

The maid asked him in and led him to a parlor. It was a large room, light enough, yet full of unfamiliar shapes. He stood there uncertain, waiting. The maid returned to say that Miss Lee would be right in.

Whoever Miss Lee was, she must have connections with wealthy people. Duane felt long-absent associations become vivid in his mind.

The pictures, the curtains, the rich furniture, the long, low windows opening like doors out into a garden of flowers recalled rooms at Wellston that he had forgotten. His utter strangeness in such environment manifested itself in the fact that he did not want to step. He thought of his boots, his spurs, the dust—which things, at the moment, he had not upon him at all.

How quiet the house! Duane felt oppressed and he imagined it the atmosphere of that rich parlor. There was a painting of a soldier over the mantel, a gallant officer wearing the gray. He wondered if it was a picture of Colonel Waite. He had never heard that name before.

This woman he expected to see—she would come in soon. What was he to say? He felt thick-tongued. All he recalled was the appeal she had made to Jeff Aiken. If she had known him as a boy, which probably was the case, what difference would she see in him now?

Then—so much she must have to tell him! He wished she would hurry. He had called too early. The house was so quiet. It was not the outdoor quiet, so familiar to him, but a closed-in, shut-up silence, somehow pregnant with meaning. He thought he heard something and listened all the more keenly.

Then came a faint rustle, a soft step. Somebody—probably Miss Lee—was in the parlor with him. Duane knew it, and the sense of her presence, or some strange fact pertaining to it, had the effect on him of the old fancies that drifted in the darkness round

his bed. An unaccountable certainty of a spirit held Duane momentarily stiff. There was a spirit in the room—the spirit of some one long dead—or—

Slowly he turned. A slender woman in white stood in the door, one hand clinging to the curtains, the other at her breast. She was whiter than her dress—as white as a flower. Her eyes were dark, strained, staring, beautiful. The look of them Duane had seen before. Yes, she was that Miss Lee of the Shirley episode.

But she was somebody else—somebody more—

Duane's lips uttered her name, yet he had a vague sense of not hearing his own voice. The movement of his lips, his hand, seemed to animate her. She had been as still as a statue, and now she was as if shot through and through with life. That supporting hand upon the curtain appeared to uphold her quivering form.

The other hand pressed deep into her heaving bosom as if to stop a bursting heart. The dark and passionate fire of her eyes was now an agony or a glory, Duane could not tell which.

He did not know that she tried to speak—failed—failed again.

She was only another phantom. He imagined it—tortured his mind to place her.

"Oh, Duane—don't you—know—"

The low voice, deep, sweet as an old chord, faltered and broke and failed.

Duane sustained a sudden shock and an instant of paralyzed confusion of thought, when the old cold sickness of fancy fought a resurging might of memory that awakened to the sweetness of a voice for years unheard, never forgotten.

"Oh, Duane, don't you—know—me?"

She moved, she swept out her hands, and the wonder of her eyes dimmed in a flood of tears. She stepped blindly. And Duane's sight, straining with all the abnormal keenness of stunned

faculties leaping back to power, caught a slight but unmistakable limp in her step.

In a flash all that had been strange about her vanished. He knew that faltering step. He was back in another world—one he had seared over in his heart and closed forever.

"My God! Who are you?" he cried hoarsely.

Then she met him, arms outstretched.

"Jennie! Jennie! Jennie!" she sobbed.

Swift as light Duane caught her up and held her crushed to his breast. The past, like deadening scales, fell from him. He stood holding her tight, with the feel of her warm, throbbing breast and the clasp of her clinging arms as flesh and blood realities to fight a terrible fear that this was only another and the worst of those moments haunted by phantoms.

Despite a stunned consciousness, he never lost the true sense of the exquisite life of that moment. He felt her and the might of it was stronger than all the demons of his unhappy years. Jennie was not dead. She was alive—alive—alive! And he held her as if she had been his soul—his strength on earth—his hope of heaven—against his lips.

The strife of doubt all past, the encroaching of old dark moods fell short and faded. He found his sight again. And there rushed over him a tide of emotion unutterably sweet and full, strong like an intoxicating wine, deep as his nature, something glorious and terrible as the blaze of the sun to one long in darkness.

He had become an outcast, a wanderer, a gunman, a victim of circumstances—he had loved and lost and suffered worse than death in that loss—he had gone down the endless bloody trail, a killer of men, a fugitive whose mind slowly and inevitably closed to all except the instinct to survive and a black despair.

And now, with this woman in his

arms, her swelling breast against his, in this moment almost of resurrection, he bent under a storm of passion and joy possible only to him who had endured so much.

