THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS

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Western Romance

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Table of Contents

I. A GENTLEMAN OF THE RANGE

Table of Contents

When Madeline Hammond stepped from the train at El Cajon, New Mexico, it was nearly midnight, and her first impression was of a huge dark space of cool, windy emptiness, strange and silent, stretching away under great blinking white stars.

"Miss, there's no one to meet you," said the conductor, rather anxiously.

"I wired my brother," she replied. "The train being so late—perhaps he grew tired of waiting. He will be here presently. But, if he should not come—surely I can find a hotel?"

"There's lodgings to be had. Get the station agent to show you. If you'll excuse me—this is no place for a lady like you to be alone at night. It's a rough little town—mostly Mexicans, miners, cowboys. And they carouse a lot. Besides, the revolution across the border has stirred up some excitement along the line. Miss, I guess it's safe enough, if you—"

"Thank you. I am not in the least afraid."

As the train started to glide away Miss Hammond walked towards the dimly lighted station. As she was about to enter she encountered a Mexican with sombrero hiding his features and a blanket mantling his shoulders.

"Is there any one here to meet Miss Hammond?" she asked.

"No sabe, Senora," he replied from under the muffling blanket, and he shuffled away into the shadow.

She entered the empty waiting-room. An oil-lamp gave out a thick yellow light. The ticket window was open, and through it she saw there was neither agent nor operator in

the little compartment. A telegraph instrument clicked faintly.

Madeline Hammond stood tapping a shapely foot on the floor, and with some amusement contrasted her reception in El Cajon with what it was when she left a train at the Grand Central. The only time she could remember ever having been alone like this was once when she had missed her maid and her train at a place outside of Versailles—an adventure that had been a novel and delightful break in the prescribed routine of her much-chaperoned life. She crossed the waiting-room to a window and, holding aside her veil, looked out. At first she could descry only a few dim lights, and these blurred in her sight. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness she saw a superbly built horse standing near the window. Beyond was a bare square. Or, if it was a street, it was the widest one Madeline had ever seen. The dim lights shone from low, flat buildings. She made out the dark shapes of many horses, all standing motionless with drooping heads. Through a hole in the window-glass came a cool breeze, and on it breathed a sound that struck coarsely upon her ear—a discordant mingling of laughter and shout, and the tramp of boots to the hard music of a phonograph.

"Western revelry," mused Miss Hammond, as she left the window. "Now, what to do? I'll wait here. Perhaps the station agent will return soon, or Alfred will come for me."

As she sat down to wait she reviewed the causes which accounted for the remarkable situation in which she found herself. That Madeline Hammond should be alone, at a late hour, in a dingy little Western railroad station, was indeed extraordinary.

The close of her debutante year had been marred by the only unhappy experience of her life—the disgrace of her brother and his leaving home. She dated the beginning of a certain thoughtful habit of mind from that time, and a dissatisfaction with the brilliant life society offered her. The change had been so gradual that it was permanent before

she realized it. For a while an active outdoor life—golf, tennis, yachting—kept this realization from becoming morbid introspection. There came a time when even these lost charm for her, and then she believed she was indeed ill in mind. Travel did not help her.

There had been months of unrest, of curiously painful wonderment that her position, her wealth, her popularity no longer sufficed. She believed she had lived through the dreams and fancies of a girl to become a woman of the world. And she had gone on as before, a part of the glittering show, but no longer blind to the truth—that there was nothing in her luxurious life to make it significant.

Sometimes from the depths of her there flashed up at odd moments intimations of a future revolt. She remembered one evening at the opera when the curtain had risen upon a particularly well-done piece of stage scenery—a broad space of deep desolateness, reaching away under an infinitude of night sky, illumined by stars. The suggestion it brought of vast wastes of lonely, rugged earth, of a great, blue-arched vault of starry sky, pervaded her soul with a strange, sweet peace.

When the scene was changed she lost this vague new sense of peace, and she turned away from the stage in irritation. She looked at the long, curved tier of glittering boxes that represented her world. It was a distinguished and splendid world—the wealth, fashion, culture, beauty, and blood of a nation. She, Madeline Hammond, was a part of it. She smiled, she listened, she talked to the men who from time to time strolled into the Hammond box, and she felt that there was not a moment when she was natural, true to herself. She wondered why these people could not somehow, some way be different; but she could not tell what she wanted them to be. If they had been different they would not have fitted the place; indeed, they would not have been there at all. Yet she thought wistfully that they lacked something for her.

