

FLAME OF THE BORDER

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CHAPTER XII—Continued

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"So!" he thundered, "my people talk behind me, do they? They mention that which is never to be mentioned? I shall deal with you—and you, senora—later. Now bring me Quince."

At that Sonya felt the world go round for one terrible second. She clutched the chair back tightly.

And from somewhere at the right there came the sound of marching feet, the swift step of men obeying a master. Through the dappled shade cast by the poplar trees five figures moved into her line of vision, four who walked abreast in twos and in their midst a fifth—Starr Stone as she had seen him last, in cowboy boots and dungarees beited at his lean hips, a faded denim shirt.

He was haggard and his eyes were large in his tanned face, and his arms were bound behind him. He was a prisoner with all a prisoner's indignities heaped upon him, but his tall form was erect, his blue eyes dark with the spreading pupils. He strode toward the table with his gaze on Diablo's face and saw no other in the silent mass.

"Senor," he said.

"Senor," said El Capitan, and the smile was gone from his face. It was black with fury.

"For five years, Quince, you have been with me—my best and ablest man. You have done my bidding quickly. You have led my raids. You have put my—merchandise—safely through its secret ways. I have called and you have come, always. Always until lately. Lately you have come on laggard feet. You have held back at my orders. You have disobeyed me. And I have now the reason. That reason is a woman. A woman whom you have set before El Capitan Diablo. Whose word has been more to you than my word. Who, through your instruction doubtless, has come upon the key of my activities. Who has caught Quatro with the goods in his own store. Who holds Diablo and all his future in the hollow of her hand. Or would so hold him had it not been for Quatro's swift action in the matter. Senor—behold the woman!"

He had half risen again, leaning with one broad hand on the table. With the other he pointed dramatically to Sonya. And like a flash Starr Stone whirled and saw her.

It was the first inkling he had had that she was not safe in her own country, and her own pursuits, and the shock of it drained his face to a ghastly pallor.

"Sonya!" his lips formed soundlessly.

"Yes," said the girl defiantly, "they took me from my horse two nights ago—kidnaped me—by airplane—and brought me here because I stumbled on the fact that Parks is their agent in the smuggling of narcotics across the line. They think you told me—that you and I have planned to double-cross this wicked bandit here—this beast who says I'm lying!"

She waved a hand at El Capitan, nodded her black head toward him.

"Ah! A beast, am I? El Capitan Diablo a beast?"

"Yes, senor—and worse," said Sonya Savarin. "You may kill me—as I do not doubt you will—but I am an American, and I do not bend to you either in body or soul. We are both Americans."

"Oh, Americans! And Americans do not double-cross?"

"No, senor."

"Well, we shall see. Quince—attention. What do you say for yourself?"

The tall man standing in the mottled shade looked long in his master's face. What years of wrongdoing, of obedience, of fear, were in

that look only they two might say. For a long time it held between the wild blue eyes, the deadly black ones.

Then Starr Stone turned to Sonya. "A misstep in my early youth—it doesn't matter now what it was—put me in the power of El Capitan Diablo. For my freedom's sake I cast in my lot with him. For my life's sake I could never leave him afterward. I have raided, burned, and pillaged, but I have never killed a man nor harmed a woman or a child. I have been his brains in smuggling, his ablest lieutenant, as he says. But now I'm through.

"With death as my sure reward for what I'm saying, I say here and now, before these witnesses, that I am done forever. Done with all wrong and all evil. That the leopard changes his spots at last. For the love of you in my soul I am made over new. They will kill me soon, and I hope they'll send you with me with all my heart—though hell itself can hold no torture for me to compare with the knowledge that I have brought you to this. That will be more punishment than my lost soul can bear. Oh, Sonya, forgive me for what I've done to you."

"Forgive you?" panted the girl, half sobbing. "Forgive you? I glory in you! And we'll go together, never fear! If not one way, then another. It will not be a long good-by, I promise you."

"Soul's covenant," said Starr Stone.

"Soul's covenant," she answered.

But here El Capitan leaped to his booted feet, his fist on the table again.

"It will not?" he rasped. "You think it will not? Carramba! El Capitan Diablo has yet the final word. You to the winds and the vultures, Quince, and may you remember many things in the—the interval.

"You," he turned to Sonya and leveled a finger at her, "I give to that one among my men who rises to this Quince's empty place. Manuel, my compliments, the lady. I believe you like a white-skinned woman with curls in the hair. And after you—the rest. And that, as they say across the Border, is that. Take them both away."

The four men moved to surround their prisoner, the marching feet passed swiftly, and Sonya watched the tall bronze head go out of the shade into the sun—around a corner.