"Jennie! Jennie!" he whispered unsteadily. "No dream—no ghost—but you! I didn't know you."

"Yes, Jennie. And you never knew me!" She stirred and lifted her face from his breast. Her hands unclasped from his neck, fell to his shoulders, and caught there. A stain of red came into her white face. "Have I changed—so much—from that time over the Rim-Rock?"

"Changed! You're not the same girl! You've only that old look in your eyes. I saw you limp—that told me."

"I'm still a little lame."

"It was that. How everything rushed back! I saw you as on that first day in the cabin. It's all clearer than the thousand times I've dreamed it. Euchre and Bland and that fierce woman, his wife, and Alloway! The little shack where you hid and nursed me. Jennie, I went back there—lived there a whole year with dreams and ghosts."

He shuddered and looked out of the window, far beyond, in cold and sick fancy, to the wilds of desert gorge. Jennie lifted a hand and touched his cheek with ineffable tenderness.

"I lived there alone—alone like a crippled wolf. Oh, the lonely nights—the black nights with their faces. But, Jennie, I found one thing—my salvation then."

He bent over her, looking deep into the dark, wet eyes.

"What?" she whispered.

"I found I loved you, and one of my bitterest regrets was that you never knew it. Hear it now! I love you! I've always loved you. I learned to love you there at Bland's cabin when we planned to save you. But it never came to me till I'd lost you."

"Then the memory was all that kept my mind from going. Your eyes

used to haunt me, Jennie. I could see them dark and sad and watchful as you peered through the window at me with that woman, Kate Bland. It all comes back.

"Jennie, you must have much to tell me; and I have much to tell you. Can you tell me—you care for me? When I think of what you must have done! Jennie, haven't you loved me—a little?"

She uttered a low laugh that was half sob and her arms slipped up to his neck again.

"A little! I nearly died of love for you," she whispered. "I've never lived a wakeful hour without loving you, longing for you, praying for you. Oh, Duane, Duane, I love you!"

Their lips met in their first kiss. The sweetness, the fire, of her mouth seemed so new, so strange, so irresistible to Duane. His sore and hungry heart throbbed with thick and heavy beats. He felt the outcast's need of love; and he gave up to the enthralling moment.

She met him half-way, returned kiss for kiss, clasp for clasp, her face scarlet, her eyes closed, till, her passion and strength spent, she fell back upon his shoulder.

Duane suddenly thought she was going to faint. He divined then that she had understood him, would have denied him nothing, not even her life, in that moment. But she was overcome, and he suffered a pang of regret at his unrestraint.

"Jennie—don't mind it—I'm rough—I was carried away," he said. "I never knew life could be so sweet."

"I don't mind—I'm glad," she replied, slipping out of his arms. "But my breath went—and—and— Come, let's sit down here by the window."

She led him to a sofa and they sat down. It seemed then that each looked at the other with different eyes, hers dark and sad and troubled, his glowing and soft, full of wonder.

"Jennie, I know you now, yet you're a stranger," he said earnestly. "You

were a pretty girl in a wild and neglected way; now you're a beautiful woman, with only your eyes and your voice to prove you the old Jennie.

"There have been many strange and amazing things in my life, but none like this meeting with you. I remember you well as I last saw you. Years ago—terrible years for me! You wore my coat over a white cotton dress stained by rain and mud. You had no hat. Your hair was like an Indian's. You sat my big horse, and as I made off into the mesquits to catch your horse you said: 'Don't be long!' I lost you then. My God! Yet here you are, stranger than any dream! Jennie, begin there—where I lost you at that old cabin—and tell me your story."

"Yes; I want to tell you," she began softly. As she took his hand in hers tears blurred the glow of her eyes. "After all, my story isn't so strange. That day we were separated so long ago—there were cowboys hiding in the mesquits. Cowboys on the trail of a rustler that they thought was in the cabin.

"When you left me they jumped out of the thicket and dragged me away with them. They were rough, but kind. They took no stock in my story. They left me at a rancher's house and went on after rustlers. The country was overrun with cattle-thieves at that time.

"The rancher's wife was good to me, helped me to the nearest town, and arranged for me to travel to Wellston. There I went to your mother and told her my story. She gave me a home with her and I loved her as if she had been my own mother.

"I helped with the housework, learned to make my clothes, and besides went to school. I worked and I studied, but I never forgot. Your uncle Jim advertised and searched for relatives of mine.