And suddenly realizing she would marry one of these men if she did not revolt, she had been assailed by a great weariness, an icy-sickening sense that life had palled upon her. She was tired of fashionable society. She was tired of polished, imperturbable men who sought only to please her. She was tired of being feted, admired, loved, followed, and importuned; tired of people; tired of houses, noise, ostentation, luxury. She was so tired of herself!

In the lonely distances and the passionless stars of boldly painted stage scenery she had caught a glimpse of something that stirred her soul. The feeling did not last. She could not call it back. She imagined that the very boldness of the scene had appealed to her; she divined that the man who painted it had found inspiration, joy, strength, serenity in rugged nature. And at last she knew what she needed—to be alone, to brood for long hours, to gaze out on lonely, silent, darkening stretches, to watch the stars, to face her soul, to find her real self.

Then it was she had first thought of visiting the brother who had gone West to cast his fortune with the cattlemen. As it happened, she had friends who were on the eve of starting for California, and she made a quick decision to travel with them. When she calmly announced her intention of going out West her mother had exclaimed in consternation; and her father, surprised into pathetic memory of the black sheep of the family, had stared at her with glistening eyes. "Why, Madeline! You want to see that wild boy!" Then he had reverted to the anger he still felt for his wayward son, and he had forbidden Madeline to go. Her mother forgot her haughty poise and dignity. Madeline, however, had exhibited a will she had never before been known to possess. She stood her ground even to reminding them that she was twenty-four and her own mistress. In the end she had prevailed, and that without betraying the real state of her mind.

Her decision to visit her brother had been too hurriedly made and acted upon for her to write him about it, and so she had telegraphed him from New York, and also, a day later, from Chicago, where her traveling friends had been delayed by illness. Nothing could have turned her back then. Madeline had planned to arrive in El Cajon on October 3d, her brother's birthday, and she had succeeded, though her arrival occurred at the twenty-fourth hour. Her train had been several hours late. Whether or not the message had reached Alfred's hands she had no means of telling, and the thing which concerned her now was the fact that she had arrived and he was not there to meet her.

It did not take long for thought of the past to give way wholly to the reality of the present.

"I hope nothing has happened to Alfred," she said to herself. "He was well, doing splendidly, the last time he wrote. To be sure, that was a good while ago; but, then, he never wrote often. He's all right. Pretty soon he'll come, and how glad I'll be! I wonder if he has changed."

As Madeline sat waiting in the yellow gloom she heard the faint, intermittent click of the telegraph instrument, the low hum of wires, the occasional stamp of an iron-shod hoof, and a distant vacant laugh rising above the sounds of the dance. These commonplace things were new to her. She became conscious of a slight quickening of her pulse. Madeline had only a limited knowledge of the West. Like all of her class, she had traveled Europe and had neglected America. A few letters from her brother had confused her already vague ideas of plains and mountains, as well as of cowboys and cattle. She had been astounded at the interminable distance she had traveled, and if there had been anything attractive to look at in all that journey she had passed it in the night. And here she sat in a dingy little station, with telegraph wires moaning a lonely song in the wind.

A faint sound like the rattling of thin chains diverted Madeline's attention. At first she imagined it was made by the telegraph wires. Then she heard a step. The door swung wide; a tall man entered, and with him came the clinking rattle. She realized then that the sound came from his spurs. The man was a cowboy, and his entrance recalled vividly to her that of Dustin Farnum in the first act of "The Virginian."

"Will you please direct me to a hotel?" asked Madeline, rising.

The cowboy removed his sombrero, and the sweep he made with it and the accompanying bow, despite their exaggeration, had a kind of rude grace. He took two long strides toward her.

"Lady, are you married?"

In the past Miss Hammond's sense of humor had often helped her to overlook critical exactions natural to her breeding. She kept silence, and she imagined it was just as well that her veil hid her face at the moment. She had been prepared to find cowboys rather striking, and she had been warned not to laugh at them.

This gentleman of the range deliberately reached down and took up her left hand. Before she recovered from her start of amaze he had stripped off her glove.

"Fine spark, but no wedding-ring," he drawled. "Lady, I'm glad to see you're not married."

He released her hand and returned the glove.

"You see, the only ho-tel in this here town is against boarding married women."

"Indeed?" said Madeline, trying to adjust her wits to the situation.

"It sure is," he went on. "Bad business for ho-tels to have married women. Keeps the boys away. You see, this isn't Reno."

