

FLAME OF THE BORDER

By Vingie E. Roe
WNU Service

SYNOPSIS

Seeking death to escape dishonor at the hands of a drunken desperado, Sonya Savarin allows herself to be saved by her 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, Babs. She is engaged to Rodney Blake, wealthy New Yorker, but her heart is with the friendless Navajos and she evades a wedding. Sonya pulls Little Moon, wife of Two Fingers, a Navajo, through the crisis of an illness. Two Fingers is deeply grateful. Sonya again meets the man who had insulted her. He tells her he bitterly regrets his action and has never had a minute's peace since that day. Sonya is affected, but unforgiving. She hears rumors of a Border bandit, "El Capitan Diablo," and vaguely connects him with her attacker. On Lone Mesa, she again comes upon the strange young man, but she no longer fears him.

CHAPTER V

Deep Things Begin to Glimmer. THAT little matter proved almost more than she could stand, however, for the Indian mother, watching the east continually since her previous visit, having taken her advice literally, collapsed at sight of her children, and Sonya had a brisk half hour in bringing her round again.

But all's well that ends well, and the girl finally rode away, leading her extra horse with a smile on her lips and the deep light in her eyes that Rod Blake called fanaticism. Maybe it was, but it made her foolishly happy to see this poor family united again. And Hosteen Nez had looked over his woman's head at her exactly as Two Fingers had and called her Blue South Woman in the Sun. It was all he said, but it was pregnant with deep things, and Sonya knew it so.

So she opened her lips and sang. And then she came to the canyon's mouth and caught her breath sharply, for a man sat there on a golden horse. He looked like a young god with the sunlight on his hair, and his eyes as blue as the heavens, and the grave look on his handsome face.

"Forgive me," he said quickly, "for being in your trail again."

"Why?" she said as quickly. "It is free country."

"Yes, I know. But I promised to stay away."

"That was from Lone Mesa."

"The intent was everywhere. I meant it, too—was goin'—going to keep my word, but I seem to come back regardless."

Sonya sat and looked at him steadily, her sweet face grave, too. He bore her scrutiny quietly, though a muscle twitched in his cheek, and there was a seeming of strain in his face.

"I've thought a lot about you," the girl said presently: "why, I don't just know. I shouldn't, by all the rules of my life's game, but I have. Tell me—if you care to—where have you been since I saw you last? Where do you live?"

He moved in his saddle, laid his hands on his pommel.

"Miss Savarin," he said, "I can't tell you. A lot of places for th' first question—nowhere for th' last one. I told you before, I wasn't fit to talk to. I am a drifter, if you like, just goin' through th' country."

"Oh, no, you're not," said Sonya, "the day you came in the store you were familiar with the place and had been there before. Don't you think I know a few things. Well, we won't talk of that," she added gently, "where are you going now?"

"Why, nowhere. That is—I was just ridin' around for exercise, sort of. Un d'Oro, here, needs a lot of exercise."

He smiled and patted the shining neck at his saddle bow.

"Un d'Oro—Golden One," said Sonya. "What a lovely name. And what a wonderful horse. He's the most beautiful thing I ever saw done up in horsehide. You love him, don't you?"

The man's face lighted as with inner fire.

"Well—some," he said. For a while they sat in silence, at a loss for something to talk about, and then Sonya told him about Cactus Flower and how Mr. Satter had taken her children.

"D—n!" he said flushing. "Excuse me—but some people just ain't human. I'd like to see that agent on—"

He stopped, and Sonya felt her heart contract, for she knew he had almost said "a cross."

What was this man? What was in the soul of him? What strange contradictions? What savageries and contritions, what sympathies and cruelties? What connection did he have with those awful retributions across the Border of which the Servant had hinted? What did the strange old man know about him? The henchman of Beelzebub had called him—for no other in all this country answered to the description of the Blue-eyed One with Bronze-colored Hair. Sonya felt cold, as if a wind of portent had blown across her spirit. And swift on its heels a sadness came, the odd, unaccountable feeling of personal loss and sorrow which had assailed her that night at Myra's.

She shook herself, mentally and actually, and was angry at herself again, and when this man spoke she listened, forgetting.

"I'm a violent man, Miss Savarin," he said strangely, "and my life won't bear th' light—but a thing like that makes my blood boil. There ain't no manner of use hurtin' something that can't fight back, and a woman an' a child—well, they're set aside, someway, like a starvin' kitten, or a dog that no one wants. No kind of a man would do them a harm—not an' be a man."

"You think that—honestly?" said Sonya. "Right from your heart?"

"Why, of course," he said surprised. "Don't you?"

"Yes, oh yes, a woman feels like that, but men are different. I just wondered."

"Have you been back to Lone Mesa?" he asked presently.

