

her by the throat. He choked her till I thought she was strangled.

"Alloway made him stop. She flopped down on the bed an' gasped fer a while. When she come to them hard-shelled cusses went after her, trying to make her give herself away. I think Bland was jealous. He suspected she'd got thick with you an' was foolin' him.

"I reckon thet's a sore feelin' fer a man to have—to guess pretty nice, but not to be sure. Bland gave it up after a while. An' then he cussed an' raved at her. One sayin' of his is worth pinnin' in your sombrero: 'It ain't nuthin' to kill a man. I don't need much fer thet. But I want to know, you hussy!'

"Then he went in an' dragged poor Jen out. She'd had time to dress. He was so mad he hurt her sore leg. You know, Jen got thet injury fightin' off one of them devils in the dark. An' when I seen Bland twist her—I hurt her—I had a queer, hot feelin' deep down in me, an' fer the only time in my life I wished I was a gun-fighter.

"Wal, Jen amazed me. She was whiter'n a sheet an' her eyes were big and starey, but she had nerve. Fust time I ever seen her show any.

"'Jennie,' he said, 'my wife said Duane came here to see you. I believe she's lyin'. I think she's been carryin' on with him, an' I want to know. If she's been an' you tell me the truth I'll let you go. I'll send you out to Huntsville, where you can communicate with your friends. I'll give you money.'

"Thet must hev been an awful minnit fer Kate Bland. If ever I seen death in a man's eye I seen it in Bland's. He loves her. Thet's the strange part of it.

"'Has Duane been comin' here to see my wife?' Bland asked fiercelike.

"'No!' said Jennie trembling with fear.

"'He's been after you?'

"'Yes.'

"'He has fallen in love with you?' Kate said thet.

"'I—I'm not—I don't know—he hasn't told me.'

"'But you're in love with him?'

"'Yes,' she said, an', Buck, if you only could have seen her! She throwed up her head an' her eyes were full of fire. Bland seemed dazed at sight of her.

"An', Alloway, why, thet little skunk of an outlaw cried right out! He was hit plumb center. He's in love with Jen. An' the look of her then was enough to make any feller quit. He jest slunk out of the room.

"I told you mebbe thet he'd been tryin' to git Bland to marry Jen to him. So even a tough like Alloway can love a woman!

"Bland stamped up an' down the room. He sure was dyin' hard.

"'Jennie,' he said, once more turnin' to her, 'you swear in fear of your life thet you're tellin' truth—Kate's not in love with Duane? She's let him come to see you? There's been nuthin' between them?'

"'No. I swear,' answered Jennie, an' Bland sat down like a man licked.

"'Go to bed, you white-faced—' Bland chocked on some word or other, a bad one, I reckon, an' he positively shook in his chair.

"Jennie went then, an' Kate began to have hysterics. An' your Uncle Euchre ducked his nut out of the door an' come home."

Duane did not have a word to say at the end of Euchre's long harangue. He experienced relief. As a matter of fact, he had expected a good deal worse. He thrilled at the thought of Jennie perjuring herself to save that abandoned woman. What mysteries these feminine creatures were!

"Wal, there's where our little deal stands now," resumed Euchre meditatively. "You know, Buck, as well as me, thet if you'd been some feller who hadn't shown he was a wonder with a gun you'd now be full of lead.

"If you'd happen to kill Bland an'

Alloway I reckon you'd be as safe on this here border as you would in Santone. Such is gun fame in this land of the draw."

CHAPTER IX.

THE GET-AWAY.

BOTH men were awake early, silent with the premonition of trouble ahead, thoughtful of the fact that the time for the long-planned action was at hand. It was remarkable that a man as loquacious as Euchre could hold his tongue so long; and this was significant of the deadly nature of the intended deed.

During breakfast he said a few words customary in the service of food. At the conclusion of the meal he seemed to come to an end of deliberation.

"Buck, the sooner the better now," he declared with a glint in his eye. "The more time we use up now the less surprised Bland'll be."

"I'm ready when you are," replied Duane quietly, and he rose from the table.

"Wal, saddle up, then," went on Euchre gruffly. "Tie on them two packs I made, one fer each saddle. You can't tell—mebbe either hoss will be carryin' double. It's good they're both big, strong hosses. Guess that wasn't a wise move of your Uncle Euchre's—bringin' in your hosses an' havin' them ready?"

"Euchre, I hope you're not going to get in bad here. I'm afraid you are. Let me do the rest now," said Duane.

The old outlaw eyed him sarcastically.

"That'd be turrible now, wouldn't it? If you want to know, why, I'm in bad already. I didn't tell you that Alloway called me last night. He's gettin' wise pretty quick."

