

MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE

CONTENTS FOR JULY, 1913

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ISSUED MONTHLY BY THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, and Temple House, Temple Avenue, E. C., London
FRANK A. MUNSEY, President. RICHARD H. TITHERINGTON, Secretary. CHRISTOPHER H. POPE, Treasurer.
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THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS*

BY ZANE GREY

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

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED

ALFRED HAMMOND, the wayward son of a rich New Yorker, has left home to become a cattleman in New Mexico, and for several years has had little communication with his family. His sister, Madeline, known to her friends as "Majesty"—aged twenty-four, and possessed of a fortune of her own—suddenly decides to visit him. She telegraphs to him, but when her train arrives at El Cajon, about midnight, he is not at the station.

Her reception is a startling one. There has been a wedding at El Cajon that evening, and Gene Stewart, a reckless cowboy, has made a drunken wager that he will marry the first girl who comes to town. Encountering Miss Hammond at the station, he strips off her glove to see if she has a wedding-ring. Finding none, he drags in a terrified Mexican priest, and forces him, at the muzzle of a revolver, to hurry through some form of words, which Madeline is too utterly dazed to understand. The strange ceremony is broken off, however, when Stewart learns that she is Alfred Hammond's sister. He takes her to the house where her brother's *fiancée*, Florence Kingsley, lives with a married sister.

Here, in the morning, Alfred and Madeline meet. She finds that her brother has not prospered in business, and that he is now foreman on Bill Stillwell's ranch. Gene Stewart is deeply repentant, but the expected trouble between him and Alfred Hammond is averted by Madeline's diplomatic version of the events of the previous night. That same day, however, Stewart gets into a fight with Pat Hawe, the sheriff, and to escape Hawe's vengeance he "hits the trail" for Mexico. Another cowboy, Danny Mains, also disappears mysteriously, after being sent out with money to pay Stillwell's hands.

On the next day Madeline goes out with Florence, Alfred, and a party of cowboys, to Stillwell's ranch in the foot-hills fifty miles from El Cajon. Here she sees the round-up and encounters a Mexican ranchman, Don Carlos, with whom Stillwell is on bad terms. A few mornings later she comes out on the porch of the ranch-house, which is an old and somewhat dilapidated Spanish building, to find Stillwell and her brother watching a riderless horse that is nearing the ranch. To their surprise, the animal proves to be Gene Stewart's splendid black charger.

X (continued)

THE wild hollow sloping up into the foot-hills lay open to unobstructed view, and less than half a mile distant Madeline saw the riderless horse coming along the white trail at a rapid canter. A piercing whistle pealed in.

"Wal, he's seen us, thet's sure," said Bill.

The horse neared the corrals, disappeared into a lane, and then, breaking his gait again, thundered into the enclosure and pounded to a halt some twenty yards from where Stillwell waited for him.

One look at him at close range, in the clear light of day, was enough for Madeline to award him a blue ribbon over all horses, even her prize-winner, White Stockings. The cowboy's great steed was no lithe, slender-bodied trotter or pacer. He was a charger, almost tremendous of build, with a black coat faintly mottled in gray, shining like polished glass in the sun. Evidently he had been carefully dressed down for this occasion, for there was no dust on him, nor a kink in his beautiful mane, nor a mark on his glossy hide.

"Come hyar, you son of a gun!" said Stillwell.

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

The horse dropped his head, snorted, and came up. He was neither shy nor wild. He poked a friendly nose at Stillwell and then looked at Al and the women.

Unhooking the stirrups from the pommel, Stillwell let them fall, and began to search the saddle for something which he evidently expected to find. Presently, from somewhere among the trappings, he produced a folded bit of paper, and after scrutinizing it, handed it to Al.

"Addressed to you, an' I'll bet you two bits I know what's in it," he said.

Alfred unfolded the letter, read it, and then looked at Stillwell.

"Bill, you're a pretty good guesser. Gene's made for the border. He sent the horse by somebody, no names mentioned, and wants my sister to have him if she will accept."

"Any mention of Danny Mains?" asked the rancher.

"Not a word."

"That's bad. Gene'd know about Danny if anybody did; but he's a close-mouthed cuss. So he's sure hittin' fer Mexico! Wonder if Danny's goin' too. Wal, that finishes two of the best cowmen I ever seen, an' I'm sorry."

With that he bowed his head and, grumbling to himself, went into the house. Lifting the reins over the head of the horse, Alfred led him to Madeline, slipped the knot over her arm, and placed the letter in her hand.

"Majesty, I'd accept the horse," he said. "Stewart is only a cowboy, and as tough as any I've known; but he had a better education than most cowboys, and I've seen him show such fine feeling as you'd scarcely expect in one of his kind. I liked him pretty well before he thrashed Pat Hawe, and afterward I guess I liked him more. Read the letter, sister."

Madeline bent her gaze from her brother's face to the letter, which ran thus:

FRIEND AL:

I'm sending my horse down to you because I'm going away and haven't the nerve to take him where he'd get hurt or fall into strange hands.

Maybe it's not just proper what I'm going to ask you, but I'm thinking most of the horse. If it's proper and all right—why, give him to your sister with my respects. And say that if there ever was a horse gentle and noble enough to be worthy of carrying her, he is.

But if you don't like the idea, Al, or if she won't have him—then he's for you. I'm not forgetting your kindness to me, even if I never showed it. And Al, my horse has never felt a quirt or a spur, and I'd like to think you'd never hurt him. It's some strange that a cow-puncher is afraid to have his horse hurt, but this horse was more like a brother to me.

I'm hoping your sister will take him. She'll be good to him, and she can't afford to take care of him. You see, Al, I'm all selfish in this deal, thinking of the horse. And that's on the square. All the same, I'm not forgetting your sister's kind words to me. And, while I'm waiting to be plugged by a greaser bullet, if I happen to have a picture in mind of how she'll look up on my horse—why, man, it's not going to make any difference to you. She needn't ever know it.

Between you and me, Al, don't let her or Flo ride alone over Don Carlos's way. If I had time, I could tell you something about that slick greaser. Tell your sister, if there's ever any reason for her to run away from anybody when she's up on that roan, just let her lean over and yell in his ear. She'll find herself riding the wind.