"No," said Sonya, "I haven't. I've been pretty busy. Housecleaning and sewing. Have you?"

"Twicet. At night. Watched th' moon come up across th' desert, and it was wonderful. A man can't describe it—like new life comin' to a dead world."

"I know," said Sonya, "I've seen it from there myself."

"Alone? My G—d, Miss Savarin, you shouldn't be goin' around this country by yourself like that!"

"Why not? I'm perfectly safe. Everyone knows me and there isn't a Navajo, drunk or otherwise, who'd say a word to me."

"Not th' Navys, no, ma'am," he said painfully, "but they ain't all there are, you know."

How well she knew! But she was sorry the inference had been drawn.

"As for being drunk—will you believe me when I say I haven't touched a glass or a bottle since—since that day—on th' cliff? Every time I've tried, your face has come before me plain as plain—the white fury of it, the courage—G—d! I choke an' quit tryin'."

He was looking at her earnestly, and Sonya did not question a word he said. Instead she smiled, and the coldness left her heart in a racing flood.

"I'm glad," she said. "Didn't I tell you it was never too late to look up? Didn't I?"

"Sure you did, but that don't

mean anything in this case, I'm just telling you that your face stopped my liquor."

"It'll stop a lot of things for you," the girl said in a rush and was astonished at herself.

"What—do you mean?" he said slowly.

"I—oh, I don't know!" said Sonya, trembling. "only I know you've got to stop—stop that Border stuff. That you've got to change—the leopard spots."

"You," he said, wetting his lips, which had suddenly lost their color, "you—want me to—do that?"

"Yes," said Sonya thickly. "yes."

"Then, by G—d!" he said through his teeth, "I'll—"

What he meant to say was not apparent, for at that moment they both heard what they had been too tensely strung to hear before—the roar of a motor in the sky. A small gray ship slipped down directly over their heads and dropped to a landing on the desert out beyond. The man took one look, and reaching out an arm, he pushed Sonya and Darkness back into the canyon's mouth, Un d'Oro shielding them both. The touch of his breast against her shoulder, the scent of him, tobacco and sweat, the nearness of his bronze cheek, sent a wave of weakness over the girl.

"Get back!" he rasped, "for th' love of heaven! Go in deep, please, an' don't come out till it's gone."

Then he had struck his heels to



Three Times the Transference of Something From the Plane to Un d'Oro's Saddle Took Place.

Un d'Oro's shining flanks and was out like a flash across the sand.

For a moment Sonya sat where he had left her, shaking as with a chill, bewildered and a little scared.

What was this? What had driven the blood from his face?

And why did he go straight to the plane if he was frightened?

Here was the answer to some of her questions, that she knew instinctively. If only she could go out there herself! She could not even see from where Darkness stood, so prompt and so efficient had been his action. But she must see. Sonya's lips set, as they did when she faced a crisis for her skill, and she dismounted and, dropping Darkness' rein, went forward carefully the few steps that separated her from the sheer edge of the canyon's mouth. Taking off her hat, she carefully leaned along the rock until her line of vision reached the open and the plane. And what she saw bewildered her more than she had been before. The Blue-eyed one was off Un d'Oro, and one man was on the ground beside him, while another was bent down in the after cockpit. This one rose, as she looked, and gave something to the other, who in turn handed it to the rider.

And as, with care and swiftness, put it in his saddlebags,

Three times the transference of something from the plane to Un d'Oro's saddle took place. Then the stranger climbed back in the forward cockpit, the plane, which had never stopped its engine, roared a moment, slid along the sand a little way, picked up its tail and took off. And Un d'Oro was loping away, headed for the town.

After a long while Sonya climbed back on Darkness and went soberly home. She had much to think about and was doing it with a vengeance.

For one thing, why had the feel of this man's arm across her breast, the nearness of his face, shot through her so strange fire?

Once before his arm had been about her, dragging her from Darkness' back, his face had been close to hers, and she had been filled with such unbearable rage and hate that she could have killed him on the spot.

What was the matter with her? Where was her character, her principles, her condemnation of wrong?

For that he was wrong—all wrong entirely—she had not the slightest doubt. Why did he meet a sky ship here on this lonely desert? Why was he afraid for her to be seen by its occupants? What strange freight had he taken from it and put so carefully in his saddlebags?

And why, she asked herself again, should all this weigh down her soul? Gravely, in a sort of cold fear, she searched her inner depths, and what she dimly saw appalled her.

It was his eyes, she told herself, the look of his eyes when he spoke of these things. They were deep eyes, strange eyes, filled with a wild spirit, and under this wildness, this old devil-may-care which had characterized them, was something so desperate, so anxious, that Sonya would have staked her life on its truth.