"He found no relatives, but he did find property of my father's and my uncle's, both of whom were killed by

raiders in Mexico. All this property was being held at Dresden in Dimmick County. It came to me, and includes the farm where I was born, a big ranch of my uncle's, and city property, too.

"My uncle was a director in the Dresden bank. I was poor and forlorn when you found me out there in the Rim-Rock. Now I'm rich. Think of that, Duane!

"I was eighteen when I came into the property. But I continued to live with your mother. You, Duane, were the common bond between us, and we needed each other. I suddenly found myself a young woman of consequence, and then I became active in my efforts to get you pardoned.

"Governor Stone hates the wild life of Texas. He's from the eastern boundary, and has never understood the desert and river country. I made friends in Austin, but it took us a year to get the pardon from the Governor. The adjutant-general was strong for us, and Captain MacNelly of the rangers brought the influence which won our case.

"I don't know the particulars; but I fancy Captain MacNelly said you might give him valuable information regarding the border. Anyway, we won. MacNelly had the pardon and set out to locate you. This was a long and anxious year for your mother and me.

"Captain MacNelly failed to find you. Then your uncle Jim and I set out on the quest, under the hampering orders of the ranger. We must be secret. It was not to be generally known that you were pardoned. We did not understand the reasons for this secrecy, but we obeyed. And that's why you were so hard to find.

"I have been to most of the towns and villages of southwestern Texas this side of the Nueces. Wherever I heard that you had friends there I stayed and made them my friends. It was no easy task. The stones of the desert are no dumber than those loyal friends of yours on the border.

"I had to guess, and love was my guide. I left all with a message. But you must never have visited any of these people since I had. I would spend a month traveling about, then go home to Wellston.

"It was on the beginning of one of these trips that I happened to go to Shirley two weeks ago. There you had enemies. I made friends with Jeff Aiken and his family. I tried to prove to him that you couldn't have harmed his wife.

"He was sensible, but hard to move. He did not talk much; but he seemed to like me, and I made up my mind to go to Shirley again. I was about to leave—the other day—when you rode into the town. Duane, I recognized you on sight. No one could fail that who had ever seen you. Yet how terribly changed you were!

"That mob! Oh, Heaven, what horror that time was to me! I recognized you; but I couldn't tell them. I prayed they couldn't prove your identity. Sibert, the cowboy, saved you that day. I had met him before—talked with him—interested him in my mission there. He fought the mob.

"Then Aiken came up, so cold and black. I believed that would be the end. My heart was bursting. But I flung myself before him into that mob, tried to say something. Then I guess I fainted, for I had to be told the rest that happened.

"Sibert told me. He was glad. And Aiken said he believed you'd go to see MacNelly. So I waited in Shirley. When that ranger came to me with messages I believe happiness began for me, the first I'd known for ten years.

"I thought it best to have you meet me here in Ensenada, where I have friends. Colonel Waite was close to my uncle. Then you are not known hereabouts. So I came and waited."

She ended in a whisper and Duane felt her hot tears fall upon the hand she clasped. He sat silent a little while, trying to comprehend.

"I'm so glad—so thankful—for

you," he said huskily. "Now tell me of home."

"You've never had a word from home in all these years?"

"Not one, till the other day when I saw MacNelly."

"Dear, I should have told you first of home instead of myself. It's all good news, Duane. Your mother's growing old, but she's strong, vigorous, bright—she'll live many years yet. Uncle Jim is well. Kitty is growing up—she's pretty and clever—she has a beau. And they all love you, never forget you."

"But to go back. When I first got to Wellston your folks weren't living in the home you were brought up in. I did not know that then. Afterward I learned they'd seen some poor times and lost the old home. There wasn't much money."

"Your Uncle Jim did what he could, but that wasn't much. When my wind-fall came I soon changed all that. We went back to the old home, fixed it up, bought the fields and woods adjoining. It's now one of the prettiest places in Wellston."

"Kitty's in the high school. She's full of fun, very popular among the boys and girls, and as I said before there's a beau."

"Uncle Jim has settled down, getting ready to be an old man, he says. He sits on the porch and smokes a great deal. He's always cheerful and he'll talk. But he never mentions you to any one except me, and that's not often. I think long ago he gave up hope. Your father's end would be yours."

"Mother Duane is different. She has two sides to her, it seems. For the most part she's gentle, kind, sweet, always busy, always doing something for some one. But she has moods. And then it's easy to see she's your mother. For then she's thoughtful, dark, stern. She's quick as fire at those times."

"I've heard her say, when report of some devilry was going round, that if

you were home it would soon be stopped. She was never ashamed of your gun record. And at any hint of your outlawry she was furious. 'Law!' she would cry. 'What's law and what's the State? My grandfather and my father and men of their kind made wild Texas safe for homes.'

