

MUNSEY

N. O. Pierce

A NOVEL OF FULL
BOOK-LENGTH

Complete in This Issue

LIGHT OF THE
WESTERN
STARS
ZANE GREY

993

THE WASP

by

Theodore
Goodridge
Roberts

A Stirring Story of
Romance *and* Adventure
in the West Indies

SEPTEMBER

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THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS*

BY ZANE GREY

AUTHOR OF "RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE," ETC.

XIX (continued)

FROM the mass of dusty-veiled humanity in the car came a chorus of low exclamations and plaintive feminine wails.

Madeline stepped to the front of the porch. Then the deep voices of men and softer voices of women united in one glad outburst, as much a thanksgiving as a greeting:

"Majesty!"

Helen Hammond was three years younger than Madeline, and a slender, pretty girl. She did not resemble her sister, except in whiteness and fineness of skin, being more of a brown-eyed, brown-haired type. Having recovered her breath soon after Madeline took her to her room, she began to talk.

"Majesty, old girl, I'm here, but you can bet I would never have come here if I had known about that ride from the railroad! You never wrote that you had a car. I thought this was out West—stage-coach, and all that sort of thing. Such a tremendous car! And the road! And that terrible little man with the leather trousers! What kind of a chauffeur is he?"

"He's a cowboy. He was crippled by falling under his horse, so I had him instructed to run the car. He can drive, don't you think?"

"Drive? Good gracious! He scared us to death, except Castleton. Nothing could scare that cold-blooded little Englishman. I am dizzy yet. Do you know, Majesty, I was delighted when I saw the car. Then your cowboy driver met us at the platform. What a queer-looking individual! He had a big pistol strapped to those leather

trousers. That made me nervous. When he piled us all in with our grips, he put me in the seat beside him, whether I liked it or not. I was fool enough to tell him I loved to travel fast. What do you think he said? Well, he eyed me in a rather cool and speculative way, and said with a smile: 'Miss, I reckon anything you love an' want bad will be coming to you out here!' I didn't know whether it was delightful candor or impudence. Then he said to all of us: 'Shore you'd better wrap up in the veils an' dusters. It's a long, slow, hot, dusty ride to the ranch, an' Miss Hammond's order was to drive safe.' He got our baggage-checks and gave them to a man with a huge wagon and a four-horse team. Then he cranked the car, jumped in, wrapped his arms round the wheel, and sank down low in his seat. There was a crack, a jerk, a kind of flash around us—and that dirty little town was somewhere on the map behind. For about five minutes I had a lovely time. Then the wind began to tear me to pieces. I was fascinated, then terrified. We went so fast I couldn't catch my breath."

"Helen, I thought you were fond of speeding," said Madeline with a laugh.

"I was; but I assure you I never before was in a fast car, I never saw a road, I never met a driver!"

"Perhaps I may have a few surprises for you out here in the wild and woolly West."

Helen's dark eyes showed a sister's memory of possibilities.

"You've started well," she said. "I am simply stunned. I expected to find you old and dowdy. Majesty, you're the hand-

* This story began in the May number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE

somest thing I ever laid eyes on! You're so splendid and strong, and your skin is like white gold. What's happened to you? What's changed you? This beautiful room, those glorious roses out there, the cool, dark sweetness of this wonderful house! I know you, Majesty, and though you never wrote it, I believe you have made a home out here. That's the most stunning surprise of all. Come, confess! I know I've always been selfish, and not much of a sister; but if you are happy out here I am glad. You were not happy at home. Tell me about yourself and about Alfred; then I'll give you all the messages and news from the East."

XX

It gave Madeline no small pleasure to hear from one and all of her guests varied encomiums upon her beautiful home, and a real and warm interest in what promised to be a delightful and memorable visit.

Of them all Castleton was the only one who failed to show surprise. He greeted her precisely as he had when he had last seen her in London. Madeline, rather to her astonishment, found meeting him again pleasurable. She discovered that she liked this imperturbable Englishman. Her capacity for liking any one had enlarged. Quite unexpectedly her old girlish love for her younger sister sprang into life; and with it interest in these half-forgotten friends and a warm regard for Edith Wayne, a chum of college days.

Helen's party was smaller than Madeline had expected it to be. Helen had been careful to select a company of good friends, all of whom were well known to Madeline. Edith Wayne was a patrician brunette, a serious, soft-voiced woman; sweet and kindly, despite a rather bitter experience that had left her worldly wise. Mrs. Carrollton Beck, a plain, lively person, had chaperoned the party. The fourth and last of the feminine contingent was Miss Dorothy Coombs—Dot, as they called her—a young woman of attractive blond prettiness.

Castleton was of small stature, with a pink and white complexion and a small golden mustache. He was immaculate and fastidious. Robert Weede was a rather large, florid young man, remarkable only for his good nature. Counting Boyd Harvey, a handsome, pale-faced fellow, with the careless smile of the man for whom

life had been easy and pleasant, the party was complete.

Dinner was a happy hour, especially for the Mexican women who served it, and who could not fail to note its success. The mingling of low voices and laughter, the old gay, superficial talk, the graciousness of a class which lived for the pleasure of things and to make time pass pleasantly for others—all this took Madeline far back into the past. She did not care to return to it, but she saw that it was well she had not wholly cut herself off from her people and friends.

When the party adjourned to the porch the heat had markedly decreased and the red sun was sinking over the red desert. An absence of spoken praise, a gradually deepening silence attested to the impression that the noble sunset made on the visitors. Just as the last curve of red rim vanished beyond the dim Sierra Madres, and the golden lightning began to flare brighter, Helen Hammond broke the silence with an exclamation.

"It wants only life! Ah, there's a horse climbing the hill! See, he's up; he has a rider."

Before she looked Madeline knew the identity of the man riding up the mesa; but she did not know until that moment how the habit of watching for him at this hour had grown upon her. He rode along the rim of the mesa and out to the point where, against the golden background, horse and rider stood silhouetted in bold relief.

"What's he doing there? Who is he?" inquired the curious Helen.

"That is Stewart, my right-hand man," replied Madeline. "Every day when he is at the ranch he rides up there at sunset. I think he likes the ride and the scene, but he goes to take a look at the cattle in the valley."

"Is he a cowboy?" asked Helen.

"Indeed yes," replied Madeline with a little laugh. "You will think so when Stillwell gets hold of you and begins to talk."

Madeline found it necessary to explain who Stillwell was and what he thought of Stewart; and while she was about it, of her own accord she added a few details of Stewart's fame.

"*El Capitan*—how interesting!" mused Helen. "What does he look like?"

"He is superb."

Florence handed the field-glass to Helen and bade her look.

"Oh, thank you," said Helen, as she complied. "There, I see him. Indeed he is superb. What a magnificent horse! How still he stands! Why, he seems carved in stone."

"Let me look," said Dorothy Coombs eagerly.

Helen gave her the glass.

"You can look, Dot, but that's all. He's mine—I saw him first."

Whereupon Madeline's feminine guests held a spirited contest over the field-glass; and three of them made bantering boasts not to consider Helen's self-asserted rights.

Madeline laughed with the others while she watched the dark figure of Stewart and his black outline against the sky. There came over her a thought not by any means new or strange—she wondered what was in Stewart's mind as he stood there in the solitude and faced the desert and the darkening west. Some day she meant to ask him. Presently he turned the horse and rode down into the shadow that was creeping up the mesa.

"Majesty, have you planned any fun, any excitement for us?" asked Helen. She was restless, nervous, and did not seem to be able to sit still a moment.

"You will think so when I get through with you," replied Madeline.

"What, for instance?" inquired Helen and Dot and Mrs. Beck in unison, while Edith Wayne smiled her interest.

"Well, I am not counting rides and climbs and golf, but these are necessary to train you for trips over into Arizona. I want to show you the desert and the Aravapai Cañon. We have to go on horseback and pack our outfit. If any of you are alive after those trips, and want more, we shall go up into the mountains. I should like very much to know what you each want particularly."

"I'll tell you," replied Helen promptly. "Dot will be the same out here as she was in the East. She wants to look bashfully down at her hand—her hand imprisoned in another—and listen to a man talk poetry about her eyes. If cowboys don't make love that way, Dot's visit will be a failure. Now Elsie Beck's one desire is to be revenged upon us for dragging her out here. She wants some dreadful thing to happen to us. I don't know what's in Edith's head, but it isn't fun. Bobby wants to be

near Elsie, and no more. Boyd wants what he has always wanted—the only thing he ever wanted that he didn't get. Castleton has a horrible, bloodthirsty desire to kill something."

"I declare now I want to ride and camp out, too," protested Castleton.

"As for myself," went on Helen, "I want—oh, if I only knew what it is that I want! Well, I know I want to be outdoors, to get into the open, to feel sun and wind, to burn some color into my white face. I want some flesh and blood and life. Beyond all that I don't know very well. I'll try to keep Dot from attaching all the cowboys to her train."

"What a diversity of wants!" said Madeline.

"Above all, Majesty, we want something to happen," concluded Helen with passionate finality.

"My dear sister, you may have your wish fulfilled," replied Madeline soberly. "Edith, Helen has made me curious about your especial yearning."

"Majesty, it is only that I wanted to be with you for a while," replied this old friend.

