

gamblin' an' gun-fightin' goin' on at Bland's camp all the time. Bland has killed some twenty men, an' thet's not countin' greasers."

Here Stevens took another drink and then rested for a while.

"You ain't likely to get on with Bland," he resumed presently. "You're too strappin' big an' good-lookin' to please the chief. Fer he's got women in his camp. Then he'd be jealous of your possibilities with a gun. Shore I reckon he'd be careful, though. Bland's no fool an' he loves his hide. I reckon any of the other gangs would be better fer you when you ain't goin' it alone."

Apparently that exhausted the fund of information and advice Stevens had been eager to impart. He lapsed into silence and lay with closed eyes.

Meanwhile the sun rose warm; the breeze waved the mesquits; the birds came down to splash in the shallow stream. Duane dozed in a comfortable seat. By and by something roused him. Stevens was once more talking, but with a changed tone.

"Feller's name—was Brown," he rambled. "We fell out—over a hoss I stole from him—in Huntsville. He stole it fust. Brown's one of them sneaks—afraid of the open—he steals an' pretends to be honest. Say, Buck, mebbe you'll meet Brown some day. You an' me are pards now."

"I'll remember, if I ever meet him," said Duane.

That seemed to satisfy the outlaw. Presently he tried to lift his head but had not the strength. A strange shade was creeping across the bronzed rough face.

"My feet are pretty heavy. Shore you got my boots off?"

Duane held them up, but was not certain that Stevens could see them. The outlaw closed his eyes again and muttered incoherently.

Then he fell asleep. Duane believed that sleep was final. The day passed with Duane watching and waiting.

Toward sundown Stevens awoke

and his eyes seemed clearer. Duane went to get some fresh water, thinking his comrade would surely want some.

When he returned Stevens made no sign that he wanted anything. There was something bright about him, and suddenly Duane realized what it meant.

"Pard, you—stuck—to me!" the outlaw whispered.

Duane caught a hint of gladness in the voice—he traced a faint surprise in the haggard face. Stevens seemed like a little child.

To Duane the moment was sad, elemental, big with a burden of mystery he could not understand.

Duane buried him in a shallow arroyo and heaped up a pile of stones to mark the grave. That done he saddled his comrade's horse, hung the weapons over the pommel, and mounting his own steed he rode down the trail in the gathering twilight.

CHAPTER IV.

BLAND'S CAMP.

Two days later, about the middle of the forenoon, Duane dragged the two horses up the last ascent of an exceedingly rough trail, and found himself on top of the Rim-Rock, with a beautiful green valley at his feet, the yellow sluggish Rio Grande shining in the sun, and the great wild mountainous barren of Mexico stretching to the south.

The trail proved to be the kind that could not be descended slowly. He kept dodging rocks which his horses loosed behind him. And in a short time he reached the valley, entering at the apex of the wedge.

A stream of clear water tumbled out of the rocks here, and most of it ran into irrigation ditches. His horses drank thirstily. And he drank with that fulness and gratefulness common to the desert traveler finding sweet water. Then he mounted and rode

down the valley, wondering what would be his reception.

The valley was much larger than it had appeared from the high elevation. Well watered, green with grass and tree, and farmed evidently by good hands, it gave Duane a considerable surprise. Horses and cattle were everywhere. Every clump of cottonwoods surrounded a small adobe house.

Duane saw Mexicans working in the fields, and horsemen going to and fro. Presently he passed a house bigger than the others, with a porch attached. A woman, young and pretty, he thought, watched him from a door. No one else appeared to notice him.

Presently the trail widened into a road, and that into a kind of square lined by a number of adobe and log buildings, of rudest structure. Within sight were horses, dogs, a couple of steers, Mexican women with children, and white men, all of whom appeared to be doing nothing.

His advent created no interest until he rode up to the white men, who were loitering in the shade of a house. This place evidently was a store and saloon, and from the inside came a lazy hum of voices.

As Duane reined to a halt one of the loungers in the shade rose with a loud exclamation.

"Bust me if thet ain't Luke's hoss!"

The others accorded their interest, if not assent, by rising to advance toward Duane.

"How about it, Euchre? Ain't thet Luke's bay?" queried the first man.

"Plain as your nose," replied the fellow called Euchre.

"There ain't no doubt about thet then," laughed another, "fer Bosomer's nose is shore plain on the landscape."

These men lined up before Duane, and as he coolly regarded them he thought they could have been recognized anywhere as desperadoes.

The man called Bosomer, who

struck out in advance of the others, was a hard-looking customer, with yellow eyes and an enormous nose. He had sandy hair and a skin the color of dust.

"Stranger, who are you, an' where did you git thet bay hoss?" he demanded.