Then he laughed rather boyishly, and from that, and the way he slouched on his sombrero, Madeline realized he was

half drunk. As she instinctively recoiled she not only gave him a keener glance, but stepped into a position where a better light shone on his face. It was like red bronze, bold, raw, sharp. He laughed again, as if good-naturedly amused with himself, and the laugh scarcely changed the hard set of his features. Like that of all women whose beauty and charm had brought them much before the world, Miss Hammond's intuition had been developed until she had a delicate and exquisitely sensitive perception of the nature of men and of her effect upon them. This crude cowboy, under the influence of drink, had affronted her; nevertheless, whatever was in his mind, he meant no insult.

"I shall be greatly obliged if you will show me to the hotel," she said.

"Lady, you wait here," he replied, slowly, as if his thought did not come swiftly. "I'll go fetch the porter."

She thanked him, and as he went out, closing the door, she sat down in considerable relief. It occurred to her that she should have mentioned her brother's name. Then she fell to wondering what living with such uncouth cowboys had done to Alfred. He had been wild enough in college, and she doubted that any cowboy could have taught him much. She alone of her family had ever believed in any latent good in Alfred Hammond, and her faith had scarcely survived the two years of silence.

Waiting there, she again found herself listening to the moan of the wind through the wires. The horse outside began to pound with heavy hoofs, and once he whinnied. Then Madeline heard a rapid pattering, low at first and growing louder, which presently she recognized as the galloping of horses. She went to the window, thinking, hoping her brother had arrived. But as the clatter increased to a roar, shadows sped by—lean horses, flying manes and tails, sombreroed riders, all strange and wild in her sight. Recalling what the conductor had said, she was at some pains to quell her uneasiness. Dust-clouds shrouded the dim

lights in the windows. Then out of the gloom two figures appeared, one tall, the other slight. The cowboy was returning with a porter.

Heavy footsteps sounded without, and lighter ones dragging along, and then suddenly the door rasped open, jarring the whole room. The cowboy entered, pulling a disheveled figure—that of a priest, a padre, whose mantle had manifestly been disarranged by the rude grasp of his captor. Plain it was that the padre was extremely terrified.

Madeline Hammond gazed in bewilderment at the little man, so pale and shaken, and a protest trembled upon her lips; but it was never uttered, for this half-drunken cowboy now appeared to be a cool, grim-smiling devil; and stretching out a long arm, he grasped her and swung her back to the bench.

"You stay there!" he ordered.

His voice, though neither brutal nor harsh nor cruel, had the unaccountable effect of making her feel powerless to move. No man had ever before addressed her in such a tone. It was the woman in her that obeyed—not the personality of proud Madeline Hammond.

The padre lifted his clasped hands as if supplicating for his life, and began to speak hurriedly in Spanish. Madeline did not understand the language. The cowboy pulled out a huge gun and brandished it in the priest's face. Then he lowered it, apparently to point it at the priest's feet. There was a red flash, and then a thundering report that stunned Madeline. The room filled with smoke and the smell of powder. Madeline did not faint or even shut her eyes, but she felt as if she were fast in a cold vise. When she could see distinctly through the smoke she experienced a sensation of immeasurable relief that the cowboy had not shot the padre. But he was still waving the gun, and now appeared to be dragging his victim toward her. What possibly could be the drunken fool's intention? This must be, this surely was a cowboy trick. She had a vague, swiftly

flashing recollection of Alfred's first letters descriptive of the extravagant fun of cowboys. Then she vividly remembered a moving picture she had seen—cowboys playing a monstrous joke on a lone school-teacher. Madeline no sooner thought of it than she made certain her brother was introducing her to a little wild West amusement. She could scarcely believe it, yet it must be true. Alfred's old love of teasing her might have extended even to this outrage. Probably he stood just outside the door or window laughing at her embarrassment.

Anger checked her panic. She straightened up with what composure this surprise had left her and started for the door. But the cowboy barred her passage—grasped her arms. Then Madeline divined that her brother could not have any knowledge of this indignity. It was no trick. It was something that was happening, that was real, that threatened she knew not what. She tried to wrench free, feeling hot all over at being handled by this drunken brute. Poise, dignity, culture—all the acquired habits of character—fled before the instinct to fight. She was athletic. She fought. She struggled desperately. But he forced her back with hands of iron. She had never known a man could be so strong. And then it was the man's coolly smiling face, the paralyzing strangeness of his manner, more than his strength, that weakened Madeline until she sank trembling against the bench.

"What—do you—mean?" she panted.

"Dearie, ease up a little on the bridle," he replied, gaily.

