

"What kind of woman is she?" inquired Duane.

"She's—she's, brazen. I've heard her with her lovers. They get drunk sometimes, when Bland's away. She's got a terrible temper. She's vain. She likes flattery. Oh, you could fool her easy enough if you'd lower yourself to—to—"

"To, make love to her?" interrupted Duane.

Jennie bravely turned shamed eyes to meet his.

"My girl, I'd do worse than that to get you away from here," he said bluntly.

"But—Duane," she faltered, and again she put out the appealing hand, "Bland will kill you."

Duane made no reply to this. He was trying to still a rising strange tumult in his breast. The old emotion—the rush of an instinct to kill! He turned cold all over.

"Chess Alloway will kill you, if Bland doesn't," went on Jennie, with her tragic eyes on Duane's.

"Maybe he will," replied Duane. It was difficult for him to force a smile. But he achieved one.

"Oh, better take me off at once," she said. "Save me without risking so much—without making love to Mrs. Bland!"

"Surely, if I can. There! I see Euchre coming with a woman."

"That's her. Oh, she mustn't see me with you."

"Wait—a moment," whispered Duane, as Jennie slipped indoors. "We've settled it. Don't forget. I'll find some way to get word to you, perhaps through Euchre. Meanwhile keep up your courage. Remember I'll save you somehow. We'll try strategy first. Whatever you see or hear me do don't think less of me—"

Jennie checked him with a gesture and a wonderful gray flesh of eyes.

"I'll bless you with every drop of blood in my heart," she whispered, passionately.

It was only as she turned away into

the room that Duane saw she was lame, and that she wore Mexican sandals over bare feet.

He sat down upon a bench on the porch and directed his attention to the approaching couple. The trees of the grove were thick enough for him to make reasonably sure that Mrs. Bland had not seen him talking to Jennie.

When the outlaw's wife drew near Duane saw that she was a tall, strong, full-bodied woman, rather good-looking with a full-blown, bold attractiveness. Duane was more concerned with her expression than with her good looks; and as she appeared unsuspecting he felt relieved. The situation then took on a singular zest.

Euchre came up on the porch and awkwardly introduced Duane to Mrs. Bland. She was young, probably not over twenty-five, and not quite so prepossessing at close range. Her eyes were large, rather prominent, and brown in color. Her mouth, too, was large, with the lips full, and she had white teeth.

Duane took her proffered hand and remarked frankly that he was glad to meet her.

Mrs. Bland appeared pleased; and her laugh, which followed, was loud and rather musical.

"Mr. Duane—Buck Duane, Euchre said, didn't he?" she asked.

"Buckley," corrected Duane. "The nickname's not of my choosing."

"I'm certainly glad to meet you, Buckley Duane," she said, as she took the seat Duane offered her. "Sorry to have been out. Kid Fuller's lying over at Deger's. You know he was shot last night. He's got fever to-day."

"When Bland's away I have to nurse all these shot-up boys, and it sure takes my time. Have you been waiting here alone? Didn't see that slattern girl of mine?"

She gave him a sharp glance. The woman had an extraordinary play of feature, Duane thought, and unless she was smiling was not pretty at all.

"I've been alone," replied Duane.

"Haven't seen anybody but a sick-looking girl with a bucket. And she ran when she saw me."

"That was Jen," said Mrs. Bland. "She's the kid we keep here, and she hardly pays her keep. Did Euchre tell you about her?"

"Now that I think of it he did say something or other."

"What did he tell you about me?" bluntly asked Mrs. Bland.

"Wal, Kate," replied Euchre, speaking for himself, "you needn't worry none, for I told Buck nothin' but compliments."

Evidently the outlaw's wife liked Euchre, for her keen glance rested with amusement upon him.

"As for Jen, I'll tell you her story some day," went on the woman. "It's a common enough story along this river. Euchre here is a tender-hearted old fool, and Jen has taken him in."

"Wal, seein' as you've got me figured correct," replied Euchre, dryly, "I'll go in an' talk to Jennie, if I may."

"Certainly. Go ahead. Jen calls you her best friend," said Mrs. Bland amiably. "You're always fetchin' some Mexican stuff, and that's why, I guess."

When Euchre had shuffled into the house Mrs. Bland turned to Duane with curiosity and interest in her gaze.

"Bland told me about you."

"What did he say?" queried Duane, in pretended alarm.

"Oh, you needn't think he's done you dirt. Bland's not that kind of a man. He said: 'Kate, there's a young fellow in camp—rode in here on the dodge. He's no criminal and he refused to join my band. Wish he would. Slickest hand with a gun I've seen for many a day! I'd like to see him and Chess meet out there in the road.' Then Bland went on to tell how you and Bosomer came together."