"Euchre, you're going with me?" queried Duane, suddenly divining the truth.

"Wal, I reckon. Either to hell or

safe over the mountain! I wisht I was a gun-fighter. I hate to leave here without takin' a peg at Jack-rabbit Benson. Now, Buck, you do some hard figgerin' while I go nosin' round. It's pretty early, which's all the better."

Euchre put on his sombrero, and as he went out Duane saw that he wore a gun and cartridge-belt. It was the first time Duane had ever seen the outlaw armed.

Duane packed his few belongings into his saddle-bags and then carried the saddles out to the corral. An abundance of alfalfa in the corral showed that the horses had fared well. They had got almost fat during his stay in the valley. He watered them, put on the saddles loosely cinched, and then the bridles. His next move was to fill the two canvas water-bottles. That done he returned to the cabin to wait.

At the moment he felt no excitement or agitation of any kind. There was no more thinking, planning to do. The hour had arrived, and he was ready. Finally he heard the shuffle of Euchre's boots on the hard path. The sound was quicker than usual.

When Euchre came round the corner of the cabin Duane was not so astounded as he was concerned to see the outlaw white and shaking. Sweat dripped from him. He had a wild look.

"Luck ours—so—fur, Buck!" he panted.

"You don't look it," replied Duane.

"I'm turrible sick. Jest killed a man. Fust one I ever killed!"

"Who?" asked Duane, startled.

"Jack-rabbit Benson. An' sick as I am, I'm gloryin' in it. I went nosin' round up the road. Saw Alloway goin' into Deger's. He's thick with the Degers. Reckon he's askin' questions. Anyway, I was sure glad to see him away from Bland's. An' he didn't see me.

"When I dropped into Benson's there wasn't nobody there but Jack-rabbit an' some greasers he was startin'

to work. Benson never had no use fer me. An' he up an' said he wouldn't give a two-bit piece fer my life. I asked him why.

"'You're double-crossin' the boss an' Chess,' he said.

"'Jack, what'd you give fer your own life?' I asked him.

"He straightened up, surprised an' mean-looking. An' I let him have it, plumb center! He wilted an' the greasers run. I reckon I'll never sleep again. But I had to do it."

Duane asked if the shot had attracted any attention outside.

"I didn't see anybody but the greasers, an' I sure looked sharp. Comin' back I cut across through the cottonwoods past Bland's cabin. I meant to keep out of sight, but somehow I had an idee I might find out if Bland was awake yet. Sure enough, I run plumb into Beppo, the boy who tends Bland's hosses.

"Beppo likes me. An' when I inquired of his boss, he said Bland had been up all night, fightin' with the *señora*. An', Buck, here's my idea.

"Bland couldn't let up last night. He was sore, an' he went after Kate again, tryin' to wear her down. Jest as likely, he might have went after Jennie with wuss intentions. Anyway, he an' Kate must have had it hot an' heavy. We're pretty lucky."

"It seems so. Well, I'm going," said Duane tersely.

"'Lucky! I should smile. Bland's been up all night after a most draggin' ride home. He'll be fagged out this mornin'—sleepy—sore—an' he won't be expectin' anythin' before breakfast. Now, you walk over to his house. Meet him how you like. Thet's your game.

"But I'm suggestin', if he comes out an' you want to parley, you can jest say you'd thought over his proposition an' was ready to join his band, or you ain't. You'll have to kill him, an' it'd save time to go fer your gun on sight. Might be wise, too, fer it's likely he'll do thet same."

"How about the horses?"

"I'll fetch them an' come along about two minnits behind you. 'Pears to me you ought to have the job done an' Jennie outside by the time I git there. Once on them hosses we can ride out of camp before Alloway or anybody else gits into action. Jennie ain't much heavier'n a rabbit. Thet big black will carry you both."

"All right. But, once more let me persuade you to stay—not to mix any more in this," said Duane earnestly.

"Nope. I'm goin'. You heard what Benson told me. Alloway wouldn't give me the benefit of any doubts. Buck, a last word—look out fer thet Bland woman!"

Duane merely nodded and then, saying that the horses were ready, he strode away through the grove. Accounting for the short cut across grove and field, it was about five minutes' walk up to Bland's house. To Duane it seemed long in time and distance, and he had difficulty in restraining his pace.

As he walked there came a gradual and subtle change in his feelings. Again he was going out to meet a man in conflict. He could have avoided this meeting. But, despite the fact of his courting the encounter, he had not as yet felt that hot, inexplicable expulsion of blood. The motive of this deadly action was not personal, and somehow that made a difference.

