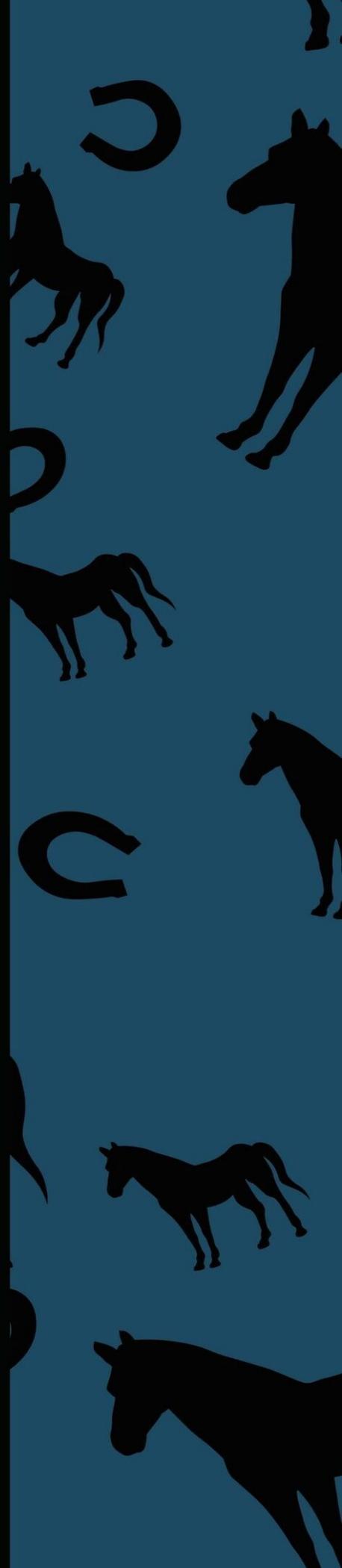


Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

A TEXAS RANGER

William MacLeod Raine



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WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

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William MacLeod Raine asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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Foreword

Within the memory of those of us still on the sunny side of forty the more remote West has passed from rollicking boyhood to its responsible majority. The frontier has gone to join the good Indian. In place of the ranger who patrolled the border for “bad men” has come the forest ranger, type of the forward lapping tide of civilization. The place where I write this— Tucson, Arizona— is now essentially more civilized than New York. Only at the moving picture shows can the old West, melodramatically overpainted, be shown to the manicured sons and daughters of those, still living, who brought law and order to the mesquite.

As Arthur Chapman, the Western poet, has written:

No loopholes now are framing Lean faces, grim and brown;
No more keen eyes are aiming To bring the redskin down.
The plough team’s trappings jingle
Across the furrowed field, And sounds domestic mingle
Where valor hung its shield. But every wind careering
Seems here to breathe a song— A song of
brave frontiering— A saga of the strong.

I

The Man from the Panhandle

(In Which Steve Plays Second Fiddle)

One

A Desert Meeting



As she lay crouched in the bear-grass there came to the girl clearly the crunch of wheels over disintegrated granite. The trap had dipped into a draw, but she knew that presently it would reappear on the winding road. The knowledge smote her like a blast of winter, sent chills racing down her spine, and shook her as with an ague. Only the desperation of her plight spurred her flagging courage.

Round the bend came a pair of bays hitched to a single-seated open rig. They were driven by a young man, and as he reached the summit he drew up opposite her and looked down into the valley.

It lay in a golden glow at their feet, a basin of pure light and silence stretching mile on mile to the distant edge of jagged mountain-line which formed its lip. Sunlight strong as wine flooded a clean world, an amber Eden slumbering in an unbroken, hazy dream primeval.

“Don’t move!”

At the summons the driver swung his head sharply to a picture he will never forget. A young woman was standing on the bank at the edge of the road covering him with a revolver, having apparently just stepped from behind the

trunk of the cottonwood beside her. The color had fled her cheeks even to the edge of the dull red-copper waves of hair, but he could detect in her slim young suppleness no doubt or uncertainty. On the contrary, despite her girlish freshness, she looked very much like business. She was like some young wild creature of the forest cornered and brought to bay, but the very terror in her soul rendered her more dangerous. Of the heart beating like a trip-hammer the gray unwinking eyes that looked into hers read nothing. She had schooled her taut nerves to obedience, and they answered her resolute will steadily despite fluttering pulses.

“Don’t move!” she said again.

“What do you want?” he asked harshly.

“I want your team,” she panted.

“What for?”

“Never mind. I want it.”