So-long,

GENE STEWART.

Madeline thoughtfully folded the letter and murmured:

"How he must love his horse!"

"Well, I should say so," replied Alfred. "Flo will tell you. She's the only person Gene ever let ride that horse, unless, as Bill thinks, the little Mexican girl Bonita rode him out of El Cajon the other night. Well, sister mine, how about it—will you accept the horse?"

"Assuredly, and very happy indeed am I to get him. Al, you said, I think, that Mr. Stewart named him after me—saw my nickname in the New York paper?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will not change his name. But Al, how shall I ever climb up on him? He's taller than I am. What a giant of a horse! Oh, look at him—he's nosing my hand. I really believe he understood what I said. Al, did you ever see such a splendid head, and such beautiful eyes? They are so large and dark and soft—and human. Oh, I am a fickle woman, for I am forgetting White Stockings!"

"I'll gamble he'll make you forget any other horse," said Alfred. "You'll have to get on him from the porch."

As Madeline was not dressed for the saddle, she did not attempt to mount.

"Come, Majesty — how strange that sounds! — we must get acquainted. You have a new owner, a very severe young woman who will demand loyalty from you and obedience — and some day, after a decent period, she will expect love."

Madeline led the horse to and fro, and was delighted with his gentleness. She discovered that he did not need to be led. He came at her call, followed her like a pet dog, and rubbed his black muzzle against her.

Sometimes, at the turns in the walk, he lifted his head, and, with ears forward, looked up the trail by which he had come, and beyond to the foot-hills. He was looking over the range. Some one was calling to him, perhaps, from beyond the mountains. Madeline liked him the better for that memory, and pitied the wayward cowboy who had parted with his only possession for very love of it.

XI

THAT afternoon, when Alfred lifted Madeline to the back of the big roan, she felt high in the air.

"We'll have a run out to the mesa," said her brother, as he mounted. "Keep a tight rein on him, and ease up when you want him to go faster; but don't yell in his ear unless you want Florence and me to see you disappear on the horizon!"

He trotted out of the yard, down by the corrals, to come out on the edge of a gray, open flat that stretched several miles to the slope of a mesa. Florence led, and Madeline saw that she rode like a cowboy. Alfred drew on to her side, leaving Madeline in the rear.

Then the leading horses broke into a gallop. They wanted to run, and it was splendidly manifest to Madeline that she would hardly be able to keep Majesty from running, even if she wanted to. He sawed on the tight bridle as the others drew away, and broke from pace to gallop.

"This will never do. They are running away from us," said Madeline, and she eased up her hold on the bridle.

Something happened beneath her just then — she did not know, at first, exactly what. Much as she had been on horseback, she had never ridden at a running gait. In New York it was neither decorous nor safe. So when Majesty lowered and stretched, and changed the stiff, jolting gallop for a smooth, gliding run, it took

Madeline some moments to realize what was happening. She felt the steady, even rush of the wind. It amazed her to find how easily, comfortably she kept to the saddle. She found herself alive, throbbing, and inspired by she knew not what. She loosened the bridle, and leaning far forward she cried:

"Oh, you splendid fellow — run!"

She heard from under her a sudden quick, clattering roar of hoofs, and she swayed back with the wonderfully swift increase in Majesty's speed. The wind stung her face, howled in her ears, tore at her hair. The gray plain swept by on each side, and in front seemed to be waving toward her. In her blurred sight Florence and Alfred appeared to be coming back; but she saw presently, upon nearer view, that Majesty was overhauling the other horses, was going to pass them.

Indeed he did pass them, shooting by so swiftly as almost to make them appear standing still. He ran on, not breaking his gait till he reached the steep side of the mesa, where he slowed down and stopped.

"Glorious!" exclaimed Madeline.

She was all in a blaze, and every muscle and nerve of her body tingled and quivered. Her hands, as she endeavored to put up the loosened strands of hair, trembled and failed of their accustomed dexterity. Then she faced about and waited for her companions.

Alfred reached her first, laughing, delighted, yet also a little anxious.

"Can't he run? Did he bolt?"

"No, I yelled in his ear," she replied.

"So that was it! That's the woman of you — forbidden fruit. Flo said she'd do it the minute she was on him. Majesty, you can ride! See if Flo doesn't say so."

The Western girl came up then, with her pleasure bright in her face.

"It was just great to see you. How your hair burned in the wind! Al, she sure can ride. Oh! I'm so glad — I was a little afraid. And that horse! Isn't he grand?"

Alfred led the way up the steep, zigzag trail to the top of the mesa. Madeline saw a flat surface of short grass, level as a floor.

She uttered a little cry of wonder and enthusiasm.

"Al, what a place for golf! This would be the finest links in the world."

"Well, I've thought of that myself," he replied. "The trouble would be, could

anybody stop looking at the scenery long enough to hit a ball? Majesty, look!"

And then it seemed that Madeline was confronted by a spectacle too sublime and terrible for her gaze. The immensity of this red-ridged, deep-gulfed world, descending by incalculable distances, refused to be grasped. It awed her, shocked her.

"Once, Majesty, when I first came out West, I was down and out—determined to end it all," said Alfred. "I happened to climb up here looking for a lonely place to die. When I saw that—I changed my mind."

Madeline was silent. She remained so during the ride around the rim of the mesa, and down the steep trail. This time Alfred and Florence failed to tempt her into a race. She had been awestruck; she had been exalted; she had been confounded; and she recovered slowly, without divining exactly what had come to her.

She reached the ranch-house far behind her companions, and at supper-time was unusually thoughtful. Later, when they assembled on the porch to watch the sunset, Stillwell's humorous complainings inspired the inception of an idea which flashed up in her mind swift as lightning. By listening sympathetically, she encouraged him to recite the troubles of a poor cattleman. They were many and long and interesting, and rather numbing to the life of her inspired idea.

"Mr. Stillwell, could ranching here on a large scale, with up-to-date methods, be made—well, not profitable exactly, but to pay—to run without loss?" she asked, determined to kill her new-born idea at birth or else give it breath and hope of life.

"Wal, I reckon it could," he replied, with a short laugh. "It'd sure be a money-maker. Why, with all my bad luck an' poor equipment, I've lived pretty well, an' paid my debts, an' haven't really lost any money except the original outlay. I reckon that's sunk fer good."

