

FLAME OF THE BORDER

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WNU Service

CHAPTER X—Continued

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Quince—a blue-eyed man. Verily, disaster was raining upon her from all quarters. But she would not sink, she would not give up. What-ever seemed to be, there was still behind it all the sound of Starr Stone's voice saying, "I'd crawl around the world—to change my spots!" Whatever he had done, whatever he had been, he was another man now. It was in his eyes, in his heart, in every tone of his voice. The past and all it meant of sin and shame were done. He would change his spots if he could; that she knew beyond all doubting.

The newcomers had passed from sight and sound, and the Mexican night hung its starry jewels above the drowsing trees. And Sonya Savarin sat by her barred window as the hours passed, her hands clasped in her lap, her face pale in the shadows.

What the morrow would bring she did not know. Uneasy thoughts moiled in her mind. She heard again the Servant of the Lord talking in Myra's yard, at the dance at the Neidlingers', "Beelzebub—and the Blue-eyed One—danger where they passed by—a dark form hung on a cross."

She shivered in the warm night, hugged her arms across her breast.

"Beware, Innocent One," the mad old man had said—and here was his warning fulfilled. Here was the goal toward which she had turned her face irrevocably when she had looked in Starr Stone's eyes and followed him in spirit. All the good past, all her work and her services, all the sane and precious things of ordinary life, were gone like so much chaff in the wind because a man had looked at her with wild blue eyes and she had turned and followed.

Now that man rode by out there in the dusk of an alien land, a prisoner; she sat trembling here, a prisoner also, and the morrow held their fate.

The morrow and El Capitan Diablo.

CHAPTER XI

The Empty Desert.

BACK at the adobe house of Serge Savarin stark tragedy held sway. The sheep man himself was hardly accountable, raging with fear and anger, bewildered entirely, at a loss to understand his sister's disappearance.

No one had seen her. No one but Hosteen Nez, and a youth from Bad canyon, who had stopped to talk with her about the sickness. That had been in the morning, before midday. And Parks at the store. Miss Savarin had been in—pretty late—for some small purchases.

He watched Serge narrowly as he told him that. Didn't they find the things in her saddlebags? Some thread and two rolls of adhesive tape. They would be there. Yes, Serge remembered, they were.

But here Mr. Marston had stepped forward, and Parks had looked at him sidewise with guarded eyes. Was Miss Savarin alone? Had Parks noticed which way she rode when she left? Alone, yes. Young Doctor Sonya was always alone. Parks had never seen her riding with anyone. Since this was the last place she had been seen, would he, Mr. Parks, mind if they looked about the store a bit?

Looked about his store? Just what did they mean?

A tide of red had come flowing up along the usually pasty cheeks of the storekeeper.

They meant nothing, only to look about the last place a missing girl had been, admittedly, seen alive.

If they meant to insinuate—Parks was deadly cold.

They insinuated nothing. Was he averse to their looking?

No! Parks exploded. Look all they pleased.

But he followed closely at their heels while Marston, Serge, and Rodney Blake walked about the scantily stored front room, looked under counters, in tipping bins and behind doors. They entered the storeroom behind with its stacks of packing cases, barrels, the usual jumble of merchandise and its containers which litter such a place. And here the red left Parks' face. It became waxen, like a moon in fog.

But none of the three men noticed it.

As the three men explored among the disorder of the place the proprietor kept close to them, and once when Marston raised the lid of a bin of dry beans the muscles of his right hand rose along the back, exactly as the body of a cat tenses before it leaps. Marston dropped the lid, and the hand relaxed.

"There is nothing here," Serge said in despair.

They went to find the sheriff and see how many men he had sent out, in which directions.

And back at the ranch Lila, who had held her tongue, looked in the face of Myra Little and poured out in a flood all she knew of Sonya and Starr Stone. Myra, who had come as fast as her two good horses and a bouncing buckboard could bring her when she heard the news from a Navajo runner who had passed her place.

"My Lord!" she said aghast. "You think—that maybe she's gone with him? Run off?"

"What else?" said Lila miserably. "She loves him. And Rod Blake has said he'll never give her up to anyone."

"H'm—yes, maybe you're right. She told me of this man—what kind of eyes he had. Blue eyes, wild an' excitable—with pupils that spread easily. I've seen their like—once in a preacher who never should have been one, an' in an outlaw at Laredo. Strange eyes they are, an' strange men who own 'em, an' women can't forget them, ever. Maybe you're right, Lila. He'd take her—an' she'd go—if she loved him."

