

MU EY

LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS
ZANE GREY - 266

Mr. H. O. Pierce,

1913

Opequon, Virginia.

The LAND of BROKEN PROMISES

by *Dane Coolidge*

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NOVEMBER

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MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE

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THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS *

BY ZANE GREY

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

XXX

ON the following day Alfred and Florence were married. Florence's sister and several friends from El Cajon were present, besides Madeline, Stillwell, and his men. It was Alfred's express wish that Stewart should attend the ceremony.

Madeline was amused when she noticed the painfully suppressed excitement of the cowboys. For them a wedding must have been an unusual and impressive event. She began to have a better understanding of the nature of it when they cast off restraint and pressed forward to kiss the bride, according to the old-fashioned custom. In all her life Madeline had never seen a bride kissed so much and so heartily, nor one so flushed and disheveled and happy.

The dinner began quietly enough, with the cowboys divided between embarrassment and voracious appetites that they evidently feared to indulge. Wine, however, loosened their tongues, and when Stillwell got up to make the speech everybody seemed to expect of him they greeted him with a roar.

Stillwell was now one huge, mountainous smile. He was so happy that he appeared on the verge of tears. He rambled on ecstatically till he came to raise his glass:

"An' now, girls an' boys, let's all drink to the bride an' groom—to their sincere an' lastin' love—to their happiness an' prosperity—to their good health an' long life. Let's drink to the unitin' of the East with the West. No man full of red blood an' the real breath of life could resist a West-

ern girl an' a good hoss an' God's free hand—that open country out there. So we claim Al Hammond, an' may we be true to him! An', friends, I think it fittin' that we should drink to his sister an' to our hopes. Heah's to the lady we hope to make *our* Majesty! Heah's to the man who'll come ridin' out of the West, a fine, big-hearted man with a fast hoss an' a strong rope, an' may he win an' hold her! Come, friends, drink—"

A heavy pound of horses' hoofs and a yell outside arrested Stillwell's voice and halted his hand in mid air. The *patio* became as silent as an unoccupied room.

Through the open doors and windows of Madeline's chamber burst the sounds of horses stamping to a halt, then harsh speech of men and a low cry of a woman in pain.

Rapid steps crossed the porch, entered Madeline's room. Nels appeared in the doorway. Madeline was surprised to see that he had not been at the dinner-table. She was disturbed at sight of his face.

"Stewart, you're wanted outdoors," called Nels bluntly. "Monty, you slope out here with me. You, Nick, an' Stillwell, I reckon the rest of you hed better shut the doors an' stay inside."

Nels disappeared. Quick as a cat Monty glided out. Madeline heard his soft, swift steps pass from her room into her office. He had left his guns there. Madeline trembled. She saw Stewart get up quietly and, without any change of expression on his dark, sad face, leave the *patio*. Nick Steele followed him.

Stillwell dropped his wine-glass. As it broke, shivering the silence, his huge smile

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

vanished. His face set into the old craginess, and the red slowly thickened into black. Stillwell went out and closed the door behind him.

Then there was a blank silence. The enjoyment of the moment had been rudely disrupted. Madeline glanced down the lines of brown faces to see the pleasure fade into the old, familiar hardness.

"What's wrong?" asked Alfred rather stupidly. The change of mood had been too rapid for him. Suddenly he awakened, thoroughly aroused at the interruption. "I'm going to see who's butted in here to spoil our dinner," he said, and strode out.

He returned before any one at the table had spoken or moved, and now the dull red of anger mottled his forehead.

"It's the sheriff of El Cajon!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "Pat Hawe, with some of his tough deputies, come to arrest Gene Stewart! They've got that poor little Mexican girl out there tied on a horse. Confound that sheriff!"

Madeline calmly rose from the table, eluding Florence's entreating hand, and started for the door. The cowboys jumped up. Alfred barred her progress.

"Alfred, I am going out," she said.

"No, I guess not," he replied. "That's no place for you."

"I am going." She looked straight at him.

"Madeline! Why, what is it? You look—dear, there's pretty sure to be trouble outside. Maybe there'll be a fight. You can do nothing. You must not go."

"Perhaps I can prevent trouble," she replied.

As she left the *patio* she was aware that Alfred, with Florence at his side and the cowboys behind, was following her.

When she got out on the porch she heard several men in loud, angry discussion. Then, at sight of Bonita helplessly and cruelly bound upon a horse, pale and disheveled and suffering, Madeline experienced the thrill that sight or mention of this girl always gave her. It yielded to a hot pang in her breast—that live pain which so shamed her. But almost instantly, as a second glance showed agony in Bonita's face, her bruised arms where the rope bit deep into the flesh, her little brown hands stained with blood, Madeline was overcome by pity for the unfortunate girl, and by a woman's righteous passion at such barbarous treatment of one of her own sex.

The man holding the bridle of the horse on which Bonita had been bound was the big-bodied, bullet-headed guerrilla who had found the basket of wine in the spring at camp. Redder of face, blacker of beard, coarser of aspect, evidently under the influence of liquor, he was as fierce-looking as a gorilla, and as repulsive.

Three other men were present, all mounted on weary horses. The one in the foreground—gaunt, sharp-featured, red-eyed, with a pointed beard—she recognized as the sheriff of El Cajon.

Madeline hesitated, then stopped in the middle of the porch. Albert, Florence, and several others followed her out; the rest of the cowboys and guests crowded the windows and doors. Stillwell saw Madeline, and, throwing up his hands, roared to be heard. This quieted the gesticulating, quarreling men.

"Wal now, Pat Hawe, what's drivin' you like a locoed steer on the rampage?" demanded Stillwell.

"Keep in the traces, Bill!" replied Hawe. "You savvy what I come fer. I've been bidin' my time, but I'm ready now. I'm hyar to arrest a criminal."

The huge frame of the old cattleman jerked as if he had been stabbed. His face turned purple.

"What criminal?" he shouted hoarsely.

The sheriff flicked his quirt against his dirty boot and twisted his thin lips into a leer.

"Why, Bill, I knowed you hed a no-good outfit ridin' this range, but I wasn't wise thet you hed more'n one criminal."

"Cut that talk! Which cowboy are you wantin' to arrest?"

Hawe's manner altered.

"Gene Stewart," he replied curtly.

"On what charge?"

"Fer killin' a greaser one night last fall."

"So you're still harpin' on that? Pat, you're on the wrong trail. You can't lay that killin' onto Stewart; but if you insist on bringin' him to court, let the arrest go to-day—we're hevin' some *fiesta* hyar—an' I'll fetch Gene in to El Cajon."

"Nope! I reckon I'll take him when I got the chance, before he slopes."

"I'm givin' you my word," thundered Stillwell.

"I reckon I don't hev to take your word, Bill, or anybody else's."

Stillwell's great bulk quivered with his

rage, yet he made a successful effort to control it.

"See hyar, Pat Hawe, I know what's reasonable. Law is law; but in this country there always has been, an' is now, a safe an' sane way to proceed with the law. Pat, you're not overlaked in these parts; but you're the sheriff, an' I'm respectin' your office. I'm respectin' it this much—if the milk of human decency is so soured in your breast that you can't hev a kind feelin', then try to avoid the onpleasantness that'll result from any contrary move on your part to-day. Do you get that hunch?"

"Stillwell, you're threatenin' an officer," replied Hawe angrily.

"Will you hit the trail quick out of hyar?" queried Stillwell in a strained voice. "I guarantee Stewart's appearance in El Cajon any day you say."

"No! I come to arrest him, an' I'm goin' to."

"So that's your game!" shouted Stillwell. "We-all are glad to get you straight, Pat. Now listen, you cheap, red-eyed coyote of a sheriff! I reckon there's been some dozen or more killin's in the last year. Why don't you take to trailin' some of the others? I'll tell you why. You want to hound Gene Stewart an' put him where he's never been yet—in jail. You want to spite his friends. Wal, go ahead an' try to arrest him!"