"We fought the Indians and the greasers. We bled for years. And now because my son was a fighter the State makes him a criminal. If there's a criminal it's I—for I gave him birth and the blood to live on this border!' She has never given up hope of having you back home, free."

"She listened when we told her of your pardon, and she read it. But I think she felt scorn for the Governor who granted it. She always watches, and often she says: 'He'll ride in some day.'"

All this was sweet to Duane, and his thankfulness was in keeping with his joy. Out of it, however, gradually grew a pang which, he divined, was caused by the fact that he must tell Jennie he had been pardoned only to go on a service more perilous than his old, lonely, bloody trail. She must be told, but how could he do it? The thought brought a chilling sensation as if a cold hand had been laid upon some warm and vital place deep within him. This thought loomed larger and darker, so that suddenly he was afraid.

"So your name is Lee—Jennie Lee?" he said, trying to make conversation. "You know I never heard your last name out there on the river. And, after all, Sellers wasn't guilty."

"Sellers? I don't remember any man by that name," replied Jennie.

"That day when the cowboys made off with you. I trailed the tracks of my horse, which you rode. They led to a village. There I got on the trail of Sellers. I was made to believe he had you. I trailed him for years, long after I had any hope you were alive."

"At last I met him in a gambling-room in Brownsville. We drew, and

he died with his lips shut. So I never knew what part he really played. I believed he had taken you, but I never proved it. And now I find him innocent!"

"Poor man! Oh, Duane, it was terrible to kill him, not knowing," cried Jennie. "Who was he? I hope not any man—"

"Sellers was bad enough. He was the worst kind of thief, a crooked cattleman. Then he was handy with guns and had used them freely. I'm carrying his bullet to this day, here in my shoulder. Sometimes it hurts me. Well, God knows I'm sorry I killed him."

Jennie placed a quick and tender arm round the shoulder he indicated.

"Duane, forget him and all the others. Forget!"

She whispered in his ear and leaned her face against his cheek. He felt more than warmth, tenderness, sympathy in her voice and touch. Again some subtle suggestion conveyed to him the impression that she understood. Perhaps her love made her divine his remorse. But he prayed that she could not see into the gulf of his soul, that black pit of fancies.

"Forget!"

"I shall make you forget," she whispered and slid upon his knee and into his arms.

"I believe you could—if—"

"If what?" she asked softly as he hesitated.

Duane groaned. He who had endured mental and physical agony beyond the limit of man's strength grew suddenly weak, unable to repress his emotion. It was because he had to tell her. He bowed his head over her as she clung to him, and had not the courage to let her see his face.

"If what, Duane? You must forget your miseries. There are no 'ifs.' I can make up to you much that you've lost. We can be happy. You will forget."

"Not—just yet," he said and could not control his voice.

He felt her start, then grow still and stiff in his arms, then slip from him. And he hid his face in his hands. There was a silence, and as it grew longer and that cold, sick darkness blotted out the brightness of joy, he prayed she would never speak.

"Duane, there's something you've not told me?" she said bravely.

"Yes."

"What—what is it?"

He kept silent because he could not answer then.

"Something—to do—with MacNelly?"

Her voice was now far away, low, and not natural.

He nodded with bowed head.

"Duane!"

That brought him up, thrilling, as might have a cry for help.

If Jennie had been white at the moment of their meeting, she now looked like death. She had guessed the condition of the Governor's pardon, the fatal service sworn to MacNelly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DUANE'S WORD.

JENNIE slipped to her knees and her trembling hands reached up to Duane.

"Don't tell me MacNelly has made you a ranger?" she implored.

"That's it," replied Duane and brought himself to face her. He feared a breakdown or at least a storm of weeping. But apparently she grew calmer now that the truth was out.

"He didn't make you a ranger just for an excuse for the pardon?"

"No. It's secret special service."

"Ah! What is it, Duane?"

"I'm to make my way west, find where Cheseldine hides out with his picked men, get in with them, and when they're ready to ride out on another raid or bank robbery I'm to plan a trap so MacNelly can kill them or capture them."

"Oh, Heaven! Duane, was it for that MacNelly got your pardon? He

might as well have killed you. To send you on a mission like that! Duane, it's impossible. With your reputation, your known hatred of border criminals—with the death of Bland, Alloway, Hardin, all those outlaws against you, why, it would be utterly hopeless—impossible!”

“No, Jennie, not that. It could be done by good management and luck.”