No outlaws were in sight. He saw several Mexican herders with cattle. Blue columns of smoke curled up over some of the cabins. The fragrant smell of it reminded Duane of his home—that he used to cut the wood for the stove. He noted a cloud of creamy mist rising above the river, dissolving in the sunlight.

Then he entered Bland's lane.

While yet some distance from the cabin he heard loud, angry voices of man and woman. Bland and Kate still quarreling! He took a quick survey of the surroundings. There was now not even a Mexican in sight. Then he hurried a little.

Half-way down the lane he turned his head to peer through the cotton-woods. This time he saw Euchre coming with the horses. There was no indication that the old outlaw might lose his nerve at the end. Duane had feared this.

Duane now changed his walk to a leisurely saunter. He reached the porch and then distinguished what was said inside the cabin.

"If you do—Bland, by Heaven, I'll fix you and her!" That was panted out in Kate Bland's full voice.

"Let me loose! I'm going in there, I tell you!" replied Bland hoarsely.

"What for?"

"I want to make a little love to her. Ha-ha! It'll be fun to have the laugh on her new lover."

"You lie!" cried Kate Bland.

"Let me go!" His voice grew hoarser with passion.

"No, no! I won't let you go! You'll choke the—the truth out of her; you'll kill her."

"The truth!" hissed Bland.

"Yes. I lied. Jen lied. But she lied to save you. You needn't—murder her—for that."

Bland cursed horribly. Then followed a wrestling sound of bodies in violent straining contact—the scrape of feet—the jangle of spurs—a crash of sliding table or chair, and then the cry of a woman in pain.

Duane stepped into the open door—inside the room. Kate Bland lay half across a table, where she had been flung, and she was trying to get to her feet. Bland's back was turned. He had opened the door into Jennie's room and had one foot across the threshold. Duane caught the girl's low, shuddering cry.

"Good morning!" he called, loud and clear.

With catlike swiftness Bland wheeled—then froze on the threshold. His sight, quick as his action, caught Duane's menacing, unmistakable position.

Bland's big frame filled the door.

He was in a bad place to reach for his gun. But he would not have time to step. Duane read in his eyes the desperate calculation of chances. For a fleeting instant Bland shifted his gaze to his wife. Then his whole body seemed to vibrate with the swing of his arm.

Duane shot him. He fell forward, his gun exploding as it dug into the floor, and it dropped loose from stretching fingers. Duane stood over him, stooped to turn him on his back. Bland looked up with clouded gaze, then gasped his last.

"Duane, you've killed him!" cried Kate Bland huskily. "I knew you'd have to."

She staggered against the wall, her eyes dilating, her strong hands clenching, her face slowly whitening. She appeared shocked, half stunned, but showed no grief.

"Jennie!" called Duane sharply.

"Oh—is it you—Duane?" came a halting reply.

"Yes. Come out. Hurry!"

She came out with uneven steps, seeing only him, and she stumbled over Bland's body. Duane caught her arm, swung her behind him. He feared the woman when she realized how she had been duped. His action was protective, and his movement toward the door equally significant.

"Duane!" cried Mrs. Bland.

It was no time for talk. Duane edged on, keeping Jennie behind him. At that moment there was a pounding of iron-shod hoofs out in the lane. Kate Bland bounded to the door. When she turned back her amaze was changing to realization.

"Where're you taking Jen?" she cried, her voice like a man's.

"Get out of my way!" replied Duane. His look, perhaps, without speech, was enough for her. In an instant she was transformed into a fury.

"You hound! All the time you were fooling me! You made love to me! You let me believe—you swore you loved me! Now I see what was queer

about you! All for that slut! But you can't have her. You'll never leave here alive! Give me that girl! Let me get at her! She'll never win any more men in this camp!"

She was a heavy, powerful woman, and it took all Duane's strength to ward off her onslaughts. She clawed at Jennie over his upheld arm. Every second her fury increased.

"Help! Help! Help!" she shrieked in a voice that must have penetrated to the remotest cabin in the valley.

"Let go! Let go!" cried Duane, low and sharp. He still held his gun in his right hand, and it began to be hard for him to ward the woman off. His coolness had gone with her shriek for help. "Let go!" he repeated, and he shoved her fiercely.

Suddenly she snatched a rifle off the wall and backed away, her strong hands fumbling at the lever. As she jerked it down, throwing a shell into the chamber and cocking the weapon, Duane leaped upon her. He struck up the rifle as it went off, the powder burning his face.

"Jennie, run out! Get on a horse!" he said, still low and sharp.

Jennie flashed out of the door.