"What did you say?" inquired Duane, as she paused.

"Me? Why, I asked him what you looked like," she replied gaily.

"Well?" went on Duane.

"Magnificent chap," Bland said. "Bigger than any man in the valley. Just a great tow-headed, blue-eyed, sunburned boy!"

"Humph!" exclaimed Duane. "I'm sorry he led you to expect somebody worth seeing."

"But I'm not disappointed," she returned archly. "Duane, are you going to stay long here in camp?"

"Yes, till I run out of money and have to move. Why?"

Mrs. Bland's face underwent one of the singular changes. The smiles and flushes and glances, all that had been coquettish about her, had lent her a certain attractiveness, almost beauty and youth. But with some powerful emotion she changed and instantly became a woman of discontent, Duane imagined, of deep violent nature.

"I'll tell you, Duane," she said earnestly. "I'm sure glad if you mean to bide a while. I'm a miserable woman, Duane. I'm an outlaw's wife, and I hate him and the life I have to lead. I come of a good family in Brownsville."

"I never knew Bland was an outlaw till long after he married me. We were separated at times, and I imagined he was away on business. But the truth came out. Bland shot my own cousin, who told me. My family cast me off, and I had to flee with Bland."

"I was only eighteen, then. I've lived here since. I never see a decent woman or man. I never hear anything about my old home or folks or friends. I'm buried here—buried alive with a lot of thieves and murderers. Can you blame me for being glad to see a young fellow—a gentleman—like the boys I used to go with?"

"I tell you it makes me feel full—I want to cry. I'm sick for somebody to talk to. I have no children, thank God! If I had I'd not stay here. I'm sick of this hole. I'm lonely—"

There appeared to be no doubt about the truth of all this. Genuine emotion checked—then halted the

hurried speech. She broke down and cried. It seemed strange to Duane that an outlaw's wife—and a woman who fitted her consort and the wild nature of their surroundings—should have weakness enough to weep.

"I'm sorry for you," he said.

"Don't be *sorry* for me," she said. "That only makes me see the—the difference between you and me. And don't pay any attention to what these outlaws say about me. They're ignorant. They couldn't understand me.

"You'll hear that Bland killed men who ran after me. But that's a lie. Bland, like all the other outlaws along this river, is always looking for somebody to kill. He swears not, but I don't believe him.

"He explains that gun-play gravitates to men who are the real thing—that it is provoked by the four-flushes—the bad men. I don't know. All I know is that somebody is being killed every other day. He hated Spence before Spence ever saw me."

"Would Bland object if I called on you occasionally?" inquired Duane.

"No, he wouldn't. He likes me to have friends. Ask him yourself when he comes back. The trouble has been that two or three of his men fell in love with me, and when half drunk got to fighting. You're not going to do that."

"I'm not going to get half drunk, that's certain," replied Duane.

He was surprised to see her eyes dilate, then glow with fire. Before she could reply Euchre returned to the porch, and that put an end to the conversation.

Duane was content to let the matter rest there, and had little more to say. Euchre and Mrs. Bland talked and joked, while Duane listened.

He tried to form some estimate of her character. Manifestly she had suffered a wrong, if not worse, at Bland's hands. She was bitter, morbid, over-emotional. If she was a liar, which seemed likely enough, she was

a frank one, and believed herself. She had no cunning.

The thing which struck Duane so forcibly was that she thirsted for respect. In that he thought he had discovered a trait through which he could manage her.

Once, while he was revolving these thoughts, he happened to glance into the house, and deep in the shadow of a corner he caught a pale gleam of Jennie's face with great staring eyes on him. She had been watching him, listening to what he said.

He saw from her expression that she had realized what had been so hard for her to believe. Watching his chance he flashed a look at her; and then it seemed to him the change in her face was wonderful.

Later, after he had left Mrs. Bland, with a meaning "*Adios-mañana*," and was walking along beside the old outlaw, he found himself thinking of the girl, instead of the woman, and of how he had seen her face blaze with hope and gratitude.

CHAPTER VII.

IDLENESS.

THAT night Duane was not troubled by faces haunting his waking and sleeping hours. He awoke feeling bright and eager, and grateful to Euchre for having put something worth while into his mind.

During breakfast, however, he was unusually thoughtful, working over the idea of how much or how little he would confide in the outlaw. He was aware of Euchre's scrutiny.

"Wal," began the old man, at last, "how'd you make out with the kid?"

"Kid?" inquired Duane, tentatively.

"Jennie, I mean. What'd you an' she talk about?"

"We had a little chat. You know you wanted me to cheer her up."