His yellow eyes took in Stevens's horse, then the weapons hung on the saddle, and finally turned their glinting hard light upward to Duane.

Duane did not like the tone in which he had been addressed and he remained silent. At least half his mind seemed busy with curious interest in regard to something that leaped inside him and made his breast feel tight. He recognized it as that strange emotion which had shot through him often of late, and which had decided him to go out to the meeting with Bain. Only now it was different, more powerful.

"Stranger, who are you?" asked another man, somewhat more civilly.

"My name's Duane," replied Duane curtly.

"An' how'd you come by the hoss?"

Duane answered briefly, and his words were followed by a short silence, during which the men looked at him. Bosomer began to twist his bearded tips.

"Reckon he's dead all right, or nobody'd hev his hoss an' guns," presently said Euchre.

"Mr. Duane," began Bosomer, in low stinging tones, "I happen to be Luke Stevens's side pardner."

Duane looked him over, from dusty worn-out boots to his slouchy sombrero. That look seemed to inflame Bosomer.

"An' I want the hoss an' them guns," he shouted.

"You or anybody else can have them for all I care. I just fetched them in. But the pack is mine," replied Duane. "And say—I befriended your pard. If you can't use a civil tongue you'd better cinch it."

"Civil? Haw! Haw!" rejoined

the outlaw. "I don't know you. How do we know you didn't plug Stevens, an' stole his hoss, an' jest happened to stumble down here?"

"You'll have to take my word, that's all," replied Duane sharply.

"I ain't takin' your word! Savvy thet? An' I was Luke's pard!"

With that Bosomer wheeled and pushing his companions aside he stamped into the saloon where his voice broke out in a roar.

Duane dismounted and threw his bridle.

"Stranger, Bosomer is shore hot-headed," said the man Euchre. He did not appear unfriendly, nor were the others hostile.

At this juncture several more outlaws crowded out of the door, and the one in the lead was a tall man of stalwart physique. His manner proclaimed him a leader.

He had a long face, a flaming red beard, and clear cold blue eyes that fixed in close scrutiny upon Duane. He was not a Texan; in truth, Duane did not recognize one of these outlaws as native to his State.

"I'm Bland," said the tall man authoritatively. "Who're you and what're you doing here?"

Duane looked at Bland as he had at the others. This outlaw chief appeared to be reasonable, if he was not courteous. Duane told his story again, this time a little more in detail.

"I believe you," replied Bland at once. "Think I know when a fellow is lying."

"I reckon you're on the right trail," put in Euchre. "Thet about Luke wantin' his boots took off—thet satisfies me. Luke hed a mortal dread of dyin' with his boots on."

At this sally the chief and his men laughed.

"You said Duane—Buck Duane?" queried Bland. "Are you a son of that Duane who was a gun-fighter some years back?"

"Yes," replied Duane.

"Never met him, and glad I didn't,"

said Bland with a grim humor. "So you got in trouble and had to go on the dodge? What kind of trouble?"

"Had a fight."

"Fight? Do you mean gun-play?" questioned Bland. He seemed eager, curious, speculative.

"Yes. It ended in gun-play, I'm sorry to say," answered Duane.

"Guess I needn't ask the son of Duane if he killed his man," went on Bland ironically. "Well, I'm sorry you bucked against trouble in my camp. But as it is, I guess you'd be wise to make yourself scarce."

"Do you mean I'm politely told to move on?" asked Duane quietly.

"Not exactly that," said Bland as if irritated. "If this isn't a free place there isn't one on earth. Every man is equal here. Do you want to join my band?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, even if you did, I imagine that wouldn't stop Bosomer. He's an ugly fellow. He's one of the few gunmen I've met who wanted to kill somebody all the time. Most men like that are four-flushes. But Bosomer is all one color, and that's red. Merely for your own sake I advise you to hit the trail."

"Thanks. But if that's all I'll stay," returned Duane. Even as he spoke he felt that he did not know himself.

Bosomer appeared at the door, pushing men who tried to detain him, and as he jumped clear of a last reaching hand he uttered a snarl like an angry dog.

Manifestly the short while he had spent inside the saloon had been devoted to drinking and talking himself into a frenzy. Bland and the other outlaws quickly moved aside, letting Duane stand alone. When Bosomer saw Duane standing motionless and watchful, a strange change passed quickly in him. He halted in his tracks, and as he did that the men who had followed him out piled over each other in their hurry to get to one side.

Duane saw all the swift action, felt

intuitively the meaning in it, and in Bosomer's sudden change of front. The outlaw was keen, and he had expected a shrinking or at least a frightened antagonist.

But Duane did not speak a word. He had remained motionless for a long moment, his eyes pale and steady, his right hand like a claw.