With an iron grasp Duane held to the rifle-barrel. He had grasped it with his left hand, and he gave such a powerful pull that he swung the woman off the floor. But he could not loose her grip. She was as strong as he.

"Kate! Let go!"

He tried to intimidate her. She did not see his gun thrust in her face, or reason had given way to such an extent to passion that she did not care. She cursed. Her husband had used the same curses, and from her lips they seemed strange, unsexed, more deadly.

Like a tigress she fought him. Her face no longer resembled a woman's. The evil of that outlaw life, the wildness and rage, the meaning to kill was, even in such a moment, terribly impressed upon Duane.

He heard a cry from outside—a man's cry, hoarse and alarming.

It made him think of loss of time. This demon of a woman might yet block his plan.

"Let go!" he whispered and felt his lips stiff. In the grimness of that instant he relaxed his hold on the rifle-barrel.

With sudden, redoubled, irresistible strength she wrenched the rifle down and discharged it. Duane felt a blow—a shock—then a burning agony tearing through his breast. He staggered backward, almost falling. The woman's strong hands, awkward from passion, again fumbled at the lever of the gun.

He caught the rifle-barrel again, this time in his right hand, and pulled. She tripped over a chair and crashed down.

Duane leaped back, whirled, flew out of the door to the porch. The sharp cracking of a gun halted him. He saw Jennie holding to the bridle of his bay horse.

Euchre sat astride the other and he had a Colt leveled, and he was firing down the lane. Then came a single shot, heavier, and Euchre's ceased. He fell from the horse.

A swiftly shifted gaze showed to Duane a man coming down the lane. Chess Alloway! His gun was smoking. He broke into a run. Then in an instant he saw Duane, tried to check his pace as he swung up his arm. But that slight pause was fatal.

Duane shot, and Alloway was falling when his gun went off. His bullet whistled close to Duane and thudded into the cabin.

Duane bounded down to the horses. Jennie was trying to hold the plunging bay. Euchre lay flat on his back, dead, a bullet-hole in his shirt, his face set hard, and his hands twisted around gun and bridle.

"Jennie, you've nerve all right!" cried Duane as he dragged down the horse she was holding. "Up with you now! There! Never mind long stirrups! Hang on somehow!"

He caught his bridle out of Euchre's clutching grip and leaped astride. The

frightened horses jumped into a run and thundered down the lane into the road. Duane saw men running from cabins. He heard shouts. But there were no shots fired.

Jennie seemed able to stay on her horse; but without stirrups she bounced so hard that Duane rode closer and reached out to grasp her arm.

Thus they rode through the valley to the trail that led up over the steep and broken Rim-Rock. As they began to climb Duane looked back. No pursuers were in sight.

"Jennie, we're going to get away!" he cried, exultation for her in his voice.

She was gazing, horror-stricken, at his breast as, in turning to look back, he faced her.

"Oh, Duane, your shirt's all bloody!" she faltered, pointing with trembling finger.

With her words Duane became aware of two things—the hand he instinctively placed to his breast still held his gun—and he had sustained a terrible wound.

CHAPTER X.

LIFE AND LOVE.

HE had been shot through the breast far enough down to give him grave apprehension of his life. Little pain attended the injury, and no sense of weakness yet. The clean-cut bullet-hole bled freely both at its entrance and where it had come out, but with no signs of hemorrhage. He did not bleed at the mouth; however, he began to cough up a reddish tinged foam.

Jennie, with pale face and mute lips, looked at him.

"I'm badly hurt, Jennie," he said; "but I guess I'll stick it out."

"The woman—did she shoot you?"

"Yes. She was a devil. Euchre told me to look out for her. I wasn't quick enough."

"You didn't have to—to—" shivered the girl.

"My God, no!" he replied.

They did not stop climbing while Duane tore a scarf and made compresses, which he bound tightly over his wounds. The fresh horses made fast time up the rough trail. From open places Duane looked down.

When they surmounted the steep ascent and stood on top of the Rim-Rock, with no signs of pursuit down in the valley, and with the wild, broken fastnesses before them, Duane turned to the girl and assured her that they now had every chance of escape.

"But—your—wound!" she faltered, with dark, troubled eyes. "I see—the blood—dripping from your back!"

"Jennie, I'll take a lot of killing," he said.

Then he became silent and attended to the uneven trail. He was aware presently that he had not come into Bland's camp by this route. But that did not matter; any trail leading out beyond the Rib-Rock was safe enough. What he wanted was to get far away into some wild retreat, where he could hide till he recovered from his wound.