In the wistful reply, accompanied by a dark and eloquent glance, there was something which told Madeline of Edith's understanding, of her sympathy, and which was perhaps a betrayal of her own unquiet soul. It saddened Madeline. How many women might there not be who had the longing to break down the bars of their cage, but had not the spirit!

XXI

IN the whirl of the succeeding days it was a mooted question whether Madeline's guests or her cowboys or herself got the keenest enjoyment out of the flying time. Considering the sameness of the cowboys' ordinary life, she was inclined to think they made the most of the opportunity.

Stillwell and Stewart, however, found the situation trying. The work of the ranch had to go on, and some of it was sadly neglected. Stillwell could not resist the ladies, any more than he could resist the fun in the extraordinary goings-on of the cowboys. Stewart alone kept the business of cattle-raising from a serious setback. Early and late he was in the saddle, driving the lazy Mexicans whom he had hired to relieve the cowboys.

One morning in June Madeline was sit-

ting on the porch with her merry friends when Stillwell appeared on the corral path. He had not come to consult Madeline for several days—an omission so unusual as to be remarked.

"Here comes Bill—in trouble!" laughed Florence.

Indeed, he bore some faint resemblance to a thunder-cloud as he approached the porch; but the greetings he got from Madeline's party, especially from Helen and Dorothy, chased away the blackness from his face and brought the wonderful, wrinkling smile.

"Miss Majesty, sure I'm a sad, demoralized old cattleman," he said presently. "I'm in need of a heap of help."

"What's wrong now?" asked Madeline with her encouraging smile.

"Wal, it's so amazin' strange what cowboys will do. I'm jest about to give up. My cowboys are all on strike for vacations. What do you think of that? We've changed the shifts, shortened hours, let one an' another off duty, hired greasers, an', in fact, done everythin' that could be thought of; but this vacation idee grewed worse. When Stewart set his foot down, then the boys begin to get sick. Never in my born days as a cattleman have I heerd of so many diseases. There's Booley. I've knowed a hoss to fall all over him. an' wunst he rolled down a cañon. Never bothered him at all! He's got a blister on his heel, a ridin' blister, an' he says it's goin' to blood-poisonin' if he doesn't rest. There's Jim Bell. He's developed what he says is spinal mengalootis, or some such like. There's Frankie Slade. He swore he had scarlet fever—because his face was burnt so red, I guess. When I hollered that scarlet fever was contagious, an' he must be put away somewhere, he up an' says he guessed it wasn't that; but he was sure awful sick an' needed to loaf around an' be amused. Why, even Nels doesn't want to work these days. If it wasn't for Stewart, who's had greasers with the cattle, I don't know what I'd do!"

"Why all this sudden illness and idleness?" asked Madeline.

"Wal, you see, the truth is every blamed cowboy on the range except Stewart thinks it's his bounden duty to entertain the ladies."

"I think that is just fine," exclaimed Dorothy Coombs, and she joined in the general laugh.

"Stillwell, you needn't be so distressed with what is only gallantry in the boys, even if it does make temporary confusion in the work," said Madeline.

"Miss Majesty, all I said is not the half, nor the quarter, nor nothin' of what's troublin' me," he answered sadly.

"Very well—unburden yourself."

"Wal, the cowboys, exceptin' Gene, have gone plumb batty, jest plain crazy, over this heah game of gol-lof."

A merry peal of mirth greeted Stillwell's solemn assertion.

"Oh, Stillwell, you're joking," replied Madeline.

"I hope to die if I'm not in daid earnest," declared the cattleman. "It's an amazin' strange fact. Ask Flo. She'll tell you. She knows cowboys, an' how, if they ever start on somethin', they ride it as they ride a hoss."

Florence, being appealed to, and evidently feeling all eyes upon her, modestly replied that Stillwell had scarcely misstated the situation.

"Cowboys play like they work or fight," she added. "They give their whole souls to it. They are great big simple boys."

"Indeed they are," said Madeline. "Oh, I'm glad if they like golf! They have so little play."

"Wal, somethin's got to be did if we're to go on raisin' cattle at Her Majesty's Rancho," replied Stillwell. "You recollect what pride the boys took in fixin' up that gol-lof course out on the mesa, and how they all wanted to see you an' your brother play, an' be caddies for you? Wal, whenever you'd quit they'd go to work tryin' to play the game. Monty Price, he was the leadin' spirit; an' he an' Link Stevens—both cripples, you might sav—joined forces an' elected to beat all comers. They did beat 'em, too, an' that's the trouble. Long an' patient the other cowboys tried to best them two game-legs, an' hev'n't done it. Mebbe if Monty an' Link was perfectly sound in their legs, like the other cowboys, there wouldn't hev been such a holler; but no sound cowboys 'll ever stand for a disgrace like that. Monty an' Link hev got the books an' directions of the game, an' they won't let the other boys see them. They show the rules, but that's all; an' of course every game ends in a row almost before it's started. The boys are all turrible in earnest about this gol-lof; an' I want to say, for the good of ranchin', not to men-

tion a possible fight, that Monty an' Link hev got to be beat. There'll be no peace round this ranch till that's done!"

"What in the world can I do?" Madeline asked.

"Wal, I reckon I couldn't say. All I'm sure of is that the conceit has got to be taken out of Monty an' Link. Wunst, just wunst will square it, an' then we can re-some our work."

"Stillwell, listen," said Madeline. "We'll arrange a match game, a foursome, between Monty and Link and your best picked team. Castleton, who is an expert golfer, will umpire. My friends will take turns as caddies for your team. Caddies may coach, and perhaps expert advice is all that is necessary for your side to defeat Monty's."

"A grand idee!" declared Stillwell with instant decision. "When can we have this match game?"

"Why, to-day—this afternoon. We'll all ride out to the links."

"Wal, I reckon I'll be some indebted to you, Miss Majesty, an' all your guests," replied Stillwell warmly. He rose with sombrero in hand and with a twinkle in his eye. "An' now I'll be goin' to fix up for the game of cowboy gol-lof. *Adios!*"

The June days had set in warm—hot, in fact, during the noon hours; and Madeline's visitors had profited by the experience of those used to the Southwest. They indulged in the restful *siesta* during the heated term of the day.

Madeline was awakened by Majesty's well-known whistle and pounding on the gravel. Then she heard the other horses. When she went out she found her party assembled in gala golf attire and with spirits to match their costumes. Castleton, especially, appeared resplendent in a golf coat that beggared description. Madeline had faint misgivings when she reflected on what Monty and Nels and Nick might do under the influence of that blazing garment.

"Oh, Majesty," cried Helen, as Madeline went up to her horse, "don't make him kneel. Try that flying mount. We all want to see it. It's stunning!"

"But that way, too, I must have him kneel," said Madeline, "or I can't reach the stirrup. He's so tremendously high."

Madeline had to yield to the laughing insistence of her friends and, after all of them except Florence were up, she made Majesty go down on one knee. Then she

stood on his left side, facing back, and took a good, firm grip on the bridle and pommel and his mane. After she had slipped the toe of her boot firmly into the stirrup she called to Majesty. He jumped and swung her up into the saddle.

"Now, just to see how it ought to be done, watch Florence," said Madeline.

The Western girl was at her best in a riding-habit and with her horse. It was beautiful to see the ease and grace with which she accomplished the cowboy's flying mount. Then she led the party down the slope and across the flat to climb the mesa.

Madeline never saw a group of her cowboys without looking them over, almost unconsciously, for her foreman; but this afternoon, as usual, Gene Stewart was not present. She could not help feeling disappointed and irritated. He had not been attentive to her guests, and he, of all her cowboys, was the one of whom they wanted most to see something. Helen, particularly, had asked to have him attend the golf match; but Stewart was with the cattle. Then Madeline thought of his proven faithfulness, and was ashamed of her momentary lapse into that old imperious habit of desiring things irrespective of reason.

Stewart, however, immediately slipped out of her mind as she surveyed the group of cowboys on the links. By actual count there were sixteen, not including Stillwell. The same number of splendid horses, all shiny and clean, grazed on the rim in care of Mexican lads. The cowboys were on dress parade, looking very different, in Madeline's eyes, at least, from the way cowboys usually appeared. But they were real and natural to her guests; and they were so picturesque that they might have been stage cowboys instead of real ones. Sombreros with silver buckles and horsehair bands were in evidence. Bright silk scarfs, embroidered vests, fringed and ornamented chaps, huge swinging guns, and clinking silver spurs lent a festive appearance.

"Wal, you-all raced over, I seen," said Stillwell, taking Madeline's bridle. "Get down, get down. We're sure amazin' glad an' proud. An', Miss Majesty, I'm offerin' to beg pawdin' for the way the boys are packin' guns. Mebbe it ain't polite, but it's Stewart's orders."

"Stewart's orders!" echoed Madeline.

"I reckon he won't take no chances on the boys bein' surprised sudden by raiders; an' there's raiders operatin' in from the

Guadaloupes. That's all. Nothin' to worry over. I was just explainin'."

Madeline, with several of her party, expressed relief, but Helen showed excitement and then disappointment.

"Oh, I want something to happen!" she cried.

Sixteen pairs of keen cowboy eyes fastened intently upon her pretty, petulant face; and Madeline divined, if Helen did not, that the desired consummation was not far off.

"So do I," said Dot Coombs. "It would be perfectly lovely to have a real adventure!"