“I mean you'd never succeed—and then come back,” said Jennie. “You might do the same out there as you did in Bland's camp. But the risk's greater. I remember all about Cheseldine. I've never heard his name since we got away from Bland; but now it all comes back—Bland and Alloway, Hardin, too, in their talks.

“Bland was mortally jealous of Cheseldine, wanted to be like him, to have his power, to rule a gang as big. Cheseldine was then supposed to control all the outlaws up the river. No one knew the extent of his rule. No one knew who were or were not his friends. There were villages that lived off him.”

“Jennie, did you ever hear the name of his hiding-place?” queried Duane eagerly.

“Yes, I did. Oh, I can't remember. Bland knew it, but I never heard *him* tell of it. Somebody told me. Who? Let me think. I remember Alloway once said outlaws were faithful to Cheseldine. Euchre! He told me. Poor old Euchre! If ever there was a good outlaw he was one. He told me. He had been in every outlaw camp in Texas. Let me remember!”

With her hands on Duane's knee, her brows knitted, her dark eyes shadowy with memories of that tragic past she had tried to forget, Jennie remained still as a stone for a long moment.

“It all comes back,” she said, with a shudder and her eyes closed. “Euchre's talks to me. I remember every word. He used to try to keep my mind off my misery. He told me everything he ever knew or saw or did.

“Cheseldine was an outlaw with brains, the planner, but not the doer. Poggin was Cheseldine's lieutenant. Handy Poggin, rustler, murderer, bank-robber, gunman, everything bad, the worst and most dangerous outlaw since the days of Murrell. Cheseldine plans, Poggin executes. There are Boldt, Fletcher—Jim Fletcher—Blossom Kane, Panhandle Smith, Phil Knell—outlaws bad and cunning enough to work with Poggin.

“Cheseldine's hiding-place is on Mount Ord in the Big Bend country. He has a beautiful ranch in a valley. It's well hidden. Euchre said he was there once.

“Cheseldine and his men work in Brewster, Presidio and Jeff Davis counties, sending cattle west along the Rio Grande. It's desert and mountain country, with ranches on the plains and valleys. They rustle cattle west of this territory and operate in other ways to the south. Valentine, Marfa, these towns are more associated with Cheseldine's gang than any others. But all the towns are dominated by the outlaws.

“Euchre told me this more than four years ago. I suppose conditions are the same now or even worse. MacNelly said as much. West of the Nueces is bad enough. But the Big Bend country! Duane, no rangers or sheriffs, even soldiers, have ever been in there.”

“That's just why MacNelly picked me out to go, I suppose,” replied Duane. “I can ride in there on my nerve, and if it comes to a show-down my name may help me along. I'm not bothered about how I'll be received. It's accomplishing my job and getting away alive—there's the rub.”

“Duane, you can never do it. Now, honestly, don't you think MacNelly's ambition for the service has led him to give you a forlorn task?”

“Yes. But that was the condition under which the Governor pardoned me. Jennie, I'm a free man now, a ranger, with an honest calling. You

ought to know what that means to me. I've had an infamous name for years. Presently that disgrace will be lifted."

"You exaggerate your disgrace. There are many Texans proud of you now as there are others who believe you're bad as you're painted. Duane, the vital point with me is not your pardon, your name, your sworn ranger service—but your life!"

She rose and stood before him, still white, though calm now, with steady hands. Underneath the shadow of love and trouble in her dark eyes smoldered a fire. She looked stronger, older then.

"Jennie, you mean this—that I have already received more than my share of narrow escapes? Logically, I can't look further to a kind Providence? Sooner or later the gun-fighter, whether he be outlaw or ranger, must meet his match—and the inevitable end?"

"I mean just that," she replied solemnly. "If you don't put up your gun and get out of Texas you're doomed. It can't be otherwise."

"Get out of Texas!" echoed Duane. The idea was new to him, though in his early days as a fugitive he had tried to plan such a thing. Then he sighed. "*Quien sabe?* I dare say you're right. But what's the use of talking any more about it? You had to be told. But let's talk of other things—of our being together now—of a possible future."

"I'm thinking of a possible future," she rejoined with a smile sweet and sad. "Duane, let me go back to MacNelly."

"What for?"

"To entreat him to release you."

"Why, he wouldn't. He's keen to do this thing. And I don't blame him. MacNelly's a fine fellow; he's not wanting in sympathy. But he's got a man's job, and you couldn't move him."

"Yes, I could. At least, if I couldn't persuade him, I could buy your release. The ranger service is poorly paid. They need money. He could do much

with money. I'll pay him ten thousand dollars to release you."