"She does," said Lila with conviction.

And all among the Bad Lands, in the scattered canyons, along the sage-brush levels, a peculiar thing was happening. From every cravasse of the lonely land where she had worked for, loved, and befriended them, the Navajos were coming: tall brown men on sorry horses, their long hair bound on their heads beneath their wide-brimmed hats, their turquoise necklaces swinging on their breasts.

They met and spoke in soft clipped voices, parted, and went appointed ways, their dark eyes on the desert's floor, scanning the open book of the world around, a moving network of detection.

It was Hosteen T'so who traced her shod horse to the town, who knew that she had sat some hours in a dry wash over to the east before she went to town, and who followed her step by step back along the circling way which had taken her at that certain spot where Sonya Savarin had looked last upon the desert's familiar face from the security of her saddle. And there Two Fingers stood with Hosteen Nez, holding her lost hat.

The three men looked at each other, nodded, spoke a few low words.

They all saw, too, three long strange marks in the sand—wheel marks soft and wide with indentations in them, a sharply defined mark running between them, beginning a bit before their start, ending a bit before they did.

None of the three had ever seen an airplane closer than the high blue sky above, but they spoke of one now, considering. And they took the sombrero with them, jogging back to their hogans.

Tomorrow they would meet again, these three, and circle wider, asking all others of their tribe they met what they knew of sky ships, telling this which they knew. And only these—the humble ones whom Rodney Blake despised—knew anything of Sonya Savarin and what had become of her.

CHAPTER XII

The Leopard Changes Spots.

DAWN came slowly to the deep-walled room where Sonya sat by the window. The girl was weary from her sleepless vigil. There were dark circles under her eyes, lines in her young face.

But her lips were steady and courageous, her heart the same. Today was to be big with portent; that she knew.

Perhaps it meant death. Perhaps she would never again behold the sunrise, or see the stars wheel in the heavens.

Well, one had but one time to die, though she could have wished a more gentle end than would likely come to anyone who fell under El Diablo's displeasure. And that she was there she knew full well; also why. Starr Stone had risked his life each time he saw her when he overstayed his time. Starr Stone who was, who must be, that Number Fifteen, Kenthal—how soft the numeral was in Spanish—who was El Diablo's ablest lieutenant. The man whom he could neither spare nor wholly trust, now, since he had disobeyed him for a woman.

And those who disobeyed Diablo—Sonya jerked her shoulders up, wet her lips that were dry as ashes.

Twice, they said, had the bandit leader "spread him up," only to take him down again. Starr Stone of the laughing courage who had dared all things in the old days, whose clever brain had been invaluable to El Capitan, who was too valuable to kill, yet who knew too much to live if he did not live for him.

And Sonya Savarin, who knew too much also, who loved Starr Stone and had listened to him in the dusk of many moons; who had stooped and picked up a five-tael can of first-grade opium when a bungling hand had dropped it.

Parks—Quatro, Number Four—the bland keeper of a store on the cross-continent railroad. He had blundered, but he had retrieved his blunder instantly by sending El Diablo's henchman to destroy the evidence by taking it away—herself that evidence.

Well, once again one could finish up but once, and she was no one's quitter. If only she might see Starr Stone again, look deep in his blue eyes, renew that soul's covenant which they had made one starlit dusk.

But the senora was here with face on a tray and she was kind and gentle with that tenderness we show to those about to go on long and perilous journeys.

"Eef eet please the Senorita," she said apologetically, "there ees one who would speak weeth you today. Eet ees one whose word ees the law, the master."

"I know," said Sonya, nodding her black head. "I shall be ready, senora. At what hour?"

"I do not know—only that when eet arrives one must be ready."

"Very well," said Sonya, and the woman went away.

Deliberately she drank the coffee, ate the spiced omelette, the little round bits of some hot sweet bread.

And a little later the senora came for her.

She walked down the long dark passage, cool with the night's freshness, and into the great main room of the casa. Here there were many men and a few women, who all seemed waiting to look at her, which they did with thoroughness in silence. There were men here who had burned and railed and shot, who thought no more of killing a human being than of slaughtering a sheep; women who followed them and wore things they looted. Their eyes were hot and cold at the same time, if one might so describe them, flaming with all the varied lusts of lawless folk, devoid of mercy or compassion.

The senora passed before them and out at the door which stood open at the south, Sonya following close behind her with her head up. Here in the stone flagged yard sat her judge.