Euchre sat with coffee cup poised and narrow eyes studying Duane.

"Reckon you cheered her, all right. What I'm afeared of is mebbe you done the job too well."

"How so?"

"Wal, when I went in to Jen last night I thought she was half crazy. She was burstin' with excitement, an' the look in her eyes hurt me. She wouldn't tell me a darn word you said. But she hung onto my hands, an' showed every way without speakin' how she wanted to thank me fer bringin' you over."

"Buck, it was plain to me thet you'd either gone the limit or else you'd been kinder prodigal of cheer an' hope. I'd hate to think you'd led Jennie to hope more'n ever would come true."

Euchre paused, and as there seemed no reply forthcoming, he went on.

"Buck, I've seen some outlaws whose word was good. Mine is. You can trust me. I trusted you, didn't I, takin' you over there an' puttin' you wise to my tryin' to help thet poor kid?"

Thus enjoined by Euchre, Duane began to tell the conversation with Jennie and Mrs. Bland word for word. Long before he had reached an end Euchre set down the coffee cup and began to stare, and at the conclusion of the story his face lost some of its red color, and beads of sweat stood out thickly on his brow.

"Wal, if that doesn't floor me!" he ejaculated, blinking at Duane. "Young man, I figgered you was some swift, an' sure to make your mark on this river, but I reckon I missed your real calibre. So thet's what it means to be a man! I guess I'd forgot. Wal, I'm old, an' even if my heart was in the right place I never was built fer big stunts. Do you know what it'll take to do all you promised Jen?"

"I haven't any idea," replied Duane gravely.

"You'll have to pull the wool over Kate Bland's eyes, an' even if she falls in love with you, which's shore likely, thet won't be easy. An' she'd kill you in a minnit, Buck, if she ever got wise.

You ain't mistaken' her none, are you?"

"Not me, Euchre. She's a woman. I'd fear her more than any man."

"Wal, you'll have to kill Bland, an' Chess Alloway, an' Rudd, an' mebbe some others before you can ride off into the hills with thet girl."

"Why? Can't we plan to be nice to Mrs. Bland, and then at an opportune time sneak off without any gun-play?"

"Don't see how on earth," returned Euchre earnestly. "When Bland's away he leaves all kinds of spies an' scouts watchin' the valley trails. They've all got rifles. You couldn't git by them. But when the boss is home there's a difference. Only, of course, him an' Chess keep their eyes peeled."

"I'll meet what comes," said Duane quietly. "The critical point is to have horses ready and pick the right moment, then rush the trick through."

"Thet's the only chance fer success. An' you can't do it alone."

"I'll have to. I wouldn't ask you to help me. Leave you behind!"

"Wal, I'll take my chances," replied Euchre gruffly. "I'm goin' to help Jennie, you can gamble your last *peso* on thet. There's only four men in this camp who would shoot me."

"Bland, an' his right hand pards, an' thet rabbit-faced Benson. If you happened to put out Bland an' Chess I'd stand a good show with the other two. Anyway I'm old an' tired—what's the difference if I do git plugged? I can risk as much as you, Buck, even if I'm afraid of gun-play. You said correct—'hosses ready, the right minnit, then rush the trick.' Thet much's settled. Now let's figger all the little details."

They talked and planned, though in truth it was Euchre who planned. Duane who listened and agreed. While awaiting the return of Bland and his lieutenants it would be well for Duane to grow friendly with the other outlaws, to sit in a few games of *monte*

or show a willingness to spend a little money.

The two schemers were to call upon Mrs. Bland every day—Euchre to carry messages of cheer and warning to Jennie—Duane to blind the elder woman at any cost. These preliminaries decided upon, they proceeded to put them into action.

No hard task was it to win the friendship of the most of those good-natured outlaws. They were used to men of a better order than theirs coming to the hidden camps, and sooner or later sinking to their lower level. Besides with them everything was easy come—easy go.

The valley was beautiful, sunny, fragrant, a place to dream in; the mountain tops were always blue or gold rimmed, the yellow river slid slowly and majestically by, the birds sang in the cottonwoods, the horses grazed and pranced, children played and women longed for love, freedom, happiness; the outlaws rode in and out, free with money and speech; they lived comfortably in their adobe homes, smoked, gambled, talked, laughed, whiled away the idle hours.

And all the time life there was wrong, and the simplest moment might be precipitated by that evil into the most awful of contrasts. Duane felt, rather than saw, a dark brooding shadow over the valley.

Then, without any solicitation or encouragement from Duane, the Bland woman fell passionately in love with him. His conscience was never troubled about the beginning of that affair. She launched herself. It took no great perspicuity on his part to see that.