That instant gave birth in Duane a power to read in his enemy's eyes the thought that preceded action. But he did not want to kill another man; he did not intend to. When Bosomer's hand moved Duane's gun was spouting fire, and Bosomer fell with his right arm shattered. He would never be able to draw a gun again.

CHAPTER V.

A CHAMPION.

OF the outlaws present, Euchre appeared to be the one most inclined to lend friendliness to curiosity; and he led Duane and the horses away to a small adobe shack. He tied the horses in an open shed and removed their saddles. Then gathering up Stevens's weapons he invited his visitor to enter the house.

It had two rooms—windows without coverings—bare floors. One room contained blankets, weapons, saddles, and bridles; the other a stone fireplace, rude table and bench, two bunks, a box cupboard, and various blackened utensils.

"Make yourself to home as long as you want to stay," said Euchre. "I ain't rich in this world's goods, but I own what's here, an' you're welcome."

"Thanks. I'll stay a while and rest. I'm pretty well played out," replied Duane.

Euchre gave him a keen glance.

"Go ahead an' rest. I'll take your hosses to grass."

"Wait," called Duane, as Euchre was going out. "Are there any friends of Bosomer's who're likely to—to look me up?"

"Nary one. Bo's not much liked on the river. He's a mean cuss. An' he lied about bein' Luke's pard. He was just achin' to kill somebody."

Euchre left Duane alone in the house. Duane relaxed then and mechanically he wiped the sweat from his face. He was laboring under some kind of a spell, which did not pass off quickly. When it had worn away he took off his coat and belt, and made himself comfortable on the blankets.

And he had a thought that if he rested or slept what difference would it make on the morrow? No rest—no sleep could change the gray outlook of the future. He felt glad when Euchre came bustling in, and for the first time he took notice of the outlaw.

Euchre was old in years. What little hair he had was gray, his face clean-shaven and full of wrinkles, his eyes were half-shut from long gazing through the sun and dust. He stooped. But his thin frame denoted strength and endurance still unimpaired.

"Hev a drink or a smoke?" he asked.

Duane shook his head. He had not been unfamiliar with whisky and he had used tobacco moderately since he was sixteen. But now strangely he felt a disgust at the idea of stimulants. He did not understand clearly what he felt. There was that vague idea of something wild in his blood—something that made him fear himself.

Euchre wagged his old head sympathetically.

"Reckon you feel a little sick. When it comes to shootin' I run. What's your age?"

"I'm twenty-three," replied Duane. Euchre showed surprise.

"You're only a boy! I thought you thirty, anyways. Buck, I heard what you told Bland, an' puttin' thet with my own figgerin' I reckon you're no criminal yet. Throwin' a gun in self-defense—thet ain't no crime!"

Duane, finding relief in talking, told more about himself.

"Huh," replied the old man. "I've been on this river for years an' I've seen hundreds of boys come in on the dodge. Most of them, though, was no good. An' thet kind don't last long."

"Fellers like Bland are exceptions. He's no Texan, you seen thet. The gang he rules here come from all over an' they're tough cusses, you can bet on thet. They live fat an' easy. If it wasn't for the fightin' among themselves they'd shore grow populous."

"The Rim-Rock is no place for a peaceable, decent feller. I heard you tell Bland you wouldn't join his gang. Thet'll not make him take a likin' to you. Have you any money?"

"Not much," replied Duane.

"Could you live by gamblin'? Are you any good at cards?"

"No."

"You wouldn't steal hosses or rustle cattle?"

"No."

"When your money's gone how will you live? There ain't any work a decent feller could do. You can't herd with greasers. Why, Bland's men would shoot at you in the fields. What'll you do, son?"

"God knows," replied Duane hopelessly. "I'll make my money last as long as possible—then starve."

"Wal, I'm pretty pore, but you'll never starve while I got anythin'."

Here it struck Duane again—that something human and kind and eager which he had seen in Stevens. Duane's estimate of outlaws had lacked this quality. He had not accorded them any virtues. To him, as to the outside world, they had been merely vicious men, without one redeeming feature.

"I'm much obliged to you, Euchre," replied Duane. "But of course I won't live with any one unless I can pay my share."

"Have it any way you like, son," said Euchre good-humoredly. "You make a fire an' I'll set about gettin' grub. I'm a sour-dough, Buck. Thet

man doesn't live who can beat my bread."

"How do you ever pack supplies in here?" asked Duane, thinking of the almost inaccessible nature of the valley.

"Some comes across from Mexico an' the rest down the river. Thet river trip is a bird. It's more'n five hundred miles to any supply point. Bland has *mazos*, greaser boatmen. Sometimes, too, he gets supplies in from down river. You see, Bland sells thousands of cattle in Cuba. An' all this stock has to go down by boat to meet the ships."

