



NAMELESS RIVER

VINGIE E. ROE

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WNU Service.

CHAPTER XIX

Riders of Portent.

Minnie Pine could get from one place to another more quickly and with less noise than any one at Sky Line.

When Rod Stone came in at dusk she came running to him in the shadows to whisper in his ear.

"The sun woman from the flats on Nameless," she said, "has thrown their words back in the faces of the master and the boss—and they have given her to Sud to guard—in Rainbow's pot with Big Basford at the Flange. It's devil's work."

Rod Stone put out an arm and hugged the girl gently.

"You're a real woman, kid, if your skin is brown," he said admiringly, "and after all, it's heart that counts. Now tell me about this."

"I came," said Minnie frankly, "to you, because you are the only man at Sky Line. The rest are skunks. Josefa says you have the heart of a Pomo chief."

Stone stood for a long time considering.

Then he drew a deep breath and flung up his head.

"You're right," he said, "it's devil's work and something must be done. I am the one to do it, too."

He was silent for another space.

Then he turned to the girl. "Kid," he said, "I've been thinking about you lately—about making a get-away down the Pipe some night and striking across the desert for Marston—we could find a parson there and drop over the line into Mexico. Arnold hasn't much on me—perhaps less than on anyone at Sky Line—and we could make a new start."

There was the soft sound of an in-drawn breath and Minnie Pine's hand went to her shapely throat.

Stone went on.

"If I do this—if I hit down for Cordova tonight—you know, of course, that it is very likely to be the end of me one way or another, in the general stir-up that will follow. I want you to know any way before I start—that I'd like that new beginning—with you."

For a long moment there was no sound save the myriad voices of the confiers talking mysteriously with the winds of night.

Then the Pomo girl put her hands on the white man's shoulders.

"A chief," she said, "does what must be done—without fear—and a chief's woman follows him—even to death. Saddle two horses."

At Sheriff Price Selwood's ranch an anxious circle watched the still form on the bed. The doctor from Bement had not left his station for seven hours. Outside cowboys, all armed, walked here and there, and on the deep veranda sat the prospector, Smith, smoking innumerable cigarettes and waiting on destiny.

"It may be an hour—it may be ten—but something is going to happen soon," the doctor had said at dusk, "he will either rally or sink. If he speaks he will be rational, I think."

And on that chance the stranger waited to ask one question, namely: "What is the secret of Sky Line? Where is the other end of the passage?"

For all the hours that Price Selwood had lain unconscious, fourteen men under Bossick had camped in a glade under the flaring skirts of Mystery's western end, ready to answer Fair's summons.

Fair's thoughts were of the girl on Nameless—of her long blue eyes with their steady light, of her smiling lips and the golden crown of her braided hair.

He drifted away, as lovers have done since time was, and it was the low-toned voice of the doctor which recalled him.

"Mr. Smith," it said without a change of inflection, "come in carefully."

He rose and, tossing away his cigarette, stepped softly across the sill.

In the faint light of the oil lamp on a stand Sheriff Selwood looked up into the face of his wife, bending above him.

"Sally," he said weakly.

Then he turned his head and looked slowly around at the others.

"Hello, Doc," he whispered, then—"they didn't get me—after all! Smith—Smith—" a sudden light leaped into the dazed eyes, "I saw—them drive Bossick's—Bossick's steers into the face of—Rainbow cliff a mile west—of Sky Line—"

"That's plenty," said Fair quickly, "you mustn't talk, Selwood—mind the doctor—I'm leaving now."

And with a gentle touch on the sick man's shoulder he was gone.

He ran to the stable and got Diamond.

Five of Selwood's riders were throwing saddles on horses.

In less time than seemed possible the six men were riding for the rendezvous on Nameless.

All along the flowing river there was the seeming of portent, a strange sense of impending tragedy, for many riders were abroad in the quiet night.

One of these was Bud Allison, his young face set and awful, his pappy's old rifle grasped in a steady hand, pushing Big Dan to an unaccustomed limit of speed toward Sheriff Selwood's ranch.

The boy was praying that he might find Brand there—and the old gun was destined for action.

