

FLAME OF THE BORDER

By Vingie E. Roe

WILLIAMS

SUMMARY

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 Navaho Indians living on an Arizona sheep ranch with her brother Serge and his wife, Lila. She is engaged to Rodney Blake, wealthy New Yorker, but her heart is with the friendless Navahos and she evades a wedding. Sonya pulls Little Moon, wife of Two Fingers, a Navaho, 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. Sonya is affected, but forgiving. 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. When he reiterates his sorrow over his misconduct she indicates forgiveness. Days later, at a dance, he tells her his right name is Starr Stone, but that he goes by a different name in this region. He departs with a tall, fierce Mexican, with whom he is mysteriously associated. Sonya, with a feeling of shame, realizes she is falling in love with an outlaw. An influenza epidemic among the Indians keeps her busy for many days. Stone greatly helps her in her care for the stricken Navahos. Sonya and Stone declare their love for each other.

CHAPTER VIII—Continued

But Sonya smiled. It did not occur to her that anything could be so dark and strong that she and her strength could not conquer it.

"We'll not talk of that just now," she said, "let's ride to the top of Lone Mesa. We owe it something—the mesa."

"I owe it something," he said passionately—"owe it my everlasting apologies, my unending reverence. It was there I saw creation as it was meant to be—in your white face on the cliff."

So they swung south from their trail that day and climbed the ancient path in the stark precipice.

There was the long stretch of the western edge where Darkness had fed full speed, a horse and rider at his flank. Where the wild face of a drunken man had blazed at the woman on his back with every evil passion of the soul. There was the spot where the man had pulled the slim girl from her saddle, where she had fought like a fury in his arms, where, at the last she had pulled free and flung herself, in one wild leap, over the mesa's brink. As they reined up at the great rock's edge they both sat silent, each with unspoken thoughts plain to be read.

"Sonya," said the man at last in a strangled voice, "I have no words—there is nothing I can ever say—nothing I can ever do—to wipe that memory away."

But Sonya turned and hid her hand on his, and there was a soft smile in her eyes.

"There is no need," she said.

"No need! The greatest need I'll ever know! And it can't be filled! I'll have to leave you soon, forever, with that on my conscience, on my heart!"

"Leave me? No, you will not. Not ever, Starr Stone. You are my man—from the beginning."

"The soul in my body—if I have one—will stay with you while life lasts. I hope you know that. But the body itself—is another matter. I think we'll be saying good-by up here. Here where we met in—disaster—and I want you to know, Sonya, that if there is such a thing as redemption of a man's inner self, I have been redeemed by knowing you. All my instincts, all my desires, all my outlook on life itself have changed. The Border and all it has meant to me in my wildness, my death-longing, has lost its charm. I'd leave it—all—everything—for a different life, if I could."

"Oh, Starr," she said tremulously, "can't you tell me? Won't you tell me what it is that threatens you—us?"

"Impossible," he said quietly. "My lips are sealed—for your sake more than mine. What I know would be dangerous knowledge for you. What I have done—being with you, coming back to you again—against orders—has been a danger for you. I know it; but was too weak to go my way, never to see your face again. I could not, in this strange transition which has been taking place in me. But strength has been growing in me of late, like a great tree, standing against the wind. Do you see, Sonya, what you have done for me?" he finished earnestly.

"I know," said Sonya. "I knew from the first, almost, that it would be so. That the good was in you under—under whatever it was that hid it. That some day it would come out, that the evil would fall away, leaving you as you were meant to be."

"You knew? How early? When?"

"The second time I saw you—at Two Fingers' Hogan in Cheesewash. I think I knew it then, dimly, when your face flushed red on seeing me. The good was struggling with the bad that minute."

"You're right. It was, and has never ceased to struggle since."

"And you're not going to go back?" cried Sonya, passionately. "Not going to throw it all away? I will not let you!"

The man sighed, wet his dry lips. Then he leaned toward her and took her against his breast.

"My darling," he said gently, "please kiss me once more."

With a strangled cry Sonya threw her arms around him.

"Why? Why?" she pleaded. "Why will you not stay here and go forward with me into life? Don't you love me?"

"Love you? My God! It's because I love you, adore you, worship you, that I'm taking myself out of your life before it is too late. I don't want to see you—"

"See me what?"

"Nothing. Let's go. Let's go now."

He turned on d'Gros sharply and headed for the down trail, Darkness following close. Sonya sat rigidly in her saddle, her throat swelled painfully with the first realization that her dream of love was done for, that this man whom she had come to love so helplessly was riding out of her life. She could not speak.