"Where on earth are the cattle driven down to the river?"

"Thet's not my secret," replied Euchre shortly. "Fact is, I don't know. I've rustled cattle for Bland, but he never sent me through the Rim-Rock with them."

Duane experienced a sort of pleasure in the realization that interest had been stirred in him. He was curious about Bland and his gang, and glad to have something to think about. He wanted to forget.

In the next hour he did forget and enjoyed helping in the preparation and eating of the meal. Euchre, after washing and hanging up the several utensils, put on his hat and turned to go out.

"Come along or stay here, as you want," he said to Duane.

"I'll stay," rejoined Duane slowly.

The old outlaw left the room and trudged away whistling cheerfully.

Duane looked around him for a book or paper, anything to read. But all the printed matter he could find consisted of a few words on cartridge boxes and an advertisement on the back of a tobacco-pouch. There seemed to be nothing for him to do.

He had rested; he did not want to lie down any more. He began to walk to and fro, from one end of the room to the other. And as he walked he fell into the lately acquired habit of brooding over his misfortune.

Later he went outdoors and cooled his heated brow in the shade of the cottonwoods. From this point he could see a good deal of the valley. Under different circumstances he felt that he would have enjoyed a visit in such a beautiful spot.

Euchre's shack sat against the first rise of the slope of the wall, and Duane, by climbing a few rods, got a view of the whole valley. Assuredly it was an outlaw settlement.

He saw a good many Mexicans, who, of course, were hand and glove with Bland. Also he saw enormous flatboats, crude of structure, moored along the banks of the river.

The Rio Grande rolled away between high bluffs. A cable, sagging deep in the middle, was stretched over the wide, yellow stream, and an old scow, evidently used as a ferry, lay anchored on the far shore.

Duane must have idled considerable time up on the hill, for when he returned to the shack Euchre was busily engaged around the camp-fire.

"Wal, glad to see you ain't so pale about the gills as you was," he said by way of greeting. "Pitch in an' we'll soon have grub ready. There's shore one consolin' fact round this here camp."

"What's that?" asked Duane.

"Plenty of good, juicy beef to eat. An' it doesn't cost a short bit."

"But it costs hard rides and trouble, bad conscience, and life, too, doesn't it?"

"I ain't shore about the bad conscience. Mine never bothered me none. An' as for life, why thet's cheap in Texas."

"Who is Bland?" asked Duane, quickly changing the subject. "What do you know about him?"

"We don't know who he is or where he hails from," replied Euchre. "Thet's always been somethin' to interest the gang. He must have been a young man when he struck Texas. Now he's middle-aged."

"I remember how years ago he was

soft-spoken an' not rough in talk or act like he is now. Bland ain't likely his right name. He knows a lot.

"He can doctor you an' he's shore a knowin' feller with tools. He's the kind thet rules men. Outlaws are always ridin' in here to join his gang, an' if it hadn't been for the gamblin' an' gun-play he'd have a thousand men round him."

"How many in his gang now?"

"I reckon there's short of a hundred now. The number varies. Then Bland has several small camps up an' down the river. Also he has men back on the cattle-ranges."

"How does he control such a big force?" asked Duane. "Especially when his band's composed of bad men. Luke Stevens said he had no use for Bland. And I heard once somewhere that Bland was a devil."

"Thet's it. He is a devil. He's as hard as flint, violent in temper, never made any friends except his right-hand men, Dave Rugg an' Chess Alloway. Bland'll shoot at a wink. He's killed a lot of fellers, an' some for nothin'."

"The reason thet outlaws gather round him an' stick is because he's a safe refuge, an' then he's well heeled. Bland is rich. They say he has a hundred thousand *pesos* hid somewhere an' lots of gold. But he's free with money."

"He gambles when he's not off with a shipment of cattle. He throws money round. An' the fact is there's always plenty of money where he is. Thet's what holds the gang. Dirty, bloody money!"

"It's a wonder he hasn't been killed. All these years on the border!" exclaimed Duane.

"Wal," replied Euchre dryly, "he's been quicker on the draw than the other fellers who hankered to kill him, thet's all."

Euchre's reply rather chilled Duane's interest for the moment. Such remarks always made his mind revolve round facts relating to himself.

"Speakin' of this here swift wrist game," went on Euchre, "there's been considerable talk in camp about your throwin' of a gun. You know, Buck, thet among us fellers—us hunted men—there ain't anythin' calculated to rouse respect like a slick hand with a gun.