And the thing which evidently held her in check was the newness, the strangeness, and for the moment, the all-satisfying fact of his respect for her. Duane exerted himself to please, to amuse, to interest, to fascinate her, and always with deference. That was his strong point, and it had made his

part easy so far. He believed he could carry the whole scheme through without involving himself any deeper.

He was playing at a game of love. Playing with life and death! Sometimes he trembled, not that he feared Bland or Alloway, or any man, but at the depths of life he had come to see into. He was carried out of his old mood.

Not once since this daring motive had stirred him had he been haunted by phantoms of Bain beside his bed. Rather had he been haunted by Jennie's sad face—her wistful smile—her eyes.

He never was able to speak a word to her. What little communication he had with her was through Euchre, who carried short messages. But he caught glimpses of her every time he went to the Bland house. She contrived somehow to pass door or window, to give him a look when chance afforded.

And Duane discovered with surprise that these moments were more thrilling to him than any with Mrs. Bland. Often Duane knew Jennie was sitting just inside the window, and then he felt inspired in his talk, and it was all made for her. So at least she came to know him while as yet she was almost a stranger.

Jennie had been instructed by Euchre to listen, to understand that this was Duane's only chance to help keep her mind from constant worry, to gather the import of every word which had a double meaning.

Euchre said that the girl had begun to wither under the strain, to burn up with intense hope, which had flamed within her. But all the difference Duane could see was a paler face and darker, more wonderful eyes. The eyes seemed to be entreating him to hurry, that time was flying, that soon it might be too late.

Then there was another meaning in them—a light—a strange fire wholly inexplicable to Duane. It was only a flash, gone in an instant. But he remembered it because he had never seen it in any other woman's eyes.

One day a careless Mexican threw a lighted cigarette up into the brush matting that served as a ceiling for Benson's den, and there was a fire which left little more than the adobe walls standing. The result was that while repairs were being made there was no gambling and drinking.

Time hung very heavily on the hands of some two score outlaws. Days passed by without a brawl, and Bland's valley saw more successive hours of peace than ever before.

Duane, however, found the hours anything but empty. He spent more time at Mrs. Bland's; he walked miles on all the trails leading out of the valley; he had a care for the condition of his two horses.

Upon his return from the latest of these tramps Euchre suggested that they go down to the river to the boat-landing.

"Ferry couldn't run ashore this mornin'," said Euchre. "River gettin' low an' sandbars makin' it hard fer hosses. There's a greaser freight-wagon stuck in the mud. I reckon we might hear news from the freighters. Bland's supposed to be in Mexico."

Nearly all the outlaws in camp were assembled on the river bank, lolling in the shade of the cottonwoods. The heat was oppressive. Not an outlaw offered to help the freighters who were trying to dig a heavily freighted wagon out of the quicksand. Few outlaws would work for themselves, let alone for the despised Mexicans.

Duane and Euchre joined the lazy group and sat down with them. Euchre lighted a black pipe, and drawing his hat over his eyes lay back in comfort after the manner of the majority of the outlaws.

But Duane was alert, observing, thoughtful. He never missed anything. It was his belief that any moment an idle word might be of benefit to him. Moreover, these rough men were always interesting.

"Bland's been chased acrost the river," said one.

"Naw, he's deliverin' cattle to thet Cuban ship," replied another.

"Big deal on, hey?"

"Some big. Rudd says the boss hed an order fer fifteen thousand."

"Say, thet order'll take a year to fill."

"Naw. Hardin is in cahoots with Bland. Between 'em they'll fill orders bigger'n thet."

"Wondered what Hardin was rustlin' in here fer."

Duane could not possibly attend to all the conversation among the outlaws. He endeavored to get the drift of talk nearest to him.

"Kid Fuller's goin' to cash," said a sandy-whiskered little outlaw.

"So Jim was tellin' me. Blood poison, ain't it? Thet hole wasn't bad. But he took the fever," rejoined a comrade.

"Deger says the kid might pull through, if he hed nursin'."

"Wal, Kate Bland ain't nursin' any shot-up boys these days. She hain't got time."

A laugh followed this sally; then came a penetrating silence. Some of the outlaws glanced good-naturedly at Duane. They bore him no ill will. Manifestly they were aware of Mrs. Bland's infatuation.

"Pete, 'pears to me you've said thet before."

"Shore. Wal, it's happened before."

This remark drew louder laughter and more significant glances at Duane. He did not choose to ignore them any longer.

"Boys, poke all the fun you like at me, but don't mention any lady's name again. My hand is nervous and itchy these days."

He smiled as he spoke and his speech was drawled, but the good humor in no wise weakened it.