"Wal, I reckon you ladies sure won't have to go home unhappy," Stillwell said. "Why, as boss of this heah outfit I'd feel myself disgraced forever if you didn't have your wish. Just wait. An' now, ladies, the matter on hand may not be amusin' or excitin' to you, but to this heah cowboy outfit it's powerful important, an' all the help you can give us will sure be thankfully received. Take a look across the links. Do you-all see them two apologies for human bein's prancin' like a couple of hobbled brinks? Wal, you're gazin' at Monty Price an' Link Stevens, who have of a sudden got too swell to associate with their old bunkies. They're practisin' for the toornament. They don't want my boys to see how they handle them crooked clubs."

"Have you picked your team?" inquired Madeline.

Stillwell mopped his red face with an immense bandanna and showed something of confusion and perplexity.

"I've sixteen boys, an' they all want to play," he replied. "Pickin' the team ain't goin' to be an easy job. Mebbe it won't be healthy, either. There's Nels an' Nick. They just stated cheerful like that if they didn't play we won't have any game at all. Nick never tried before, an' Nels, all he wants is to get a crack at Monty with one of them crooked clubs."

"I suggest you let all your boys drive from the tee, and choose the two who drive the farthest," said Madeline.

Stillwell's perplexed face lighted up.

"Wal, that's a plumb good idee! The boys 'll stand for that." He promptly broke up the admiring circle of cowboys round the ladies. "Grab a rope—I mean a club, all you cow-punchers. March over hyar an' take a swipec at this little white bean!"

The cowboys obeyed with alacrity. There was some difficulty over the choice of clubs and who should try first. The latter question had to be adjusted by lot. However, after Frankie Slade made several ineffectual attempts to hit the ball from the teeing-ground, at last to send it only a few yards, the other players were not so eager to follow.

Stillwell had to push Booley forward; the cowboy executed a most miserable shot and retired to the laughing comments of his comrades. The efforts of several succeeding candidates attested to the extreme difficulty of making a good drive.

"Wal, Nick, it's your turn now," said Stillwell.

"Bill, I ain't so particular about playin'," replied Nick.

"Why? You was roarin' about it a little while ago. Afraid to show how bad you'll play?"

"Nope, jest plain consideration for my feller cow-punchers," answered Nick with spirit. "I'm appreciatin' how bad they play, an' I'm not mean enough to show them up."

"Wal, you've got to show me," said Stillwell. "I know you never seen a gol-lof stick in your life. What's more, I'll bet you can't hit that little ball square—not in a dozen cracks at it."

"Bill, I'm also too much of a gent to take your money; but you know I'm from Missouri. Gimme a club."

Nick's angry confidence seemed to evaporate as one after another he took up and handled the clubs. It was plain that he had never before wielded one; but also it was plain that he was not the kind of a man to give in. Finally he selected a driver, looked doubtfully at the small knob, and then stepped into position on the teeing-ground.

Nick Steele stood six feet four inches in height. He had the rider's wiry slenderness, yet he was broad of shoulder. His arms were long. Manifestly he was an exceedingly powerful man. He swung the driver aloft and whirled it down with tremendous swing. *Crack!* The white ball disappeared, and from where it had been rose a tiny cloud of dust.

Madeline's quick sight caught the ball as it lined somewhat to the right. It was shooting low and level with the speed of a bullet. At a hundred yards or so it began to rise. At two hundred it seemed to be

sailing into the sky. It went up and up in swift, beautiful flight, then lost its speed and began to sail, to curve, to drop, and it fell out of sight beyond the rim of the mesa.

Madeline had never seen a drive that excelled this one. It was magnificent, beyond belief, except for the evidence of her own eyes.

The yelling of the cowboys probably brought Nick Steele out of the astonishment with which he beheld his lucky shot. Suddenly alive to the situation, and resting nonchalantly upon his club, he surveyed Stillwell and the boys. After their first surprised outburst they were dumb.

"You-all seen thet?" Nick grandly waved his hand. "Thought I was joshin', didn't you? Why, I used to go to St. Louis an' Kansas City to play this here game. There was some talk of the golf-clubs takin' me down East to play the champions; but I never cared fer the game. Too easy fer me! Them fellers back in Missouri were a lot of cheap dubs anyhow, always kickin' because whenever I hit a ball hard I *always* lost it. Now you-all can go ahead an' play Monty an' Link. I could beat them both, playin' with one hand, if I wanted to; but I ain't interested. I jest hit thet ball off the mesa to show you. I sure wouldn't be seen playin' on your team!"

With that Nick sauntered away toward the horses. Then Nels strode into the lime-light. He picked up the club Nick had used and called for a new ball. Stillwell carefully built up a little mound of sand, and, placing the ball upon it, squared away to watch. He looked grim and expectant.

Nels was not so large a man as Nick, and did not look so formidable as he waved his club at the gaping cowboys. Still he was lithe, tough, and strong. Briskly, with an insouciant manner, he stepped up and delivered a mighty swing at the ball. He missed. The power and momentum of his swing flung him off his feet, and he actually turned upside down and spun round on his head.

The cowboys howled. Stillwell's stentorian laugh rolled across the mesa. Madeline and her guests found it impossible to restrain their mirth; and when Nels got up he cast a reproachful glance at them. His feelings were hurt.

His second attempt, not by any means so

violent, resulted in as clean a miss as the first, and brought jeers from the cowboys.

Nels's red face flamed redder. Angrily he swung again. The mound of sand spread over the teeing-ground, and the exasperating little ball rolled a few inches.

"Shore it's jest thet crooked club!" he declared.

He changed clubs, and made another signal failure. Rage suddenly possessing him, he began to swing wildly. Always it appeared the elusive little ball was not where he aimed. Stillwell hunched his huge bulk, leaned hands on knees, and roared his riotous mirth. The cowboys leaped up and down in glee.

"You can't hit thet ball!" sang out one of the noisiest.

"Nels, you're too old!" Stillwell shouted. "Your eyes are no good!"

Nels slammed down the club; and when he straightened up, with the red leaving his face, then the real pride and fire of the man showed. He stepped off ten paces and turned toward the little mound upon which rested the ball. His arm shot down, elbow crooked, hand like a claw.

"Aw, Nels, it's jest fun—that's all!" yelled Stillwell.

But swift as a gleam of light Nels flashed his gun, and the report came with the action. Chips flew from the golf-ball as it tumbled from the mound. Nels had hit it without raising the dust. Then he dropped the gun back in its sheath and faced the cowboys.

"Mebbe my eyes ain't so orful bad," he said coolly, and started to walk off.

"But look aheah, Nels," replied Stillwell. "We come out to play gol-lof. We can't let you knock the ball around with your gun. What'd you want to get mad for? It's only fun. Now you an' Nick hang round heah an' be sociable. We ain't depreciatin' your company none, nor your usefulness on occasions; an' if you just hain't got inborn politeness sufficient to do the gallant before the ladies, why, remember Stewart's orders."

"Stewart's orders?" queried Nels, coming to a sudden halt.

"That's what I said," replied Stillwell with asperity. "His orders. Are you forgettin' orders? Wal, you're a fine cowboy. You an' Nick an' Monty, 'specially, are to obey orders."

Nels took off his sombrero and scratched his head.

"Bill, I reckon I'm some forgetful; but I was mad. I'd 'a' remembered pretty soon, an' mebbe my manners."

"Sure you would," replied Stillwell. "Wal, now, we don't seem to be proceedin' much with my gol-lof team. Next ambitious player step up!"

In Ambrose, who showed some deftness at the driving stroke, Stillwell found one of his team. The succeeding players, however, were so poor and so evenly matched that the earnest Stillwell was in despair. He lost his temper just as easily as Nels had. Finally Ed Linton's wife appeared, riding up with Ambrose's wife, and perhaps this helped, for Ed suddenly disclosed ability that made Stillwell single him out.

"Let me coach you a little," said Bill.

"Sure, if you like," replied Ed; "but I know more about this game than you do."

"Wal, then, let's see you hit a ball straight. Don't sling your club as if you was ropin' a steer. Come round easy like an' hit straight."

Ed made several attempts, which, although better than those of his predecessors, were rather discouraging to the exacting coach. Presently, after a particularly atrocious shot, Stillwell strode in distress here and there, and finally stopped a dozen paces or more in front of the teeing-ground. Ed calmly made ready for another attempt.

"Fore!" he called.

Stillwell stared.

"Fore!" yelled Ed.

"Why're you hollerin' that way at me?" demanded Bill.

"I mean for you to lope off the horizon. Get back from in front!"

"Oh, that's one of them crazy words Monty is always hollerin'. Wal, I reckon I'm safe enough hyar. You couldn't hit me in a million years."

"Bill, ooze away," urged Ed.

"Didn't I say you couldn't hit me? What am I coachin' you for? It's because you hit crooked, ain't it? Wal, go ahaid an' break your back."

Ed Linton was a short, heavy man, and his stocky build gave evidence of strength. His former strokes had not been made with much exertion, but now he got ready for a supreme effort. A sudden silence camped down upon the exuberant cowboys. It was one of those fateful moments when the air was charged with disaster. As Ed swung the club it fairly whistled.

Crack! Instantly came a thump; but

no one saw the ball until it dropped from Stillwell's shrinking body. His big hands went spasmodically to the place that hurt and a terrible groan rumbled from him.