"I heard Bland say this afternoon—an' he said it serious like an' speculative—thet he'd never seen your equal. He was watchin' of you close, he said, an' just couldn't follow your hand when you drawed. All the fellers who seen you meet Bosomer had somethin' to say.

"Bo was about as handy with a gun as any man in this camp, barrin' Chess Alloway, an' mebbe Bland himself—Chess is the captain with a Colt—or he was. An' he shore didn't like the references made about your speed. Bland was honest in acknowledgin' it, but he didn't like it, neither.

"Some of the fellers allowed your draw might have been just accident. But most of them figgered different. An' they all shut up when Bland told who an' what your dad was. 'Pears to me I once seen your dad in a gun-scrape over at Santone, years ago.

"Wal, I put my oar in to-day among the fellers an' I says: 'What ails you locoed gents? Did young Duane budge an inch when Bo came roarin' out, blood in his eye? Wasn't he cool an' quiet, steady of lips, an' weren't his eyes readin' Bo's mind? An' thet lightnin' draw—can't you-all see thet's a family gift?'"

Euchre's narrow eyes twinkled, and he gave the dough he was rolling a slap with his flour-whitened hand. Manifestly he had proclaimed himself a champion and partner of Duane's, with all the pride an old man could feel in a young one whom he admired.

"Wal," he resumed presently, "the't's your introduction to the border, Buck. An' your card was a high trump. You'll be let severely alone by real gun-fighters, an' men like Bland, Alloway, Rugg, an' the bosses of the

other gangs. After all these real men are men, you know, an' unless you cross them they're no more likely to interfere with you than you are with them.

"But there's a sight of fellers like Bosomer in the river country. They'll all want your game. An' every town you ride into will scare up some cow-puncher full of booze or a long-haired four-flush gunman or a sheriff—an' these men will be playin' to the crowd an' yellin' for your blood. The't's the Texas of it.

"You'll have to hide forever in the brakes or you'll have to kill such men. . . . Buck, I reckon this ain't cheerful news to a decent chap like you. I'm only tellin' you because I've taken a likin' to you, an' I seen right off thet you ain't border wise."

When Duane went out with Euchre the sun was setting behind a blue range of mountains across the river in Mexico. The valley appeared to open to the southwest.

It was a tranquil beautiful scene. Somewhere in a house near at hand a woman was singing. And in the road Duane saw a little Mexican boy driving home some cows, one of which wore a bell. The sweet, happy voice of a woman and a whistling bare-foot boy—these seemed utterly out of place here.

Euchre presently led to the square and the row of rough houses Duane remembered.

"Let's have a look in here," said Euchre.

Duane had to bend his head to enter the door. He found himself in a very large room enclosed by adobe walls and roofed with brush. It was full of rude benches, tables, seats.

At one corner a number of kegs and barrels lay side by side in a rack. A Mexican boy was lighting lamps hung on posts that sustained the log rafters of the roof.

"The only feller who's goin' to put a close eye on you is Benson," said

Euchre. "He runs the place an' sells drinks. The gang calls him Jackrabbit Benson because he's always got his eye peeled an' his ear cocked. Don't notice him if he looks you over, Buck.

"Benson is scared to death of every newcomer who rustles into Bland's camp. An' the reason, I take it, is because he's done somebody dirt. He's hidin'. Not from a sheriff or ranger! Men who hide from them don't act like Jackrabbit Benson.

"He's hidin' from some guy who's huntin' him to kill him. Wal, I'm always expectin' to see some feller ride in here an' throw a gun on Benson. Can't say I'd be grieved."

Duane casually glanced in the direction indicated, and he saw a spare, gaunt man with a face strikingly white beside the red and bronze and dark skins of the men around him. It was a cadaverous face.

The black mustache hung down; a heavy lock of black hair dropped down over the brow; deep-set, hollow, staring eyes looked out piercingly. The man had a restless, alert, nervous manner.

He put his hands on the board that served as a bar and stared at Duane. But when he met Duane's glance he turned hurriedly to go on serving out liquor.

"What have you against him?" inquired Duane, as he sat down beside Euchre.

He asked more for something to say than from real interest. What did he care about a mean, haunted, craven-faced criminal?

"Wal, mebbe I'm cross-grained," replied Euchre apologetically. "Shore an outlaw an' rustler such as me can't be touchy. But I never stole nothin' but cattle from some rancher who never missed 'em, anyway. Thet sneak Benson—he was the means of puttin' a little girl in Bland's way."

"Girl?" queried Duane, now with real attention.

"Shore. Bland's great on women.

I'll tell you about this girl when we get out of here. Some of the gang are goin' to be sociable, an' I can't talk about the chief."