Stillwell took one mighty stride off the porch. His last words had been cold. His rage appeared to have been transferred to Hawe. The sheriff had begun to stutter and shake a lanky red hand at the cattleman when Stewart stepped out.

"Here, you fellows, give me a chance to say a word!"

As Stewart appeared the Mexican girl suddenly seemed vitalized out of her stupor. She strained at her bonds, as if to lift her hands beseechingly. A flush animated her haggard face and her dark eyes lighted.

"Señor Gene!" she moaned. "Help me! I so seek. They beat me, rope me, mos' keel me. Oh, help me, Señor Gene!"

"Shut up, er I'll gag you!" said the man who held Bonita's horse.

"Muzzle her, Sneed, if she blabs again!" called Hawe.

Madeline sensed something tense and strained working in the short silence. Was it only a phase of her thrilling excitement? Her swift glance showed the faces of Nels

and Monty and Nick to be brooding, cold, watchful. She wondered why Stewart did not look toward Bonita. He, too, was now dark-faced, cool, quiet, with something ominous about him.

"Hawe, I'll submit to arrest without any fuss," he said slowly, "if you'll take the ropes off that girl."

"Nope!" replied the sheriff. "She got away from me wunst. She's hawg-tied now, an' she'll stay hawg-tied!"

Madeline thought she saw Stewart give a slight start; but an unaccountable dimness came over her eyes, at brief intervals obscuring her keen sight. Vaguely she was conscious of a clogged and beating tumult in her breast.

"All right, let's hurry out of here," said Stewart. "You've made annoyance enough, Hawe. Ride down to the corral with me. I'll get my horse and go along with you."

"Hold on!" yelled Hawe, as Stewart turned away. "Not so fast! Who's doin' this? You don't come no El Capitan stunts on me. You'll ride one of my pack-hosses, an' you'll go in irons!"

"You want to handcuff me?" queried Stewart with a sudden start of passion.

"Want to? Haw, haw! Nope, Stewart, that's jest my way with hoss-thieves, raiders, greasers, murderers, an' sich. See hyar, you Sneed, git off an' put the irons on this man!"

The guerrilla called Sneed slid off his horse and began to fumble in his saddle-bags.

"You see, Bill," went on Hawe, "I swore in a new depooty fer this particular job. Sneed is some handy. He rounded up thet little Mexican cat fer me."

Stillwell did not hear the sheriff; he was gazing at Stewart in a kind of imploring amaze.

"Gene, you ain't goin' to stand fer them handcuffs?" he pleaded.

"Yes," replied the cowboy. "Bill, old friend, I'm an outsider here. There's no call for Miss Hammond and—and her brother and Florence to be worried further about me. Their happy day has already been spoiled on my account. I want to get out—quick!"

"Wal, you might be too durned considerate of Miss Hammond's sensitive feelin's." There was now no trace of the courteous, kindly old rancher. He looked harder than stone. "How about my

feelin's? I want to know if you're goin' to let this sneakin' coyote put you in irons and hawg-tie you and drive you off to jail?"

"Yes," replied Stewart steadily.

"You, Gene Stewart! What's come over you? Why, man, go in the house, an' I'll 'tend to this feller. Then to-morrow you can ride in an' give yourself up like a gentleman."

"No—I'll go. Thanks, Bill, for the way you and the boys would stick to me. Hurry, Hawe, before my mind—*changes!*"

Stewart's voice broke at the last word, betraying the wonderful control he had kept over his passions. As he ceased speaking he seemed suddenly to become spiritless and dropped his head.

Madeline saw in him then a semblance to the hopeless, shamed Stewart of earlier days. The vague riot in her breast leaped into conscious fury—a woman's passionate repudiation of Stewart's broken spirit.

Once she had entreated him to become her kind of a cowboy—a man in whom reason tempered passion. She had let him see how painful and shocking any violence was to her. And the idea had obsessed him, had grown like a softening lichen upon his will, had shorn him of the wild, bold spirit which she now strangely longed to see him feel.

When the man Sneed came forward jingling the iron fetters Madeline's blood turned to fire. She would have forgiven Stewart then for lapsing into the kind of cowboy it had been her blind and sickly sentiment to abhor. This was a man's West—a man's game! What right had a woman reared in a softer mold to use her beauty and her influence to change a man who was bold and free and strong?

But Stewart held forth his hands to be manacled. Then Madeline heard her own voice burst out in a ringing, imperious command:

"Wait!"

As she stepped to the porch, facing the men, she not only felt anger and pride summoning their forces to her command, but there was something else calling—a deep, passionate, mysterious thing not born of the moment.

XXXI

SNEED dropped the manacles. Stewart's face took on a chalky whiteness. Hawe, in a slow, stupid embarrassment beyond his

control, removed his sombrero in a respect that seemed wrenched from him.

"Mr. Hawe, I can prove to you that Stewart was not concerned in any way whatever with the crime for which you want to arrest him."

The sheriff's stare underwent a blinking change. He coughed, stammered, and tried to speak. Manifestly he had been thrown completely off his balance. Astonishment slowly merged into discomfiture.

"It was absolutely impossible for Stewart to have been connected with that assault," Madeline went on swiftly. "He was with me in the waiting-room of the station at the moment when it happened outside. I assure you I have a distinct and vivid recollection. The door was open. I heard the voices of quarreling men speaking in Spanish. Evidently they had left the dance-hall opposite and were coming toward the station. I heard a woman's voice mingling with the others. It, too, was Spanish, and I could not understand, but the tone was beseeching. Then I heard footsteps on the gravel. I knew Stewart heard them—I could see from his face that something dreadful was about to happen. Then, just outside the door, there were hoarse, furious voices, a scuffle, a muffled shot, a woman's cry, the thud of a falling body, and the quick footsteps of a man running away. Next, the girl Bonita staggered into the door. She was white, trembling, terror-stricken. She recognized Stewart, appealed to him. Stewart supported her and endeavored to calm her. He asked her if Danny Mains had been shot, or if he had done the shooting. The girl said no. She told Stewart that she had danced a little, flirted a little with *vaqueros*, and they had quarreled over her. Then Stewart took her outside and put her upon his horse. I saw the girl ride down the street and disappear in the darkness."

While Madeline spoke another change appeared to be working in the man Hawe. His discomfiture wore to a sullen fury and his sharp features fixed in an expression of craft.

"Thet's mighty interestin', Miss Hammond, 'most as interestin' as a story-book," he said. "Now, since you're so obligin' a witness, I'd sure like to put a question or two. What time did you arrive at El Cajon thet night?"

"It was after eleven o'clock," replied Madeline.

"Nobody there to meet you?"

"No."

"The station-agent an' operator both gone?"

"Yes."

"Wal, how soon did this feller Stewart show up?" Hawe continued with a wry smile.

"Very soon after my arrival. Perhaps fifteen minutes, possibly a little more."

"Some dark an' lonesome around thet station, wasn't it?"

"Indeed, yes."

"An' what time was the greaser shot?" queried Hawe, his little eyes gleaming like coals.

"Probably close to half past one. It was two o'clock when I looked at my watch at Florence Kingsley's house. Directly after Stewart sent Bonita away he took me to Miss Kingsley's. So, allowing for the walk and a few minutes' conversation with her, I can pretty definitely say the shooting took place at about half past one."

Stillwell heaved his big frame a step closer to the sheriff.

"What're you drivin' at?" he roared, his face black again.

"Evidence!" snapped Hawe.

Madeline marveled at this interruption. As Stewart irresistibly drew her glance she saw him gray-faced as ashes, shaking, utterly unnerved.

"I thank you, Miss Hammond," he said huskily, "but you needn't answer any more of Hawe's questions. He's—he's—it's not necessary. I'll go with him now, under arrest. Bonita will corroborate your testimony in court, and that will save me from this—this man's spite."

Madeline, looking at Stewart, seeing a humility which she at first took for cowardice, suddenly divined that it was not fear for himself that made him dread further disclosures, but fear for her—fear lest she might suffer shame through him.

Pat Hawe cocked his head to one side, like a vulture about to strike with his beak, and cunningly eyed Madeline.