"Jennie! Oh, you mustn't think of such a thing! He wouldn't consent. Remember, I'm practically bound to Governor Stone as well as Captain MacNelly."

"What Governor Stone would never know wouldn't hurt him," muttered Jennie.

The fire in her eyes had spread. Faint red spots appeared in her white cheeks. Her bosom rose and fell with deep, hurried breaths. Duane saw in her the fighting spirit of Texas and sensed a bursting storm.

"Dear Jennie, look at it this way," he said persuasively. "Thank Heaven I'm a free man now! Think how glad my mother will be. I've a hard job on hand. But you know I'm pretty well able to tackle it. I'll break up Cheseldine's band. And maybe I'll get away safe. There's a chance. Can't you imagine what I'll do with that chance—when all the time I'll know you love me—are waiting for me?"

For all the effect this speech produced, he might as well have kept silent. Her eyes, black now and blazing, were on him.

"Duane, return the pardon to MacNelly and go back to the Nueces. Be an outlaw again! I'll go with you."

Duane stared at her, amazed. He hardly knew what to say. He felt how little he understood women. His heart began to pound, and thrills ran over him. The sweetness of this woman—that she would go back to outlawry with him—appealed with strange power.

"That course wouldn't be dishonorable?" she continued.

"No. But it's impossible. I'd die before I'd drag you into that life. You ought to remember an outlaw's days."

"I do. I'd rather have them again than lose you. Besides, we could hide in some cañon, some valley—and be happy."

"No—no—no."

Duane felt the insidious, creeping

twining strength of some hitherto unknown emotion. It came from her suggestion to be alone with her—to have her—and he realized that he must not let the thing stay before his mind.

Jennie came closer to him then, so close that she almost touched him. Something about her presence, the look of her eyes or the heave of her breast, made that sweet, vague emotion grow.

"Duane, do you love me?" she asked.

"Jennie, you're going to make it harder for me!" he burst out in despair.

"Tell me," she insisted.

"Love you? I love you as no man ever loved a woman. Think of my lonely, wretched life! What I have known of women—of the sweetness of one? And now it bursts on me. Jennie, don't ask me that. I'm afraid of myself. I can't understand."

She came only the closer, until now she touched him, her slender form reaching to his shoulders, and she leaned upon him with her face upturned. He felt her hands on his, and they were soft, clinging, strong, like steel under velvet. He felt the rise and fall—the warmth of her breast.

A tremor ran over him. He tried to draw back, and if he succeeded a little her form swayed with him, pressing closer. She did not speak. She held her face up, and he was compelled to look. It was wonderful now—white, yet glowing, with the red lips parted, the dark eyes alluring. But that was not all. There was passion, unquenchable spirit, woman's resolve deep and mighty as life.

"I love you, Duane," she said. "I could suffer anything for you. I'm not selfish in this. It's for you. I know what your life has been. I can't let you go back to it. Listen—you don't know me. You think you're with the old Jennie. But I'm different. I've suffered and I've learned in these years. I believe I'm right in asking you to give up this ranger service. Will you?"

"Jennie, I can't. How could you ask it?"

"How could you go if you love me?"

"If you were a man you'd understand."

"But I'm a woman. You don't understand that!" she cried passionately.

"Can you expect a man who lives like a hunted wolf to understand the finer feelings of a woman? I am outside, Jennie—the outcast—the outlaw. And even so, I've kept myself different from the others. But Heaven knows—perhaps I'm coarse, hard, inhuman."

"Hush!" She put a hand over his lips. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I meant— Oh, Duane, I'm here ready for your arms—a starved woman—and you don't know it."

Duane became suddenly weak, and when he did take her into his arms he scarcely had strength to life her to a seat beside him. She seemed more than a dead weight. Her calmness had fled. She was throbbing, palpitating, quivering, with hot, wet cheeks and arms that clung to him like vines. She lifted her mouth to him, whispering: "Kiss me!"

Duane bent down, and her arms went round his neck and drew him close. With his lips on hers, he seemed to float away. That kiss closed his eyes, and he could not lift his head. He sat motionless, holding her, blind and helpless, wrapped in a sweet, dark glory.

She kissed him—one long, endless kiss—or else a thousand times. Her lips, her wet cheeks, her hair, the softness, the fragrance of her, the tender, moving clasp of her arms, the swell of her breast—all these enclosed him, bound him. She whispered and murmured broken and incoherent words—words that did not need to be understood, so full were they of sweetness and meaning and love.