The world and all it held turned dark before her just as the senora reached out a motherly arm.

She dimly heard Manuel saying, "Careful, senora, careful—she is mine."

CHAPTER XIII

Love's Sacrifice.

WHEN she opened her eyes again it was dark in the deep-walled room, and she lay on the ancient bed. For a while she lay in a sort of stupid peace, gathering her faculties, which seemed to have been scattered to the four winds.

And then suddenly the values of life dropped into their appointed places, like the brilliant colors in a kaleidoscope, and she knew where she was and what had happened.

El Capitan had spoken, and she was still a prisoner, the property of a dapper Mexican bandit with predatory eyes and laughing, thin lips, Manuel the aviator. And Starr Stone was gone—oh, heaven! Gone to that ghastly fate which lurked in the poignant words, "you to the winds and the vultures." The wild blue eyes that had darkened and changed under the mandates of life, the long hands with their tender touch, the lips so warm upon her own!

And presently the senora came padding softly to the door on heavy feet, for she was old and ex-

cellently fed, and entered to her kindly ministrations.

Sonya whirled and faced her, her dark eyes burning in the shadows. "Senora," she said desperately, "have pity on me! Can you not help me? A knife, senora—with my next meal—left on the tray? In the name of that holy Woman whom you worship, please, senora!"

"I cannot, child," she answered gently. "Manuel would kill me. Come, let me wash your sweet white body with fresh water. And there is perfume, and a woman's clothes to dress you in—a scarlet dress, and golden shoes for your feet. Tonight you rest—Manuel's orders—but tomorrow you wear these things for him. You must forget."

Forget! Forget—the vultures and the wind! Forget the stars, the soft winds blowing, the creak of leather, and Starr Stone's hand on hers laid on her pommel!

"If you have within you, senora," she said piteously, "any remnant of a woman's pity for another woman lost to all the light of life, leave me to fight it out alone. Leave me now."

For a long time the other stood and watched her, calculating, then nodded and turned away.

"I have not forgotten—for thirty years," she said cryptically. "You shall have your night, querida."

The sound of the bolt falling echoed in the empty passage.

And Sonya Savarin, who had guarded life so well, now stood at



Through This—and the Night Sky Was Above Them.

bay, holding her breath, pondering desperately how she might destroy it.

If only she had her bags! Her little case of instruments! But she had nothing—and Starr Stone was dying now, perhaps, or would tomorrow.

There was nothing left to do, no foes to face with lifted head, no schemes of hope to make, no one whom she might coax to help her.

And so at last Sonya, having exhausted all her resources, scant at best in this terrible situation, made ready to bow in resignation. She knelt by the ancient bed, which had no doubt seen tragedies before, and folding her hands addressed her soul to its Maker in sorrow and humility.

How long she knelt so she never afterward could recall. Sometimes she prayed, weeping, for that other soul which had so grievously mispent its days, and these were fervent prayers, abased and agonized before the heavenly throne, begging for that mercy of the eleventh hour which has been divinely promised; sometimes for Serge and Lila and little Babs, even for Darkness. For herself she asked scant favor. It had been always so with her. Service to her fellow men, comfort for all suffering things, had been her passionate aim in life.

Of herself she thought last and least, of Starr Stone most.

If only they had met in those early days of which he spoke, before that one misstep had put him in El Diablo's power, made him an outlaw, a Border renegade. When the sweetness, the kindness in him had been paramount. Before sin and wrong had put the leopard spots upon him.

But the spots were changed at last when it was too late. To his face he had repudiated El Capitan, signed his own death warrant, for anyone leaving the dark service of this monstrous bandit put himself "on the spot" as truly as any in more modern places.

And he had done it deliberately, to prove to her that he was changed even to the death. The courage which had shone in his face at that repudiation had been magnificent. He knew, none better, the fate of El Diablo's double-crossers, and he double-crossed him high-handedly and with supreme finality.

"Oh, Starr!" wept Sonya with her forehead on her clasped hands. "Oh, my man of all men! My one and only love!"

In the warm dark silence the heart in her seemed to melt in anguish, the tides of life to run swiftly out.

For her it was the ebb of finite things, the last low hour before the end. In a dull coma of hopelessness, her face swollen with weeping, she sank lower and lower against the great bed, her lips apart, her black head disheveled.

And into this last deep abyss there dropped a tiny sound.

The outside bolt, huge and heavy, slipped slowly in its slot!

Instinctively the girl shrank back against the bed.

Manuel!

Manuel, her master! She stifled a scream on her open mouth, her hand across it.