Then the cowboys broke into a frenzy of mirth that seemed to find adequate expression only in a dancing and rolling accompaniment to their howls. Stillwell recovered his dignity as soon as he caught his breath, and he advanced with a rueful face.

"Wal, boys, it's on Bill," he said. "I'm a livin' proof of the pig-headedness of mankind. Ed, you win. You're captain of the team. You hit straight, an' if I hadn't been obstructin' the general atmosphere that ball would sure have gone clear to the Chiricahuas!" Then, making a megaphone of his huge hands, Stillwell yelled a blast of defiance at Monty and Link.

"Hey, you swell gol-lofers! We're waitin'. Come on if you ain't scared."

Instantly Monty and Link quit practising and, like two emperors, came stalking across the links.

"Guess my bluff didn't work much," said Stillwell. Then he turned to Madeline and her friends. "Sure I hope, Miss Majesty, that you-all won't weaken an' go over to the enemy. Monty is some eloquent, an' has a way of gettin' people to agree with him. He'll be plumb wild when he heahs what he an' Link are up against; but it's a square deal, because he wouldn't help us or lend the book that shows how to play. An' besides, it's policy for us to beat him. Now if you'll elect who's to be caddies an' umpire I'll be powerful obliged."

Madeline's friends were hugely amused over the prospective match, but, except for Dorothy and Castleton, they disclaimed any ambition for active participation. Accordingly Madeline appointed Castleton to judge the play, Dorothy to act as caddie for Ed Linton, and she herself decided to be caddie for Ambrose. While Stillwell beamingly announced this momentous news to his team and supporters, Monty and Link were striding up.

Both were diminutive in size, bow-legged, lame in one foot, and altogether unprepossessing. Link was young. Monty's years, more than twice Link's, had left their mark; but it would have been impossible to tell the veteran cowboy's age. As Stillwell said, Monty was burned to the color and hardness of a cinder. He never

noticed the heat, and always wore heavy sheepskin chaps with the wool outside. This made him look broader than he was long.

Link, always partial to leather, had, since he became Madeline's chauffeur, taken to leather altogether. He carried no weapon, but Monty wore a huge gun-sheath and gun. Link smoked a cigarette and looked coolly impudent. Monty was dark-faced, swaggering, for all the world like a barbarian chief.

"That Monty makes my flesh creep," said Helen, low-voiced. "Really, Mr. Stillwell, is he so bad—desperate—as I've heard? Did he ever kill anybody?"

"Sure—most as many as Nels," replied Stillwell cheerfully.

"Oh! And is that nice Mr. Nels a desperado, too? I wouldn't have thought so. He's so kind and old-fashioned and soft-voiced."

"Nels is sure an example of the duplicity of men, Miss Helen. Don't you listen to his soft voice. He's really as bad as a side-winder rattlesnake."

At this juncture Monty and Link reached the teeing-ground, and Stillwell went out to meet them. The other cowboys pressed forward to surround the trio. Madeline heard Stillwell's voice, and evidently he was explaining that his team was to have skilled advice during the play.

Suddenly there came from the center of the group a loud, angry roar that broke off as suddenly. Then followed excited voices all mingled together. Presently Monty appeared, breaking away from restraining hands, and he strode toward Madeline.

Monty Price had never been known to speak to a woman unless he was first addressed, and then he answered in blunt, awkward shyness. Upon this great occasion, however, it appeared that he meant to plead with Madeline, for he showed stress of emotion. Madeline had never become acquainted with Monty. She was a little in awe, if not in fear of him, and now she found it imperative to keep in mind that more than any other of the wild fellows on her ranch this one should be dealt with as if he were a big boy.

Monty removed his sombrero—something he had never done before—showing that his head was entirely bald. This was one of the marks of that terrible Montana prairie-fire through which he had fought to save the life of a child. Madeline did not for-

get it, and all at once she wanted to take Monty's side. Remembering Stillwell's wisdom, however, she forbore yielding to sentiment and called upon her wits.

"Miss—Miss Hammond," began Monty, stammering. "I'm extendin' admirin' greetin's to you an' your friends. Link an' me are right down proud to play the match game with you watchin'. But Bill says you're goin' to caddie for his team an' coach 'em on the fine points. An' I want to ask, all respectful, if that's fair an' square?"

"Monty, that is for you to say," replied Madeline. "It was my suggestion; but if you object in the least, of course we shall withdraw. It seems fair to me, because you have learned the game, you are expert, and I understand the other boys have no chance with you. Then you have coached Link. I think it would be sportsmanlike of you to accept the handicap."

"Aw, a handicap! That was what Bill was drivin' at! Why didn't he say so? Every time Bill comes to a word thet's pie to us old golfers, he jest stumbles. Miss Majesty, you've made it all as clear as print; an' I may say with becomin' modesty thet you wasn't mistaken none about me bein' sportsmanlike. Me an' Link was born thet way. We accept the handicap. Lackin' thet handicap, I reckon Link an' me would have no ambish to play our most be-ootiful game. An' thankin' you, Miss Majesty, an' all your friends, I want to add thet if Bill's outfit couldn't beat us before, they've got a swell chanst now, with you ladies a watchin' me an' Link!"

Monty seemed to expand with pride as he delivered this speech. At the end he bowed low and turned away to join the group round Stillwell. Once more there arose animated discussion and argument and expostulation. One of the cowboys came for Castleton and led him away to discuss the ground rules.

It seemed to Madeline that the game never would begin. She strolled on the rim of the mesa, arm in arm with Edith Wayne, and while Edith talked she looked out over the gray valley leading to the rugged black mountains and the vast red wastes. In the foreground, on the gray slope, she saw cattle in movement and cowboys riding to and fro. She thought of Stewart.

Then Boyd Harvey came for them, saying that all the preliminary details had been

arranged. Stillwell met them half-way, and this cool, dry old cattleman, whose face and manner would scarcely change at the announcement of a cattle raid, now showed extreme agitation.

"Wal, Miss Majesty, we've gone an' made a fozzle right at the start," he said dejectedly.

"A fozzle? But the game has not yet begun," replied Madeline.

"A bad start, I mean. It's amazin' bad, an' we're licked already."

"What in the world is wrong?"

She wanted to laugh, but Stillwell's distress restrained her.

"Wal, it's this way. That blamed Monty is as cute an' slick as a fox. After he got done declaimin' about the handicap he an' Link was so happy to take, he got Castleton over hyar an' drove us all dotty with his crazy gol-lof names. Then he borrowed Castleton's gol-lof coat. I reckon borrowed is some kind word. He just about took that blazin' coat off the Englishman; though I ain't sayin' but that Castleton was agreeable when he tumbled to Monty's meanin', which was nothin' more'n to break Ambrose's heart. That coat dazzles Ambrose. You know how vain he is. Why, he'd die to get to wear that Englishman's gol-lof coat; an' Monty forestalled him. It's plumb pitiful to see the look in Ambrose's eyes. He won't be able to play much. I reckon Monty was right about brains bein' what wins!"

The game began. At first Madeline and Dorothy essayed to direct the endeavors of their respective players; but all they said and did only made their team play the worse. At the third hole they were two down and hopelessly bewildered. What with Monty's borrowed coat, with its dazzling effect upon Ambrose, and Stillwell's vociferous disgust, and the clamorous pursuit of the cowboy supporters, and the embarrassing presence of the ladies, Ambrose and Ed wore through all manner of strange play until it became ridiculous.

"Hey, Link!" came Monty's voice booming over the links. "Our esteemed rivals are playin' shinny!"

Madeline and Dorothy gave up presently, when the game became a rout; and they sat down with their followers to watch the finish of the match. It came with spectacular suddenness. A sharp yell pealed out, and all the cowboys turned attentively in its direction. A big black horse had

surmounted the rim of the mesa and was just breaking into a run. His rider yelled sharply to the cowboys. They wheeled to dash toward their grazing horses.

"That's Stewart. There is something wrong!" said Madeline in alarm.

XXII

CASTLETON stared. The other men exclaimed uneasily. The women sought Madeline's face with anxious eyes.

The black got into his stride and bore swiftly down upon them.

"Oh, see that horse run!" cried Helen. "See that fellow ride!"

Helen was not alone in her admiration. Madeline divided her emotions between growing alarm of some danger menacing and a thrill and quickening of pulse-beat that tingled over her whenever she saw Stewart in violent action. No action of his was any longer insignificant, but violent action meant much—might mean anything.

For one moment she remembered Stillwell and all his talk about fun and plots and tricks to amuse her guests. Then she discountenanced the thought. Stewart might lend himself to a little fun, but he cared too much for a horse to run him at that speed unless there was imperious need. That alone sufficed to answer Madeline's questioning curiosity.

Her alarm mounted to fear, not so much for herself as for her guests. But what danger could there be? She could think of nothing except the guerrillas.

Whatever threatened, it would be met and checked by this man Stewart who was thundering up on his fleet horse; and as he neared her, so that she could see the dark gleam of face and eyes, she had a strange feeling of comradeship and trust in her dependence upon him.

The big black was so close to Madeline and her friends that when Stewart pulled him the dust and sand kicked up by his pounding hoofs flew in their faces.

"What is it, Stewart?" cried Madeline.

"Guess I scared you, Miss Hammond," he replied; "but I'm some pressed for time. There's a gang of bandits hiding on the ranch, most likely in a deserted hut. They held up a train near Agua Prieta. Pat Hawe is with the posse that's trailing them, and you know Pat has no use for us. I'm afraid it wouldn't be pleasant for you or your guests to meet either the posse or the bandits."