He seemed to feel a fire inside his breast, and his throat burned so that it was necessary for him to take a swallow of water every little while. He began to suffer considerable pain, which increased as the hours went by and then gave way to a numbness. From that time on he had need of his great strength and endurance.

Gradually he lost his steadiness and his keen sight; and he realized that if he were to meet foes, or if pursuing outlaws should come up with him, he could make only a poor stand. So he turned off on a trail that appeared seldom traveled.

Soon after this move he became conscious of a further thickening of his senses. He felt able to hold on to his saddle for a while longer, but he was failing. Then he thought he ought to advise Jennie, so in case she was left alone she would have some idea of what to do.

"Jennie, I'll give out soon," he said.

"No—I don't mean—what you think. But I'll drop soon. My strength's going— If I die—you ride back to the main trail. Hide and rest by day. Ride at night. That trail goes to water. I believe you could get across the Nueces, where some rancher will take you in."

Duane could not get the meaning of her incoherent reply. He rode on, and soon he could not see the trail or hear his horse. He did not know whether they traveled a mile or many times that far. But he was conscious when the horse stopped, and had a vague sense of falling mingled with the feel of Jennie's arms before all became dark to him.

When consciousness returned he found himself lying in a little hut of mesquit branches. It was well-built and evidently some years old.

There were two doors or openings, one in front and the other at the back. Duane imagined the construction had been that of a fugitive—of one who meant to keep an eye both ways, and not to be surprised. Duane felt weak and had no desire to move.

Where was he, anyway? A strange, intangible sense of time, distance, of something far behind, weighed upon him. Sight of the two packs Euchre had made brought his thought to Jennie. What had become of her? There was evidence of her work in a smoldering fire and a little, blackened coffee-pot.

Probably she was outside looking after the horses or getting water. He thought he heard a step and listened, but he felt tired, and presently his eyes closed and he fell into a doze.

Awakening from this he saw Jennie sitting beside him. She appeared different in some way. When he spoke she gave a start and turned eagerly to him.

"Duane!" she cried.

"Hello! How're you, Jennie, and how am I?" he said, finding it a little difficult to talk.

"Oh, I'm all right," she replied.

"And you've come to—your wound's healed, but you've been sick. Fever, I guess. I did all I could."

Duane saw now that the difference in her was a whiteness and tightness of skin, a hollowness of eye, a look of strain.

"Fever? How long have we been here?" he asked.

She took some pebbles from the crown of his sombrero and counted them.

"Nine. Nine days," she answered.

"Nine days!" he exclaimed incredulously. But another look at her assured him that she meant what she said. "I've been sick all the time? You nursed me?"

"Yes."

"Bland's men didn't come along here?"

"No."

"Where are the horses?"

"I keep them grazing down in a gorge back of here. There's good grass and water."

"Have you slept any?"

"A little. Lately I couldn't keep awake."

"Good Lord! I should think not. You've had a time of it, sitting here day and night, nursing me, watching for the outlaws. Come, tell me all about it."

"There's nothing much to tell."

"I want to know, anyway, just what you did—how you felt."

"I can't remember very well," she replied simply. "We must have ridden forty miles that day we got away. You bled all the time. Toward evening you lay on your horse's neck. When we came to this place you fell out of the saddle. I dragged you in here and stopped your bleeding."

"I thought you'd die that night. But in the morning I had a little hope. I had forgotten the horses. But luckily they didn't stray far. I caught them and kept them down in the gorge. When your wounds closed and you began to breathe stronger I thought you'd get well quick."

"It was fever that put you back. You raved a lot, and that worried me. Because I couldn't stop you. Anybody trailing us could have heard you a good ways. I don't know whether I was scared most then or when you were quiet, and it was so dark and lonely and still all around. Every day I put a stone in your hat."

"Jennie, you saved my life," said Duane.

"I don't know. Maybe. I did all I knew how to do," she replied. "You saved mine—more than my life."

Their eyes met in a long gaze, and then their hands in a close clasp.

"Jennie, we're going to get away," he said with gladness. "I'll be well in a few days. You don't know how strong I am. We'll hide by day and travel by night. I can get you across the river."

"And then?" she asked.

"We'll find some honest rancher."

"And then?" she persisted.

"Why—" he began slowly. "That's as far as my thought ever got. It was pretty hard, I tell you, to assure myself of so much. It means your safety. You'll tell your story. You'll be sent to some village or town and taken care of until a relative or friend is notified."

"And you?" she inquired in a strange voice.

Duane kept silence.

"What will you do?" she went on.

"Jennie, I'll go back to the brakes. I daren't show my face among respectable people. I'm an outlaw."

"You're no criminal!" she declared with deep passion.