There were grizzled outlaws in that group, some of whom had many notches on their gun handles, and they, with their comrades, accorded Duane silence that carried conviction of the regard in which he was held.

Duane could not recall any other instance where he had let fall a familiar speech to these men, and certainly he had never before hinted of his possibilities. He saw instantly that he could not have done better.

"Orful hot, ain't it," remarked Bill Black presently.

Bill could not keep quiet for long. He was a typical Texas desperado, had never been anything else. He was stoop-shouldered and bow-legged from much riding; a wiry little man all muscle, with a square head, a hard face partly black from scrubby beard and red from sun, and a bright, roving, cruel eye. His shirt was open at the neck, showing a grizzled chest.

"Is there any guy in this heah outfit sport enough to go swimmin'?" he asked.

"My Gawd, Bill, you ain't a goin' to wash!" exclaimed a comrade.

This raised a laugh, in which Black joined. But no one seemed eager to join him in a bath.

"Laziest outfit I ever rustled with," went on Bill discontentedly. "Nuthin' to do! Say, if nobody wants to sweat maybe some of you'll gamble."

He produced a dirty pack of cards and waved them at the motionless crowd.

"Bill, you're too good at cards," replied a lanky outlaw.

"Now, Jasper, you say thet powerful sweet an' you look sweet er I might take it to heart," replied Black, with a sudden change of tone.

Here it was again—that upflashing passion. What Jasper saw fit to reply would mollify the outlaw or it would not. There was an even balance.

"No offense, Bill," said Jasper placidly, without moving.

Bill grunted, and forgot Jasper. But he seemed to be one restless and dissatisfied outlaw. Duane knew him to be an inveterate gambler. And as Benson's place was out of running order Black was like a fish on dry land.

"Wal, if you-all are afraid of the

cairds what will you bet on?" he asked, in disgust.

"Bill, I'll play you a game of mumbly peg fer two bits," replied one.

Black eagerly accepted. Betting to him was a serious matter. The game obsessed him, not the stakes. He entered into the mumbly peg contest with a thoughtful mien and a corded brow. He won. Other comrades tried their luck with him and lost. Finally when Bill had exhausted their supply of two-bit pieces or their desire for that particular game he offered to bet on anything.

"See thet turtle-dove there," he said, pointing. "I'll bet he'll scare at one stone or he won't. Five pesos he'll fly or he won't fly, when some one chucks a stone. Who'll take me up?"

That appeared to be more than their gambling spirit could withstand.

"Take thet. Easy money," said one.

"Who's goin' to chuck the stone?" asked another.

"Anybody," replied Bill.

"Wal, I'll bet you I can scare him with one stone," said the first outlaw.

"We're in on thet, Jim to fire the darnick," chimed in the others.

The money was put up, the stone thrown. The turtle-dove took flight, to the great joy of all the outlaws except Bill.

"I'll bet you-all he'll come back to thet tree inside of five minnits," he offered imperturbably.

Hereupon the outlaws did not show any laziness in their alacrity to cover Bill's money as it lay on the grass. Somebody had a watch and they all sat down, dividing attention between the timepiece and the tree.

The minutes dragged by to the accompaniment of various jocular remarks anent a fool and his money. When four and three quarter minutes had passed a turtle-dove alighted in the cottonwood. Then ensued an impressive silence while Bill calmly pocketed the fifty dollars.

"But it hain't the same dove!" exclaimed one outlaw excitedly. "This one is smaller, dustier, not so purple."

Bill eyed the speaker loftily.

"Wal, you'll have to ketch the other one to prove thet. Sabe, pard. Now I'll bet any gent heah the fifty I jest won thet I can scare thet dove with one stone."

No one offered to take his wager.

"Wal, then, I'll bet any of you, even money, thet you *can't* scare him with one stone."

Not proof against this chance the outlaws made up a purse, in nowise disconcerted by Bill's contemptuous allusions to their banding together. The stone was thrown. The dove did not fly.

Thereafter, in regard to that bird, Bill was unable to coax or scorn his comrades into any kind of a wager.

He tried them with a multiplicity of offers, and in vain. Then he appeared at a loss for some unusual and seductive wager.

Presently a little ragged Mexican boy came along the river trail—a particularly starved and poor looking little fellow. Bill Brown called to him and gave him a handful of silver coins. Speechless, dazed, he went his way, hugging the money.

"I'll bet he drops some before he gits to the road," declared Bill. "I'll bet he runs. Hurry, you four-flush gamblers."

Bill failed to interest any of his companions, and forthwith became sullen and silent. Strangely, his good humor departed in spite of the fact that he had won considerable.

Duane, watching the disgruntled outlaw, marveled at him, and wondered what was in his mind. These men were more variable than children, as unstable as water, as dangerous as dynamite.