"I fancy not," said Madeline, considerably relieved. "We'll hurry back to the house."

They exchanged no more speech at the moment, and Madeline's guests were silent. Perhaps Stewart's actions and looks belied his calm words. His piercing eyes roved round the rim of the mesa, and his face was as hard and stern as chiseled bronze.

Monty and Nick came galloping up, each leading several horses by the bridles. Nels appeared behind them with Majesty, and he was having trouble with the roan. Madeline observed that all the other cowboys had disappeared.

One sharp word from Stewart calmed Madeline's horse; the other horses, however, were frightened and not inclined to stand. The men mounted without trouble, as did Madeline and Florence; but Edith Wayne and Mrs. Beck, being nervous and almost helpless, were got into the saddle with some difficulty.

"Beg pardon, but I'm some pressed for time," said Stewart coolly, as with iron arm he forced Dorothy's horse almost to its knees.

Dorothy, who was active and plucky, climbed astride; and when Stewart loosed his hold on bit and mane, the horse doubled up and began to buck. Dorothy screamed as she shot into the air. Stewart, as quick as the horse, leaped forward and caught Dorothy in his arms. She had slipped head downward, and, had he not caught her, would have had a serious fall.

Handling her as if she were a child, Stewart turned her right side up to set her upon her feet. Dorothy evidently thought only of the spectacle she presented, and made startled motions to readjust her riding-habit. It was no time to laugh, though Madeline felt as if she wanted to. Besides, it was impossible to be anything but sober with Stewart in violent mood.

He had jumped at Dorothy's stubborn mount. All good cowboys are masters of horses. It was wonderful to see him conquer the vicious animal. He was cruel, perhaps, yet it was from necessity. When, presently, he led the horse back to Dorothy, she mounted without further trouble. Meanwhile Nels and Nick had lifted Helen into her saddle.

"We'll take the side trail," said Stewart shortly, as he swung upon the big black.

He led the way and the other cowboys trotted in the rear.

It was only a short distance to the rim of the mesa; but when Madeline saw the steep trail, narrow and choked with weathered stone, she felt that her guests would certainly flinch.

"That's a jolly bad course," observed Castleton.

The women appeared to be speechless.

Stewart checked his horse at the deep cut where the trail started down.

"Boys, drop over and go slow," he said, dismounting. "Flo, you follow. Now, ladies, let your horses loose and hold on. Lean forward and hang to the pommel. It looks bad, but the horses are used to such trails."

Helen followed closely after Florence; Mrs. Beck went next, and then Edith Wayne. Dorothy's horse balked.

"I'm not so—so frightened," said Dorothy. "If only he would behave!"

She began to urge him into the trail, making him rear, when Stewart grasped the bit and jerked the horse down.

"Put your foot in my stirrup," said Stewart. "We can't waste time!" He lifted her upon his horse and started him down over the rim. "Go on, Miss Hammond. I'll have to lead this nag down. It'll save time."

It was a loose trail. The weathered slopes seemed to slide under the feet of the horses. Dust-clouds formed; rocks rolled and rattled down; cactus spikes tore at horse and rider. Mrs. Beck broke out into laughter, and there was a note in it that suggested hysteria. Once or twice Dorothy murmured plaintively.

Half the time Madeline could not distinguish those ahead through the yellow dust. It was dry and made her cough. The horses snorted. She heard Stewart close behind, starting little avalanches that kept rolling on Majesty's fetlocks. She feared her horse's legs might be cut or bruised, for some of the stones crashed by and went rattling down the slope.

At length the clouds of dust thinned, and Madeline saw those before her ride out upon a level. Soon she was down, and Stewart also.

Here there was a delay, occasioned by Stewart changing Dorothy from his horse to her own. This struck Madeline as being singular, and made her thoughtful. In fact, the alert, quiet manner of all the cowboys was not reassuring. As they resumed the ride it was noticeable that Nels and Nick

were far in advance, Monty stayed far in the rear, and Stewart rode with the party.

Madeline heard Boyd Harvey ask Stewart if lawlessness, such as he had mentioned, was not unusual. Stewart replied that, except for occasional deeds of outlawry, such as might break out in any isolated section of the country, there had been peace and quiet along the border for years. It was the Mexican revolution that had revived wild times, with all the attendant raids and hold-ups and gun-packing. Madeline knew that they were really being escorted home under armed guard.

When they rounded the head of the mesa, bringing into view the ranch-house and the valley, she saw dust or smoke hovering over a hut upon the outskirts of the Mexican quarters. As the sun had set and the light was fading, she could not distinguish which it was.

Then Stewart set a fast pace for the house. In a few minutes the party was in the yard, ready and willing to dismount.

Stillwell appeared, ostensibly cheerful—too cheerful to deceive Madeline. She noted, also, that a number of armed cowboys were walking with their horses just below the house.

"Wal, you-all had a nice little run," Stillwell said, speaking generally. "I reckon there wasn't much need of it. Pat Hawe thinks he's got some outlaws corralled on the ranch—nothin' at all to be fussed up about. Stewart's that particular he won't have you meetin' with any rowdies."

Many and fervent were the expressions of relief from Madeline's feminine guests as they dismounted and went into the house. Madeline lingered behind to speak with Stillwell and Stewart.

"Now, Stillwell, out with it," she said briefly.

The old cattleman stared, and then he laughed, pleased with her keenness.

"Wal, Miss Majesty, there's goin' to be a fight somewhere, an' Stewart wanted to get you-all in before it come off. He says the valley's overrun by vaqueros an' guerrillas an' robbers, an' goodness knows what else."

He stamped off the porch, his huge spurs rattling, and started down the path toward the waiting men.

Stewart stood in his familiar attentive position, erect, silent, with a hand on pomel and bridle.

"Stewart, you are exceedingly—thoughtful of my interests," she said, wanting to thank him, and not readily finding words. "I would not know what to do without you. Is there danger?"

"I'm not sure; but I want to be on the safe side."

She hesitated. It was no longer easy for her to talk to Stewart, and she did not know why.

"May I know the special orders you gave Nels and Nick and Monty?" she asked.

"Who said I gave those boys special orders?"

"I heard Stillwell tell them so."

"Of course I'll tell you, if you insist; but why should you worry over something that'll likely never happen?"

"I insist, Stewart," she replied quietly.

"My orders were that at least one of them must be on guard near you day and night—never to be out of hearing of your voice."

"I thought as much. But why Nels or Monty or Nick? That seems rather hard on them. For that matter, why put any one to keep guard over me? Do you not trust my other cowboys?"

"I'd trust their honesty, but not their ability."

"Ability? Of what nature?"

"With guns."

"Stewart!" she exclaimed.

"Miss Hammond, you have been having such a good time entertaining your guests that you forget. I'm glad of that. I wish you had not questioned me."

"Forget what?"

"Don Carlos and his guerrillas."

"Indeed I have not forgotten. Stewart, you still think Don Carlos tried to make off with me, and may try it again?"

"I don't think. I know."

"And besides all your other duties you yourself have shared the watch with these three cowboys?"

"Yes."

"And this has been going on without my knowledge?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"Since I brought you down from the mountains last month."

"How long is it to continue?"

"That's hard to say. Till the revolution is over, anyhow."

She mused a moment, looking away to

the west, where the great void was filling with red haze. She believed implicitly in him, and the menace hovering near her fell like a shadow upon her present happiness.

"What must I do?" she asked.

"I think you ought to send your friends back East, and go with them, until this guerrilla war is over."

"Why, Stewart! They would be broken-hearted, and so should I."

He had no reply for that.

"If I do not take your advice it will be the first time since I have come to look to you for so much," she went on. "Cannot you suggest something else? My friends are having such a splendid visit. Helen is getting well. Oh, I should be sorry to see them go before they want to!"

"We might take them up into the mountains and camp out for a while," he said presently. "I know a wild place up among the crags. It's a hard climb, but worth the work. I never saw a more beautiful spot. Fine water, and it will be cool. Pretty soon it'll be too hot here for your party to go out of doors."

"You mean to hide me away among the crags and clouds," replied Madeline, with a laugh.

"Well, it'd amount to that. Your friends needn't know. Perhaps in a few weeks this spell of trouble on the border will be over till fall."

"You say it's a hard climb up to this place?"

"It sure is. Your friends will get the real thing if they make that trip."

"That suits me. Helen, especially, wants something to happen; and they are all crazy for excitement."

"They'd get it up there—bad trails, cañons to head, steep climbs, wind-storms, thunder and lightning, rain, mountain-lions, and wildcats."

"Very well, I am decided. Stewart, of course you will take charge? I don't believe I—Stewart, isn't there something more you could tell me—why you think my own personal liberty is in peril?"

"Yes, but do not ask me what it is. If I hadn't been a rebel soldier I would never have known."

"If you had not been a rebel soldier, where would Madeline Hammond be now?" she asked earnestly.

He made no reply.

"Stewart," she continued, with warm impulse, "you once mentioned a debt you

owed me." Seeing his dark face pale, she wavered, then went on. "It is paid."

"No, no!" he answered huskily.

"Yes! I will not have it otherwise."

"No. That never can be paid."

Madeline held out her hand.