"Would you sell, if some one would pay your price?"

"Miss Majesty, I'd jump at the chance. Yet somehow I'd hate to leave hyar. I'd jest be fool enough to go sink the money in another ranch."

"Would Don Carlos and these other Mexicans sell?"

"They sure would. The don has been after me fer years, wantin' to sell thet old rancho of his; an' these herders in the val-

ley, with their stray cattle, they'd fall daid at sight of a little money."

"Please tell me, Mr. Stillwell, exactly what you would do here if you had unlimited means?" went on Madeline.

"Wal, Miss Majesty, it jest makes my old heart warm up to think of sich a thing. I dreamed a lot about it when I first come hyar. What would I do if I hed unlimited money? Listen. I'd buy out Don Carlos an' the greasers. I'd give a job to every good cowman in this country. I'd make them prosper as I prospered myself. I'd buy all the good horses on the ranges. I'd fence twenty thousand acres of the best grazin'. I'd drill fer water in the valley. I'd pipe water down from the mountains. I'd dam up thet draw out there. A mile-long dam from hill to hill would give me a big lake, an' hevin' an eye fer beauty, I'd plant cottonwoods around it. I'd fill thet lake full of fish. I'd put in the biggest field of alfalfa in the Southwest. I'd plant fruit-trees an' garden. I'd tear down them old corrals an' barns an' bunk-houses, to build new ones. I'd make this old rancho some comfortable an' fine. I'd put in grass an' flowers all around, an' bring young pine-trees down from the mountains. An' when all thet was done, I'd sit in my chair an' smoke an' watch the cattle stringin' in fer water an' stragglin' back into the valley. An' thet red sun out there wouldn't set on a happier man in the world than Bill Stillwell, last of the old cattlemen!"

Madeline thanked the rancher, and then rather abruptly retired to her room, where she felt no restraint to hide the force of that wonderful idea, now full-grown and tenacious and alluring.

The next day, late in the afternoon, she asked Alfred if it would be safe for her to ride out to the mesa.

"I'll go with you," he said gaily.

"Dear fellow, I want to go alone," she replied.

"Ah!" Alfred exclaimed, suddenly serious. He gave her just a quick fling of eyes, then turned away. "Go ahead! I think it's safe. I'll make it safe by sitting here with my glass and keeping an eye on you. Be careful coming down the trail. Let the horse pick his way. That's all."

She rode Majesty across the wide flat, up the zigzag trail, across the beautiful grassy level to the far rim of the mesa, and not till then did she lift her eyes to face the southwest.

Madeline looked from the gray valley at her feet to the blue Sierra Madres, gold-tipped in the setting sun. Her vision embraced in that glance distance and depth and glory hitherto unrevealed to her. The gray valley sloped and widened to the black sentinel Chiricahuas, and beyond was lost in a vast, corrugated sweep of earth, reddening down to the west, where a golden blaze lifted the dark, rugged mountains into bold relief.

The scene had infinite beauty; but after Madeline's first swift, all-embracing flash of enraptured eyes, the thought of beauty passed away. In that darkening desert there was something illimitable. Madeline saw the hollow of a stupendous hand; she felt a mighty hold upon her heart. Out of the endless space, out of silence and desolation and mystery and age, came slow-changing, colored shadows, fancies of peace, and they whispered to Madeline.

They whispered that this was a great, grim, immutable earth—that time was eternity—that life was fleeting. They whispered for her to be a woman—to love some one before it was too late—to love any one, every one—to realize the need of work, and in doing it to find happiness.

She rode back across the mesa, and down the trail, and once more upon the flat she called to the horse and made him run. His spirit seemed to race with hers. The wind of his speed blew her hair from its fastenings. When he thundered to a halt at the porch steps, Madeline, breathless and disheveled, alighted with the mass of her hair tumbling around her.

Alfred met her, and his exclamation, and Florence's rapt eyes shining on her face, and Stillwell's speechlessness, made her self-conscious. Laughing, she tried to put up her hair.

"I must—look a—fright!" she panted.

"Wal, you can say what you like," replied the old cattleman, "but I know what I think."

Madeline strove to attain calmness.

"My hat—and my combs—went on the wind. I thought my hair would go, too. There is the evening star. I am very hungry!"

And then she gave up trying to be calm, and likewise to fasten up her hair, which fell again in a golden mass.

"Mr. Stillwell," she began, and paused, strangely aware of a hurried note, a deeper ring in her voice. "Mr. Stillwell, I want

to buy your ranch—to engage you as my superintendent. I want to buy Don Carlos's ranch, and other property, to the extent, say, of fifty thousand acres. I want you to buy horses and cattle—in short, to make all those improvements which you said you had so long dreamed of. Then I have ideas of my own, in the development of which I must have your advice and Alfred's. I intend to better the condition of those poor Mexicans in the valley. I intend to make life a little more worth living for them, and for the cowboys of this range. To-morrow we shall talk it all over and plan the business details."

Madeline turned from the huge, ever-widening smile that beamed down upon her, and held out her hands to her brother.

"Alfred—strange, is it not, my coming out to you? Nay, don't smile. I hope I have found myself—my work—my happiness—here under the light of that western star!"

XII

FIVE months brought all that Stillwell had dreamed of, and so many more changes and improvements and innovations that it was as if a magic touch had transformed the old ranch. Madeline, Alfred, and Florence had talked over a fitting name and had decided on one chosen by Madeline; but in this one respect her wishes were not complied with. The cowboys named the new ranch "Her Majesty's Rancho." Stillwell said the names cowboys bestowed were felicitous, and as unchangeable as the everlasting hills; Florence went over to the enemy; and Alfred, laughing at his sister's protest, declared that the cowboys had elected her queen of the ranges, and that there was no help for it. So the name stood as Her Majesty's Rancho.

The April sun shone down upon a green knoll that nestled in the lea of the foothills, and seemed to center bright rays upon the long ranch-house, which gleamed snow-white from the level summit of the knoll. The grounds around the house bore no semblance to Eastern lawns or parks; there had been no landscape gardening; Stillwell had just brought water and grass and flowers to the knoll-top, and there had left them, as it were, to follow nature.