Suddenly he found that he was listening to low, clear, vibrant speech, that

dispelled the thickness in his ears, impelled and drew him even more powerfully than had the tender wildness: "The only way! Oh, Duane, we can do it! Who could blame us? You will go straight on from Ensenada. You'll get a through train at Center Junction.

"You'll go through Santone, Austin, perhaps at night. No one would recognize you up there. Travel straight north to St. Louis. There's a hotel I've heard of—the Buell House. Go there and wait. Wait for me! I'll be careful, quiet; no one will suspect anything. But I'll draw what money I have in bank. I sold my uncle's ranch.

"I've been prepared. So if I can't sell the rest we'll still have money—more than we need. I'll slip off and come to St. Louis. Then, oh, Duane, we'll plan our future with this bloody Texas left out of account. We'll never come back. We'll never be heard of again here where we've been known.

"We can go East; we can go abroad; or we can hunt for an out-of-the-way place, somewhere in a pretty country, and make our home and be at peace.

"Oh, Duane, don't refuse! We've suffered so much. This's our chance. Let's take it. I beg you, Duane, dear lonely wanderer, let me find you a home!"

"My Heaven!" cried Duane, shaken to his soul. "You mustn't! If you love me don't—don't! MacNelly, damn him, he knew his man! That's why he got my word."

Jennie enfolded him closer, stronger in her abandonment as he weakened.

"Your word? Yes, but break it! What is your word to your life and my love? I beseech you, break it. No man could be blamed for that. No one will ever know what became of you. See! There's a straw, if you want to grasp it.

"But I—I say damn MacNelly! Damn the Governor! Damn the State! I was an outlaw, too, Duane. That life influenced me, almost ruined me.

It comes out now. I put your life before your honor. I believe your mother would do the same.

"You have paid for that pardon. You have rid the State of many a villain. I repeat, no one will ever know what became of you. I'll leave an impression behind.

"I'll grow sick of Texas. I'll give up hope. I'll confide only in your mother and swear her to silence. MacNelly will think you were killed in your service. He'll never dream you—~~you~~—"

"Yes, that's the hell of it. He'd never dreamed I'd double-crossed him. Oh, Jennie, you're torturing me!"

She did not cease, but seemed to gather more force in this crisis. He could not put her from him. She fell again to loving him, without shame, without joy, passionate, inflamed, unchangeable in her resolve to break his will.

He yielded to her lips and arms, watching her, involuntarily returning her caresses, sure now of her intent, fascinated by the sweetness of her, bewildered, almost lost.

This was what it was to be loved by a woman. His years of outlawry had blotted out any boyish love he might have known. This was what he had to give up—all this wonder of her sweet person, this strange fire he feared yet loved, this mate his deep and tortured soul recognized.

Never until that moment had he divined the meaning of a woman to a man. That meaning was physical, inasmuch that he learned now what beauty was, what marvel in the touch of quickening flesh; and it was spiritual in that he saw there might have been for him, under happier circumstances, a life of noble deeds lived for such a woman.

If he kept his word he must give up love, along, perhaps, with his life. If he won love through dishonor, could he ever rise to the height otherwise possible for the sake of the woman who loved him? Some flash of in-

sight told him no. Perhaps that was the instant of decision.

Jennie wore herself out and lay on his breast, broken in strength but still indomitable in spirit. She seemed in this state more beautiful than ever, and her slenderness, the lightness of her body, its fragility, brought home a new thought to Duane.

She was not strong, she needed a protector—some man to work for her, take care of her. He had to give that up, too. The more he thought the more he found to give up. It was she who had hurled into his mind all this possibility of love, companionship, happiness, home, children. Still, despite the pain of hopeless regret, he was glad she had made him feel that possibility.

Then a trip-hammer warning beat into his brain the truth that he divined in Jennie's signs of recovery. If she ever found strength to abandon herself to the storm of love and passion that she had spent upon him he would be overwhelmed. The thought of it almost broke his will, as indeed it made him tremble.

He rose and let Jennie sit back against the cushions. Her fingers clung weakly to him. Her eyes hurt him. While he fumbled in his pocket for papers, to fetch forth the Governor's pardon, Jennie watched him; and when he laid the paper in her hands she let it drop.

"Give that to mother," he said huskily. "Tell her—maybe I'll come back—there's a chance."

"Don't go! Don't go!" she cried.

"I must. Dear, good-by. Remember I loved you! Jennie, let me go!"

He pulled her hands loose from his; stepped back.

She fell upon her knees with outstretched arms.

"Duane! Duane!" she wailed.

Like a murderer he backed away.

"Jennie—dearest I believe—I'll come back!" he whispered.