But within the narrow margin of a mile Fair was passing toward the north as he went south—and thus Bud missed him with the news of Nance's disappearance. Had they met, the happenings of that night might have had a different ending, for Fair would have stormed the citadel of Sky Line like a fury, forgetting all things in his fear for the woman he loved—the ends of justice which he sought to serve, Bossick's steers and everything else.

And in the shadow of Rainbow cliff Rod Stone and Minnie Pine waited patiently for the ranch to settle down that they might slip away.

At the camp on the skirts of Mystery, Fair found Bossick ready.

"Selwood's conscious," he told him quickly, "and his first thought was of his race for life. He said 'they didn't get me after all, and I saw them driving Bossick's steers into the face of Rainbow cliff a mile from Sky Line.' That's the secret he discovered and for which they tried to kill him."

"There's some sort of opening in the rock face which connects with the subterranean passage that leads to Blue Stone canyon, the desert range beyond, and finally to Marston on the railroad. That, gentlemen, is the secret of your disappearing cattle. Selwood said they always vanished at the same time Kate Cathrew drove her stock down to Cordova and out to the station—do you see?"

"The drive, coming down to the river, obliterated all tracks of those going up. Now that we know I think we've got the Sky Line rustlers dead to rights. There are twenty-one of us."

"We'll divide you; you, Bossick, going with your party up to Rainbow cliff, and I striking up through the mysterious passage. This trip will take a long hard grill, for it is far up Blue Stone to the south, and none of us know the length of the underground way."

"However, it must lead to some pocket not far from the cliff itself and on the inside. A gunshot will locate us when we are ready for each other. Lord knows what we'll find, or what the outcome will be. Let's go."

And so it was that some time later Brand Fair with his posse passed close along the upper edge of Nance Allison's ruined field and thought tenderly of the blue-eyed girl with her dogged courage and her simple faith, little dreaming that she was not safe in her bed in the cabin.

The hours of the night wore on. Crossing diagonally down, Rod Stone, safe away from Sky Line at last, made for Cordova with Minnie Pine behind him.

Bossick, having the shortest journey of all, sat in a clump of pines with his men around him, and waited in strained silence for a distant shot.

It was well after midnight when two things took place at almost the same moment—Brand Fair rode in behind the clump of willows that were always blowing out from the canyon's wall with his men in single file behind him—and Rod Stone got off his horse at Cordova. He handed his rein to the Pomo girl and went swiftly up the steps, opening the door upon the lighted room where a group of men were playing. They were mostly from the Upper country, though one or two were Cordovans. Among them were the bearded man who had sat on McKane's porch that day in spring and watched Cattle Kate come riding in on Bluefire, and the young cowboy with whom he had spoken concerning them.

Stone, a Sky Line man, received cold glances from the faces raised at his entrance. All Nameless knew and disapproved of Sky Line. But the boy was made of courageous stuff and he tackled the issue promptly.

"Men," he said sharply, "I'm from Sky Line, as you all know, and you may class me now as a traitor to my outfit. Perhaps I am. That's neither here nor there. I don't give a d—n whether I am or not. I'd have stood true in all cases but one. That one has happened. There's a good girl—a Bible girl, like I used to know back in the Middle West—shut up in a secret spot with Sud Province—and I've got to have help to save her and that quick. She's a fighter, I think, and is strong—but you all know Province. I don't know what I'm stirring up and I don't care. Will you come?"

Every chair at the dirty canvas-covered table but one shot back and outward as the players rose.

"Where's this here spot—an' who's th' girl?" said the cowboy. "Lead us to 'em."

"In Rainbow cliff—and the Allison girl from the homestead on the river." "Th' h—I you say! Ain't that poor kid had enough trouble?"

But McKane the trader spoke from where he sat, frowning.

"Ain't you all taking a lot for granted?" he asked, "and musing in Kate Cathrew's business?"

The bearded man turned on him.

"D—n Kate Cathrew's business! She can't give a decent girl to that slimy rep-tile Province and get by with it in this man's country—not by a d—n sight! Get your horses, boys!"