El Capitan Diablo, in a huge chair behind a long table made of crude slabs and undressed wood set on sections of saplings peeled and weathered. Here too was Manuel, that dapper slim pilot who had brought her across the Border. Manuel, second in power, in value, in ability, to that one whom the master had brought home to answer for his sins.

The sins of lingering too long about that master's business, of doing his bidding less and less eagerly, or that most heinous crime of all, loving a good woman.

El Diablo hated a good woman. Of all things on the earth he feared and hated most a good woman.



"You Are Well Schooled, Senorita," He Sneered.

What power this one might hold against him, what secrets she might know for his undoing, he did not know. What Quince had told her in the softening urge of love he furiously suspected. Evil himself, lost to all standards of loyalty, a double-crosser of double-crossers, he trusted no one, believed in no one.

That great structure of blood and raid and contraband which he had built for himself from Mazatlan to New York city stood toppling in the hands of these two—and El Diablo would not have it.

He looked at the slim girl before him, his thick nostrils dilating.

"So," he said, "we meet again, senorita."

"So it would seem," said Sonya Savarin.

A great concourse of people was gathering swiftly in the grove, all standing back at a respectful distance. But nowhere was there a tall man with bronze hair and wild blue eyes that shone. The girl looked earnestly around, and El Diablo smiled.

"Not just yet, senorita," he said, "presently. In all good time."

Manuel rose and coming around the table, brought a chair and placed it for her. Sonya nodded but did not sit down. It seemed to her

that she was on trial here, as indeed she was, though with the issue a foregone conclusion, and she must take it standing. The injustice, the insult of it all was making a fire in her soul, and she was not afraid.

"I think, sir," she said sharply, suddenly, "that you will answer to my people and my country for this abduction of myself. You cannot hide it long."

"So? You think not? Well, well, has El Diablo lost his cunning?"

He had changed his speech to Spanish, and for a moment Sonya hesitated as to whether or not she should show she understood. Then she decided that he probably knew she did and accepted the issue.

"There comes an end to all things, senor," she said.

"Yes, to life even," the bandit said smoothly, looking at her.

"To life, even," said Sonya calmly. A little whisper of admiration murmured through the silent crowd. She had courage, the young white woman from beyond the Border. No one had ever met the master so, word for word and eye for eye.

"You remember, senorita," El Diablo said, "that once I took my lieutenant from your arms on a dance floor. That should have been a warning. A sufficient warning. Yet you did not heed it."

"Why should I have heeded it?" said Sonya steadily. "Who were you that I should fear you to such an extent?"

"You saw that Quince feared me."

"Yes. And knew there must be a reason. He is no man's coward."

"Then you should have known the reason to be good."

"I did."

"And tried to find that reason out. I have no doubt?"

"Assuredly."

"And did?"

"No."

"You lie to me, senorita!"

"And so do you!" flashed Sonya.

"Caramba!" swore Diablo. "You tell me that?"

"You told me that. In my country a man does not speak so to women."

The man who ruled his little world with blood and steel half rose, his dark face purple with a mounting rage. In that wavering second Sonya Savarin was nearer death than she had ever been.

Then he sat down again and smiled. That smile was deadly as an adder's grin.

"So," he said, "we shall proceed. And Quince did not tell you that I meet the ships from China at Mazatlan?"

"No, senor."

"Nor that I bring into Mexico and along the Border merchandise of great value?"

"No, senor."

"Nor that that merchandise crosses into the United States by my little gray ships of the sky to be sent to New York on the railroad?"

"No, senor."

"You are well schooled, senorita," he sneered. "I make bold to compliment you both. You did not know that Quince is—or was—my ablest man in both countries? That he knows as much of El Diablo as El Diablo knows about himself? That he can do anything connected with—my business—from sealing the sea at low tide for floats, tied to sunken contraband, to flying a plane? You did not know all this?"

He was leaning forward now, searching the girl's face with burning eyes to catch the faintest change.

"I did not, senor," she said.

"H'm," said El Diablo savagely, "and when you so quickly stooped and picked from the floor that small brass can which Senor Parks dropped from his pocket, you still did not know what you were finding?"

"No," said Sonya, "and would not now if Manuel there had not told the Senora about it—called it a five-tael can of 'black molasses.'"

Manuel leaped from his seat, talking swiftly, facing his master. And somewhere behind her a woman stifled a scream. But Diablo was on his feet, his fist on the table.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)