His idea may have been crude, but the result was beautiful. Under that hot sun, with cool water daily soaking into the rich soil, a green covering sprang into life, and

everywhere upon it, as if by magic, many-colored flowers rose in the sweet air. Lavender daisies, fragile bluebells, white four-petaled lilies, and golden poppies—deep sunset gold, the color of the West—bloomed in happy confusion. California roses, crimson as blood, nodded heavy heads and trembled with the weight of bees. Low down in bare places, isolated, open to the full power of the sun, blazed the vermilion and magenta blossoms of cactus-plants.

Green slopes led all the way down to where new adobe barns and sheds had been erected, and wide corrals stretched high-barred fences down to great squares of alfalfa, gently inclining to the gray of the valley. The bottom of a dammed-up hollow shone brightly with its slowly increasing acreage of water, upon which thousands of migratory wild-fowl whirled and splashed and squawked, as if reluctant to leave this cool surprise, so new in the long desert journey to the northland.

Quarters for the cowboys—comfortable, roomy adobe houses which not even the lamest cowboy dared designate as crampy bunks—stood in a row upon a long bench of ground above the lake. And down to the edge of the valley the cluster of Mexican habitations and the little church showed the touch of the same renewing hand.

All that had been left of the old Spanish house, which had been Stillwell's home for so long, was the bare, massive structure, and some of this had been cut away for new doors and windows. Every modern convenience, even to hot and cold running water and acetylene light, had been installed; and the whole interior painted and carpentered and furnished.

No slight task was it to oversee the many business details of Her Majesty's Rancho, and to keep a record of them. Madeline found the course of business training upon which her father had insisted to be invaluable to her now. It helped her to assimilate and arrange the practical details of cattle-raising as put forth by the blunt Stillwell.

She split up the great stock of cattle into different herds; and when any of these were out running upon the open range she had them closely watched. Part of the time each herd was kept in an enclosed range, fed and watered and carefully handled by a big force of cowboys. She employed three scouts whose duty was to ride

the ranges searching for stray, sick, or crippled cattle, or motherless calves, and to bring these in to be treated and nursed. There were two cowboys whose business was to master a pack of Russian staghounds, and to hunt down the coyotes, wolves, and lions that preyed upon the herds.

The better and tamer milch cows were separated from the ranging herds, and kept in a pasture adjoining the dairy. All branding was done in corrals, and calves were weaned from mother-cows at the proper time to benefit both. The old rough-and-ready method of branding and classing, which had so shocked Madeline, had been abandoned; and one had been inaugurated whereby cattle, cowboys, and horses were spared brutality and injury.

Madeline established an extensive vegetable farm, and planted orchards. The climate was superior to that of California, and, with abundant water, trees and plants, flourished and bloomed in a way wonderful to behold. It was with ever-increasing pleasure that Madeline walked through acres of ground once bare, now green and bright and fragrant. There were poultry-yards and pig-pens and marshy quarters for ducks and geese.

Here, in the farming section of the ranch, Madeline found employment for the little colony of Mexicans. Their lives had been as hard and barren as the dry valley where they had lived; but as the valley had been transformed by the soft, rich touch of water, so their lives had been transformed by help and sympathy and work.

Here, Madeline felt, was her home. She meant to go back to New York for a time, and to visit her old friends once or twice every year thereafter; but she shrank from making her first departure from the ranch. In New York she would have to make explanations, and they would not be understood. Her father's business had been such that he could not leave it for the time required for a Western trip; otherwise, he wrote, he would have come to take Madeline back with him. Mrs. Hammond could not have been driven to cross the Hudson River; her idea of the wilderness westward was that Indians still chased buffalo on the outskirts of Chicago.

Madeline's sister Helen professed herself eager to come out to the ranch—as much from curiosity, Madeline suspected, as from sisterly regard. She invited Helen to visit her during the summer, and bring

as many people as she liked. Madeline thought that this would be the best way to let her relatives and her Eastern friends realize and understand her determination to break old ties.

One April morning Madeline sat in her office wrestling with a problem. She had problems to solve every day. Most of these were concerned with the management of twenty-seven incomprehensible cowboys. This particular problem involved Ambrose Mills, who had eloped with her French maid, Christine.

Stillwell faced Madeline with a smile almost as huge as his bulk.

"Wal, Miss Majesty, we ketched them, but not before Padre Marcos had married them. All thet speedin' in the auto-moobile was jest a scarin' of me to death fer nothin'. I tell you, Link Stevens is crazy about runnin' thet car. Link never hed no sense even with a hoss. If my hair hedn't been white, it'd be white now. No more rides in thet thing fer me! Wal, we ketched Ambrose an' the girl too late; but we fetched them back, an' they're out there now—spoonin', sure oblivious to their shameless conduct!"

"Stillwell, what shall I say to Ambrose? How shall I punish him? He has done wrong to deceive me. I never was so surprised in my life. Christine did not seem to care any more for Ambrose than for any of the other cowboys. What does my authority amount to? I must do something. Stillwell, you must help me."

Whenever Madeline fell into a quandary she had to call upon the old cattleman. No man ever held a position with greater pride than Stillwell, but he had been put to tests that steeped him in humility. Here he scratched his head in great perplexity.

"Dog-gone the luck! What's this elopin' bizness to do with cattle-raisin'? I don't know nothin' but cattle. Miss Majesty, it's amazin' strange what these cowboys hev come to. I don't know them any more. They dress swell an' read books, an' some of them hev actooly stopped cussin' an' drinkin'. I ain't sayin' all this is against them. Why, they're jest the finest bunch of cow-punchers I ever seen or dreamed of; but managin' them is beyond me. When cowboys begin to play thet game gol-lof an' run off with French maids, I reckon Bill Stillwell has got to resign!"

"Stillwell! Oh, you will not leave me?

What in the world should I do?" exclaimed Madeline in great anxiety.

"Wal, I sure won't leave you, Miss Majesty. No, I never'll do thet. I'll run the cattle bizness fer you, an' see after the hosses an' other stock; but I've got to hev a foreman who can handle this amazin' strange bunch of cowboys."

"You're tried half a dozen foremen. Try more, until you find the right man," said Madeline. "Never mind that now. Tell me how to impress Ambrose—to make him an example, so to speak. I must have another maid; and I do not want the next one carried off in this summary manner."