"Considered 'as testimony, what you've said is sure important an' conclusive. But I'm calculatin' thet the court will want to hev explained *why* you stayed from eleven thirty till one thirty in thet waitin'-room alone with Stewart!"

Stewart gave a tigerish start. Stillwell's big hands tore at the neck of his shirt, as if he was choking. Alfred strode hotly for-

ward, to be stopped by the cold and silent Nels. Monty Price emitted a sudden noise which was both a hiss and a roar.

In the rush of her thought Madeline could not interpret the meaning of these things which seemed so strange at the moment; but they were portentous. Even as she was forming a reply to Hawe's speech she felt a chill creep over her.

"Stewart detained me in the waiting-room," she said, clear-voiced as a bell. "But we were not alone—all the time."

For a moment the only sound following her words was a gasp from Stewart. Hawe's face became transformed with a hideous amaze and joy.

"Detained?" he whispered, craning his lean and corded neck. "How's thet?"

"Stewart was drunk. He—"

With a sudden passionate gesture of despair Stewart appealed to her:

"Oh, Miss Hammond! Don't! *Don't!*"

Then he seemed to sink down, his head lowered upon his breast in utter shame. Stillwell's great hand swept to the bowed shoulder and he turned to Madeline.

"Miss Majesty, I reckon you'd be wise to tell all," said the old cattleman gravely. "There ain't one of us who *could* misunderstand any motive or act of yours. Mebbe a stroke of lightnin' might clear this murky air. Whatever Gene Stewart did that onlucky night—you tell it!"

Madeline's dignity and self-possession had been disturbed by Stewart's importunity. She broke into swift, disconnected speech:

"He came into the station—a few minutes after I got there. I asked—to be shown to a hotel. He said there wasn't any that would accommodate married women. He grasped my hand—looked for a wedding-ring. Then I saw he was—he was intoxicated. He told me he would go for a hotel porter; but he came back with a priest. Padre Marcos. The poor priest was—terribly frightened. So was I. Stewart fired his gun at the *padre's* feet. He pushed me into a bench. Again he shot—right before my face. I—I nearly fainted; but I heard him cursing the *padre*—heard the *padre* praying or chanting—I didn't know what. Stewart tried to make me say things in Spanish. All at once he asked my name. I told him. He jerked at my veil. I took it off. Then he threw his gun down and pushed the *padre* out of the door. That was just before the

vaqueros came with Bonita. Padre Marcos must have seen them—must have heard them. After that Stewart grew quickly sober. He was mortified—distressed—stricken with shame. He told me he had been drinking at a wedding—I remember, it was Ed Linton's wedding. Then he explained that the boys were always gambling, and he had wagered he would marry the first girl who came to El Cajon. I happened to be the first one. He tried to force me to marry him. The rest—about the assault on the *vaquero*—I have already told you."

Madeline ended, out of breath and panting, with her hands pressed upon her heaving bosom. The revelation of what she had so long kept secret made her throb and tremble and burn. She thought of Alfred and his wrath; but he stood motionless, as if dazed. Stillwell's attention was centered upon Stewart, who seemed utterly crushed.

Hawe rolled his red eyes and threw back his head.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! Say, Sneed, you didn't miss any of it, did ye? Haw! Haw! Best I ever heerd in all my born days! Ho! Ho!" Then he ceased laughing and, with glinting gaze upon Madeline, insolent and vicious and savage, he began to drawl: "Wal, now, my lady, I reckon your story, if it tallies with Bonita's an' Padre Marcos's, will clear Gene Stewart in the eyes of the court." Here he grew slower, more biting, sharper, and harder of face. "But you needn't expect Pat Hawe or the court to swaller that part of your story *about bein' detained unwillin'!*"

Madeline had not time to grasp the sense of his last words. Stewart had convulsively sprung upward, white as chalk. As he leaped at Hawe, Stillwell interposed his huge bulk and wrapped his arms around the cowboy. There was a brief, whirling, wrestling struggle. Stewart appeared to be besting the old cattleman.

"Help, boys, help!" yelled Stillwell. "I can't hold him! Hurry, or there's goin' to be blood spilled!"

Nick Steele and several others leaped to Stillwell's assistance. Stewart, getting free, tossed one aside and then another. They closed in on him. For an instant a furious, straining wrestle of powerful bodies made rasp and shock and blow. Once Stewart heaved them from him; but they plunged back and finally conquered him.

"Gene! Why, Gene!" panted the old cattleman. "Sure you're locoed to act this way! Cool down! Why, boy, it's all right! Jest stand still—give us a chance to talk to you. It's only ole Bill, you know—your ole pal who's tried to be a daddy to you. He's only wantin' you to hev sense—to be cool—to wait!"

"Let me go! Let me go!" cried Stewart, and the poignancy of that cry pierced Madeline's heart. "Let me go, Bill, if you're my friend! I don't care what Hawe's said or done to me. It was that about *her!* Are you all a lot of greasers? How can you stand it?" Then his voice broke and fell to a whisper. "Bill, dear old Bill, let me go! *I'll kill him!*"

"Gene, I know you'd kill him if you hed an even break," replied Stillwell soothingly; "but you ain't even packin' a gun, an' there's Pat lookin' nasty, with his hand nervous like. He seen you hed no gun. He'd jump at the chance to plug you an' then holler about opposition to the law. Cool down, son! It'll all come right."

Suddenly Madeline was transfixed by a terrible sound. Her startled glance shifted from the anxious group round Stewart to see that Monty Price had leaped off the porch. He crouched, hunched down, with his hands below his hips, where the big guns swung. From his distorted lips there again issued a sound that was combined roar and bellow and Indian war-whoop, and, more than all, a horrible, warning cry. He looked like a hunchback about to leap on his foe like a malicious demon. He was quivering, vibrating. His eyes, black and hot, were fastened with piercing intentness upon Hawe and Sneed.

"Git back Bill, git back!" he roared. "Git 'em back!"

With one lunge Stillwell shoved Stewart and Nick and the other cowboys up on the porch. Then he crowded Madeline and Alfred and Florence to the wall and tried to force them further. Failing to get them through door and windows, he planted his wide person between the women and danger. Madeline grasped his arm, held on, and peered fearfully from behind his broad shoulder.

"You, Hawe! You, Sneed!" called Monty in that same wild voice. "Don't you move a finger er an eyelash!"

Madeline's faculties nerved to keen, thrilling divination. She grasped the relation between Monty's terrible cry and the

strange, hunched posture he had assumed. Stillwell's haste and silence, too, were pregnant of catastrophe.

"Nels, git in this!" yelled Monty, and all the time he never shifted his intent gaze as much as a hair's breadth from Hawe and his deputy. "Nels, chase away them two fellers hangin' back there. Chase 'em, quick!"

These men, the two deputies who had remained in the background with the pack-horses, did not wait for Nels. They spurred their mounts, wheeled, and galloped away.

"Now, Nels, cut the girl loose!" ordered Monty.

Nels ran forward, jerked the halter out of Sneed's hand, and pulled Bonita's horse in close to the porch. As he slit the rope which bound her she fell into his arms.

"Hawe, git down!" went on Monty. "Face front an' stiff!"

The sheriff swung his leg, and, never moving his hands, with his face a deathly, sickening white, he slid to the ground.

"Line up there beside your guerrilla pard! There! You two make a fine pictoor—a fine team of pizened coyote an' a cross between a wild mule an' a greaser! Now listen!"

Monty made a long pause, in which his breathing was plainly audible. Madeline's eyes were riveted in fascination upon him. Her mind, swift as lightning, had gathered the subtleties in action and word succeeding his domination of the men. Violence, terrible violence—the thing she had sensed, the thing she had feared, the thing she had sought to eliminate from among her cowboys—was, after many months, about to be enacted before her eyes. It had come at last!