"It is paid, I tell you," she repeated.

Suddenly he drew back from the outstretched white hand, which seemed to fascinate him.

"I'd kill a man to touch your hand, and go to perdition for doing it; but I won't touch it on the terms you offer."

His unexpected passion disconcerted her.

"Stewart, no man ever before refused to shake hands with me, for any reason. It—it is scarcely flattering," she said, with a little laugh. "Why won't you? Because you think I offer it as mistress to servant—rancher to cowboy?"

"No."

"Then why? The debt you owed me is paid. I cancel it. So why not shake hands upon it, as men do?"

"I won't—that's all."

"I fear you are ungracious, whatever your reason," she replied. "Still, I may offer it again some day. Good night!"

He said good night and turned. Madeline wonderingly watched him go down the path with his hand on the black horse's neck.

XXIII

SHE went in to rest a little before dressing for dinner, and, being fatigued from the day's riding and excitement, she fell asleep. When she awoke it was twilight. She wondered why her Mexican maid had not come to her, and she rang the bell. The maid did not put in an appearance, nor was there any answer to the ring.

The house seemed unusually quiet. It was a brooding silence, which presently broke to the sound of footsteps on the porch. Madeline recognized Stillwell's tread, though he appeared to be stepping more lightly than usual. Then she heard him call softly in at the open door of her office. The suggestion of caution in his voice suited the strangeness of his walk.

With a boding sense of trouble she hurried through the rooms. He was standing outside her office door.

"Stillwell!" she exclaimed.

"Anybody with you?" he asked in a low tone.

"No."

"Please come out on the porch," he said somewhat peremptorily.

She complied. Stillwell's grave face, paler than she had ever beheld it, caused her to stretch an appealing hand toward him. He intercepted it and held it in his own.

"Miss Majesty, I'm amazin' sorry to tell worrisome news." He spoke almost in a whisper, cautiously looked about him, and seemed both hurried and mysterious. "The fact is, we're in a bad fix. If your guests ain't scared out of their skins, it'll be owin' to your nerve an' how you carry out Stewart's orders."

"You can rely upon me," replied Madeline firmly, though she trembled.

"Wal, what we're up against is this—that gang of bandits Pat Hawe was chasin' are hidin' in the house!"

"In the house?" echoed Madeline, aghast.

"Miss Majesty, it's the amazin' truth, an' shamed indeed am I to admit it. Stewart—why, he's wild with rage, to think it could hev happened. You see it couldn't hev happened if I hedn't sloped the boys off to the gol-lof links, an' if Stewart hedn't rid out on the mesa after us. It's my fault. I've hed too much femininity around fer my old haid. Gene cussed me—he cussed me sure scandalous. But now we've got to face it—to figger—"

"Do you mean that a gang of hunted outlaws — bandits — have actually taken refuge somewhere in my house?" demanded Madeline.

"I sure do. Seems powerful strange to me why you didn't find somethin' was wrong, seein' all your servants hev sloped."

"Gone? Ah! I missed my maid. I wondered why no lights were lit. Where did my servants go?"

"Down to the Mexican quarters, an' scared half to death. Now listen. When Stewart left you an hour or so ago, he follered me direct to where me an' the boys was tryin' to keep Pat Hawe from tearin' the ranch to pieces. At that we was helpin' Pat all we could to find them bandits; but when Stewart got there he made a difference. Pat was nasty before, but seein' Stewart made him wuss. I reckon Gene to Pat is the same as red to a greaser bull. Anyway, when the sheriff set fire to an old 'dobe hut, Stewart called him, an' called him hard. Pat Hawe hed six fellers with him, an' from all appearances bandit-hunt-

in' was some *fiesta*. There was a row, an' it looked bad fer a little; but Gene was cool an' he controlled the boys. Then Pat an' his tough depooties went on huntin'. That huntin', Miss Majesty, petered out into what was only a farce. I reckon Pat could hev kept on foolin' me an' the boys, but as soon as Stewart showed up on the scene—wal, either Pat got to blunderin' or else we-all shed our blinders. Pat Hawe wasn't lookin' hard fer any bandits; he wasn't daid set huntin' anythin', unless it was trouble fer Stewart. Finally, when Pat's men made fer our storehouse, where we keep ammunition, grub, liquors, an' sich, then Gene called a halt, an' ordered Pat Hawe off the ranch. Pat hollered law. He pulled down off the shelf his old stock-grudge on Stewart, accusin' him over again of that greaser murder last fall. Stewart made him look like a fool—showed him up as bein' scared of the bandits, or hevin' some reason fer slopin' off the trail. Anyway, the row started all right. In the thick of it, when Stewart was drivin' Pat an' his crowd off the place, one of them depooties lost his haid an' went fer his gun. Nels throwed his gun an' crippled the feller's arm. Monty jumped then an' throwed two forty-fives, an' fer a second or so it looked ticklish; but the bandit-hunters crawled, an' then lit out."

Stillwell paused in the rapid delivery of his narrative; he still retained Madeline's hand, as if by that he might comfort her.

"After Pat left we put our haid to together," began the old cattleman, with a long respiration. "We rounded up a lad who had seen a dozen or so fellers—he wouldn't say they was greasers—breakin' through the shrubbery to the back of the house. That was while Stewart was ridin' out to the mesa. Then this lad seen your servants all runnin' down the hill toward the village. Now, heah's the way Gene figgers. There sure was some deviltry down along the railroad, an' Pat Hawe trailed bandits up to the ranch. He hunts hard, an' then all to wunst he quits. Stewart says Pat Hawe wasn't scared, but he got wind in some way that there was in the gang of bandits some fellers he didn't want to ketch—*sabe*? Then Gene, quicker'n a flash, springs his plan on me. He'd go down to Padre Marcos an' hev him help to find out all possible from your Mexican servants. I was to hurry up hyar an' tell you—give you orders, Miss Majesty. Ain't

that amazin' strange? You're to assemble all your guests in the kitchen. Make a grand bluff an' pretend as your help has left, that it'll be great fun fer your guests to cook dinner. The kitchen is the safest room in the house. While you're joshin' your party along, makin' a kind of picnic out of it, I'll place cowboys in the long corridor, an' also outside in the corner where the kitchen joins on to the main house. It's pretty sure the bandits think no one's wise to where they're hid. Stewart says they're in that end room where the alfalfa is, an' they'll slope in the night. Of course, with me an' the boys watchin', you-all will be safe to go to bed. We're to rouse your guests early before daylight, to hit the trail up into the mountains. Tell them to pack outfits before goin' to bed. Say, as your servants hev sloped, you might as well go campin' with the cowboys. That's all. If we hev any luck, your friends'll never know they've been sittin' on a powder-mine."

"Stillwell, do you advise that trip up into the mountains?" asked Madeline.

"I reckon I do, considerin' everythin'. Now, Miss Majesty, I've used up a lot of time explainin'. You'll sure keep your nerve?"

"Yes," Madeline replied, and was surprised at herself.

"Better tell Florence. She'll be a power of comfort to you. I'm goin' now to fetch up the boys."

Instead of returning to her room, Madeline went through the office into the long corridor. It was almost as dark as night. She fancied she saw a slow-gliding figure darker than the surrounding gloom; and she entered upon the fulfilment of her part of the plan in something like trepidation. Her footsteps were noiseless.

Finding the door to the kitchen, and going in, she struck lights. Upon passing out again she made certain she discerned a dark shape, now motionless, crouching along the wall; but she mistrusted her vivid imagination. It took all her boldness to enable her unconcernedly and naturally to strike the corridor light. Then she went on through her own rooms and thence into the *patio*.

Her guests laughingly and gladly entered into the spirit of the occasion. Madeline fancied her acting must have been pretty nearly perfect, seeing that it deceived even Florence.

They trooped merrily into the kitchen. Madeline, delaying at the door, took a sharp but unobtrusive glance down the great, barnlike hall. She saw nothing but blank, dark space.

Suddenly, from one side, not a rod distant, protruded a pale, gleaming face, breaking the even blackness. Instantly it flashed back out of sight; yet that time was long enough for Madeline to see a pair of glittering eyes and to recognize them as Don Carlos's.

Without betraying either hurry or alarm she closed the door. It had a heavy bolt, which she slowly, noiselessly shot. Then the cold amaze that had all but stunned her into inaction throbbed into wrath. How dared that Mexican steal into her home? What did he mean? Was he one of the bandits supposed to be hidden in her house?

She was thinking herself into greater anger and excitement, and probably would have betrayed herself, had not Florence, who had evidently seen her bolt the door, and read her thoughts, come toward her with a bright, intent, questioning look. Madeline caught herself in time.

Thereupon she gave each of her guests a duty to perform. Leading Florence into the pantry, she unburdened herself of the secret in one brief whisper. Florence's reply was to point out of the open window, passing which was a file of stealthily moving cowboys. Then Madeline lost both anger and fear, retaining only the glow of excitement.

Madeline could be gay. She initiated the abandonment of dignity by calling Castleton into the pantry, and, while interesting him in some pretext or other, imprinting the outlines of her flour-covered hands upon the back of his black coat. Castleton innocently returned to the kitchen, to be greeted with a roar.

That surprising act of the hostess set the pace, and there followed a merry, noisy time. Everybody helped. The miscellaneous collection of dishes so confusingly contrived made up a dinner which they all heartily enjoyed. Madeline enjoyed it herself, even with the feeling of a sword hanging suspended over her.