The rigor of his gaze slowly softened to a smile compound both of humor and grimness. He was a man to appreciate a piquant situation, none the less because it was at his expense. The spark that gleamed in his bold eye held some spice of the devil.

“All right. This is your hold-up, ma’am. I’ll not move,” he said, almost genially.

She was uneasily aware that his surrender had been too tame. Strength lay in that close-gripped salient jaw, in every line of the reckless sardonic face, in the set of the lean muscular shoulders. She had nerved herself to meet resistance, and instead he was yielding with complacent good nature.

“Get out!” she commanded.

He stepped from the rig and offered her the reins. As she reached for them his right hand shot out and caught the wrist that held the weapon, his left

encircled her waist and drew her to him. She gave a little cry of fear and strained from him, fighting with all her lissom strength to free herself.

For all the impression she made the girdle round her waist might have been of steel. Without moving, he held her as she struggled, his brown muscular fingers slowly tightening round her wrist. Her stifled cry was of pain this time, and before it had died the revolver fell to the ground from her paralyzed grip.

But her exclamation had been involuntary and born of the soft tender flesh. The wild eyes that flamed into his asked for no quarter and received none. He drew her slowly down toward him, inch by inch, till she lay crushed and panting against him, but still unconquered. Though he held the stiff resistant figure motionless she still flashed battle at him.

He looked into the storm and fury of her face, hiding he knew not what of terror, and laughed in insolent delight. Then, very deliberately, he kissed her lips.

“You— coward!” came instantly her choking defiance.

“Another for that,” he laughed, kissing her again.

Her little fist beat against his face and he captured it, but as he looked at her something that had come into the girl’s face moved his not very accessible heart. The salt of the adventure was gone, his victory worse than a barren one. For stark fear stared at him, naked and unconcealed, and back of that he glimpsed a subtle something that he dimly recognized for the outraged maidenly modesty he had so ruthlessly trampled upon. His hands fell to his side reluctantly.

She stumbled back against the tree trunk, watching him with fascinated eyes that searched him anxiously. They found their answer, and with a long ragged breath the girl turned and burst into hysterical tears.

The man was amazed. A moment since the fury of a tigress had possessed her. Now she was all weak womanish despair. She leaned against the cottonwood and buried her face in her arm, the while uneven sobs shook her slender body. He frowned resentfully at this change of front, and because his calloused conscience was disturbed he began to justify himself. Why didn't she play it out instead of coming the baby act on him? She had undertaken to hold him up and he had made her pay forfeit. He didn't see that she had any kick coming. If she was this kind of a boarding-school kid she ought not to have monkeyed with the buzz-saw. She was lucky he didn't take her to El Paso with him and have her jailed.

"I reckon we'll listen to explanations now," he said grimly after a minute of silence interrupted only by her sobs.

The little fist that had struck at his face now bruised itself in unconscious blows at the bark of the tree. He waited till the staccato breaths had subsided, then took her by the shoulders and swung her round.

"You have the floor, ma'am. What does this gun-play business mean?"

Through the tears her angry eyes flashed starlike.

"I sha'n't tell you," she flamed. "You had no right to— How dared you insult me as you have?"

"Did I insult you?" he asked, with suave gentleness. "Then if you feel insulted I expect you lay claim to being a lady. But I reckon that don't fit in with holding up strangers at the end of a gun. If I've insulted you I'll ce'tainly apologize, but you'll have to show me I have. We're in Texas, which is next door but one to Missouri, ma'am."

"I don't want your apologies. I detest and hate you," she cried,

"That's your privilege, ma'am, and it's mine to know whyfor I'm held up with a gun when I'm traveling peaceably along the road," he answered evenly.

“I’ll not tell you.”

He spoke softly as if to himself. “That’s too bad. I kinder hate to take her to jail, but I reckon I must.”

She shrank back, aghast and white.

“No, no! You don’t understand. I didn’t mean to— I only wanted— Why, I meant to pay you for the team.”

“I’ll understand when you tell me,” he said placidly.

“I’ve told you. I needed the team. I was going to let you have one of our horses and seventy-five dollars. It’s all I have with me.”

“One of your horses, you say? With seventy-five dollars to boot? And you was intending to arrange the trade from behind that gun. I expect you needed a team right bad.”

His steady eyes rested on her, searched her, appraised her, while he meditated aloud in a low easy drawl.

“Yes, you ce’tainly must need the team. Now I wonder why? Well, I’d hate to refuse a lady anything she wants as bad as you do that.” He swiftly swooped down and caught up her revolver from the ground, tossed it into the air so as to shift his hold from butt to barrel, and handed it to her with a bow. “Allow me to return the pop-gun you dropped, ma’am,”

She snatched it from him and leveled it at him so that it almost touched his forehead. He looked at her and laughed in delighted mockery.