"Bill, I'll bet you ten you can't spill whatever's in the bucket thet peon's packin'," said one called Jim.

Black's head came up with the action of a hawk about to swoop.

Duane glanced from Black to the road where he saw a crippled peon carrying a tin bucket toward the river. This peon was a half-witted Indian who lived in a shack and did odd jobs for the Mexicans. Duane had met him often.

"Jim, I'll take you up," replied Black.

Something, perhaps a harshness in his voice, caused Duane to whirl. He caught a leaping gleam in the outlaw's eye.

"Aw, Bill, thet's too fur a shot," said Jasper, as Black rested an elbow on his knee and sighted over the long heavy Colt. The distance to the peon was about fifty paces, too far for even the most expert shot to hit a moving object so small as a bucket.

Duane, marvelously keen in the alignment of sight, was positive that Black held too high. Another look at the hard face confirmed Duane's suspicion that the outlaw was not aiming at the bucket at all.

Duane leaped and struck up the leveled gun. He had saved the peon at the risk of his own life. But strangely the outlaw Black showed no great offense.

CHAPTER VIII.

MOONLIGHT.

WHAT a contrast, Duane thought, the evening of that day presented to the state of his soul!

The sunset lingered in golden glory over the distant Mexican mountains; twilight came slowly; a faint breeze blew from the river cool and sweet; the late cooing of a dove and the tinkle of a cowbell were the only sounds; a serene and tranquil peace lay over the valley.

Inside Duane's body there was strife: his heart pounded, his blood raced, his breast bore a heavy pang. Something hot had dug into his vitals and the pain remained. In the depths of his mind, his soul, there was chaos.

He felt something dying in him. He suffered. Hope seemed far away. Despair had seized upon him and was driving him into reckless mood when he thought of Jennie.

He had forgotten her. He had forgotten that he had promised to save her. He had forgotten that he meant to snuff out as many lives as might stand between her and freedom.

The very remembrance sheered off his morbid introspection. She made a difference. How strange for him to realize that! He felt grateful to her. He had been forced into outlawry; she had been stolen from her people and carried into captivity.

They had met in the river fastness, he to instil hope into her despairing life, she to be the means, perhaps, of keeping him from sinking to the level of her captors. He became conscious of a strong beating desire to see her, talk with her.

These thoughts had run through his mind while on his way to Mrs. Bland's house. He had let Euchre go on ahead because he wanted more time to compose himself.

Darkness had about set in when he reached his destination. There was no light in the house. Mrs. Bland was waiting for him on the porch.

She embraced him, and the sudden violent unfamiliar contact sent such a shock through him that he all but forgot the deep game he was playing. She, however, in her agitation did not notice his shrinking. From her embrace and the tender incoherent words that flowed with it he gathered that Euchre had acquainted her of the incident concerning Black.

"He might have killed you!" she whispered; and if Duane ever heard love in a voice he heard it then.

It softened him. After all she was a woman, weak, fated through her nature, unfortunate in her experience of life, doomed to unhappiness and tragedy. He met her advance so far that he returned the embrace and kissed her.

"Duane, you love me?" she whispered.

"Yes—yes," he burst out, eager to get it over, and even as he spoke he caught the pale gleam of Jennie's face through the window.

He felt a shame—he was glad she could not see. Did she remember that she had promised not to misunderstand any action of his? What did she think of him, seeing him out there in the dusk with this bold woman in his arms?

Somehow that dim sight of Jennie's pale face, the big dark eyes, thrilled him, inspired him to his hard task of the present.

"Listen, dear," he said to the woman, and he meant his words for the girl. "I'm going to take you away from this outlaw den if I have to kill Bland, Alloway, Rudd—anybody who stands in my path. You were dragged here. You are good—I know it. There's happiness for you somewhere—a home among good people who will care for you. Just wait till—"

His voice trailed off and failed from excess of emotion. Kate Bland closed her eyes and leaned her head on his breast.

Duane felt her heart beat against his, and conscience smote him a keen blow. If she loved him so much! But memory—understanding of her character hardened him again, and he gave her such commiseration as was due her sex, and no more.

"Boy, that's good of you," she whispered, "but it's too late. I'm done for. I can't leave Bland. All I ask is that you love me a little and stop your gun-throwing."

The moon had risen over the eastern bulge of dark mountain, and now the valley was flooded with mellow light, and shadows of cottonwoods wavered against the silver.

Suddenly the *clip-clop, clip-clop* of hoofs caused Duane to raise his head and listen. Horses were coming down the road from the head of the valley. The hour was unusual for riders to

come in. Presently the narrow moonlit lane was crossed at its far end by black moving objects. Two horses Duane discerned.