She had softened Stillwell, she had influenced Nels, she had changed Stewart; but this black-faced, terrible Monty Price now rose, as it were, out of his wild past, and no power on earth could stay his hand. Madeline did not shudder; she did not wish to blot out from sight this little man, fearful in his mood of wild justice. She suffered a flash of horror to feel that Monty, blind and dead to her authority, cold as steel toward her presence, understood the depths of a woman's soul. For in this moment of strife, of insult to her, of torture to the man she had uplifted and then broken, the passion of her reached deep toward primitive hate.

With eyes slowly hazing red she watched Monty Price; she listened with thrumming ears; she waited, slowly sagging against Stillwell.

"Hawe, if you an' your dirty pard hev loved the sound of human voice, then listen, an' listen hard!" said Monty. "Fer I've been goin' contrary to my ole style jest to hev a talk with you. You all but got away on your nerve, didn't you? 'Cause why? You roll in here an' flash yer badge, an' talk mean, an' almost bluff away with it. You heerd all about Miss Hammond's cowboy outfit stoppin' drinkin' an' cussin' an' packin' guns. They've took on religion an' decent livin', an' sure they'll be easy to hobble an' drive to jail! Hawe, listen. Ther was a good an' noble woman come out of the East somewheres, an' she brought a lot of sunshine an' happiness an' new idees into the tough lives of cowboys. I reckon it's beyond you to know what she come to mean to them; but wunst they was only a lot of poor cowboys, an' then, sudden like, they was human bein's, livin' in a big world thet hed somethin' sweet even fer them—even fer an ole, worn-out, hobble-legged, burned-up cowman like me! An' you, Pat Hawe, you come along, not satisfied with ropin' an' beatin' thet friendless little Bonita, you come along an' face the lady we fellers honor an' love an' reverence, an' you—you—"

With whistling breath, foaming at the mouth, Monty Price hunched lower, his hands at his hips, and edged inch by inch farther out from the porch, closer to Hawe and Sneed.

"Thet's all!" roared Monty. Lower and lower he hunched, a terrible figure of ferocity. "Now, both you armed ossifers of the law, come on! Flash your guns! Throw 'em, an' be quick! Monty Price is done! There'll be daylight through you both before you fan a hammer, but I'm givin' you a chanst to sting me. You holler law, an' my way is the ole law!"

Hoarser and more demoniacal he grew with each panting breath, lower he hunched his shoulders. All his body, except his rigid arms, quivered with a muscular convolution.

"Dogs! Skunks! Scorpions! Buzards! Flash them guns, er I'll flash mine! Aha!"

To Madeline it seemed that the three stiff, crouching men leaped into instant and united action. She saw streaks of fire and

puffs of smoke. Then a crashing volley deafened her.

Smoke veiled the scene. Slowly it drifted away, to disclose three fallen men, one of whom, Monty, leaned on one hand, a smoking gun in the other.

He watched for a movement from the other two. It did not come. Then, with a terrible smile, he slipped back and stretched out.

XXXII

IN the days that followed, whether she was awake or asleep, Madeline Hammond could not release herself from the thralling memory of that tragedy. She was haunted by Monty Price's terrible smile. Only in action could she escape; and to that end she worked, she walked, and rode. Overcoming a strong feeling, which she feared was unreasonable disgust, she waited on Bonita, who lay ill at the ranch, bruised and feverish, in need of skilful nursing.

Madeline felt that something inscrutable was changing her soul. She was never spiritually alone. There was a step on her trail. Indoors she was oppressed. She required the open—the light, the wind, the sight of endless slopes, the sounds of corral and pond and field.

One afternoon she rode down to the alfalfa fields, round them, and back up to the spillway of the lower lake, where a group of mesquit-trees, fed by the water that seeped through the sand, had taken on the bloom and beauty of renewed life. Under these trees there was shade enough to make a pleasant place to linger.

Madeline dismounted, desiring to rest a little. She liked this quiet, lonely spot. It was really the only secluded nook near the house. If she rode down into the valley, or out to the mesa, or up on the foot-hills, she could not go alone. Even now probably Stillwell or Nels knew her whereabouts; but as she was comparatively hidden here, she imagined a solitude that was not actually hers.

Her horse, Majesty, bobbed his head and flung his mane and switched his tail at the flies. He would rather have been cutting the wind down the valley slope.

Madeline sat with her back against a tree and took off her sombrero. The soft breeze, fanning her hot face, blowing strands of her hair, was refreshingly cool. She heard the slow tramp of cattle going in to drink. That sound ceased, and the

grove of mesquits appeared to be lifeless, except for her and her horse.

Yet, listening and looking with keen ears and eyes, she found that the place was far from dead. Desert quail, as gray as the bare earth, were dusting themselves in a shady spot. A bee, swift as light, hummed by. She saw a horned toad, the color of stone, squatting low in the sand. A brown bird darted down from an unseen perch and made a swift, irregular flight after a fluttering insect. Madeline heard the sharp snapping of a merciless beak. There was death, as well as life, in the shade of the mesquits.

Suddenly Majesty shot up his long ears and snorted. Then Madeline heard a slow pad of hoofs. A horse was approaching from the direction of the lake.

Madeline had learned to be wary. Mounting Majesty, she turned him toward the open. A moment later she felt glad of her caution, for, looking back between the trees, she saw Stewart leading a horse into the grove. She would as willingly have met a guerrilla as this cowboy.

Majesty had broken into a trot when a shrill whistle rent the air. The horse leaped, and, wheeling so swiftly that he nearly unseated his rider, he charged back straight for the mesquits. Madeline spoke to him, cried angrily to him, pulled with all her strength upon the bridle, but was helplessly unable to stop him.

He whistled a piercing blast. Madeline realized then that Stewart, his old master, had called him, and that nothing could turn him. She gave up trying and attended to the urgent need of saving herself from mesquit boughs that Majesty thrashed into motion.

The horse thumped into an aisle between the trees, and, stopping before Stewart, whinnied eagerly. Madeline, not knowing what to expect, had no time for any feeling but amazement. A quick glance showed her the cowboy in rough garb, dressed for the trail and leading a wiry horse, saddled and packed.

When Stewart, without looking at her, put his arm around Majesty's neck and laid his face against the flowing mane, Madeline's heart suddenly began to beat with unwonted quickness. Stewart seemed oblivious to her presence. His eyes were closed. His dark face worked into softer mold, lost its hardness and sadness, and for an instant became beautiful.

Madeline instantly divined what his action meant. He was leaving the ranch; this was his good-by to his horse. How strange, sad, fine, was this love between man and beast!

A dimness confused Madeline's eyes; she hurriedly brushed it away, and it came back wet and blurring. She averted her face, ashamed of the tears Stewart might see. She was sorry for him. She fought a mounting wish to take him again into her service. He was going away, and this time, judging from the nature of his farewell to his horse, it was to be forever.

Like a stab from a cold blade, a pain shot through Madeline's heart. But why Stewart's departure?

"I want to talk to you," he said.

Madeline started, turned to him, and now she saw the earlier Stewart, the man who reminded her of their first meeting.

"I want to ask you something," he went on. "I've been wanting to know something. That's why I've hung on here. You never spoke to me, never noticed me, never gave me a chance to ask you; but now I'm going over—over the border, and I want to know. *Why did you discharge me?*"

At his last words that hot shame, tenfold more stifling than before, rushed over Madeline, sending the scarlet in a wave to her temples. It was as if his words made her realize that she was actually face to face with him—that somehow he must discover what she would rather have died than reveal. Biting her lips to hold back speech, she jerked on Majesty's bridle, struck him with her whip, spurred him.

Stewart's iron arm held the horse. Then, in a flash of passion, she struck at Stewart's face, missed it, struck again and hit.

With one pull, almost drawing her from the saddle, he tore the whip from her hands. It was not that action on his part, or the masterfulness of his look, so much as the livid mark on his face where the whip had lashed, that quieted her fury.

"That's nothing," he said with something of his old audacity. "That's nothing—to how you've hurt me!"

Madeline battled with herself for control. This man would not be denied. The piercing eyes he bent upon her burned her, went through her, as if he were looking into her soul. Then her quick sight caught a fleeting doubt, a wistfulness, a surprised and saddened certainty in his eyes. She

saw it shade and pass away. Her woman's intuition, as keen as her sight, told her that Stewart in that moment had sustained a shock of bitter, final truth.