The hour was late when she rose from the table and told her guests to go to their rooms, to don their riding-clothes, to pack what they needed for the long and adventurous camping-trip, which she hoped

would be the climax of their Western experience, and to snatch a little sleep before the cowboys roused them for the early start.

Madeline went immediately to her room and was getting out her camping apparel when a knock interrupted her. She thought Florence had come to help her pack; but the knock was upon the door opening out on the porch. It was repeated.

"Who's there?" she questioned.

"Stewart," came the reply.

She opened the door. He stood on the threshold. Beyond him, indistinct in the gloom, were several cowboys.

"May I speak to you?" he asked.

"Certainly." She hesitated a moment, then asked him in, and closed the door. "Is—is everything all right?"

"No. These bandits stick to cover pretty close. They must have found out we're on the watch. But I'm sure we'll get you and your friends away before anything starts. I wanted to tell you that I've talked with your servants. They were just scared. They'll come back to-morrow, as soon as Bill gets rid of this gang. You needn't worry about them or your property."

"Do you have any idea who is hiding in the house?"

"I was worried some at first. Pat Hawe acted queer. I imagined he'd discovered he was trailing bandits who might turn out to be his smuggling guerrilla cronies. But talking with your servants, and finding a bunch of horses hidden down in the mesquit behind the pond, I changed my mind. My idea is that a cowardly handful of riffraff outcasts from the border have hidden in your house, more by accident than design. We'll let them go—get rid of them without even a shot. If I didn't think so—well, I'd be considerably worried. It would make a different state of affairs."

"Stewart, you are wrong," she said.

He started, but his reply did not follow swiftly. The expression of his eyes altered. Presently he spoke:

"How so?"

"I saw one of these bandits. I distinctly recognized him."

One long step brought him close to her.

"Who was he?" demanded Stewart.

"Don Carlos."

He muttered low and deep, then said:

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I saw his figure twice in the hall, then his face in the light. I could never mistake his eyes."

"Did he know you saw him?"

"I am not positive, but I think so. Oh, he must have known! I was standing full in the light. I had entered the door, then purposely stepped out. His face showed from around a corner, and swiftly flashed out of sight."

Madeline was tremblingly conscious that Stewart underwent a transformation. She saw as well as felt the leaping passion that changed him.

"Call your friends—get them in here," he ordered tersely, and wheeled toward the door.

"Stewart—wait," she said.

He turned. His white face, his burning eyes, his presence now charged with definite, fearful meaning, influenced her strangely, weakened her.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"That needn't concern you. Get your party in here. Bar the windows and lock the doors. You'll be safe."

"Stewart! Tell me what you intend to do."

"I won't tell you," he replied, and turned away again.

"But I must know," she said. With a hand on his arm she detained him. She saw how he halted—felt the shock in him as she touched him. "Oh, I do know. You mean to fight!"

"Well, Miss Hammond, isn't it about time?" he asked. Evidently he overcame a violent passion for instant action. There were weariness, dignity, and even reproof in his question. "The fact of that Mexican's presence here in your house ought to prove to you the nature of the case. These fellows have found out you won't stand for any fighting on the part of your men. Don Carlos is a sneak, a coward, yet he's not afraid to hide in your own house. He has learned you won't let your cowboys hurt anybody. He's taking advantage of it. He'll rob, burn, and make off with you. He'll murder, too, if it falls his way. These greasers use knives in the dark. So I ask, isn't it about time for us to stop him?"

"Stewart, I forbid you to fight unless in self-defense! I forbid you!"

"I reckon what I mean to do is self-defense. Haven't I tried to explain to you that just now there are wild times along this stretch of border? Must I tell you again that Don Carlos is hand and glove with the revolution? The rebels are crazy to stir up the United States. You are a

woman of prominence. Don Carlos would make off with you. If he got you, what an easy matter to cross the border with you! And where would the hue and cry go? Through the troops along the border! To New York! To Washington! Why, it would mean what the rebels are working for—United States intervention; in other words, war!"

"Oh, surely you exaggerate?" she cried.

"Maybe so; but I'm beginning to see the don's game. And Miss Hammond, I—it's awful for me to think what you'd suffer if Don Carlos got you over the line. I know these low-caste Mexicans. I've been among the peons—the slaves."

"Stewart, don't let Don Carlos get me," replied Madeline, in sweet directness.

She saw him shake, saw his throat swell as he swallowed hard, saw the hard fierceness return to his face.

"I won't! That's why I'm going after him."

"But I forbade you to start a fight deliberately."

"Then I reckon I'll go ahead and start one without your permission," he replied shortly, and again he wheeled.

This time, when Madeline caught his arm, she held to it, even after he stopped.

"No!" she said imperiously.

He shook off her detaining hand and strode forward.

"Please don't go," she called beseechingly; but he kept on. "Stewart!"

She ran ahead of him, intercepted him, and turned to face him with her back against the door. He swept out a long arm as if to brush her aside; but it wavered and fell. Haggard, troubled, with working face, he stood before her.

"It's for your sake," he expostulated.

"If it is for my sake, then do what pleases me."

"These guerrillas will knife somebody. They'll burn the house. They'll make off with you. They'll do something bad, unless we stop them."

"Let us risk all that," she importuned.

"But it's a terrible risk, and it oughtn't be run!" he exclaimed passionately. "I know best here. Stillwell upholds me. Let me out, Miss Hammond. I'm going to take the boys and go after these guerrillas!"

"No!"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Stewart. "Why not let me go? It's the thing to do. I'm sorry to distress you and your guests.

Why not put an end to Don Carlos's badgering? Is it because you're afraid a rumpus will spoil your friends' visit?"

"It isn't—not this time."

"You're sick to think of a little greaser blood staining the halls of your home?"

"No!"

"Well, then, why keep me from doing what I know is best?"

"Stewart, I—I—" she faltered in growing agitation. "I'm frightened—confused. All this is too—too much for me. I'm not a coward. If you *have* to fight, you'll see I'm not a coward. But your way seems so reckless—that hall is so dark—the guerrillas would shoot from behind doors. You're so wild, so daring. You'd rush right into peril. Is that necessary? I think—I mean—I don't know just why I feel so—so about you doing it. But I believe it's because I'm afraid you—you might be hurt."

"You're afraid I—I might be hurt?" he echoed wonderingly, the hard whiteness of his face warming, flushing, glowing.

"Yes!"

The single, unequivocal word, with all it might mean, with all it might not mean, softened him as if by magic, made him gentle, amazed, shy as a boy, stifling under a torrent of emotions.

Madeline thought she had persuaded him—worked her will with him. Then another of his startlingly sudden moves told her that she had reckoned too quickly. This move was to put her firmly aside so that he could pass; and Madeline, seeing that he would not hesitate to lift her out of the way, surrendered the door.

He turned on the threshold. His face was still working, but the flame-pointed gleam of his eyes indicated the return of that cowboy ruthlessness.

"I'm going to drive Don Carlos and his gang out of the house!" declared Stewart. "I think I may promise you to do it without a fight; but if it takes a fight, off he goes!"

XXIV

As Stewart departed from one door Florence knocked upon another. Madeline, far shaken out of her usual serenity, admitted the Western girl with more than gladness. Just to have her near helped Madeline to get back her balance.

She was conscious of Florence's sharp scrutiny, and then of a sweet, deliberate change of manner. Florence might have

been burning with curiosity to know more about the bandits hidden in the house, the plans of the cowboys, the reason for Madeline's suppressed emotion; but instead of asking questions she introduced the important subject of what to take on the camping-trip.

For an hour they discussed the need of this and that article, selected the things most needful, and then packed them in Madeline's duffel-bags. That done, they decided to lie down, fully dressed as they were in riding-costume, and sleep, or at least rest, during the little remaining time left before the call to saddle.

Madeline turned out the light. Peeping through her window, she saw dark forms standing sentinel-like in the gloom. When she lay down she heard soft steps on the path. This fidelity to her swelled her heart, while the need of it presaged that fearful something which, since Stewart's passionate appeal to her, haunted her as inevitable.

Madeline did not expect to sleep, yet she did, and only a moment seemed to have passed until Florence called her. She followed Florence outside. It was the dark hour before dawn. She could discern saddled horses being held by cowboys. There was an air of hurry and mystery about the departure.

Helen, who came tiptoeing out with Madeline's other guests, whispered that it was like an escape. She was delighted. The others were amused. To Madeline it was indeed an escape.

In the darkness Madeline could not descry how many escorts her party was to have. She heard low voices, the champing of bits, and the thumping of hoofs; and she recognized Stewart when he led up Majesty for her to mount. Then came a pattering of soft feet and the whining of dogs. Cold noses touched her hands, and she saw the long, gray, shaggy shapes of her pack of Russian wolfhounds. The fact that Stewart meant to let them go with her was another instance of the care with which he studied her pleasure. She loved to be out with the hounds and her horse.

Stewart led Majesty out into the darkness past a line of mounted horses.

"Guess we're ready," he said. "I'll make the count."

He went rapidly along the waiting line, and when he returned Madeline heard him say several times:

"Now everybody ride close to the horse in front, and keep quiet till daylight!"

Then the snorting and pounding of the big black horse in front of her told Madeline that Stewart had mounted.

"All right—we're off!" he called.