"Wal, if you fetch pretty maids out hyar you can't expect nothin' else. Why, thet black-eyed little French girl, with her white skin an' pretty airs an' smiles an' shrugs—she hed the cowboys crazy. It'll only be wuss with the next one."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Madeline.

"An' as fer impressin' Ambrose, I reckon I can tell you how to do thet. Jest give it to him good an' say you're goin' to fire him. Thet'll fix Ambrose, an' mebbe scare the other boys fer a spell."

"Very well, Stillwell. Bring Ambrose in to see me, and tell Christine to wait in my room."

It was a handsome, debonair, bright-eyed cowboy that came tramping into Madeline's presence. His accustomed shyness and awkwardness had disappeared. He looked straight into Madeline's face as if he expected her to wish him joy; and Madeline actually found that expression trembling to her lips. She held it back, and tried to be severe; but she feared that she would fail. Something warm and sweet, like a fragrance, had entered the room with Ambrose.

"Ambrose, what have you done?" she asked.

"Miss Hammond, I've been and gone and got married," replied Ambrose, his words tumbling over one another. His eyes snapped, and there was a kind of glow upon his clean-shaven brown cheek. "I've stole a march on the other boys. There was Frank Slade pushin' me close, and I was hevin' some runnin' to keep Jim Bell back in my dust."

"Even old man Nels made eyes at Christine; so I wasn't goin' to take any chances. I just packed her off to El Cajon and married her."

"Oh! So I heard," said Madeline slow-

ly, as she watched him. "Ambrose, do you—love her?"

He reddened under her clear gaze, dropped his head, and fumbled with his new sombrero, and there was a catch in his breath. Madeline saw his powerful brown hand tremble. It affected her strangely that this stalwart cowboy, who could rope and throw and tie a wild steer in less than one minute, should tremble at a mere question. Suddenly he raised his head, and at the beautiful blaze of his eyes Madeline turned her own away.

"Yes, Miss Hammond, I love her," he said. "I think I love her in the way you're askin' about. I know the first time I saw her I thought how wonderful it'd be to have a girl like that for my wife. It's all been so strange—her comin', an' how she made me feel. My—it—well, I guess I have a little understandin' now of Padre Marcos's blessin'."

"Ambrose, have you anything else to say to me?" asked Madeline.

"I'm sure sorry I didn't have time to tell you; but I was in some hurry."

"What did you intend to do? Where were you going—when Stillwell found you?"

"We'd just been married. I hadn't thought of anything after that. Suppose I'd have rustled back to my job. I'll sure have to work now, and save my money."

"Well, Ambrose, I am glad you realize your responsibilities. Do you earn enough—is your pay sufficient to keep a wife?"

"Sure it is! Why, Miss Hammond, I never before earned half the salary I'm gettin' now. It's some fine to work for you. I'm goin' to fire the boys out of my bunk-house and fix it up for Christine and me. Say, won't they be jealous?"

"Ambrose, I—I congratulate you—I wish you joy," said Madeline. "I shall make Christine a little wedding-present. I want to talk to her for a few moments. You may go now."

It would have been impossible for Madeline to say one severe word to that happy cowboy. She called to Christine.

"Mrs. Ambrose Mills, please come in!"

No sound came from the other room.

"I should like very much to see the bride," went on Madeline.

Still there was no stir or reply.

"Christine!" called Madeline.

Then it was as if a little whirlwind of flying feet and entreating hands and be-

seching eyes blew in upon Madeline. Christine was small, graceful, plump, with very white skin and very dark hair. She had been Madeline's favorite maid for years, and there was sincere affection between the two. Whatever had been the blissful ignorance of Ambrose, it was manifestly certain that Christine knew how she had transgressed. Her fear and remorse and appeal for forgiveness were poured out in an incoherent storm.

Plain it was that the little French maid had been overwhelmed. It was only after Madeline had taken the emotional girl in her arms, and had forgiven and soothed her, that her part in the elopement became clear. Christine was in a maze; but gradually, as she saw that she was forgiven, calmness came in some degree and with it a story which amused yet shocked Madeline. If ever a cave-man had taken unto himself a wife, if ever a barbarian had carried off a Sabine woman, then Ambrose Mills had acted with the violence of such ancient forebears.

"He say he love me," repeated the girl, in a kind of rapt awe. "He ask me to marry him—he kees me—he hug me—he lift me on ze horse—he ride with me all night—he marry me!"

And she exhibited a ring on the third finger of her left hand. Madeline saw that whatever had been the state of Christine's feeling for Ambrose before this marriage, she loved him now. She had been taken forcibly, but she was won.

After Christine had gone, comforted and betraying her shy eagerness to get back to Ambrose, Madeline was haunted by the look in the girl's eyes, and by her words. Assuredly the spell of romance was on this sunny land!

XIII

STILLWELL'S interest in the revolution across the Mexican line had manifestly increased with the news that Gene Stewart had achieved distinction with the rebel forces. Thereafter the old cattleman sent for El Paso and Douglas newspapers, wrote to ranchmen he knew on the big bend of the Rio Grande, and would talk indefinitely to any one who would listen to him. There was no possibility of Stillwell's friends at the ranch forgetting his favorite cowboy, though he always prefaced his eulogy with an apologetic statement that Stewart had gone to the bad.

Madeline liked to listen to him, though she was not always sure how much of the news was authentic. There appeared to be no doubt, however, that the cowboy had performed some daring feats. Madeline found his name mentioned in several of the border newspapers. When the rebels under Madero captured the city of Juarez, Stewart did fighting that won him the name of El Capitan. This battle apparently ended the revolution. The capitulation of President Diaz followed, and there was a feeling of relief among ranchers on the border.

Nothing more was heard of Gene Stewart until April, when a report reached Stillwell that the cowboy had arrived in El Cajon, evidently hunting trouble. The old cattleman saddled a horse and started post-haste for town. In two days he returned, depressed in spirit. Madeline happened to be present when he told Alfred what he had learned.

"I got there too late, Al," said the cattleman. "Gene was gone. An' what do you think of this? Danny Mains hed jest left with a couple of burros packed. I couldn't find what way he went, but I'm bettin' he hit the Peloncillo trail."