For the third time he repeated his question. Madeline did not answer; she could not speak.

"You don't know I love you, do you?" he continued passionately; "that ever since you stood before me in that hole at Chiricahua I've loved you? You can't see that I've been another man, loving you, working for you, living for you? You won't believe that I've turned my back on the old, wild life, that I've been decent and honorable and happy and useful—*your kind of a cowboy?* How could you tell that a wild fellow, faithless to mother and sister, except in memory, riding a hard, drunken trail straight to perdition, had looked into the eyes of a beautiful woman infinitely beyond him and above him, and had so loved her that he was saved—that he became faithful again—that he saw her face in every flower and her eyes in the blue heaven? Who could tell you, when at night I stood alone under these Western stars, how deep in my soul I was glad just to be alive, to be able to do something for you, to be near you, to stand between you and trouble or danger, to feel somehow that I was a part, just a little part, of the West you had come to love?"

Madeline was mute. She heard her heart thundering in her ears.

Stewart leaped at her. His powerful hand closed on her arm. She trembled. His action presaged the old instinctive violence.

"No, but you think I kept Bonita up in the mountains, that I went secretly to meet her, that all the while I served you I was—oh, I know what you think! I know now why you discharged me! I never knew till I made you look at me. Now say it! *Speak!*"

White-hot, blinded, utterly in the fiery grasp of passion, powerless to stem the rush of a word both shameful and revealing and fatal, Madeline cried:

"*Yes!*"

Stewart had wrenched the word from her, but he was not subtle enough, not sufficiently versed in the mystery of woman's motive, to divine the deep significance of her reply. Plain it was that it had only literal meaning for him, confirming the dishonor in which she held him.

Dropping her arm, he shrank back—a strange action for the savage and crude man she judged him to be.

"But that day at Chiricahua you spoke of faith," he burst out. "You said the greatest thing in the world was faith in human nature. You said the finest men had been those who had fallen low and had risen. You said you had faith in me. *You made me have faith in myself!*"

His reproach, without bitterness or scorn, was a lash to her old egoistic self-confidence. She had preached a beautiful principle, but she had failed to live up to it. She understood his rebuke, she wondered and wavered; but the affront to her pride had been too great, the tumult within her breast had been too startlingly fierce. She could not speak.

The moment passed and with it Stewart's brief, rugged splendor of simplicity.

"You think I am vile," he said. "You think—that about Bonita! I could make you ashamed—I could tell you—"

His passionate utterance ceased with a snap of his teeth. His lips set in a thin, bitter line. The agitation of his face preceded a convulsive wrestling of his shoulders. All this swift action denoted an inner combat, and it nearly overwhelmed him.

"No! No!" he panted.

Was it his answer to some mighty temptation? Then, like a bent sapling released, he sprang erect.

"I'll be the man—the dog—you think me!" he cried.

He laid hold of her arm with rude, powerful clutch. One pull drew her sliding half out of the saddle into his arms. She fell with her breast against his, not wholly free of stirrups or horse, and there she hung, utterly powerless.

Maddened, writhing, she tore to release herself. All she could accomplish was to twist herself, raise herself high enough to see his face. That almost paralyzed her. Did he mean to kill her?

He wrapped his arms around her and crushed her tighter, closer to him. She felt the pound of his heart; her own seemed to have frozen. Then he pressed his burning lips to hers. It was a long, terrible kiss. She felt him shake.

"Oh, Stewart! I implore you—let me go!" she whispered.

His white face loomed over hers. She closed her eyes. He rained kisses upon her

face, but no more upon her mouth. On her closed eyes, her hair, her cheeks, her neck, he pressed his lips—lips that lost their fire and grew cold. Then he released her, and, lifting and righting her in the saddle, he held her arm to keep her from falling.

For a moment Madeline sat on her horse with shut eyes. She dreaded the light.

"I reckon you sure can't say you've never been kissed," Stewart said. His voice seemed a long way off. "But that was coming to you, so be game. Here!"

She felt something hard and cold and metallic thrust into her hand. He made her fingers close over it, hold it.

The feel of the thing revived her. She opened her eyes. Stewart had given her his gun. He stood with his broad breast against her knee, and she looked up to see that old, mocking smile on his face.

"Go ahead! Throw my gun on me! Be a thoroughbred!"

Madeline did not yet grasp his meaning.

"You can put me down in that quiet place on the hill beside Monty Price."

Madeline dropped the gun with a shuddering cry of horror. The meaning of his words, the memory of Monty, the certainty that she would kill Stewart if she held the gun an instant longer tortured the self-accusing cry from her.

Stewart stooped to pick up the weapon.

"You might have saved me a lot of trouble," he said, with another flash of the mocking smile. "You're beautiful and sweet and proud, but you're no thoroughbred! Majesty Hammond, *adios!*"

Stewart leaped for the saddle of his horse and, with a flying mount, crashed through the mesquits to disappear.

XXXIII

IN the shaded seclusion of her room, with her face buried deep among the soft cushions on her couch, Madeline Hammond lay prostrate and quivering under the outrage she had suffered.

The afternoon wore away; twilight fell; night came; and then she rose to sit by the window, to let the cool wind blow upon her face. She passed through hours of unintelligible shame, impotent rage, and futile striving to reason away her defilement.

The train of brightening stars seemed to mock her with their unattainable, passionless serenity. She had loved them, and now she imagined she hated them and

everything connected with this wild, fateful, and abrupt West.

She would go home!

The great stars, blinking white and cold over the dark crags, looked down upon her and, as always, after she had watched them for a while, they enthralled her.

"Under Western stars!" she mused, thinking a little scornfully of the romantic destiny that they had blazed for her idle sentiment.

Nevertheless, they were beautiful; they were speaking; they were mocking; they drew her.

"Ah!" she sighed. "It will not be so very easy to leave them, after all!"

Madeline closed and darkened the window. She struck a light. It was necessary to tell the anxious servants who knocked that she was well and required nothing. A soft step on the walk outside arrested her. Who was there—Nels, or Nick Steele, or Stillwell? Who shared the guardianship over her now that Monty Price was dead, and that other—that savage—had gone away? It was monstrous and unfathomable that she regretted him.

The light annoyed her. Complete darkness fitted her strange mood. She retired and tried to compose herself to sleep; but sleep, for her, was not a matter of will. Her cheeks burned so hotly that she rose to bathe them. Cold water would not alleviate this burning; and then, despairing of forgetfulness, she lay down again with a shameful gratitude for the cloak of night. Stewart's kisses were there, scorching her lips, her closed eyes, her swelling neck. They penetrated deeper and deeper into her blood, into her heart, into her soul—the terrible farewell kisses of a wild, passionate, hardened man. Despite his baseness he had loved her!

Late in the night Madeline fell asleep. In the morning she was pale and languid, but in a mental condition that promised composure.

It was considerably after her regular hour that she went to her office. The door was open, and just outside, tipped back in a chair, sat Stillwell.

"'Mawnin', Miss Majesty," he said, as he rose to greet her with his usual courtesy.

There were signs of trouble in his lined face. Madeline shrank inwardly, fearing his old lamentations about Stewart. Then she saw a dusty, ragged pony in the yard and a little burro drooping under a heavy

pack. Both animals bore evidence of long, hard travel.

"To whom do they belong?" asked Madeline.

"Them critters? Why, to Danny Mains," replied Stillwell with a cough that betrayed embarrassment.

"Danny Mains?" echoed Madeline wonderingly.

"Wal, I said so."

Stillwell was indeed not himself.

"Is Danny Mains here?" she asked in sudden curiosity.

The old cattleman nodded gloomily.

"Yep, he's hyar, all right. Sloped in from the hills, an' he hollered to see Bonita. He's locoed, too, about that little black-eyed hussy. Why, he hardly said 'Howdy, Bill,' before he began to ask about the girl; so I took him in to see her. He's been there more'n a half-hour now."