At the mesa's foot they set out across the levels which were once more darkening into a starlit night in dreary silence. And before they had said another word, before they could say that last farewell which comforts the heart bereaved, fate was upon them.

Out of the shadows of a clump of juniper four men suddenly rode across their way. And at their head rode that huge figure of a man which had loomed on the dance floor that enchanted night and called Starr Stone as a master calls his dog.

He sat now and looked at him with black eyes burning.

"Eombr," he said again as he had said before, "three times in as many days have I sent for you, and you did not come. This is the reason."

He nodded toward Sonya.

"Yes!" cried the girl like a shot, though her voice shook. "Yes! I—and a better one. I first, and the curing for those who died, second. I am a doctor, and there has been a great sickness among my people, the Indians. This man has stood with me shoulder to shoulder in a fine thing. Together we have saved many lives. That's why he stayed." There was a note of defiance in the trembling voice.

"Oh, so that's why, senorita?"

the stranger said, changing from the Spanish to broken English, "why he disobey's laws (orders)? For you, eh, an' for these dirty Navahos? Well, he goes now, an' don't you forget it! An' remember, Senorita Savarin, that if he comes to you, ever again, that will happen to you an' yours which will be a price. A fair price for these insult to me, in that you keep my best lieutenant from here's work. Adios, senorita. Do not forget!"

He raised his sombrero with a gallant gesture and whittled his horse away. And this time Starr Stone, following, looked long in Sonya's white face with eyes in which all the tragedy of life lay stark and awful. Then he was gone, and only the soft sound of loping horses in sand came back to her.

Until the dim shapes were lost in the night the girl sat still, listening, her mouth open, her hands on her rein cold and nerveless.

That which threatened had struck at last.

And presently she drooped forward with her face in Darkness' mane and fell to such weeping as only a heart cleaved to the quick can know.

When she rode into the patio at home an hour later a man came swiftly from the lighted doorway, his hands reaching up for hers, his



Climbed the Ancient Path in the Stark Precipice.

face glowing with joy.

"Sonya! Dear heart!" he cried, and.

"Rod!" said Sonya before she crumpled and slid limp into his coaching arms.

"She's fainted!" he cried. "Lila—Serge—quick!"

He carried her to the door and in, laying her down on the living room couch, and Lila was at his side in a flash.

"Get me some water," she said.

But Sonya, strong creature that she was, did not need it. Her senses, seeling from grief and fear and the sudden sight of Rodney Blake, who was the last man she wanted to see in her present trouble, dignified themselves swiftly. She moved, opened her eyes, sat up a bit unsteadily.

"Why, what a silly thing!" she said tremulously. "And Rod—how in the world—"

"Steady, dear," said Rod. "I just dropped in—by plane and car—from New York—Williams—got a man to bring me over. It's rather. There's a friend with me. But don't talk now. Lila—Serge—"

"Puff!" said Sonya. "I'm all right. A bit tired, I guess."

"She's been riding day and night for a month," said Lila, looking at Blake. "Epidemic, you know."

"Don't Indians again," the man thought. "They'll kill her yet!"

But Sonya was on her feet, stripping the kerchief from her neck, rolling back her shirt sleeves.

"Um (U. K.)," she said. "I'll just go and clean up a bit."

And she walked steadily to her own room.

Inside its shielding door she clasped her hands together, stood a long moment staring into the darkness. The light of life which she had visioned, of which she had spoken to Starr Stone, was on, and she had lost the first battle—as that black force across the Border.

CHAPTER IX

The Dark Threat Falls.

RODNEY BLAKE had brought a friend with him. A tall, quiet man by the name of Marston. Sonya, herself again to all outward appearances, met him at breakfast. His face arrested her. A keen face, but still as æsthetic as its eyes penetrating everything they met.

She felt uneasy under them, as if they could read the secret of her heart. Rod seemed to know him well.

But she was soon so taken up with her own problem that she had no time to study this stranger who sat and smoked and asked odd questions of Serge: her problem of what and when to tell Rod Blake, how to break her sacred word, to ask him to release her. Rod, who had said that no man, no people, no country should ever take her from him. But Mr. Marston's questions were very strange. Were there any people in the country whom he, Serge, did not know? Any strangers about? Any airplanes flying off the regular line above the new port at Williams?

Rodney Blake smiled and leaned forward, tapping his cigarette ash in his saucer.

"I may as well tell you folks that you're entertaining an angel unawares—or rather, to quote the poetry he's always after, a father one. Mr. Marston is the government's crack man of the secret service, whose rare talents are enlisted only as a last resort. He is here on a mission of his own. I merely accompanied him as an excuse to be here."