Frightened to her foundations, the girl straightened in her saddle and lifted Darkness into his stride. She would forget this man, his eyes and his hands and the heady intoxication of the scent of him. She would write to Rod tonight, a long, good letter.

The next day Sonya went to town to mail her letter. She felt very virtuous and calm. All the strife and unease of the day before had gone from her. She had written dutifully to Rod and told him all the trivial happenings of every day—that is, all but those pertaining to the rider on the golden horse. These were of too small import, she told herself, wouldn't interest him. And besides, he wouldn't understand. At the store Mr. Parks was urbanity itself, bustling about to wait on her, smiling unctuously, rubbing his fat hands together.

"Good morning," she told him politely.

"It's always a good morning, Doctor Sonya," he said richly, "when we see you here. You don't get down too often. You goin' to the dance over to th' Neidlingers next Sat'day night? Bill Pingle from Big Town an' two others is goin' to furnish th' music. Accordion an' two fiddles. Ought to be good. Think you folks'll git over?"

"Why, yes," said Sonya, "I shouldn't wonder if we did. The Neidlingers always have such nice times at their ranch. Nice people."

"Sure are. An' th' more th' merrier, I always say."

In the room behind the store a man stood where the first sound of Sonya's voice had stopped him. The cigarette he had just rolled hung unsealed in his fingers. Until the girl had gone out, until the last sound of her feet on the boards had died away, until the sputter and roar of the old flivver lessened in the distance, he remained so. Then he flung the cigarette into the refuse barrel and went on out the back door.

Sonya Savarin loved the dances of the region.

Although liquid contraband flowed freely, and the cowboys from the upper country sometimes raised the rafters with their noise, there was something elemental and very young about these gatherings of the folk of the lonely land. The sheep men brought their wives and daughters, the whole family, in fact, down to the little ones, who slept in ranks on the wall benches as the night wore on, and everybody danced.

Sonya, in a new dress, her dark face sparkling already, laid her wrap on Lila's shoulder and swung out on the floor in the arms of a perspiring cowboy.

She met these people only at the dances, but she remembered every one and danced with all who asked her, provided they were not too far gone in the common hilarity. If so, she would merely laugh and shake her adorable black head with its shining curls and say gently, "No, Billy, I'm too tired to hold you up. Come around earlier next time"; or, "You're silly, Bob, just plumb silly. I think you're lit."

And young Bob, weaving on his booted feet, would tell her anxiously that he wasn't near drunk, but he knew how she felt about it and didn't blame her a bit, not a shidge bit. Neither did he, nor anyone else whom she refused a dance. It was enough that she was there to look at, the most beautiful woman in all the country, the highest-up, yet the sweetest to everyone that a man could ask for. Everyone knew of her and her work among the lonely. Her little fame was sweet in the land.

So Sonya danced and laughed and listened to the music of the violins, the gay accordion, with her arm on this lean shoulder and that, and was extremely happy. She forgot the sorrows of the world and lived her youth to its full extent. Forgot Rod Blake and New York city and the man of Lone Mesa, all of which had troubled her of late.

Lila was dancing, and so was Serge, and Babs was already dead to the world on a bench in the corner, covered with Lila's cape. The music was waxing more "hot" and furious. And by the door a man came suddenly into her range of vision, a tall man, slim-hipped and graceful. He was in store clothes, and the eternal cigarette hung in his fingers, its spiral of smoke ascending in a tiny stream, but she knew him instantly. As instantly the almost terrible thrill she thought her from head to toe, blurring her eyes a bit, catching her throat with a little pain.

Suddenly the music changed, some one yelled "Paul Jones" and the circling couples broke like the colors in a kaleidoscope. They strung out in a huge oval, all holding hands, and began going to the right in time to the lively tune. A whistle blew, and they broke apart, each man taking the woman immediately facing him at the whistle's blast, and dancing on with her.

Whirled from this pair of arms to that, breaking step, catching it again, snitting her step to each new partner's, the girl felt as if a vein of portent was bearing down upon her. Something was going to happen—something terrible and wonderful—she was afraid and exhilarated as she had never been in her life before—and here he was coming toward her in the line. He danced as she might have known he would, like the wind blowing in hot grass—she could see him sway as he weaved in and out in "almanac" style—and the whistle blew, and he was here, before her. Her hand was in his, his arm had gone about her, they were drifting away together—and all the lights on the walls were running together in a long blur.

Sonya held her breath and let it out in a long sigh, and felt suddenly the trembling of his arms.

Then the whistle blew again, and some one else had caught her hand and she was circling right once more in the long oval.

When the number was over she went dizzily to where Lila sat finishing her flushed cheeks and set down beside her. She wanted to rest, to gather herself together, to still the shameful tumult of her heart.

(TO BE CONTINUED)