“All serene, ma’am. You’ve got me dead to rights again.”

His very nonchalance disarmed her. What could she do while his low laughter mocked her?

“When you’ve gone through me complete I think I’ll take a little pasear over the hill and have a look at your hawss. Mebbe we might still do business.”

As he had anticipated, his suggestion filled her with alarm. She flew to bar the way.

“You can’t go. It isn’t necessary.”

“Sho! Of course it’s necessary. Think I’m going to buy a hawss I’ve never seen?” he asked, with deep innocence.

“I’ll bring it here.”

“In Texas, ma’am, we wait on the ladies. Still, it’s your say-so when you’re behind that big gun.”

He said it laughing, and she threw the weapon angrily into the seat of the rig.

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ll amble down and see what’s behind the hill.”

By the flinch in her eyes he tested his center shot and knew it true. Her breast was rising and falling tumultuously. A shiver ran through her.

“No— no. I’m not hiding— anything,” she gasped.

“Then if you’re not you can’t object to my going there.”

She caught her hands together in despair. There was about him something masterful that told her she could not prevent him from investigating; and it was impossible to guess how he would act after he knew. The men she had known had been bound by convention to respect a woman’s wishes, but even her ignorance of his type made guess that this steel-eyed, close-knit young Westerner— or was he a Southerner?— would be impervious to appeals founded upon the rules of the society to which she had been accustomed. A glance at his stone-wall face, at the lazy confidence of his manner, made her dismally aware that the data gathered by her experience of the masculine gender were insufficient to cover this specimen.

“You can’t go.”

But her imperative refusal was an appeal. For though she hated him from the depths of her proud, untamed heart for the humiliation he had put upon her, yet for the sake of that ferocious hunted animal she had left lying under a cottonwood she must bend her spirit to win him.

“I’m going to sit in this game and see it out,” he said, not unkindly.

“Please!”

Her sweet slenderness barred the way about as electively as a mother quail does the road to her young. He smiled, put his big hands on her elbows, and gently lifted her to one side. Then he strode forward lightly, with the long, easy, tireless stride of a beast of prey, striking direct for his quarry.

A bullet whizzed by his ear, and like a flash of light his weapon was unscabbarded and ready for action. He felt a flame of fire scorch his cheek and knew a second shot had grazed him.

“Hands up! Quick!” ordered the traveler.

Lying on the ground before him was a man with close-cropped hair and a villainous scarred face. A revolver in his hand showed the source of the bullets.

Eye to eye the men measured strength, fighting out to the last ditch the moral battle which was to determine the physical one. Sullenly, at the last, the one on the ground shifted his gaze and dropped his gun with a vile curse.

“Run to earth,” he snarled, his lip lifting from the tobacco-stained upper teeth in an ugly fashion.

The girl ran toward the Westerner and caught at his arm. “Don’t shoot,” she implored

Without moving his eyes from the man on the ground he swept her back.

“This outfit is too prevalent with its hardware,” he growled. “Chew out an explanation, my friend, or you’re liable to get spoiled.”

It was the girl that spoke, in a low voice and very evidently under a tense excitement.

“He is my brother and he has— hurt himself. He can’t ride any farther and we have seventy miles still to travel. We didn’t know what to do, and so—”

“You started out to be a road-agent and he took a pot-shot at the first person he saw. I’m surely obliged to you both for taking so much interest in me, or rather in my team. Robbery and murder are quite a family pastime, ain’t they?”

The girl went white as snow, seemed to shrink before his sneer as from a deadly weapon; and like a flash of light some divination of the truth pierced the Westerner’s brain. They were fugitives from justice, making for the Mexican line. That the man was wounded a single glance had told him. It was plain to be seen that the wear and tear of keeping the saddle had been too much for him.

“I acted on an impulse,” the girl explained in the same low tone. “I saw you coming and I didn’t know— hadn’t money enough to buy the team— besides —”

He took the words out of her mouth when she broke down.

“Besides, I might have happened to be a sheriff. I might be, but then I’m not.”

The traveler stepped forward and kicked the wounded man’s revolver beyond his reach, then swiftly ran a hand over him to make sure he carried no other gun.

The fellow on the ground eyed him furtively. “What are you going to do with me?” he growled.

The other addressed himself to the girl, ignoring him utterly.

“What has this man done?”

“He has— broken out from— from prison.”

“Where?”