Evidently Stillwell's sensitive feelings had been ruffled. Madeline's curiosity changed to blank astonishment, which left her with a thrilling premonition. She caught her breath. A thousand thoughts seemed thronging for clear conception in her mind.

Rapid footsteps, with an accompaniment of clinking spurs, sounded in the hallway. Then a young man ran out upon the porch. He resembled a cowboy in his lithe build, in his garb and action, in the way he wore his gun; but his face, instead of being red, had a clear, brown tan. His eyes were blue; his hair was light and curly. He was a handsome, frank-faced boy.

At sight of Madeline he slammed down his sombrero and, leaping at her, he possessed himself of her hands. His swift violence not only alarmed her, but painfully reminded her of something she wished to forget.

This cowboy bent his head and kissed her hands and wrung them, and when he straightened up he was crying.

"Miss Hammond, she's safe, an' almost well, an' what I feared most ain't so, thank God!" he cried. "Sure I'll never be able to pay you for all you've done for her! She's told me how she was dragged down here—how Gene tried to save her—how you spoke up for Gene an' her, too—how Monty at the last threw his guns—poor Monty! We were good friends, Monty an' I; but it wasn't friendship for me that made Monty stand in there. He would have saved her, anyway. Monty Price was

the whitest man I ever knew. There's Nels an' Nick an' Gene—they've been some friends to me, but Monty Price was grand! He never knew, any more than you or Bill here, or the boys, what Bonita was to me."

Stillwell's kind and heavy hand fell upon the cowboy's shoulder.

"Danny, what's all this queer gab?" he asked. "An' you're takin' some liberty with Miss Hammond, who never seen you before. Come, ease up now, an' talk sense!"

The cowboy's frank face broke into a smile. He dashed the tears from his eyes and laughed. His laugh had a pleasant, boyish, happy ring.

"Bill, old pal, stand bridle-down a minute, will you?" Then he bowed to Madeline. "I beg your pardon, Miss Hammond, for seemin' rudeness. I'm Danny Mains, an' Bonita is my wife. I'm so crazy glad she's safe an' unharmed an' so grateful to you that—why, sure, it's a wonder I didn't kiss you outright!"

"Bonita's your wife!" ejaculated Stillwell in amazement.

"Sure! We've been married for months," replied Danny happily. "Gene Stewart did it—good old Gene! I guess maybe I haven't come to pay him up for all he's done for me! You see, I've been in love with Bonita for two years; an' Gene—you know, Bill, what a way Gene has with girls—he was tryin' to get Bonita to have me."

Madeline's quick, varying emotions were swallowed up in a boundless gladness. Something dark, deep, heavy, and somber was flooded from her heart. She had a sudden rich sense of gratitude toward this smiling, clean-faced cowboy, whose blue eyes flashed through tears.

"Danny Mains," she said, "if you are as glad as your news has made me—if you really think I merit such a reward—you may kiss me outright!"

With a bashful wonder, but with right hearty will, Danny Mains availed himself of this gracious privilege. Stillwell snorted. The signs of his phenomenal smile were manifest; otherwise Madeline would have thought that snort an indication of furious disapproval.

"Bill, straddle a chair," said Danny. "You've gone back a heap these last few months, frettin' over your bad boys, Danny an' Gene. You'll need support under you while I'm throwin' my yarn. Story of my life, Bill!" He placed a chair for Made-

line. "Miss Hammond, beggin' your pardon again, I want you to listen, too. You've the face an' eyes of a woman who loves to hear of other people's happiness. Besides, somehow it's easy for me to talk lookin' at you."

His manner subtly changed. Possibly it took on a little swagger; certainly he lost the dignity that he had shown under stress of feeling; he was now more like a cowboy about to boast or affect some stunning maneuver. Walking off the porch, he stood before the weary horse and burro.

"Played out!" he exclaimed.

Then, with the swift violence so characteristic of men of his class, he slipped the pack from the burro and threw saddle and bridle from the horse.

"There! See 'em! Take a look at the last dog-gone weight you ever packed! You've been some faithful to Danny Mains, an' Danny Mains pays! Never a saddle again, or a strap or a halter or a hobble, so long as you live! So long as you live nothin' but grass an' clover an' cool water in shady places an' dusty swales to roll in an' rest an' sleep!"

Then he untied the pack and, taking a small but heavy sack from it, he came back upon the porch. Deliberately he emptied the contents of the sack at Stillwell's feet. Piece after piece of rock thumped upon the floor. The pieces were sharp, ragged, evidently broken from a ledge; the body of them was white in color, with yellow veins and bars and streaks.

Stillwell took up one rock after another, stared, and stuttered. He put the rocks to his lips and dug into them with his shaking fingers. Then he lay back in his chair, his head against the wall; and as he gaped at Danny the old smile began to transform his face.

"Lord! Danny, if you hev'n't been an' gone an' struck it rich!"

Danny regarded Stillwell with lofty condescension.

"Some rich," he said. "Now, Bill, what've we got here, say, offhand?"

"Oh, Lord, Danny! I'm afraid to say. Nothin' under ten thousand dollars a ton! I never seen sich free gold. Look, Miss Majesty, jest look at the gold! I've lived among prospectors an' gold-mines fer thirty years, an' I never seen the beat of this. Tell us how you found it, Danny."

"Bill, it was some long time ago when you sent me in to El Cajon with a pay-

roll," said Danny. "Reckon you've been some disheartened rememberin' that. Fact is, I know how you felt, because Gene kept me posted. Well, that day, ridin' in, I run up against some of Don Carlos's *vaqueros*. They pretended to be friendly, as they always done; but they laid me out with a crack on the head. When I came to I was layin' in the road an' Bonita was fussin' over me. The money was gone; so was my horse. Pretty soon I come to all right, an' Bonita spotted my horse off on the grass. She got him. I wasn't goin' to let her ride away alone when she told me she was in trouble. Besides, I figured myself disgraced; so we hit the trail for the Peloncillos. Bonita had Gene's horse an' she was to meet him up on the trail. We got to the mountains all right an' nearly starved for a few days till Gene found us. He had got in trouble himself an' couldn't fetch much with him.

"We made for the Craggs an' built a cabin. I come down that day Gene sent his horse to you. Never saw Gene so broken-hearted! Well, after he sloped for the border, Bonita an' I were hard put to it to keep alive; but we got along, an' I think it was then she began to care a little for me. I killed cougars an' went down to Rodeo to get bounties for the skins an' bought grub an' supplies we needed. Once I went into El Cajon an' run plumb into Gene. He was back from the revolution an' cuttin' up pretty bad; but I got away from him, after doin' all I could to drag him out of town. A long time after that Gene trailed up to the Craggs an' found us. Gene had stopped drinkin'; he'd changed wonderful, an' was fine an' dandy. It was then he began to pester the life out of me to make me marry Bonita. I was happy, so was she, an' I was some scared of spoilin' it. Bonita had been a little flirt, an' I was afraid she'd get shy of a halter; so I bucked against Gene. But I was all locoed, as it turned out. Gene would come up occasionally, packin' supplies for us, an' always he'd get after me to do the right thing by Bonita. Gene's dog-gone hard to buck against; and finally he fetched up Padre Marcos an' we was married."

Danny paused in his narrative, breathing hard, as if the memory of the wedding had stirred strong and thrilling feeling in him. Stillwell's smile was rapturous. Madeline leaned toward Danny with her eyes shining.

"Miss Hammond, an' you, Bill Stillwell—listen, for this is a strange thing I've got to tell you. The afternoon Bonita an' I were married, when Gene an' the *padre* had gone, I was happy one minute an' low-hearted the next. I was miserable because I had a bad name; I couldn't go among my old friends without money to pay back what I'd lost. I couldn't buy even a decent dress for my pretty wife. Bonita heard me sayin' so, an' she was some mysterious. She told me the story of what she called the lost mine of the *padres* an' she kissed me an' made joyful over me in the strangest way. I knew marriage went to women's heads, an' I thought even Bonita had a spell.