"Jennie, on this border the little difference between an outlaw and a criminal doesn't count for much."

"You won't go back among those terrible men? You, with your gentleness and sweetness—all that's good about you! Oh, Duane, don't, don't go!"

"I can't go back to the outlaws, at least not Bland's band. No, I'll go

alone. I'll lone wolf it, as they say on the border. What else can I do, Jennie?"

"Oh, I don't know. Couldn't you hide? Couldn't you slip out of Texas—go far away?"

"I could never get out of Texas without being arrested. I could hide, but a man must live. Never mind about me, Jennie."

"Duane, if ever I'm safe out of this awful country," she cried, "I'll go to the Governor. I'll tell him your story. I'll tell him mine. I'll get you pardoned."

In three days Duane was able, with great difficulty, to mount his horse. During daylight, by short relays, he and Jennie rode back to the main trail, where they hid again till he had rested. Then, in the dark, they rode out of the cañons and gullies of the Rim-Rock, and early in the morning halted at the first water to camp.

From that point they traveled after nightfall and went into hiding during the day. Once across the Nueces River, Duane was assured of safety for her and great danger for himself. They had crossed into a country he did not know. Somewhere east of the river there were scattered ranches.

But he was as liable to find the rancher in touch with the outlaws as he was likely to find him honest. Duane hoped his good fortune would not desert him in this last service to Jennie. Next to the worry of that was realization of his condition. He had got up too soon; he had ridden too far and hard; and now he felt that any moment he might fall from his saddle.

At last, far ahead over a barren, mesquit-dotted stretch of dusty ground, he espied a patch of green and a little, flat, red ranch-house. He headed his horse for it, and turned a face he tried to make cheerful for Jennie's sake. She seemed both happy and sorry.

When near at hand he saw that the

rancher was a thrifty farmer. And thrift spoke more for honesty than otherwise. There were fields of alfalfa, fruit-trees, corrals, windmill pumps, irrigation ditches, all surrounding a neat little adobe house.

Some children were playing in the yard. The way they ran at sight of Duane hinted of both the loneliness and fear of their isolated lives. Duane saw a woman come to the door, then a man.

The latter looked keenly, then stepped outside. He was a sandy-haired, freckled Texan.

"Howdy, stranger?" he called, as Duane halted, "get down, you an' your woman. Say, now, air you sick or shot or what? Let me—"

Duane, reeling in his saddle, bent searching eyes upon the rancher. He thought he saw good-will, kindness, honesty. He risked all on that one sharp glance. Then he almost plunged from the saddle.

The rancher caught him, helped him to a bench.

"Martha, come out here," he called. "This man's sick. No—he's shot, or I don't know blood-stains."

Jennie had slipped off her horse and to Duane's side. Duane appeared about to faint.

"Air you his wife?" asked the rancher.

"No. I'm only a girl he saved from outlaws. Oh! he's so pale. Duane! Duane!"

"Buck Duane!" exclaimed the rancher excitedly. "The man who killed Bland an' Alloway! Say, I owe him a good turn, an' I'll pay it, young woman."

The rancher's wife came out and, with a manner at once kind and practical, essayed to make Duane drink from a flask. He was not so far gone that he could not recognize its contents, which he refused, and weakly asked for water. When that was given him he found his voice.

"Yes, I'm Duane. I've only overdone myself—just all in. The

wounds I got at Bland's are healing. Will you take this girl in—hide her a while till the excitement's over among the outlaws?"

"I shore will," replied the Texan.

"Thanks. I'll remember you—I'll square it."

"What're you goin' to do?"

"I'll rest a bit—then go back to the brakes."

"Young man, you ain't in any shape to travel. See here—any rustlers on your trail?"

"I think we gave Bland's gang the slip."

"Good. I'll tell you what. I'll take you in along with the girl, an' hide both of you till you get well. It'll be safe. My nearest neighbor is five miles off. We don't have much company."

"You risk a great deal. Both outlaws and rangers are hunting me," said Duane.

"Never seen a ranger yet in these parts. An' have always got along with outlaws, mebbe exceptin' Bland. I tell you I owe you a good turn."

"My horses—might betray you," added Duane.

"I'll hide them in a place where there's water an' grass. Nobody goes to it. Come now, let me help you indoors."

Duane's last fading sensations of that hard day were the strange feel of a bed, a relief at the removal of his heavy boots, and of Jennie's soft, cool hands on his hot face.

He lay ill for three weeks before he began to mend, and it was another week then before he could walk out a little in the dusk of the evenings. After that his strength returned rapidly. And it was only at the end of this long siege that he recovered his spirits. During most of his illness he had been silent, moody.