“At Yuma.”

“Damn you, you’re snitching,” interrupted the criminal in a scream that was both wheedling and threatening.

The young man put his foot on the burly neck and calmly ground it into the dust. Otherwise he paid no attention to him, but held the burning eyes of the girl that stared at him from a bloodless face.

“What was he in for?”

“For holding up a train.”

She had answered in spite of herself, by reason of something compelling in him that drew the truth from her.

“How long has he been in the penitentiary?”

“Seven years.” Then, miserably, she added: “He was weak and fell into bad company. They led him into it.”

“When did he escape?”

“Two days ago. Last night he knocked at my window— at the window of the room where I lodge in Fort Lincoln. I had not heard of his escape, but I took him in. There were horses in the barn. One of them was mine. I saddled, and after I had dressed his wound we started. He couldn’t get any farther than this.”

“Do you live in Fort Lincoln?”

“I came there to teach school. My home was in Wisconsin before.”

“You came out here to be near him?”

“Yes. That is, near as I could get a school. I was to have got in the Tucson schools next year. That’s much nearer.”

“You visited him at the penitentiary?”

“No. I was going to during the Thanksgiving vacation. Until last night I had not seen him since he left home. I was a child of seven then.”

The Texan looked down at the ruffian under his feet.

“Do you know the road to Mexico by the Arivaca cut-off?”

“Yes.”

“Then climb into my rig and hit the trail hard— burn it up till you’ve crossed the line.”

The fellow began to whine thanks, but the man above would have none of them, “I’m giving you this chance for your sister’s sake. You won’t make anything of it. You’re born for meanness and deviltry. I know your kind from El Paso to Dawson. But she’s game and she’s white clear through, even if she is your sister and a plumb little fool. Can you walk to the road?” he ended abruptly.

“I think so. It’s in my ankle. Some hell-hound gave it me while we were getting over the wall,” the fellow growled.

“Don’t blame him. His intentions were good. He meant to blow out your brains.”

The convict cursed vilely, but in the midst of his impotent rage the other stopped and dragged him to his feet.

“That’s enough. You padlock that ugly mouth and light a shuck.”

The girl came forward and the man leaned heavily on her as he limped to the road. The Texan followed with the buckskin she had been riding and tied it to the back of the road-wagon.

“Give me my purse,” the girl said to the convict after they were seated.

She emptied it and handed the roll of bills it contained to the owner of the team. He looked at it and at her, then shook his head.

“You’ll need it likely. I reckon I can trust you. Schoolmarms are mostly reliable.”

“I had rather pay now,” she answered tartly.

“What’s the rush?”

“I prefer to settle with you now.”

“All right, but I’m in no sweat for my money. My team and the wagon are worth two hundred and fifty dollars. Put this plug at forty and it would be high.” He jerked his head toward the brush where the other saddle-horse was. “That leaves me a balance of about two hundred and ten. Is that fair?”

She bit her lip in vexation. “I expect so, but I haven’t that much with me. Can’t I pay this seventy on account?”

“No, ma’am, you can’t. All or none.” There was a gleam of humor in his hard eyes. “I reckon you better let me come and collect after you get back to Fort Lincoln.”

She took out a note-book and pencil. “If you will give me your name and address please.”

He smiled hardily at her. “I’ve clean forgotten them.”

There was a warning flash in her disdainful eye.

“Just as you like. My name is Margaret Kinney. I will leave the money for you at the First National Bank.”

She gathered up the reins deftly.

“One moment.” He laid a hand on the reins. “I reckon you think I owe you an apology for what happened when we first met.”

A flood of spreading color dyed her cheeks. “I don’t think anything about it.”

“Oh, yes, you do,” he contradicted. “And you’re going to think a heap more about it. You’re going to lay awake nights going over it.”

Out of eyes like live coals she gave him one look. "Will you take your hands from these reins please?"

"Presently. Just now I'm talking and you're listening."

"I don't care to hear any apologies, sir," she said stiffly.

"I'm not offering any," he laughed, yet stung by her words.

"You're merely insulting me again, I presume?"

"Some young women need punishing. I expect you're one."

She handed him the horsewhip, a sudden pulse of passion beating fiercely in her throat. "Very well. Make an end of it and let me see the last of you," she challenged.

He cracked the lash expertly so that the horses quivered and would have started if his strong hand had not tightened on the lines.

The Westerner laughed again. "You're game anyhow."

"When you are quite through with me," she suggested, very quietly.

But he noticed the fury of her deep-pupiled eyes, the turbulent rise and fall of her bosom.