"Danny will show up some day," replied Alfred. "What did you learn about Stewart? Maybe he left with Danny."

"Not much," said Stillwell shortly. "Gene's off again. None of these mountains fer him."

"Well, tell us about him."

Stillwell wiped his sweaty brow and squared himself to talk.

"Wal, it's sure amazin' strange about Gene. It's got me locoed. He came to El Cajon a week or so ago. He was trained down like as if he'd been ridin' the range all winter. He hed plenty of money—Mex, they said. All the greasers was crazy about him, an' called him El Capitan. He got drunk an' went roarin' round fer Pat Hawe. You remember thet greaser who was plugged last October—the night Miss Majesty arrived? Wal, he's daid, an' people says thet Pat is a goin' to lay thet killin' onto Gene. I reckon thet's jest talk, though Pat is mean enough to do it, if he hed the nerve. Anyway, if he was in El Cajon, he kept mighty much to hisself. Gene walked up an' down, up an' down, all day an' night, lookin' fer Pat; but he didn't find him. An' of course he kept gettin' drunker. He made lots of trouble, but there wasn't no gun-play. Mebbe thet

made him sore, so he went an' licked Flo's brother-in-law. Thet wasn't so bad. Jack sure needed a good lickin'. Wal, then Gene met Danny an' tried to get Danny drunk; but he couldn't! What do you think of thet? Danny wouldn't touch a drop. I'm sure glad of thet, but it's amazin' strange. Why, Danny was a fish fer red liquor. I guess he an' Gene had some pretty hard words, though I'm not sure about thet. Anyway, Gene went down to the railroad, got on an engine, an' was in the engine when it pulled out. I hope he doesn't hold up the train. If he gets gay over in Arizona, he'll go to the pen at Yuma, an' thet pen is a graveyard fer cowboys. I wired to agents along the railroad to look out fer him an' to wire back to me if he's located."

"Suppose you do find him, Stillwell—what can you do?" inquired Alfred.

The old man nodded gloomily.

"I straightened him up once; mebbe I can do it again." Then, brightening somewhat, he turned to Madeline. "I jest hed an idea, Miss Majesty. If I can get him, Gene Stewart is the cowboy I want fer my foreman. He can manage this bunch of cow-punchers thet are drivin' me dotty; an' since he's fought fer the rebels, an' got thet name El Capitan, all the greasers in the country will kneel to him. Now, Miss Majesty, we hev'n't got rid of Don Carlos an' his vaqueros yet. To be sure, he sold you his house an' ranch an' stock; but you remember nothin' was put in black an' white about when he should get out, an' he ain't gettin' out. I don't like the looks of things a little bit. I'll tell you now thet Don Carlos knows somethin' about the cattle I lost an' thet you've been losin' right along. Thet greaser is hand an' glove with the rebels. I'm willin' to gamble thet when he does get out, he an' his vaqueros will make another one of the bands of guerrillas thet are harassin' the border. Wal, I need Gene Stewart. I need him bad. Will you let me hire him, Miss Majesty, if I can get him straightened up?" The old cattleman ended huskily.

"Stillwell, by all means find Stewart, and do not wait to straighten him up. Bring him to the ranch," replied Madeline.

Thanking her, Stillwell led his horse away.

"Strange how he loves that cowboy!" murmured Madeline.

"Not so strange, Majesty," replied her brother; "not when you know. Stewart

has been with Stillwell on some hard trips into the desert alone. There's no middle course of feeling between men facing death in the desert. Either they hate each other or love each other. I don't know, but I imagine Stewart did something for Stillwell—saved his life, perhaps. Besides, Stewart's a likable chap when he's going straight. I hope Stillwell brings him back. It's true that we are worried about Don Carlos. Some of his vaqueros came into my yard the other day when I had left Flo alone. She had a bad scare. The vaqueros have been different since Don Carlos sold the ranch. I never would have trusted a white woman alone with them; but they are bolder now. They've got assurance. They know they can ride off any night and cross the border."

During the succeeding week Madeline discovered that a good deal of her sympathy for Stillwell in his hunt for the reckless Stewart had insensibly grown to be sympathy for the cowboy. It was rather a paradox, she thought, that opposed to the continual reports of Stewart's wildness as he caroused from town to town were the continual expressions of good-will and faith and hope universally given out by those near her at the ranch. Stillwell loved the cowboy; Florence was fond of him; Alfred liked, admired, and pitied him; the cowboys swore their regard for him the more he disgraced himself.

Stillwell was so earnest and zealous in his search that one not familiar with the situation would have believed he was trying to find and reclaim his own son. He made several trips to little stations in the valley, from which he returned with a gloomy face. Madeline got the details from Alfred. Stewart was going from bad to worse—drunk—disorderly—savage—sure to land in the penitentiary.

Then came a report that hurried Stillwell off to Rodeo. He returned on the third day, a crushed man. He had been so bitterly hurt that no one, not even Madeline, could get out of him what had happened. He admitted finding Stewart and failing to influence him; but when the old cattleman got so far he turned purple in the face and talked to himself, as if dazed.

"But Gene was drunk. He was *drunk*, or he couldn't hev treated old Bill like thet!"

Madeline was stirred with an anger toward the cowboy that was as strong as

her sorrow for the loyal old cattleman; and yet, when Stillwell gave up, she resolved to take a hand herself. She sent Nels, mounted upon his own horse, and leading Majesty, to Rodeo in search of Stewart, with instructions to bring him back to the ranch. In due time Nels returned, leading the roan without a rider.

"Yep, I shore found him," replied Nels, when questioned. "Found him half sobered up. He'd been in a scrap, an' somebody hed put him to sleep, I guess. Wal, when he seen thet roan hoss he let out a yell an' grabbed him round the neck. The hoss knowed him, all right. Gene hugged the hoss an' cried—cried like— I never seen no one who cried like he did. I waited a while, an' was jest goin' to say some-thin' to him, when he turned on me red-eyed—mad as fire.

"'Nels,' he said, 'I cared a lot fer thet hoss, an' I liked you pretty well, but if you don't take him away I'll shoot you both!'

"Wal, I lit out. I didn't even git to say howdy to him."

"Nels, you think it useless to try to persuade him?" asked Madeline.