"Jennie, I'll be riding off soon," he said one evening. "I can't impose on this good man Andrews much longer. I'll never forget his kindness. His

wife, too—she's been so good to us. Yes, Jennie, you and I will have to say good-by very soon."

"Don't hurry away," she replied.

Lately Jennie had appeared strange to him. She had changed from the girl he used to see at Mrs. Bland's house. He took her reluctance to say good-by as another indication of her regret that he must go back to the brakes.

Yet somehow it made him observe her more closely. She wore a plain white dress made from material Mrs. Andrews had given her. Sleep and good food had improved her. If she had been pretty out there in the outlaw band, now she was more than that.

But she had the same paleness, the same strained look, the same dark eyes, full of haunting shadows. After Duane's realization of the change in her he watched her more, with a growing certainty that he would be sorry not to see her again.

"It's likely we won't ever see each other again," he said. "That's strange to think of. We've been through some hard days, and I seem to have known you a long time."

Jennie appeared shy, almost sad, so Duane changed the subject to something less personal.

Andrews returned one evening from a several days' trip to Huntsville.

"Duane, everybody's talkin' about how you cleaned up the Bland outfit," he said, important and full of news. "It's some exaggerated, accordin' to what you told me, but you've shore made friends on this side of the Neuces. I reckon there ain't a town where you wouldn't find people to welcome you."

"Huntsville, you know, is some divided as to the code of respectability. Half the people are crooked. Likely enough all them who was so loud in praise of you are the crookedest. For instance, I met King Fisher, the boss outlaw of these parts. Well, King thinks he's a decent citizen.

"He was tellin' me what a grand job yours was for the border an' honest cattlemen. Now that Bland an' Alloway are done for, King Fisher will find rustlin' some easier."

"There's talk of Hardin movin' his camp over to Bland's. But I don't know how true it is. I reckon there ain't much to it. In the past when a famous outlaw chief went under his band almost always broke up an' scattered. There's no one left who could run thet outfit."

"Did you hear of any outlaws hunting me?" asked Duane.

"Nobody from Bland's outfit is huntin' you, thet's shore," replied Andrews. "Fisher said there never was a hoss straddled to go on your trail. Nobody had any use for Bland. Anyhow, his men would be afraid to trail you."

"An' you could go right in to Huntsville, where you'd be some popular. Reckon you'd be safe, too, except when some of them fool saloon-loafers or bad cow-punchers would try to shoot you for the glory in it. Them kind of men will bob up everywhere you go, Duane."

"I'll be able to ride and take care of myself in a day or two," went on Duane. "Then I'll go—I'd like to talk to you about Jennie."

"She's welcome to a home here with us."

"Thank you, Andrews. You're a kind man. But I want Jennie to get farther away from the Rio Grande. She'd never be safe here. Besides, she may be able to find relatives. She has some, though she doesn't know where they are."

"All right, Duane. Whatever you think best. I reckon now you'd better take her to some town. Go north an' strike for Shelbyville or Crockett. Them's both good towns. I'll tell Jennie the names of men who'll help her. You needn't ride into town at all."

"Which place is nearer, and how far is it?"

"Shelbyville. I reckon about two days' ride. Poor stock country, so you ain't liable to meet rustlers. All the same, better hit the trail at night an' go careful."

At sunset two days later Duane and Jennie mounted their horses and said good-by to the rancher and his wife. Andrews would not listen to Duane's thanks.

"I tell you I'm beholden to you yet," he declared.

"Well, what can I do for you?" asked Duane. "I may come along here again some day."

"Get down an' come in, then, or you're no friend of mine."

Andrews made no further comment, and the two men turned to the women.

"The main road for about three miles, then where it forks take the left-hand road and keep on straight. That what you said, Andrews?"

"Shore. An' good luck to you both!"

Duane and Jennie trotted away into the gathering twilight.

He fell into low conversation with Jennie, holding out hopeful views of her future, and presently darkness set in. The sky was overcast with heavy clouds; there was no air moving; the heat and oppression threatened storm.

By and by Duane could not see a rod in front of him, though his horse had no difficulty in keeping to the road. Duane was bothered by the blackness of the night. Traveling fast was impossible, and any moment he might miss the road that led off to the left.

So he was compelled to give all his attention to peering into the thick shadows ahead. As good luck would have it he came to higher ground where there were fewer mesquits, and therefore not such impenetrable darkness, and at this point he came to where the road split.

Once headed in the right direction, he felt easier in mind. To his annoyance, however, a fine, misty rain set in. Jennie was not well dressed for

wet weather, and for that matter neither was he. His coat, which in that dry, warm climate he seldom needed, was tied behind his saddle, and he put it on Jennie.