These last words were falsehood.

He reached the door, gave her one

last piercing glance—to fix forever in memory that white face with its dark, staring, tragic eyes.

"Duane!"

He fled with that moan like thunder, death, hell, in his ears.

CHAPTER XIX.

INTO DANGER.

WEST of the Pecos River Texas extended a vast wild region, barren in the north where the *Llano Estacado* spread its shifting sands, fertile in the south along the Rio Grande. A railroad marked undeviating course across five hundred miles of this country, and the only villages and towns lay on or near this line of steel.

Toward the close of a day in September a stranger rode into the village of Ord, and, in a community where all men were remarkable for one reason or another, he excited interest.

His horse perhaps received the first and most engaging attention, horses in that region being apparently more important than men. This particular horse did not attract with beauty. At first glance he seemed ugly.

But he was a giant, black as coal, rough despite the care manifestly bestowed upon him, long of body, ponderous of limb, huge in every way. A bystander remarked that he had a grand head. True, if only his head had been seen he would have been a beautiful horse.

Like men, horses show what they are in the shape, the size, the line, the character of the head. This one denoted fire, speed, blood, loyalty, and his eyes were as soft and dark as a woman's. His face was solid black except in the middle of his forehead, where there was a round spot of white.

"Say, mister, mind tellin' me his name?" asked a ragged urchin, with born love of a horse in his eyes.

"Bullet," replied the rider.

"Thet there's fer the white mark, ain't it?" whispered the youngster to

another. "Say, ain't he a whopper? Biggest hoss I ever seen."

Bullet carried a huge black, silver-ornamented saddle of Mexican make, a lariat and canteen, and a small pack rolled into a tarpaulin.

This rider apparently put all care of appearances upon his horse. His apparel was the ordinary jeans of the cowboy without vanity, and it was torn and travel-stained. His boots showed evidence of an intimate acquaintance with cactus.

Like his horse, this man was a giant in stature, but rangier, not so heavy. Otherwise the only striking thing about him was his somber face, with its piercing eyes and hair white over the temples. He packed two guns, both low down, but that was too common a thing to attract notice in the Big Bend.

A close observer, however, would have noted a singular fact—this rider's right hand was more bronzed, more weather-beaten, than his left. He never wore a glove on that right hand!

He had dismounted before a ramshackle structure that bore upon its wide, high-boarded front the sign: Hotel. There were horsemen coming and going down the wide street between its rows of old stores, saloons, and houses.

Ord certainly did not look enterprising. Americans had manifestly assimilated much of the leisure of the Mexicans. The hotel had a wide platform in front, and this did duty as porch and sidewalk. Upon it, and leaning against a hitching-rail, were men of varying ages, most of them slovenly, in old jeans and slouched sombreros. Some were booted, belted, and spurred. No man there wore a coat, but all wore vests. The guns in that group would have outnumbered the men.

It was a crowd seemingly too lazy to be curious. Good nature did not appear to be wanting, but it was not the frank and boisterous kind natural to the cowboy or rancher in town for

a day. These men were idlers; what else, perhaps, was easy to conjecture. Certainly to this arriving stranger, who flashed a keen eye over them, they wore an atmosphere never associated with work.

Presently a tall man, with a drooping, sandy mustache, leisurely detached himself from the crowd.

"Howdy, stranger?" he said.

The stranger had bent over to loosen the cinches; he straightened up and nodded. Then: "My Gawd, I'm thirsty!"

That brought a broad smile to faces. It was characteristic greeting. One and all trooped after the stranger into the hotel.

It was a dark, ill-smelling barn of a place, with a bar as high as a short man's head. A bartender with a scarred face was serving drinks.

"Line up, gents," said the stranger.

They piled over one another to get to the bar with coarse jests and oaths and laughter. None of them noted that the stranger did not appear so thirsty as he had claimed to be. In fact, though he went through the motions, he did not drink at all.

"My name's Jim Fletcher," said the tall man with the drooping, sandy mustache.

He spoke laconically, nevertheless there was a tone that showed he expected to be known. Something went with that name. The stranger did not appear to be impressed.

"My name might be Blazes, but it ain't," he replied. "What do you call this burg?"

"Stranger, this heah me-tropoles bears the handle Ord. Is thet new to you?"

He leaned back against the bar, and now his little, yellow eyes, clear as crystal, flawless as a hawk's, fixed on the stranger. Other men crowded close, forming a circle, curious, ready to be friendly or otherwise, according to how tall the interrogator marked the newcomer.

"Sure, Ord's a little strange to me.