He smiled and looked at Sonya.

Marston fingered his cigarette, looking down gravely.

"For months our department in New York has been puzzled by a certain matter, a serious matter in this country, which has been bafflingly mysterious. By our department I mean the Federal narcotics bureau. A steady flow of 'mud,' or pure raw opium, has been coming through, which we could not trace. We have reason to believe it is coming in on the west coast of Mexico—at Mazatlan, to be exact—brought inland and across the Border by fast and private planes, and sent east by train, from somewhere about the middle of the line. I am here—about the middle—to see what I can see. I need not tell you that this knowledge is dangerous for anyone to possess, and that it must be held in the utmost confidence—chiefly because of that one across the Border—El Capitan Diablo, as he is known—who is Mexico's king racketeer. Anyone tampering with El Capitan tampers with death. I should not have told you this if Rod had not spoken as he did. Let me impress again the danger of my mention of this affair to anyone."

Sonya Savarin wet her lips, which had suddenly gone dry, laid down the knife in her trembling hand.

She had her answer at last!

The answer to that night on the dance hall floor—to the little gray slip settling so swiftly on the sand at the canyon's mouth—to Starr Stone's communion of love and all it meant.

The answer to Starr Stone himself.

And that answer was—El Capitan Diablo. El Capitan Diablo who harried the north of Mexico, who aided mines, who leveled taxes on

the poor, and who—crucified his faithful-crossers!

To know too much of El Capitan Diablo and ever leave his service was to die—and one's friends also who might share that knowledge, one's friend's friends, maybe, his suitcases. With dilated eyes, the girl looked round the table, at Serge, at Lila, at little Babo. Lila's face was pale, but Serge was talking eagerly.

"By George!" he was saying, his hat on the table. "There have been strangers here—and I'd stake my hat dollar. Sonya, you remember that chap you danced with at the 'Saddlers' and the funny thing that happened?"

Sonya did not speak, and Serge went on excitedly:

"There was a dance at a neighboring ranch, and my sister was dancing with a stranger when the biggest Mexican I ever saw appeared and dropped a hand on the stranger's shoulder. The man followed him out. I'd forgotten the incident."

"What sort of looking Mexican?"

"Don't know, only that he was monstrously tall and broad."

Marston sat in silence for a little time.

"El Capitan stands six feet three in his boots," he said.

"Then who was the man he took away?"

"If I should make a guess, which I never do," said the other, "I'd say it was Quince—Quintan—Number Fifteen—the wildest white man in Mexico, and El Diablo's oldest lieutenant. I've heard of him. But his master owns him body and soul. They say on the Border that twice El Capitan's 'spread him up,' after his amusing little custom of cracking any and all who incur his anger, only to take him down again. He's too valuable to kill. But some day the butcher will be too mad to think of that. I'd hate to be in Quince's shoes."

Back to her foundations, Sonya Savarin examined herself.

And John Marston looked curiously after her.

The rest of that day was like a nightmare to Sonya.

She had to be about the house, to help Lila with the work, and Rod was everywhere she went, leaning fondly on her shoulder, tipping her face to look into her eyes, whispering of that future which she knew could never be. Misery was her portion through it all. She sorrowed for the blow she must deal him sooner or later, for herself in her fear and her loneliness, and for the disaster she might some day bring on this house. And her code her life a wraith whenever she thought of Starr Stone riding to the border with that prince of butchers, El Capitan Diablo.

"What are you, Sonya?" asked Rodney Blake. "You don't hear half I'm saying. You're obsessed with something. Is it these G-G Indians?"

"If you don't stop that, Rod," she flamed, "I'll not forgive you. I told you once that one's life is his own. I still think so."

"Not a woman's—when she has given her promise," he said calmly. "It then belongs to her man."

"I'm sorry you take that attitude," she said, "my life will never belong to any—"

She did not finish, for the flushing thought that already her life was not her own, that for better or worse it was irrevocably connected with the precarious existence of Starr Stone—Quince of the Border! The time was ripe to tell Rod the truth, yet she did not speak. It seemed that something stronger than herself, some vital caution, held back the words.

"Lila," Sonya told the other woman later. "Use got to get away by myself a while or go crazy. You know—I want to think."

"Well," said Lila unsteadily, "be careful." And she stood on tiptoe to kiss the taller woman.

So Sonya rode away on Darkness, and Rodney Blake stood watching her with a strange expression in his eyes.