"I shore do, Miss Hammond," replied Nels gravely. "I've seen a few sun-blinded an' locoed an' snake-poisoned an' skunk-bitten cow-punchers in my day; but Gene Stewart beats 'em all. He's shore runnin' wild fer the divide!"

Madeline dismissed Nels, but before he got out of ear-shot she heard him speak to Stillwell, who awaited him on the porch.

"Bill, put this in your pipe an' smoke it—none of them scraps Gene has hed was over a woman. It used to be thet when he was drunk he'd scrap over every pretty greaser girl he'd run across. Thet's why Pat Hawe thinks Gene plugged the strange vaquero who was with little Bonita thet night last fall. Wal, Gene's scrappin' now jest to git shot up hisself, for some reason thet only God Almighty knows."

Nels's story of how Stewart wept over his horse influenced Madeline powerfully. Her next move was to persuade Alfred to see if he could not do better with this doggedly bent cowboy. Alfred needed only a word of persuasion, for he had already considered going to Rodeo. He went—and returned alone.

"Majesty, I can't explain Stewart's actions," said Alfred. "I saw him, I talked with him, and he knew me, but nothing I said appeared to get to him. He

has changed terribly. It actually hurt me to look at him. I couldn't have fetched him back here—not as he is now. I heard all about him, and if he isn't out of his mind he's determined to get himself killed. Some of his escapades are—are terrible, and not for your ears. Bill did all any man could do for another. We've all done our best for Stewart. If you had had a chance, perhaps you could have saved him; but it's too late now."

XIV

DAYS passed, and each one brought additional gossip of Stewart's headlong career toward the Yuma penitentiary. He had crossed the line into Cochise County, Arizona, where sheriffs kept a stricter observance of law. Finally a letter came from a friend of Nels's in Chiricahua, saying that Stewart had been hurt in a brawl there. His hurt was not serious, but it would probably keep him quiet long enough to get sober, and the opportunity, Nels's informant said, would be a good one for Stewart's friends to take him home.

This epistle enclosed a letter to Stewart from his sister, which had been found upon him. It told a story of illness and destitution, and made an appeal for aid. Nels's friend said that he forwarded it without Gene's knowledge, thinking Stillwell might care to help the errant cowboy's family. Stewart had no money, he said.

The sister's letter found its way to Madeline. She read it, tears in her eyes. It told her much more than its brief story of illness and poverty, and of wonder why Gene had not written home for so long. It told of motherly love, sisterly love, brotherly love—dear family ties that had not been broken. It spoke of pride in this El Capitan brother who had become famous. It was signed "your loving sister Letty."

Not improbably, Madeline thought, this letter was one reason for Stewart's headstrong and long-continued abasement. It had been received too late—after he had squandered the money that would have meant so much to mother and sister. Be that as it might, Madeline immediately sent a bank-draft to Stewart's sister, with a letter explaining that the money was drawn in advance on Stewart's salary. This done, she impulsively determined to go to Chiricahua herself.

The horseback rides Madeline had taken to the little Arizona hamlet had tried her

endurance to the utmost, but the journey by automobile, except for some rocky bits of road and sandy stretches, was comfortable, and a matter of only a few hours. The big touring-car was still a kind of seventh wonder to the Mexicans and cowboys; not that automobiles were very new and strange, but because this one was such an enormous machine and capable of greater speed than an express train.

The chauffeur who had arrived with the car found his situation among the jealous cowboys far removed from a bed of roses. He had been induced to remain long enough to teach the management of the machine; and choice fell upon Link Stevens as his successor, for the simple reason that of all the cowboys he was the only one with any knack for mechanics. Now, Link had been a hard-riding, hard-driving cowboy, and that winter he had sustained an injury to his leg, caused by a bad fall, and was unable to sit his horse. This had been gall and wormwood to him; but when the big white automobile came, and he was elected to drive it, life was once more worth living.

All the other cowboys regarded Link and his machine as some correlated species of demon. They were deathly afraid of both. For this reason Nels, when Madeline asked him to accompany her to Chiricahua, replied reluctantly that he would rather follow on his horse. However, she prevailed over his hesitancy, and with Florence also in the car, they set out.

For miles and miles the valley road was smooth, hard-packed, and slightly down hill; and when speeding was perfectly safe Madeline was not averse to it. The grassy plain sailed backward in gray sheets, and the little dot in the valley grew larger and larger. From time to time Link glanced round at Nels, whose eyes were wild and whose hands clutched his seat.

While the car was crossing the sandy and rocky places, going slowly, Nels appeared to breathe easier; and when it stopped in the wide, dusty street of Chiricahua, he gladly tumbled out.

"Nels, we shall wait here in the car while you find Stewart," said Madeline.

"Miss Hammond, I reckon Gene'll run when he sees us—if he's able to run," replied Nels. "Wal, I'll go find him an' make up my mind what we'd better do."

Nels crossed the railroad track and disappeared behind the low, flat houses. After a little time he reappeared and hurried up

to the car. Madeline felt his gray gaze searching her face.

"Miss Hammond, I found him," said Nels. "He was sleepin'. He's sober an' not bad hurt; but I don't believe you ought to see him. Mebbe Florence—"

"Nels, I want to see him myself. Why not? What did he say when you told him I was here?"

"Shore, I didn't tell him thet. I jest says 'Hullo, Gene!' an' he says, 'Wal, Nels, mebbe I ain't glad to see a human bein'.' He asked me who was with me, an' I told him Link an' some friends. I said I'd fetch them in. Now, if you really *will* see him, Miss Hammond, it's a good chance; but shore it's a touchy matter, an' you'll be some sick at sight of him. He's layin' in a greaser hole over here."

Madeline did not hesitate a moment.

"Thank you, Nels. Take me at once. Come, Florence!"

They left the car, now surrounded by gaping-eyed Mexican children, and crossed the dusty space to a narrow lane between red adobe walls. Passing by several houses, Nels stopped at the door of what appeared to be an alleyway, leading back. It was filthy.

"He's in there, around thet first corner, in the *patio*. Miss Hammond, if you don't mind, I'll wait here for you. I reckon Gene wouldn't like any fellers around when he sees you girls."

Madeline hesitated, and went forward slowly. She had given no thought at all to what Stewart might feel when suddenly surprised by her presence.