Madeline lifted Majesty's bridle and let the roan go. There came a crack and crunch of gravel, fire struck from stone, and then the steady short *clip-clop* of iron hoofs on hard ground. Madeline could just discern Stewart and his black outlined in shadowy gray before her; yet they were almost within touching distance. Once or twice one of the wolfhounds leaped up at her and whined joyously. A thick belt of darkness lay low and seemed to thin out above to a gray fog through which a few wan stars showed.

It was altogether an unusual departure from the ranch; and Madeline found herself thrillingly sensitive to the soft beat of hoofs, the feel of cool, moist air, the dim sight of Stewart's dark figure. The caution, the early start before dawn, the enforced silence—these lent the occasion all that was needful to make it stirring.

Majesty plunged into a gully, where sand and rough going made Madeline stop romancing to attend to riding. In the darkness it was not so easy to keep close to Stewart, even on smooth trails, and now she had to be watchfully attentive to do it. There followed a long march through dragging sand. During this the blackness gradually changed to gray. At length Majesty climbed out of the wash, and once more his iron shoes rang on stone.

The figure of Stewart and his horse loomed more distinctly in Madeline's sight. Bending over, she tried to see the trail, but could not. She wondered how Stewart could follow a trail in the dark. His eyes must be as piercing as they sometimes looked.

As Majesty climbed steadily, Madeline saw the gray darkness change and lighten, lose its substance, and reveal the grotesque shapes of yucca and ocotillo. Dawn was about to break. All at once, to her surprise, Stewart and his powerful horse stood clear in her sight. She saw the characteristic rock and cactus and brush that covered the foot-hills. The trail was old and seldom used, and it zigzagged and turned and twisted.

Looking back, she saw the short, squat figure of Monty Price humped over his

saddle. Behind Monty rode Dorothy Coombs, and next loomed up the lofty form of Nick Steele.

Bright daylight came, and Madeline saw that the trail was leading up through foot-hills. It led through shallow gullies full of stones and brush washed down by floods. At every turn Madeline expected to come upon water and the waiting pack-train; but time passed, and miles of climbing, and no water or horses were met. Expectation in Madeline gave place to desire; she was hungry.

Presently Stewart's horse went splashing into a shallow pool. Beyond that, damp places in the sand showed here and there, and again more water in rocky pockets. Stewart kept on. It was eight o'clock by Madeline's watch when, upon turning into a wide hollow, she saw horses grazing on spare grass, a great pile of canvas-covered bundles, and a fire round which cowboys and two Mexican women were busy.

Madeline sat her horse and reviewed her followers as they rode up single file. Her guests were in merry mood, and they all talked at once.

"Breakfast—and rustle!" called out Stewart without ceremony.

"No need to tell me to rustle," said Helen. "This air makes me simply ravenous!"

The hurry order, however, did not interfere with the meal being somewhat of a picnic. While they ate and talked and laughed, the cowboys were packing horses and burros. As soon as the train was in readiness, Stewart started it off in the lead to break trail.

A heavy growth of shrub interspersed with rock and cactus covered the slopes; and now all the trail appeared to be up-hill. It was not a question of comfort for Madeline and her party, for comfort was impossible; it was a matter of making the travel possible for them. Florence wore corduroy breeches and high top-boots, and the advantage of this masculine garb was at once in evidence. The riding-habits of the other ladies suffered considerably from the sharp spikes. It took all Madeline's watchfulness to save her horse's legs, to pick the best bits of open ground, to make cut-offs from the trail, and to protect herself from outreaching thorny branches; so that the time sped by without her knowing it.

The pack-train forged ahead, and the trailing couples grew farther apart. At

noon they got out of the foot-hills, to face the real ascent of the mountains. The sun beat down hotly. There was little breeze; the dust rose thick and hung in a pall. The view was restricted, and what scenery lay open to the eye was dreary and drab, a barren monotony of slow-mounting slopes, ridged by rocky cañons.

Once Stewart waited for Madeline. As she came up, he said:

"We're going to have a storm."

"That will be a relief. It's so hot and dusty," replied Madeline.

"Shall I call a halt and make camp?"

"What do you think best?"

"Well, if we have a good, healthy thunder-storm," said Stewart, "it will be something new for your friends. I think we'd be wise to keep on the go. There's no place to make a good camp here. The wind would blow us off this slope, if the rain didn't wash us off. It'll take all-day travel to reach a good camp-site, and I don't promise that. We're making slow time. If it rains, let it rain. The pack outfit is well covered. We shall have to get wet."

"Surely," replied Madeline, and she smiled at his inference. She knew what a storm was in that country, and her guests had yet to experience one. "If it rains, let it rain."

Stewart rode on and Madeline followed. Up the slope toiled and nodded the pack-animals, the little burros going easily where the horses labored. Their packs, like the humps of camels, bobbed from side to side. Stones rattled down; the heat-waves wavered black; the dust puffed up and sailed. The sky was a pale blue, like heated steel, except where dark clouds peeped over the mountain crests. A heavy, sultry atmosphere made breathing difficult.

Down the slope the trailing party stretched out in twos and threes; and it was easy to distinguish the weary riders.

Half a mile farther up Madeline could see over the foot-hills to the north and west; and she forgot the heat and weariness and discomfort for her guests in wide, unlimited prospects of sun-scorched earth. She marked the gray valley, the black mountains, the red gateway of the desert, and the dim, shadowy peaks, blue as the sky they pierced.

Then there came a respite from the steep climb, and the way led through a matted, storm-wrenched forest of stunted cedar-trees. Even up to this elevation the desert

reached with its gaunt hand. The clouds overspreading the sky, hiding the sun, made a welcome change. The pack-train rested, and Stewart and Madeline waited for the party to come up. Here he briefly explained to her that Don Carlos and his bandits had left the ranch some time in the night. Thunder rumbled in the distance and a faint wind rustled the scant foliage of the cedars.

An hour later the party had climbed above the cedar flat and was rounding the side of a great bare ridge that long had hidden the crags. The last burro of the pack-train plodded over the ridge out of Madeline's sight. She looked backward down the slope, amused to see her guests change wearily from side to side in their saddles. Far to the west the sky was still clear, with shafts of sunlight shooting down from behind the encroaching clouds.

Stewart reached the summit of the ridge, and, though only a few rods ahead, he waved to her, sweeping his hand round to what he saw beyond. It was an impressive gesture, and Madeline, never having climbed as high as this, anticipated much.

Majesty surmounted the last few steps and halted beside Stewart's black. To Madeline the scene was as if the world had changed. The ridge was a mountain top. It dropped before her into a black, stone-ridged shrub-patched, many-cañoned gulf. Eastward, beyond the gulf, bare mountain-heads loomed up. Upward, on the right, led giant steps of cliff and bench and weathered slope to the fir-bordered and pine-fringed crags, standing dark and bare against the stormy sky.

Inky clouds were piling across the peaks, obscuring the highest ones. A fork of white lightning flashed, and, like the looming of an avalanche, thunder followed.

That bold world of broken rock under the slow mustering of storm-clouds was a grim, awe-inspiring spectacle. The fierce desert had reached up to meet the majestic heights where heat and wind and frost and lightning and flood contended in everlasting strife. And before their onslaught this mighty upflung world of rugged stone was crumbling, splitting, wearing to ruin.

Madeline glanced at Stewart. He had forgotten her presence. Immovable as stone he sat his horse. Dark-faced, dark-eyed, and like an Indian unconscious of thought, he watched and watched. To see him thus

was to divine the affinity between the soul of this primitive man and the savage environment that had developed him.

A cracking of iron-shod hoofs broke the spell. Monty had reached the summit.

"Gene, what it won't all be doin' in a minute Moses hisself couldn't tell!" observed Monty.

Then Dorothy climbed to his side and looked.

"Isn't it just perfectly lovely?" she exclaimed. "But I wish it wouldn't storm. We'll all get wet!"

Once more Stewart faced the ascent, keeping to the slow heave of the ridge as it rose southward toward the looming spires of rock. Soon he was off smooth ground, and Madeline, some rods behind him, looked back with concern at her friends. Here the real toil, the real climb began; and a mountain storm was about to burst in all its fury.

Stewart waited for Madeline under the lee of a shelving cliff, where the cowboys had halted the pack-train. Majesty was sensitive to the flashes of lightning. Madeline patted his neck and softly called to him. The weary burros nodded; the Mexican women covered their heads with their mantles.

Stewart untied the slicker at the back of Madeline's saddle and helped her on with it. Then he put on his own. The other cowboys followed suit.

A blue-white, jagged rope of lightning burned down out of the clouds, and instantly a thunder-clap crashed, seeming to shake the foundations of the earth. Then it rolled from cloud to cloud, boomed along the peaks, and reverberated from deep to low, at last to rumble away into silence.

Madeline felt the electricity in Majesty's mane, and it seemed to tingle through her nerves. This moment of the breaking of the storm, with the strange, growing roar of wind, like a moaning monster, was pregnant with a heart-disturbing emotion. Glorious it was to be free, healthy, out in the open, under the shadow of the mountain and cloud, in the teeth of the wind and rain!

Another dazzling blue blaze showed the bold mountainside and the storm-driven clouds. In the flare of light Madeline saw Stewart's face.

"Are you afraid?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied simply.

Then the thunderbolt racked the heavens.

(To be continued)