"It's Bland!" whispered the woman, grasping Duane with shaking hands. "You must run! No, he'd see you. That'd be worse. It's Bland. I know his horse's trot."

"But you said he wouldn't mind my calling here," protested Duane. "Euchre's with me. It'll be all right."

"Maybe so," she replied, with visible effort at self-control. Manifestly she had a great fear of Bland. "If I could only think!"

Then she dragged Duane to the door, and pushed him in.

"Euchre, come out with me. Duane, you stay with the girl. I'll tell Bland you're in love with her. Jen, if you give us away I'll wring your neck!"

The swift action and fierce whisper told Duane that Mrs. Bland was herself again. Duane stepped close to Jennie, who stood near the window.

Neither spoke, but her hands were outstretched to meet his own. They were small, trembling hands, cold as ice. He held them closely, trying to convey what he felt—that he would protect her. She leaned against him, and they looked out of the window.

Duane felt calm and sure of himself. His most pronounced feeling, besides that for the frightened girl, was a curiosity as to how Mrs. Bland would rise to the occasion.

He saw the riders dismount down the lane and wearily come forward. A boy led away the horses. Euchre, the old fox, was talking loud and with remarkable ease, considering what he claimed was his natural cowardice.

"That was way back in the sixties about the time of the war," he was saying. "Rustlin' cattle wasn't nuthin' then to what it is now. An' times is rougher these days. This gun-throwin' has come to be a disease."

"Men have an itch fer the draw same as they used to have fer poker. The only real gambler, outside of

greasers, we ever had here was Bill, an' I presooome Bill is burnin' now."

The approaching outlaws, hearing voices, halted a rod or so from the porch. Then Mrs. Bland uttered an exclamation, ostensibly meant to express surprise, and hurried out to meet them.

She greeted her husband warmly and gave welcome to the other man. Duane could not see well enough in the shadow to recognize Bland's companion, but he believed it was Alloway.

"Dog-tired we are and starved," said Bland heavily. "Who's here with you?"

"That's Euchre on the porch. Duane is inside at the window with Jen," replied Mrs. Bland.

"Duane!" he exclaimed. Then he whispered low—something Duane could not catch.

"Why, I asked him to come," said the chief's wife. She spoke easily and naturally, and made no change in tone. "Jen has been ailing. She gets thinner and whiter every day. Duane came here one day with Euchre, saw Jen, and went loony over her pretty face, same as all you men. So I let him come."

Bland cursed low and deep under his breath. The other man made a violent action of some kind, and apparently was quieted by a restraining hand.

"Kate, you let Duane make love to Jennie?" queried Bland incredulously.

"Yes, I did," replied the wife stubbornly. "Why not? Jen's in love with him. If he takes her away and marries her, she can be a decent woman."

Bland kept silent a moment, then his laugh pealed out loud and harsh.

"Chess, did you get that? What do you think of my wife?"

"She's lyin' or she's crazy," replied Alloway, and his voice carried an unpleasant ring.

Mrs. Bland promptly and indignant-ly told her husband's lieutenant to keep his mouth shut.

"Ho, ho, ho!" rolled out Bland's laugh.

Then he led the way to the porch, his spurs clinking, the weapons he was carrying rattling, and he flopped down on a bench.

"How're you, boss?" asked Euchre.

"Hello, old man! I'm well, but all in."

Alloway slowly walked on to the porch and leaned against the rail. He answered Euchre's greeting with a nod. Then he stood there, a dark, silent figure.

Mrs. Bland's full voice in eager questioning had a tendency to ease the situation. Bland replied briefly to her, reporting a remarkably successful trip.

Duane thought it time to show himself. He had a feeling that Bland and Alloway would let him go for the moment. They were plainly nonplused, and Alloway seemed sullen, brooding.

"Jennie," whispered Duane, "that was clever of Mrs. Bland. We'll keep up the deception. Any day now be ready."

She pressed close to him, and a barely audible "hurry" came breathing into his ear.

"Good night, Jennie," he said aloud. "Hope you feel better to-morrow."

Then he stepped out into the moonlight and spoke. Bland returned the greeting and, though he was not amiable, he did not show resentment.

"Met Jasper as I rode in," said Bland presently. "Duane, I want you to stop quarreling with my men. If you were one of us—that'd be different. I can't keep my men from fighting. But I'm not called on to let an outsider hang round my camp and plug my rustlers."

"I guess I'll have to be hitting the trail for somewheres," said Duane.

"Why not join my band? You've got a bad start already, Duane, and if I know this border you'll never be a respectable citizen again. You're a born killer. I know every bad man on this frontier.