"I'll not punish you that way this time." And he gave back the whip.

"If you won't use it I will."

The lash flashed up and down, twined itself savagely round his wrist, and left behind a bracelet of crimson. Startled, the horses leaped forward. The reins slipped free from his numbed fingers. Miss Kinney had made her good-bye and was descending swiftly into the valley.

The man watched the rig sweep along that branch of the road which led to the south. Then he looked at his wrist and laughed.

"The plucky little devil! She's a thoroughbred for fair. You bet I'll make her pay for this. But ain't she got sand in her craw? She's surely hating me proper."

He laughed again in remembrance of the whole episode, finding in it something that stirred his blood immensely.

After the trap had swept round a curve out of sight he disappeared in the mesquite and bear-grass, presently returning with the roan that had been ridden by the escaped convict.

“Whoever would suppose she was the sister of that scurvy scalawag with jailbird branded all over his hulking hide? He ain’t fit to wipe her little feet on. She’s as fine as silk. Think of her going through what she is to save that coyote, and him as crooked as a dog’s hind leg. There ain’t any limit to what a good woman will do for a man when she thinks he’s got a claim on her, more especially if he’s a ruffian.”

With this bit of philosophic observation he rolled a cigarette and lit it.

“Him fall into bad company and be led away?” he added in disgust. “There ain’t any worse than him. But he’ll work her to the limit before she finds it out.”

Leisurely he swung to the saddle and rode down into the valley of the San Xavier, which rolled away from his feet in numberless tawny waves of unfeatured foot-hills and mesas and washes. Almost as far as the eye could see there stretched a sea of hilltops bathed in sun. Only on the west were they bounded, by the irregular saw-toothed edge of the Frenchman Hills, silhouetted against an incomparable blue. For a stretch of many miles the side of the range was painted scarlet by millions of poppies splashed broadcast.

“Nature’s gone to flower-gardening for fair on the mountains,” murmured the rider. “What with one thing and another I’ve got a notion I’m going to take a liking to this country.”

The man was plainly very tired with rapid travel, and about the middle of the afternoon the young man unsaddled and picketed the animal near a water-

hole. He lay down in the shadow of a cottonwood, flat on his back, face upturned to the deep cobalt sky. Presently the drowse of the afternoon crept over him. The slumberous valley grew hazy to his nodding eyes. The reluctant lids ceased to open and he was fast asleep.

Two

Lieutenant Fraser Interferes



The sun had declined almost to a saddle in the Cuesta del Burro when the sleeper reopened his eyes. Even before he had shaken himself free of sleep he was uneasily aware of something wrong. Hazily the sound of voices drifted to him across an immense space. Blurred figures crossed before his unfocused gaze.

The first thing he saw clearly was the roan, still grazing in the circle of its picket-rope. Beside the bronco were two men looking the animal over critically.

“Been going some,” he heard one remark, pointing at the same time to the sweat-stains that streaked the shoulders and flanks.

“If he had me on his back he’d still be burning the wind, me being in his boots,” returned the second, with a grating laugh, jerking his head toward the sleeper. “Whatever led the durned fool to stop this side of the line beats me.”

“If he was hiking for Chihuahua he’s been hitting a mighty crooked trail. I don’t savvy it, him knowing the country as well as they say he does,” the first speaker made answer.

The traveler's circling eye now discovered two more men, each of them covering him with a rifle. A voice from the rear assured him there was also a fifth member to the party.

"Look out! He's awake," it warned.

The young man's hand inadvertently moved toward his revolver-butt. This drew a sharp imperative order from one of the men in front.

"Throw up your hands, and damn quick!"

"You seem to have the call, gentlemen," he smiled. "Would you mind telling me what it's all about?"

"You know what it's all about as well as we do. Collect his gun, Tom."

"This hold-up business seems to be a habit in this section. Second time today I've been the victim of it," said the victim easily.

"It will be the last," retorted one of the men grimly.

"If you're after the mazuma you've struck a poor bank."

"You've got your nerve," cried one of the men in a rage; and another demanded: "Where did you get that hawss?"

"Why, I got it—" The young man stopped in the middle of his sentence. His jaw clamped and his eyes grew hard. "I expect you better explain what right you got to ask that question."

The man laughed without cordiality. "Seeing as I have owned it three years I allow I have some right."

"What's the use of talking? He's the man we want, broke in another impatiently.

"Who is the man you want?" asked their prisoner.

"You're the man we want, Jim Kinney."

"Wrong guess. My name is Larry Neill. I'm from the Panhandle and I've never been in this part of the country till two days ago."