"Florence, you wait also," said Madeline at the doorway, and turned in alone.

She stepped into a broken-down *patio*, littered with alfalfa straw and debris, all clear in the sunlight. Upon a bench, his back toward her, sat a man looking out through the rents in the broken wall. He had not heard her.

She saw that the place had been used as a corral. A rat ran boldly across the dirt floor. The air swarmed with flies, at which the man brushed with weary hand. Madeline did not recognize Stewart. The side of his face exposed to her gaze was black, bruised, bearded. His clothes were ragged and soiled. There were bits of alfalfa in his hair. His shoulders sagged. He made a wretched and hopeless figure, sitting there. Madeline divined something of why Nels shrank from being present.

"Mr. Stewart! It is I—Miss Hammond—come to see you," she said.

He grew perfectly motionless, as if he had been changed to stone.

She repeated her greeting. His body jerked. He moved violently, as if instinctively to turn and face this intruder, but a more violent movement checked him.

Madeline waited. How singular that this ruined cowboy had pride that kept him from showing his face! Or, was it not shame more than pride?

"Mr. Stewart, I have come to—talk with you, if you will let me."

"Go away," he muttered.

"Mr. Stewart!" she began with involuntary hauteur; but instantly she corrected herself, and became deliberate and cool, for she saw that otherwise he might not even hear her. "I have come to help you. Will you not let me?"

"For Heaven's sake! You—you!" He choked over the words. "Go away!"

"Stewart, perhaps it was for Heaven's sake that I came," said Madeline. "Surely it was for yours, and your sister's—"

Madeline bit her tongue, for she had not meant to betray her knowledge of Letty. He groaned, and, staggering up to the broken wall, leaned there with his face hidden. Madeline reflected that perhaps the slip of speech had been well.

"Stewart, please let me say what I have to say."

He was silent. She gathered courage and inspiration.

"Stillwell is deeply hurt, deeply grieved that he could not turn you back from this—this fatal course. My brother is also. They wanted to help you; and so do I. I have come, thinking somehow I might succeed where they failed. Nels brought your sister's letter. I—I read it. I was only the more determined to try to help you, and indirectly to help your mother and Letty. Stewart, we want you to come to the ranch. Stillwell needs you for his foreman. The position is open to you, and you can name your salary. Both Al and Stillwell are anxious about Don Carlos, the vaqueros, and the raids down along the border. My cowboys are without a capable leader. Will you come?"

"No!" he answered.

"But Stillwell wants you so badly."

"No!"

"Stewart—I want you to come."

"No!"

His replies had been hoarse, loud, furious. They disconcerted Madeline, and she paused, trying to think of a way to proceed. Stewart staggered away from the wall, and falling upon the bench, he hid his face in his hands. All his motions, like his speech, had been violent.

"Will you please go away?" he asked.

"Stewart, certainly I cannot remain here longer if you insist upon my going. But why not listen to me when I want so much to help you? Why?"

"I'm an infernal blackguard!" he burst out. "But I'm not so low—that I can stand for a—lady like you—seeing me here."

"When I made up my mind to help you, I made it up to see you wherever you were. Stewart, come away; come back with us to the ranch. You are in a bad condition now. Everything looks black to you; but that will pass. When you are among friends again you will get well. You will be your old self. Why, Stewart, think how young you are! It is a shame to waste your life. Come back with me."

"Miss Hammond, this was my last plunge. I'm done for now," he replied despondently. "It's too late."

"Oh, no; it is not so bad as all that."

"It's too late."

"At least make an effort, Stewart. Try!"

"No. There's no use. I'm done for. Please leave—me—thank you—for—"

He had been savage, then sullen, and now he was grim. Madeline all but lost power to resist his deadly finality. No doubt he knew he was doomed. Yet something halted her—held her even as she took a backward step.

She became conscious of a subtle change of her own feeling. She had come into that squalid hole Madeline Hammond, earnest enough, kind enough in her intentions, but she had been almost imperious—a woman habitually, proudly used to being obeyed. She divined that all the pride, blue blood, wealth, culture, distinction, all the condescending persuasion, the fatuous philanthropy on earth would not avail to turn this man a single hair's breadth from his downward career to destruction. Her coming had terribly augmented his bitter hate of himself. She was going to fail to help him! She experienced a sensation of impotence that amounted almost to distress; and all at once she became merely a woman, brave and sweet and indomitable.

"Stewart, look at me," she said.

He shuddered. She advanced and laid a hand on his bent shoulder. Under the light touch he appeared to sink.

"Look at me," she repeated.

But he could not lift his head. He was abject, crushed. He dared not show his swollen, blackened face. His sullen, cramped posture revealed more than his features might have shown; it betrayed the torturing shame of a man of violent pride and passion, a man who had been confronted in his degradation by the woman he had dared to enshrine in his heart. It betrayed his love.

"Listen, then," went on Madeline, and her voice was unsteady. "Listen to me, Stewart. The greatest men are those who have fallen deepest into the mire, sinned most, suffered most, and then have fought their evil natures and conquered. I think you can shake off this desperate mood and be a man."

"I'm only a dog!" he cried.

"Listen to me again. Somehow I know you're worthy of Stillwell's love. Will you come back with us—for his sake?"

"No! It's too late, I tell you."

"Stewart, the best thing in life is faith in human nature. I have faith in you. I believe you are worth it."

"You're only kind and good, saying that. You can't mean it."

"I mean it with all my heart," she replied, a sudden rich warmth suffusing her body as she saw the first sign of his softening. "Will you come back? If not for your own sake or Stillwell's—then for mine?"

"What am I to such a woman as you?"

"A man in trouble. I have come to help you—to show my faith in you."

"If I believed that I might try," he said.

"Listen," she began softly, hurriedly. "My word is not lightly given. Let it be my pledge of faith in you. Look at me now—and say you will come."

He heaved up his big frame, as if trying to cast off a giant's burden, and then slowly he turned toward her. His face was a blotched and terrible thing. It was hideous. At that instant all that appeared human to Madeline was the dawning in dead, furnacelike eyes of a beautiful light.

"I'll come," he whispered huskily. "Give me a few days to straighten up—then I'll come!"

(To be continued)