And then a voice, whispering into the darkness, a breath of a voice as lovely as music, said "Senorita!"

"Si," said Sonya, gasping. "I am here."

There was the murmur of a moving form, and Concha knelt carefully before her. Sonya reached out and touched her incredibly, but the girl drew sharply from the contact.

"Attend," she said, "if you are brave—are you so, senorita?"

"I am very brave," said Sonya simply.

"Then listen. You I hate from my soul's bottom—I could strike you now with my two hands—but there is—another, whom I love. Oh, Mary Mother! Love!" she said as if to her inward self. She stopped a moment then went on.

"If you can follow me without a sound there is—a hope. Can you walk so?"

"Without a sound," said Sonya, and bent forward to unlace her boots. Swiftly she took them off.

The Mexican girl reached out and took her by the sleeve. That hatred in her would not let her touch her flesh. Softly, step by step, the two young things crossed the silent room, listened at the partly opened door, and slid through it. In the long dark passage they listened again, then went south along the wall toward a door which also stood ajar.

Through this—and the night sky was above them, the tall cottonwoods against the stars. Like wreaths of the gloom they entered the grove, passed through it, came out on the open landing field.

Before the little hangar Sonya saw in the starlight the ghostly shape of a little gray ship. They made toward it swiftly, and as they reached its protecting wing a man stepped out from the hangar behind; a tall man, naked to the waist, his head bare, his feet also, a man who was prepared for "spreading up" on the morrow. Starr Stone drew them both against the gray ship's side.

"Sonya!" he whispered, "Oh, Sonya!" Then, "Listen. We have one chance in a million. This plane is still warm from a trip Manuel took this afternoon. I heard it come in about dark."

"Yes," said Sonya, "so did I." "It is fueled. They are always so. Thank God—and Concha—we are here. I have just disabled the other one, I think, though not as permanently as I could wish. We've got to take that one chance, Sonya. It's our only one. Get in quick!"

With his hands under her elbow Sonya went up along the side, dropped into the little seat, felt swiftly for the safety belt.

"Safe?" the man whispered tensely.

"Safe," she answered pulling the buckle tight.

Then she saw Starr Stone turn to Concha and take her in his arms.

"Concha," he said softly but loud enough for Sonya to hear the whispered words, "I leave thee. It is fate. But never will I forget thee, nor this thing which you have done. Always while I live I will remember. Adios, little one."

And, bending his tall head, he kissed her on the lips.

"Ready," he said, and, pushing the girl beyond the plane's wing tip, he caught the propeller's blade.

Up and down he swung it—once, two, three, then a fourth vehement time, and came lithely up and over into the pilot's seat as the roar of the catching engine thundered into the night.

There came the little surge forward, the heavier one, the lifting of the tail as they rocked away along the field, the gathering of speed, and then the soft wave of stillness as they lost contact with the earth and sailed away into the starry heavens.

And Sonya Savarin, looking down with wide drawn eyes, had seen, just as they surged for the start, a long red spurt of flame where Concha stood in the shadows, heard, above the roar of the motor, the faint, sharp crack of a shot.

"Oh, God!" she cried, a sob in her throat. "Oh, God! Conchita!"

Conchita, who, saving her lover yet could not save him apart from his, had made the last great sacrifice for love itself.

The pouring crowd that flowed along the field, lighted now, could wreak no vengeance on her, for Concha, too, was gone among the stars.

CHAPTER XIV

On Lone Mesa's Top.

SONYA clung to the cockpit's edge with clutching fingers, her eyes, burned dry of sudden tears, fixed on the future, if future there was to be. The aching sorrow for the lovely Mexican girl who had loved Starr Stone sank deep in her heart, never to be quite eradicated.

Life—that could do such ghastly things to its poor devotees—was calling from the starry skies. They were free, together, she and this scarecrow man with the wild bronze hair, the naked torso, the bare feet, and she asked no more of destiny.

The memory of all sane and ordered things was dim and far away—the ranch house that was home, the faces of Serge and Lila and the child.

And Rodney Blake! With a shock she remembered him.

He was a stranger to her. She could not recall his face with any clearness. There was only one face clear to her. The face of this man so miraculously snatched from death to life, this man who drove an airship through the midnight sky toward life and love and liberty.

Presently, watching tensely, she saw the great pale ribbon of the Rio Grande.

The Border!

The international line!

She held her breath as they passed above it, and let it out in a great sigh.

El Capitan Diablo—Manuel—the strange adobe house in the poplar grove—they all seemed to fade, to become unreal, like the figures in a frightful dream.

A little longer, and they would be safe.

Safe—and home.

Home!