As the players surged out, McKane, obeying some apprehensive instinct which pulled at his heart like a cold hand, rose and followed.

"Wait till I get mine!" he shouted as he ran.

CHAPTER XX

Conclusion.

When Nance Allison mounted Buckskin at Kate Cathrew's door a terrible weight hung at her heart, yet a current of strength seemed flowing in her veins.

"The Lord is the strength of my life," she thought valiantly, "of whom shall I be afraid?"

The courage of the familiar words had been with her through many bitter trials—it did not fail her now.

So she rode in silence with Province's lascivious eyes upon her from behind, and Big Basford glowering in self-centered inattention ahead.

The way led close along the foot of Rainbow cliff among the weathered debris which sifted always down the rock face, and presently she was amazed to see the wall itself seem to slice in between Basford and herself, and in another second she was riding into a very narrow defile in the living stone with Province close upon her horse's heels. There was just room for horse and rider in the echoing aisle and none to spare. It was dimly lighted by what seemed a crack in the earth's surface high up among the clouds. The girl looked up in wonder.

This, she knew, was the secret of Rainbow cliff and Mystery ridge. Despite her danger she noted the passage with keen interest. The way was short for in a few minutes the rock-walled cut turned sharply to the right and ended abruptly.

Before her startled vision lay spread out a little paradise, round as a cup, green with tender grass, dotted with oak and poplar trees beside its countless springs—and grazing contentedly on its peculiarly rank forage was a band of cattle, each one of which bore on its left the "B. K." of Bossick's brand!

This, then, was Rainbow's pot of which Arnold had spoken.

In utter astonishment she drew Buckskin up and looked at the "secret spot" of Sky Line ranch.

"Well," said Province amusedly, "how do you like it?"

The girl did not reply, but sat still with her hands crossed on her saddle horn.

The snaky eyes under the black brows lost their drowsy palsy.

"I wouldn't advise you, purty," he said, "to come the high-and-mighty with me. A little kindness, now, would go a long way toward an understanding. Get off that horse."

Without a word Nance obeyed.

A little cold touch was at her inmost heart, but that tight, tense feeling of strength was still with her. She measured Province's shoulders with her eyes as he unsaddled the animals and turned them out to graze. She looked at his long arms, his lean and sinewy back.

"I've handled my plow all spring," she said to herself sagely, "I pitched hay all day and was not too tired at night. I can lift a grain sack easy. I'll sell out hard if I have to—for Mammy and Brand and Bud and Sonny."

And when Province turned and came toward her, smiling, he was met by blue eyes that were hard as shining stone, a mouth like a line of battle and hands clutched hard on folded arms.

"Oh, ho," he said, "we're goin' to butt our head agin a wall, ain't we? Cut it, kid, an' kiss me—you might as well now as later. An' besides, I don't like a mouth all mashed up from discipline."

"The hand of God," said the big girl stiffly, "is before my face. His host is round about me. I'd advise you to let me alone."

The man threw back his head and laughed.

"I don't see no host," he said, "an' I ain't superstitious," and with a leap he swung one long arm around her neck.

"Help me, Lord!" said Nance aloud, and bowing her young body she pulled her forehead down his breast and slipped free.

Next moment she had struck him in the mouth with all her might and followed through like any man.

Province roared and swore and came for her again, head down and small eyes blazing.

"Now," he said, "I'll have to hand you discipline, you d—d hell-cat!"

So the night that was so full of portent dropped down upon the country of the Deep Heart hills and Destiny rode the winds.

Sky Line ranch was stirring early, even before the first gray light had touched the east.

There was much afoot. Bossick's steers were going down the Pipe that day—and perhaps Sud Province and

Nance Allison would go with them, bound for the Big Bend country in Texas whence the man had hailed.

"I think she'll sign this morning," said Arnold easily as he sat down to Josefa's steaming breakfast by lamp-light, "and keep her mouth shut, too."

In the shielding clump of pines Bossick waited for Fair's signal somewhere inside the cliff.

Not so far down the great slope of Mystery Rod Stone was climbing up with the Cordova men behind him and Minnie Pine like his shadow at his side.