During the ensuing half hour a number of outlaws passed by Duane and Euchre, halted for a greeting, or sat down for a moment. They were all gruff, loud-voiced, merry, and good natured. Duane replied civilly and agreeably when he was personally addressed, but he refused all invitations to drink and gamble.

Evidently he had been accepted, in a way, as one of their clan. No one made any hint of an allusion to his affair with Bosomer. Duane saw readily that Euchre was well liked. One outlaw borrowed money from him; another asked for tobacco.

By the time it was dark the big room was full of outlaws and Mexicans, most of whom were engaged at *monte*. These gamblers, especially the Mexicans, were intense and quiet. The noise in the place came from the drinkers, the loungers.

Duane had seen gambling resorts; some of the famous ones in San Antonio and El Paso; a few in border towns where license went unchecked. But this place of Jackrabbit Benson's impressed him as one where guns and knives were accessories to the game.

To his perhaps rather distinguishing eye the most prominent thing about the gamblers appeared to be their weapons. On several of the tables were piles of silver—Mexican pesos—as large and high as the crown of his hat. There were also piles of gold and silver in United States coin. Duane needed no experienced eyes to see that betting was heavy and that heavy sums exchanged hands.

The Mexicans showed a sterner obsession, an intenser passion. Some of the Americans staked freely, nonchalantly, as befitted men to whom money was nothing.

"Bland's not here to-night," Euchre was saying. "He left to-day on one

of his trips, takin' Alloway an' some others. But his other man, Rugg—he's here. See him standin' with them three fellers, all close to Benson.

"Rugg's the little bow-legged man with the half of his face shot off. He's one-eyed. But he can shore see out of the one he's got. An', darn me, there's Hardin! You know him. He's got an outlaw gang as big as Bland's. Hardin is standin' next to Benson. See how quiet an' unassumin' he looks.

"Yes, thet's Hardin. He comes here once in a while to see Bland. They're friends, which's shore strange. Do you see thet greaser there—the one with gold an' lace on his sombrero? Thet's Manuel, a Mexican bandit. He's a great gambler. Comes here often to drop his coin.

"Next to him is Bill Marr—the feller with the bandanna round his head. Bill rode in the other day with some fresh bullet-holes. He's been shot more'n any feller I ever heard of. He's full of lead. Funny, because Bill's no trouble-hunter, an', like me, he'd rather run than shoot. But he's the best rustler Bland's got—a grand rider an' a wonder with cattle.

"An' see the tow-headed youngster! Thet's Kid Fuller—the kid of Bland's gang. Fuller has hit the pace hard, an' he won't last the year out on the border. He killed his sweetheart's father, got run out of Staceytown, took to stealin' hosses. An' next, he's here with Bland. Another boy gone wrong, an' now shore a hard nut."

Euchre went on calling Duane's attention to other men just as he happened to glance over them. Any one of them would have been a marked man in a respectable crowd. Here each took his place with more or less distinction, according to the record of his past wild prowess and his present possibilities.

For a time Duane was wrapped in painful recollections; but Euchre's heavy hand, clapping with a warning hold on his arm, brought him back to outside things.

The hum of voices, the clink of coin, the loud laughter had ceased. There was a silence that manifestly had followed some unusual word or action sufficient to still the room.

It was broken by a harsh curse and the scrape of a bench on the floor. Some man had risen.

"You stacked the cards, you—"

"Say that twice," another voice replied, so different in its cool, ominous tone from the other.

"I'll say it twice," returned the first gamester in hot haste. "I'll say it three times. I'll whistle it. Are you deaf? You light-fingered gent! You stacked the cards!"

Silence ensued, deeper than before, pregnant with meaning. For all that Duane saw, not an outlaw moved for a full moment. Then, suddenly, the room was full of disorder as men rose and ran and dived everywhere.

"Run or duck!" yelled Euchre, close to Duane's ear.

With that he dashed for the door. Duane leaped after him. They ran into a jostling mob. Heavy gun-shots and hoarse yells hurried the crowd. Duane was with pell-mell out into the darkness. There they all halted, and several peeped in at the door.

"Who was the Kid callin'?" asked one outlaw.

"Bud Marsh," replied another.

"I reckon them fust shots was Bud's. *Adios* Kid. It was comin' to him," went on yet another.

"How many shots?"

"Three or four, I counted."

"Three heavy an' one light. Thet light one was the Kid's thirty-eight . . . Listen! There's the Kid hollerin' now. He ain't cashed, anyway."

At this juncture most of the outlaws began to file back into the room. Duane thought he had seen and heard enough in Benson's den for one night, and he started slowly down the walk. Presently Euchre caught up with him.