"Well, she left me for a little; an' when she came back she said she wanted to show me where she always sat an' waited an' watched for me when I was away. She led me round under the Craggs to a long slope. It was some pretty there—clear an' open, with a long sweep, an' the desert yawnin' deep an' red. An' there, under the Craggs, was gold—gold everywhere—surface gold—gold deep in the cracks. At that I was worse than locoed. I went gold-crazy. I worked like seventeen burros. Bill, I dug a car-load of gold-bearin' quartz an' never got to live rock. Bonita watched the trails for me an' brought me water. That was how she come to get caught by Pat Hawe an' his guerrillas. Hawe was so set on doin' Gene dirt that he mixed up with Don Carlos. Bonita will tell you some staggerin' news about that outfit; but just now my story's all gold."

Danny Mains got up and kicked back his chair. Blue lightning gleamed from his eyes as he thrust his right hand toward Stillwell.

"Bill, old pal, put her there—give me your hand!" he said. "You were always my friend. It stuck in my craw how you refused to think I was crooked. Gene told me. Well, Danny Mains owes you an' Gene Stewart a good deal, an' Danny Mains pays! I want two pardners to help me work my gold-mine—you an' Gene! If there's any ranch hereabouts that takes your fancy I'll buy it! If Miss Hammond ever gets tired of her range an' stock an' home I'll buy them for Gene. If there's any railroad or town round here that she likes I'll buy it. If I see anythin' myself that I like I'll buy it! Go out, find Gene

for me. I'm achin' to see him, to tell him. Go fetch him, an' right here in this house, with my wife an' Miss Hammond as witnesses, we'll draw up a pardnership. Go find him, Bill! I want to show him this gold, to show him how Danny Mains pays! An' the only bitter drop in my cup to-day is that I can't ever pay Monty Price!"

XXXIV

MADLINE'S lips tremblingly formed to tell Danny Mains and Stillwell that the cowboy they wanted so much had left the ranch; but the flame of fine loyalty that burned in Danny's eyes, the happiness that made the old cattleman's face at once amazing and beautiful, stiffened her lips. She watched the huge Stillwell and the little cowboy, both talking wildly, as they walked off arm in arm to find Stewart. She imagined something of what Danny's disappointment would be, of the elder man's consternation and grief, when they learned that Stewart had left for the border.

At this juncture she looked up to see a strange yet familiar figure approaching. It was Padre Marcos.

Madeline felt herself trembling. What did the *padre's* presence mean on this day? He had always seemed to avoid meeting her. He had been exceedingly grateful for all she had done for his people, his church, and himself; but he had never thanked her in person. Perhaps he had come for that purpose now; but Madeline did not believe so.

Mention of Padre Marcos, or sight of him, had always occasioned Madeline a little indefinable shock; and now, as he stepped to the porch, a shrunken, stooped, and sad-faced man, she was startled.

The *padre* bowed low to her. His voice was low-toned and grave.

"*Señora*, will you grant me audience?" he asked in perfect English.

"Certainly, Padre Marcos," replied Madeline, and she led him into her office.

"May I beg to close the doors?" he asked. "It is a matter of great moment which you might not care to have any one hear."

Wonderingly Madeline inclined her head. The *padre* gently closed one door and then the other.

"*Señora*, I have come to disclose a secret—my own sinfulness in keeping it—and to implore your pardon. Do you re-

member that night when Señor Stewart dragged me before you in the waiting-room at El Cajon?"

"Yes," replied Madeline.

"*Señora*, since that night you have been Señor Stewart's wife."

Madeline became as motionless as stone. She seemed to feel nothing—only to hear.

"You are Señor Stewart's wife. I have kept the secret under fear of death; but I could keep it no longer. Señor Stewart may kill me now. Ah, *señora*, it is very strange to you! You were so frightened that night—you knew not what happened. Señor Stewart threatened me. He forced you. He made me speak the service. He made you speak the Spanish 'yes.' And I—*señora*, knowing the deeds of these sinful cowboys, fearing worse than disgrace to one so beautiful and as good as you, I could not do less than marry you truly. At least you should be his wife; so I married you in the service of my church."

"Good Heavens!" cried Madeline, rising.

"Hear me! I implore you, *señora*, hear me out! Do not leave me! Ah, *señora*, let me speak a word for Señor Stewart. He did not know what he was doing that night. In the morning he came to me and made me swear by my cross that I would not reveal the disgrace he had put upon you. If I did, he would kill me. Life is nothing to the American *vaquero*, *señora*. I promised to respect his command; but I did not tell him then that you were his wife. He did not dream I had truly married you. He went to fight for the freedom of my country—*señora*, he is one splendid soldier—and I brooded over the sin of my secret. If he were killed, I need never tell you; but if he lived I knew that I must do so some day.

"It was strange indeed that Señor Stewart and Padre Marcos should both come to this ranch together. The great change your goodness wrought in my beloved people was no greater than the change in Señor Stewart. *Señora*, I feared you would go away one day—go back to your Eastern home ignorant of the truth. The time came when I confessed to Stewart. I said that I must also tell you. *Señora*, the man went mad with joy. I have never seen so supreme a joy. He threatened no more to kill me. That strong, cruel *vaquero* begged me not to tell the secret—never to reveal it. He confessed his love for you—a love,

señora, something like the desert storm. He swore by all that was once sacred to him, and by my cross and my church, that he would be a good man—that he would be worthy to have you secretly his wife for the little time life left him to worship at your shrine. You need never know. As long as you did not leave the West, or seem to desire marriage, you need never know. But if you left, if you meant to marry, then he would quietly and silently go to his death. *Señora*, he meant it. Death has no terrors for such a man. I know that he would have welcomed death, because it would have served you. So I held my tongue, half pitying him, half fearing him, and praying for some God-sent light.

"*Señora*, it was a fool's paradise that Stewart lived in. I saw him often. When he took me up into the mountains to have me marry that wayward Bonita and her lover I learned to know the real Stewart. I came to have respect for a man whose ideas about nature and life and God were at variance with mine. He taught me many things. He made me doubt much that heretofore I have thought wisdom and truth. He professed to have no religion; but the man is a worshiper of God in all material things. He is a part of the wind and sun and desert and mountain that have made him. He is like them. He may be hard and violent, but he is just and true. Remembering his vice of drunkenness, his love of fighting, his contempt of death, his indifference to spilling blood, I was astounded to find a man of gentleness and kindness. I have never heard more beautiful words than those in which he persuaded Bonita to accept Señor Mains, to forget her old lovers, and henceforth to be faithful and happy. For Señor Stewart it was natural to be loyal to his friend, to have a fine sense of the honor due to a woman who had loved and given, to bring about their marriage, to succor them in their need and loneliness. It was natural for him never to speak of them. He seldom speaks needlessly. It would have been natural for him to give his life in their defense, if peril menaced them. *Señora*, I want you to understand that to me the man has the same stability, the same strength, the same elements which I am in the habit of attributing to the physical life around me in this wild and rugged desert. If you can see that, you will see he is wonderful."

Madeline listened as one under a spell. It was not only that this soft-voiced, eloquent priest knew how to move the heart, to stir the soul; but his defense, his praise of Stewart, if they had been couched in the crude speech of cowboys, would have been a glory to her.

"*Señora*, I pray you, do not misunderstand my mission. Beyond my confession to you I have only one duty—to tell you of the man whose wife you are. The ways of God are inscrutable. I am only a humble instrument. You are a noble woman, and Señor Stewart is a man of desert-iron forged anew in the crucible of love. *Quien sabe?* Señor Stewart swore he would kill me if I betrayed him; but he will not lift his hand against me. For the man bears you a very great and pure love, and it has changed him. I no longer fear his threat, but I do fear his anger should he ever know I spoke of his love, of his fool's paradise. I have watched his dark face turned to the sun setting over the desert. I have watched him lift it to the light of the stars. *Señora*, I am a priest, and I can read the soul, but no poor words of mine would ever be adequate to express what is in Señor Stewart's soul. Think, my gracious and noble lady, think what is his paradise. To love you above the spirit of the flesh; to know you are his wife; his, never to be another's except by his sacrifice; to watch you with a secret glory of joy and pride; to stand, while he might, between you and evil; to find his happiness in service; to wait, with never a dream of telling you, for the hour to come when, to leave you free, he must go out to his death.