And deep in the heart of the earth Brand Fair was slowly forging upward toward that coup of justice for which he had labored so long and patiently.

Not least of the actors in the coming play, set to function on the stage of Rainbow's pot, was Bud Allison urging his exhausted horse slowly up toward Sky Line.

There was a cold breeze blowing when Arnold and Kate Cathrew rode along the rock face to the Flange. They spoke in low tones to Big Basford standing like an image and slipped into the wall. They rode in silence down the defile, dark as Erebus and full of wind, and came out into the amphitheater where the pale light was breaking.

At first they saw no sign of anything human in all the shadowy place. Arnold's keen eyes swept the pot from side to side, while Cattle Kate's went slowly round the wall.

"That's funny," said the man, "Province—"

"Look," said Kate, "over toward the left—against the cliff."

The light in the east struck first at the western face of the precipice, so that an object standing back against the perpendicular surface got its full benefit.

Arnold bent forward in his saddle and looked long at this object.

Then he touched his horse and rode forward.

"Good Lord!" he said as he pulled rein a distance from it, "Good Lord!"

For the object was Nance Allison— or what had been Nance Allison some few hours back.

Now it was a tragic wreck of a woman whose garments hung in fantastic shreds upon her body, whose white skin shone through in many places and whose great eyes gleamed from her ghastly face with awful light. One long gold braid of hair hung from her head in a dangling loop. The other was loose to its roots and swept in a ragged flag to her hip. Long wisps of it shone here and there upon the trampled grass around.

And over her from head to foot was blood—blood in clots and streaks and splashes, while from a small gash on her temple a red stream slowly dripped.

The man was awed for once in his relentless life.

"Heaven!" he said, "what have you done? Where's Province?"

"Dead, I hope," said Nance Allison dully.

Arnold struck his horse and dashed away, riding here and there as if he must know the ghastly finish quickly.

For a while it seemed that the man was gone entirely.

Then suddenly his horse shied from something moving in the deep grass by a spring and Arnold dismounted.

He had found Province—Sud Province rolling in agony, his face in the mud. With no gentle hand he grasped his shoulder and pulled him up.

"What's all this?" he rasped. "What's the matter with you?"

For answer Province took his hands from the left side of his face and looked up at his master.

Arnold dropped him back with an oath, which Province echoed.

"Gone!" he cried hoarsely, "gouged—sliced an' clean! An' she tried to get 'em both—d—n her hussy's soul!"

Arnold rode slowly back to where that grotesque caricature of a woman still stood by the wall. She seemed immovable as the rock itself, part and parcel of the waiting world and the gray shadows.

"You young hellion!" he gritted through his teeth, "you have blinded my best man!"

"Have so," said Nance, still in that dull voice, "yes—I have so." She nodded her disheveled head.

"Oh, what's the use to fool with her!" cried Kate Cathrew furiously. "I'm done!"

With a flare of her unbridled temper she snatched her gun from its saddle loops and flung it up.

As her finger curled on the trigger Arnold plunged his horse against Bluefire.

"No!" he cried as the report rang out clear and sharp in the thin air of dawn. The bullet struck with a vicious "phwit" ten feet above its mark, and a little rain of rock dust fell on Nance's hair.

From all the sides of Rainbow's pot that shot came back in echoes, a roaring fusillade—and Bossick, waiting in his clump of pines, straightened in his saddle. He picked up his hanging rein and spoke in a low voice.

"Ready, men?" he asked, "then let's go."

Cattle Kate had fired her own signal of fate and her enemies heard it. (TO BE CONTINUED.)

Billion Really a Vast Sum
When a billion is spoken of it means a huge sum to the average mind, but to express or visualize the sum in any unit that can be comprehended quickly is not easy. Probably one of the easiest ways of comprehending it is to imagine spending a dollar a minute and then realize that since the birth of Christ there had been only a little more than a billion minutes. By the end of 1925 there will have passed just 1,011,900,000 minutes.

MY FAVORITE STORIES

By IRVIN S. COBB

(Copyright.)