"Nobody hurt much, which's shore some strange," said. "The Kid—young Fuller thet I was tellin' you

about—he was 'drinkin' an' losin'. Lost his nut, too, callin' Bud Marsh thet way. Bud's as straight at cards as any of 'em. Somebody grabbed Bud, who shot into the roof. An' Fuller's arm was knocked up. He only hit a greaser."

To Duane that day had seemed the length of a week. He was weary, and glad to lie down.

But sleep did not come soon to him any more, as once it had. His mind was thronged with images.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO WOMEN.

NEXT morning Duane found that a moody and despondent spell had fastened on him. Wishing to be alone he went out and walked a trail leading round the river bluff. He thought and thought.

After a while he made out that the trouble with him probably was that he could not resign himself to his fate. He abhorred the possibility chance seemed to hold in store for him. He could not believe there was no hope. But what to do appeared beyond his power to tell.

When he returned to the shack Euchre was cooking dinner.

"Say, Buck, I've news for you," he said, and his tone conveyed either pride in his possession of such news, or pride in Duane. "Feller named Bradley rode in this mornin'. He'd heard some about you.

"Told about the ace of spades they put over the bullet holes in thet cow-puncher Bain you plugged. Then there was a rancher shot at a water-hole twenty miles south of Wellston. Reckon you didn't do it?"

"No, I certainly did not," replied Duane.

"Wal, you get the blame. It ain't nothin' for a feller to be saddled with gun-plays he never made. An' Buck, if you ever get famous, as seems likely, you'll be blamed for many a crime.

The border'll make outlaw an' murderer out of you. . . . Wal, thet's enough of thet. I've more news. You're goin' to be popular."

"Popular? What do you mean?"

"I met Bland's wife this mornin'. She seen you the other day when you rode in. She shore wants to meet you an' so do some of the other women in camp. They always want to meet the new fellers who've just come in. It's lonesome for women here an' they like to hear news from the towns."

"Well, Euchre, I don't want to be impolite, but I'd rather not meet any women," rejoined Duane.

"I was afraid you wouldn't. Don't blame you much. I was hopin' though, you might talk a little to thet poor lonesome kid."

"What kid?" inquired Duane, in surprise.

"Didn't I tell you about Jennie—the girl Bland's holdin' here—the one Jackrabbit Benson had a hand in stealin'?"

"You mentioned a girl. That's all. Tell me now," replied Duane abruptly.

"Wal, I got it this way. Mebbe it's straight an' mebbe it ain't. Some years ago Benson made a trip over the river to buy mescal an' other drinks. He'll sneak over there once in a while. An' as I get it he run across a gang of greasers with some gringo prisoners.

"I don't know, but I reckon there was some barterin', perhaps murderin'. Anyway Benson fetched the girl back. She was more dead than alive. But it turned out she was only starved an' scared half to death. She hadn't been harmed.

"I reckon she was then about fourteen years old. Benson's idee, he said, was to use her in his den, sellin' drinks an' the like. But I never went much on Jackrabbit's word. Bland seen the kid right off an' took her—bought her from Benson.

"You can gamble Bland didn't do thet from notions of chivalry. I ain't gainsayin', however, but thet Jennie was better off with Kate Bland. She's

been hard on Jennie, but she's kept Bland an' the other men from treatin' the kid shameful. Late Jennie has growed into an all-fired pretty girl, an' Kate is powerful jealous of her. I can see trouble brewin' over there in Bland's cabin.

"That's why I wish you'd come over with me. Bland's hardly ever home. His wife's invited you. Shore if she gets sweet on you, as she has on—Wal, thet'd complicate matters. But you'd get to see Jennie, an' mebbe you could help her.

"Mind, I aint hintin' nothin'. I'm just wantin' to put her in your way. You're a man an' can think for yourself. I had a baby girl once, an' if she'd lived she be as big as Jennie now, an' by gosh I wouldn't want her here in Bland's camp."

"I'll go, Euchre. Take me over," replied Duane.

He felt Euchre's eyes upon him. The old outlaw, however, had no more to say.

In the afternoon Euchre set off with Duane, and soon they reached Bland's cabin. Duane remembered it as the one where he had seen the pretty woman watching him ride by. He could not recall what she looked like.

The cabin was the same as the other adobe structures in the valley, but it was larger, and pleasantly located, rather high up in grove of cottonwoods. In the windows and upon the porch were evidences of a woman's hand. Through the open door Duane caught a glimpse of bright Mexican blankets and rugs.

Euchre knocked upon the side of the door.

"Is that you, Euchre?" asked a girl's voice, low, hesitatingly.

The tone of it, rather deep and with a note of fear, struck Duane. He wondered what she would be like.

"Yes, it's me, Jennie. Where's Mrs. Bland?" answered Euchre.

"She went over to Deger's. There's somebody sick," replied the girl.