They traveled on. The rain fell steadily, if anything growing thicker. Duane grew uncomfortably wet and chilly. Jennie, however, fared somewhat better, by reason of the heavy coat. The night passed quickly, despite the discomfort, and soon a gray dismal rainy dawn greeted the travelers.

Jennie insisted that he find some shelter where a fire could be built to dry his clothes. He was not in a fit condition to risk catching cold. In fact, his teeth were chattering. To find a shelter in that barren waste seemed a futile task.

Quite unexpectedly, however, they happened upon a deserted adobe cabin situated a little off the road. Not only did it prove to have a dry interior but also there was firewood. Water was available in pools everywhere; however, there was no grass for the horses.

A good fire and hot food and drink changed the aspect of their condition, as far as comfort went. And Jennie lay down to sleep. For Duane, however, there must be vigilance. This cabin was no hiding-place. The rain fell harder all the time and the wind changed to the north.

"It's a norther, all right," muttered Duane. "Two or three days!" and he felt that his extraordinary luck had not held out. Still one point favored him, and it was that travelers were not likely to come along during the storm.

Jennie slept while Duane watched. The saving of this girl meant more to him than any task he had ever assumed. First it had been partly from a human feeling to succor an unfortunate woman, and partly a motive to establish clearly to himself that he was no outlaw. Lately, however, had come a different sense, a strange one, with something personal and warm and protective in it.

As he looked down upon her,

a slight slender girl with bedraggled dress and disheveled hair, her face pale and quiet, a little stern in sleep, and her long dark lashes lying on her cheek, he seemed to see her fragility, her prettiness, her femininity as never before. But for him she might at that very moment have been a broken, ruined girl, lying back in that cabin of the Bland's.

To-morrow she would be gone, among good kind people, with a possibility of finding her relatives. He thanked God for that; nevertheless he felt a pang.

She slept more than half the day. Duane kept guard, always alert, whether he was sitting, standing, or walking. The rain pattered steadily on the roof and sometimes came in gusty flurries through the door. The horses were outside in a shed that afforded poor shelter, and they stamped restlessly. Duane kept them saddled and bridled.

About the middle of the afternoon Jennie awoke. They cooked a meal, and afterward sat beside the little fire. She had never been, in his observation of her, anything but a tragic figure, an unhappy girl, the farthest removed from serenity and poise. That characteristic capacity for agitation struck him as stronger in her this day. He attributed it, however, to the long strain, the suspense nearing an end. Yet sometimes, when her eyes were on him, she did not seem to be thinking of her freedom, of her future.

"This time to-morrow you'll be in Shelbyville," he said.

"Where will you be?" she asked quickly.

"Me? Oh, I'll be making tracks for some lonesome place," he replied.

The girl shuddered.

"I've been brought up in Texas. I remember what a hard lot the men of my family had. But poor as they were, they had a roof over their heads, a hearth with a fire, a warm bed—somebody to love them.

"And you, Duane, oh, my God!

What your life must be! You must ride and hide and watch eternally. No decent food, no pillow, no friendly word, no clean clothes, no woman's hand! Horses, guns, trails, rocks, holes—these must be the important things in your life. You must go on riding, hiding, killing until you meet—"

She ended with a sob and dropped her head on her knees. Duane was amazed, deeply touched.

"My girl, thank you for that thought of me," he said, with a tremor in his voice. "You don't know how much that means to me."

She raised her face and it was tear-stained, eloquent, beautiful.

"I've heard tell—the best of men go to the bad out there. You won't. Promise me you won't. I never—knew any man—like you. I—I—we may never see each other again—after to-day. I'll never forget you. I'll pray for you and I'll never give up trying to—to do something.

"Don't despair. It's never too late. It was my hope that kept me alive—out there at Bland's—before you came. I was only a poor, weak girl. But if I could hope—so can you. Stay away from men! Be a lone wolf! Fight for your life! Stick out your exile—and maybe—some day—"

Then she lost her voice. Duane clasped her hand, and with feeling as deep as hers promised to remember her words. In her despair for him she had spoken wisdom—pointed out the only course.

Duane's vigilance, momentarily broken by emotion, had no sooner re-asserted itself than he discovered the bay horse, the one Jennie rode, had broken his halter and gone off. The soft wet earth had deadened the sounds of his hoofs. His tracks were plain in the mud. There were clumps of mesquit in sight, among which the horse might have strayed. It turned out, however, that he had not done so.

Duane did not want to leave Jennie alone in the cabin, so near the road.