Where the Partnership Dissolved

One of the oldest stories in the known world—and in my humble judgment one of the best ones as well—deals with three actors—an aged negro, an itinerant conjurer and a twelve-pound snapping turtle.

The most popular version runs in this wise: It is a hot day in a Mississippi countryside. The conjurer, who is making his way across country afoot, is sitting alongside the dusty road, resting. There passes him an ancient negro returning from a fishing expedition. The undertaking has yielded no fish but the darkey is not going home empty-handed. He has captured a huge snapping turtle. He is holding it fast by its tail, which is stretched tautly over his right shoulder so that the flat undershell of the captive rests against his back. He has delectable visions dancing in his mind of turtle soup, turtle steaks and turtle stew. He bids the recumbent stranger a polite good-morning and trudges on. He has gone perhaps twenty feet further when an impish inspiration leaps full-grown into the magician's brain. In addition to his other gifts he is by way of being a fair ventriloquist.

He throws his voice into the turtle's mouth and speaking in a muddy, guttural tone such as would be suitable to a turtle if a turtle ever indulged in conversation, he says sharply:

"Look here, nigger, where are you taking me?"

The old man freezes in his tracks. He rolls his eyes rearward. There is the look of a vast, growing, startled bewilderment on his face.

"W-h-who—who dat speakin' to me?" he asks falteringly.

"It's me speakin' to you," the turtle seemingly says, "here on your back. I asked you where you were taking me."

"Huh, boss," cries the old man, "I ain't takin' you nowhars—I'se leavin' you right yere!"

And he does.

A Start From Humble Beginnings

Mr. Campbell, who was a lawyer, felt somewhat irritated on reaching his office at 8:30 in the morning to find the fire in the grate unkindled and the floor unswept and the place generally in a state of disorder. It was nearly nine o'clock before Ike, his black office servant, appeared.

"Good Lord, Ike," said Mr. Campbell petulantly. "What's detained you?"

"Mist' Campbell," apologized Ike, "you must please, suh, 'scuse me fur bein' late dis one time. I sort of overslept myself. De truth of the matter is dat I wuz kept up de best part of de night on' count of jinin' a cullud lodge."

"It surely didn't take you all night to join a lodge, did it?"

"Now suh, not perzacly. De fust part of de evenin' dey wuz 'niciatin' me into de membership an' de rest of de time dey wuz 'onductin' me into office."

"Isn't it rather unusual to confer an office on a member immediately after taking him in?"

"Now suh, dat's de standin' rule in dat lodge—jes' soon ez you is 'niciated you gits a office."

"What office did they confer upon you?"

"Imperial Supreme King."

"What?"

"Dat's whut dey calls it—Imperial Supreme King of de Universe."

"Isn't that rather a high office for a brand new member?"

"Why, naw, suh, Mist' Campbell, dat's de lowes' office dey is in dat lodge. W'en I's been in a spell longer dey is goin' to give me somethin' really worth while."

The Confusing Geography of Jersey

Years ago, when I earned my daily bread and occasional beer on Park row, one Andy Horn ran a cozy bar in the shadow of Brooklyn bridge. All sorts and conditions of men frequented the saloon—sailors, newspaper men, rich men, poor men, policemen off duty, artists and commuters from over the river.

A grubby person known as Smitty was a fixture at Andy's. He cut up food for the free lunch counter, did odd jobs and in rush hours helped to serve the trade. Smitty was to Manhattan what a cockney is to London.

He had been born on Cherry hill, right around the corner; he had been reared on the Bowery and he had never ranged further than Coney Island or Far Rockaway. Greater New York city was all the world he knew or cared to know.

His sister married a German market gardener over in New Jersey, and when his summertime vacation came Smitty went to visit her for two weeks. His new brother-in-law had bought a car and had promised to tour Smitty about over the state and show him the sights.

At the end of a week Smitty was back at work. One of the regular patrons hailed him:

"Hey, Smitty, I thought you were going to stay longer. Didn't you care for country life?"

"Nix on dat stuff fur me," said Smitty. "I'm offen it fur life. Say, dat Joisey sointly is one funny place. Why, all dem towns over there is got different names!"

After Every Meal

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