Euchre turned and whispered some-

thing about luck. The snap of the outlaw's eyes was added significance to Duane.

"Jennie, come out or let us come in. Here's the young man I was tellin' you about," Euchre said.

"Oh—I can't! I look so—so—"

"Never mind how you look," interrupted the outlaw, in a whisper. "It ain't no time to care for thet. Here's young Duane. Jennie, he's no rustler, no thief. He's different. Come out, Jennie, an' mebbe he'll—"

Euchre did not complete his sentence. He had spoken low, with his glance shifting from side to side.

But what he said was sufficient to bring the girl quickly. She appeared in the doorway with downcast eyes and a stain of red in her white cheek. She had a pretty, sad face, and bright hair.

"Don't be bashful, Jennie," said Euchre. "You an' Duane have a chance to talk a little. Now I'll go fetch Mrs. Bland, but I won't be hurryin'."

With that Euchre went away through the cottonwoods.

"I'm glad to meet you, Miss—Miss Jennie," said Duane. "Euchre didn't mention your last name. He asked me to come over to—"

Duane's attempt at pleasantry halted short when Jennie lifted her lashes to look at him. Some kind of a shock went through him.

Her gray eyes were beautiful, but it had not been beauty that cut short his speech. He seemed to see a tragic struggle between hope and doubt that shone in her piercing gaze. She kept looking, and Duane could not break the silence. It was no ordinary moment.

"What did you come here for?" she asked at last.

"To see you," replied Duane, glad to speak.

"Why?"

"Well—Euchre thought—he wanted me to talk to you, cheer you up a bit," replied Duane somewhat lamely.

The earnest eyes embarrassed him.

"Euchre's good. He's the only per-

son in this awful place who's been good to me. But he's afraid of Bland. He said you were different. Who are you?"

Duane told her.

"You're not a robber or rustler or murderer or some bad man come here to hide?"

"No, I'm not," replied Duane, trying to smile.

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm on the dodge. You know what that means. I got in a shooting scrape at home and had to run off. When it blows over I hope to go back."

"But you can't be honest here?"

"Yes, I can."

"You fought Bosomer the other day?"

"In self-defense I crippled him."

"Oh, I know what these outlaws are— Yes, you're different." She kept the strained gaze upon him, but hope was kindling, and the hard lines of her youthful face were softening.

Something sweet and warm stirred deep in Duane as he realized the unfortunate girl was experiencing a birth of trust in him.

"Maybe you're the man to save me—to take me away before it's too late!"

Duane's spirit leaped.

"Maybe I am," he replied instantly.

She seemed to check a blind impulse to run into his arms. Her cheek flamed, her lips quivered, her bosom swelled under her ragged dress. Then the glow began to fade; doubt once more assailed her.

"It can't be— You're only—after me, too, like Bland—like all of them."

Duane's long arms went out and his hands clasped her shoulders. He shook her.

"Look at me—straight in the eye— There are decent men. Haven't you a father—a brother?"

"They're dead—killed by raiders. We lived in Dimmit County. I was carried away," Jennie replied hurriedly.

She put up an appealing hand to him.

"Forgive me. I believe—I know you're good. It was only—I live so much in fear—I'm half crazy—I've almost forgotten what good men are like—. Mr. Duane, you'll help me?"

"Yes, Jennie, I will. Tell me how. What must I do? Have you any plan?"

"Oh, no. But take me away."

"I'll try," said Duane simply.

"That won't be easy, though. I must have time to think. You must help me. There are many things to consider. Horses—food, trails, and then, the best time to make the attempt. Are you watched—kept prisoner?"

"No. I could have run off lots of times. But I was afraid. I'd only have fallen into worse hands. Euchre has told me that. Mrs. Bland beats me, half starves me, but she has kept me from her husband. She's been as good as that and I'm grateful.

"She hasn't done it for love of me, though. She always hated me. And lately she's growing jealous. There was a man came here by the name of Spence—so he called himself. He tried to be kind to me. But she wouldn't let him. She was in love with him. She's a bad woman.

"Bland finally shot Spence and that ended that. She's been jealous ever since. I hear her fighting with Bland about me. She swears she'll kill me before he gets me. And Bland laughs in her face. Then I've heard Chess Alloway try to persuade Bland to give me to him. But Bland doesn't laugh then.

"Just lately before Bland went away things almost came to a head. I couldn't sleep. I wished Mrs. Bland would kill me. I'll certainly kill myself if— Duane, you must be quick if you'd save me."

"I realize that," replied he thoughtfully. "I think my difficulty will be to fool Mrs. Bland. If she suspected me she'd have the whole gang of outlaws on me at once."

"She would that. You've got to be careful—and quick."