"More than one of them have told me that something exploded in their brain, and when sense came back there lay another dead man. It's not so with me. I've done a little shooting, too; but I never wanted to kill another man just to rid myself of the last one.

"My dead men don't sit on my chest at night. That's the gun-fighter's trouble. He's crazy. He has to kill a new man—he's driven to it to forget the last one."

"But I'm no gun-fighter," protested Duane. "Circumstances made me—"

"No doubt," interrupted Bland with a laugh. "Circumstances made me a rustler. You don't know yourself. You're young; you've got a temper; your father was one of the most dangerous men Texas ever had. I don't see any other career for you. Instead of going it alone—a lone wolf, as the Texans say—why not make friends with other outlaws? You'll live longer."

Euchre squirmed in his seat.

"Boss, I've been givin' the boy exactly that same line of talk. That's why I took him in to bunk with me. If he makes pards among us there won't be any more trouble. An' he'd be a grand feller fer the gang. Slickest of all the gun-throwers I ever seen! An' I've rustled around over the Southwest.

"I've seen Wild Bill Hickok throw a gun, an' Billy the Kid an' Hardin' an' Cheseldine an' Chess here—all the fastest men on the border. An', with apologies to present company, I'm here to say Duane has them all skinned. His draw is different. You can't see how he does it."

Euchre's admiring praise served to create an effective little silence. Alloway shifted uneasily on his feet, his spurs jangling faintly, and did not lift his head. Bland seemed thoughtful.

"That's about the only qualification I have to make me eligible for your band," said Duane easily.

"It's good enough," replied Bland

shortly. "Will you consider the idea?"

"I'll think it over. Good night!"

He left the group, followed by Euchre. When they reached the end of the lane, and before they had exchanged a word, Bland called Euchre back. Duane proceeded slowly along the moonlit road to the cabin and sat down under the cottonwoods to wait for Euchre.

The night was intense and quiet, a low hum of insects giving the effect of a congestion of life. The beauty of the soaring moon, the ebony cañons of shadow under the mountain, the melancholy serenity of the perfect night made Duane shudder in the realization of how far aloof he now was from enjoyment of these things. Never again so long as he lived could he be natural. His mind was clouded. His eye and ear henceforth must register impressions of nature, but the joy of them had fled.

Still, as he sat there with a foreboding of more and darker work ahead of him, there was yet a strange sweetness left to him, and it lay in thought of Jennie. The pressure of her cold, little hands lingered in his.

He did not think of her as a woman, and he did not analyze his feelings. He had vague, dreamy thoughts and imaginations that were interspersed in the constant and stern revolving of plans to save Jennie.

A shuffling step roused him. Euchre's dark figure came crossing the moonlit grass under the cottonwoods. The moment the outlaw reached him Duane saw that he was laboring under great excitement. It scarcely affected Duane. He seemed to be acquiring patience, calmness, strength.

"Bland kept you pretty long," he said.

"Wait till I git my breath," replied Euchre.

He sat silent a little while, fanning himself with a sombrero, though the night was cool, and then he went into

the cabin, to return presently with a lighted pipe.

"Fine night," he said, and his tone further acquainted Duane with Euchre's quaint humor. "Fine night fer love-affairs, by gum!"

"I'd noticed that," rejoined Duane dryly.

"Wal, I'm a son-of-a-gun if I didn't stand an' watch Bland choke his wife till her tongue stuck out an' she got black in the face!"

"No!" ejaculated Duane in astonishment.

"Hope to die if I didn't. Buck, listen to this here yarn. When I got back to the porch I seen Bland was wakin' up. He'd been too fagged out to figger much. Alloway an' Kate had gone in the house, where they lit up the lamps.

"I heard Kate's high voice, but Alloway never chirped. He's not the talkin' kind, an' he's dangerous when he's thet way. Bland asked me some questions right from the shoulder. I was ready for them, an' I swore the moon was green cheese.

"He was satisfied. Bland always trusted me, an' liked me, too, I reckon. I hated to lie black thet way. But he's a hard man, with bad intentions toward Jennie, an' I'd double-cross him any day.

"Then we went into the house. Jennie had gone to her little room, an' Bland called her to come out. She said she was undressin'. An' he ordered her to put her clothes back on. Then, Buck, his next move was some surprisin'. He deliberately threwed a gun on Kate. Yes, sir; he pointed his big, blue Colt right at her, an' he says:

"'I've a mind to blow out your brains!'

"Go ahead,' says Kate, cool as could be.

"'You lied to me!' he roars.

"Kate laughed in his face. Bland slammed the gun down an' made a grab fer her. She fought him, but wasn't a match fer him; an' he got