"*Señora*, that is beautiful, it is sublime, it is terrible, it is appalling. It has brought me to you with my confession. I repeat, *señora*, the ways of God are inscrutable. What is the meaning of your influence upon Señor Stewart? Once he was merely an animal—low, vile, brutal, unheeding, unquicken; now he is a man—I have not seen his like! So I beseech you in my humble office as priest, as a lover of mankind, before you send Stewart away to seek death, to be sure that there is here no mysterious dispensation of God. Love, that mighty and blessed and unknown thing, might be at work. *Señora*, I have heard that somewhere, in the rich Eastern cities, you are a very great lady. I know you are good and noble. That is all I want to

know. To me you are only a woman, just as Señor Stewart is only a man. So I pray you, *señora*, before you let Stewart give you freedom at such cost, be sure you do not want his love, lest you cast away something sweet and ennobling which you yourself have created!"

XXXV

BLINDED, like a wild creature, Madeline Hammond ran to her room. She felt as if a stroke of lightning had shattered the shadowy substance of the dream that she had made of real life. The wonder of Danny Mains's story, the strange regret with which she had realized her injustice to Stewart, the astounding secret revealed by Padre Marcos—all these things were utterly forgotten in the sudden consciousness of her own love.

She fled as if pursued. With trembling hands she locked the doors; drew the blinds of the windows that opened on the porch; pushed chairs aside so that she could pace the length of her room. She was alone now, and she walked with soft, hurried, uneven steps. She could be herself here; she needed no mask; the long-established habit of serenely hiding the truth from the world and from herself could be broken.

She paused in her swift pacing to and fro. She liberated the thought that knocked at the gates of her mind. With quivering lips she whispered it. Then she spoke aloud:

"I will say it—hear it. I—I love him! I love him!"

She repeated the astounding truth, but she doubted her own identity.

"Am I still Madeline Hammond? What has happened? Who am I?"

She stood where the light from the one unclosed window fell upon her image in a mirror.

"Who is this woman?"

She expected to see a familiar, dignified person—a quiet unruffled figure—a tranquil face with dark, proud eyes and calm, proud lips. No, she did not see Madeline Hammond. She did not see any one she knew. Were her eyes, like her heart, playing her false? The figure before her was instinct with pulsating life. The hands she saw were clasped together and pressed deep into a swelling bosom that heaved with each panting breath. The face she saw—white, rapt, strangely glowing, with

parted, quivering lips, with great, staring, tragic eyes—this could not be Madeline Hammond's face!

Yet, as she looked, she knew that no fancy could really deceive her—that she was only Madeline Hammond come at last to the end of brooding dreams. She swiftly realized the change in her, divined its cause and meaning, accepted it as inevitable, and straightway fell back again into that mood of bewildering amaze.

Calmness was unattainable; tranquillity was impossible. She could not go back to count the innumerable, imperceptible steps of her undoing. Her old power of reflecting and analyzing seemed to have vanished in a pulse-stirring sense of one new emotion. She only felt.

All her pacing strides and quick breaths and tingling nerves and muffled, painful heart-beats—all her instinctive outward action that was a physical relief—all her involuntary inner strife that was maddening, yet unutterably sweet, seemed to be just one great stunning effect of surprise.

In a nature like hers, where strength of feeling had long been inhibited as a matter of training, such a transformation as the sudden consciousness of passionate love required time for its awakening, time for its sway.

But at last the enlightening moment came; and Madeline Hammond faced not only the love in her heart, but the thought of the man she loved.

When she let herself think of Gene Stewart—think that the impossible had happened and that she loved him—then she became a woman in the multiple, incomprehensible ways wherein she had never understood womanhood. For a moment, or an hour, she imagined she was merely a prey to the emotions that might rush to the overwhelming of one of her sex. She loved him, but he was a cowboy, and she could never be anything to him. She had unwittingly allowed her love of the range and the desert and the mountain, of the great, free, outdoor West, to trap her into an infatuation for one of its wild characters.

It was not really Stewart whom she loved, but the West as embodied in him. She would get over her madness. Some such lesson might have been expected as punishment for the summary disruption of her life in the East. She merited the lesson.

This, then, was the conclusive event in that long struggle to decide her future. She would go home where she belonged, where there were no stalwart, violent, fire-tempered cowboys to fascinate a young woman who had an innate weakness for the elemental!

Suddenly, as she raged, something in her took arms against indictment of Gene Stewart. She saw him drunk, violent, brutal; she saw him abandoned, base, lost; but out of the picture she had made there grew one of a different man—weak, sick, changed by shock, growing strong, strangely altered in spirit, silent, lonely like an eagle, secretive, tireless, faithful, soft as a woman, hard as iron to endure, and, at the last, noble.

She softened. In a flash her complex mood changed to one wherein she thought of the truth, the beauty, the wonder of Stewart's uplifting. Humbly she trusted that she had helped him to climb. That influence had been the best she had ever exerted. It had wrought magic in her own character. By it she had reached a better, higher, nobler plane of trust in man. She had received infinitely more than she had given.

"Oh, it is terrible!" she cried. "I am his wife—his wife! And I can never be anything to him. Could I be anything to him—I, Madeline Hammond? But I am his wife, and I love him! I am the wife of a cowboy. That might be undone. Can my love be undone? Ah, do I want anything undone? He is *gone*—and probably forever. Could he have meant—I will not, dare not think of that. He will come back. No, he never will come back. Oh, what shall I do?"

For Madeline Hammond the days following that storm of feeling were leaden-footed, endless, hopeless, a long succession of weary hours, sleepless hours, passionate hours, all haunted by a fear slowly growing into torture—a fear that Stewart had crossed the border to invite the bullet which would give her freedom.

And finally the day came when she knew this to be the truth. The spiritual tidings reached her, not subtly as so many divinations had come, but in a clear, vital flash of certainty.

Then indeed she suffered. She burned inwardly, and the nature of that deep fire

showed through her eyes. She kept to herself, waiting, waiting for her fears to be confirmed.

At times she broke out in wrath—at the circumstances that she had failed to control, at Stewart, at herself. She had been blind to a man's honesty, manliness, uprightness, and faith. She had been dead to love, to nobility that she had herself created. Padre Marcos's grave, wise words returned to haunt her. She fought her bitterness, scorned her intelligence, hated her pride, and, weakening, gave up more and more to a yearning, almost hopeless hope.

She had shunned the light of the stars, as she had violently dismissed every hinting memory of Stewart's kisses. But one night she went deliberately to her window. There they shone. Her stars! Bright, beautiful, white, serene, passionless as always, but strangely closer, warmer, speaking a kinder language, helpful as they had never been, teaching her now that regret was futile, revealing to her the supreme duty of life—to be true!

Those shining stars made her yield. She whispered to them that they had claimed her—the West claimed her—Stewart claimed her forever, whether he lived or died.

She gave herself up wholly to her love for him.

It was as if he were there in person, dark-faced, fire-eyed, violent in his action, crushing her to his breast in that farewell moment, kissing her with one burning kiss of passion, then with cold, terrible lips of renunciation.

"I am your wife!" she whispered to him.

In that moment, throbbing, exalted, quivering in her first sweet, tumultuous surrender to love, she would have given her all, her life, to be in his arms again, to meet his lips with hers, to put forever out of his power any thought of wild self-sacrifice!

On the morning of the next day, when Madeline went out upon the porch, Stillwell, haggard and stern, with a husky, incoherent word, handed her a message from El Cajon. She read:

El Capitan Stewart captured by rebel soldiers in fight at Agua Prieta yesterday. He was a sharpshooter in the Federal ranks. Sentenced to death Thursday at sunset.

(To be concluded)