometimes. I've come from Juniper Tank today."

"Whew!" whistled Myra. "That's a long trail, an' a hard one, especially for burros."

"Oh, they do well, my little lowas. They're true servants of the Word, never complaining, always willing. Their reward is small, I'm sure. If I weren't, I'd be happy; they are so patient, so peevish."

He looked at Myra anxiously, his faded old dark eyes.

"None," said the woman bluntly. "sure they'll be rewarded. Just a sure as anything."

The Servant smiled reflectively. "I knew you'd understand, Mr. Little," he said. "Some people don't. They smile when I tell them that. Now I'll go up."

A little later they all sat down to a simple meal, and Sonya studied him with careful glances. She had heard so much about him.

Where he had come from, the country did not know, or where he made his habitat, or if he ever had one. In rain and shine, sun and heat and winter's cold, he rode the lonely stretches on his thin, frail carrying his Bible and his prayer kit. Many a life he had saved in emergency; many a difference he had patched up; many a bit of courage he had put in some faint heart. They called him the Servant of the Lord, shortened to "the Servant," and he had no other name but that for his soutriquet. He was very old, and the rigors of life had bent him to the bone; his sun-baked, wrinkled skin to the color of old leather. But there was a fire in his face, a flame that shined the evil out of men beholding, and he lived as they might live.

(Continued next week)

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