Madeline thought she must be dreaming. She could not think clearly. It had all been too swift, too terrible for her to grasp. Yet she not only saw this man, but also felt his powerful presence. And the shaking priest, the haze of blue smoke, the smell of powder—these were not unreal.

Then close before her eyes burst another blinding red flash, and close at her ears bellowed another report. Unable to stand, Madeline slipped down onto the bench. Her drifting faculties refused clearly to record what transpired during the

next few moments; presently, however, as her mind steadied somewhat, she heard, though as in a dream, the voice of the padre hurrying over strange words. It ceased, and then the cowboy's voice stirred her.

"Lady, say Si—Si. Say it—quick! Say it—Si!"

From sheer suggestion, a force irresistible at this moment when her will was clamped by panic, she spoke the word.

"And now, lady—so we can finish this properly—what's your name?"

Still obeying mechanically, she told him.

He stared for a while, as if the name had awakened associations in a mind somewhat befogged. He leaned back unsteadily. Madeline heard the expulsion of his breath, a kind of hard puff, not unusual in drunken men.

"What name?" he demanded.

"Madeline Hammond. I am Alfred Hammond's sister."

He put his hand up and brushed at an imaginary something before his eyes. Then he loomed over her, and that hand, now shaking a little, reached out for her veil. Before he could touch it, however, she swept it back, revealing her face.

"You're—not—Majesty Hammond?"

How strange—stranger than anything that had ever happened to her before—was it to hear that name on the lips of this cowboy! It was a name by which she was familiarly known, though only those nearest and dearest to her had the privilege of using it. And now it revived her dulled faculties, and by an effort she regained control of herself.

"You are Majesty Hammond," he replied; and this time he affirmed wonderingly rather than questioned.

Madeline rose and faced him.

"Yes, I am."

He slammed his gun back into its holster.

"Well, I reckon we won't go on with it, then."

"With what, sir? And why did you force me to say Si to this priest?"

"I reckon that was a way I took to show him you'd be willing to get married."

"Oh!... You—you!..." Words failed her.

This appeared to galvanize the cowboy into action. He grasped the padre and led him toward the door, cursing and threatening, no doubt enjoining secrecy. Then he pushed him across the threshold and stood there breathing hard and wrestling with himself.

"Here—wait—wait a minute, Miss—Miss Hammond," he said, huskily. "You could fall into worse company than mine—though I reckon you sure think not. I'm pretty drunk, but I'm—all right otherwise. Just wait—a minute."

She stood quivering and blazing with wrath, and watched this savage fight his drunkenness. He acted like a man who had been suddenly shocked into a rational state of mind, and he was now battling with himself to hold on to it. Madeline saw the dark, damp hair lift from his brows as he held it up to the cool wind. Above him she saw the white stars in the deep-blue sky, and they seemed as unreal to her as any other thing in this strange night. They were cold, brilliant, aloof, distant; and looking at them, she felt her wrath lessen and die and leave her calm.

The cowboy turned and began to talk.

"You see—I was pretty drunk," he labored. "There was a fiesta—and a wedding. I do fool things when I'm drunk. I made a fool bet I'd marry the first girl who came to town.... If you hadn't worn that veil—the fellows were joshing me—and Ed Linton was getting married—and everybody always wants to gamble.... I must have been pretty drunk."

After the one look at her when she had first put aside her veil he had not raised his eyes to her face. The cool audacity had vanished in what was either excessive emotion or the maudlin condition peculiar to some men when drunk. He could not stand still; perspiration collected in beads upon his

forehead; he kept wiping his face with his scarf, and he breathed like a man after violent exertions.

"You see—I was pretty—" he began.

"Explanations are not necessary," she interrupted. "I am very tired—distressed. The hour is late. Have you the slightest idea what it means to be a gentleman?"

His bronzed face burned to a flaming crimson.

"Is my brother here—in town to-night?" Madeline went on.

"No. He's at his ranch."

"But I wired him."

"Like as not the message is over in his box at the P.O. He'll be in town to-morrow. He's shipping cattle for Stillwell."

"Meanwhile I must go to a hotel. Will you please—"

If he heard her last words he showed no evidence of it. A noise outside had attracted his attention. Madeline listened. Low voices of men, the softer liquid tones of a woman, drifted in through the open door. They spoke in Spanish, and the voices grew louder. Evidently the speakers were approaching the station. Footsteps crunching on gravel attested to this, and quicker steps, coming with deep tones of men in anger, told of a quarrel. Then the woman's voice, hurried and broken, rising higher, was eloquent of vain appeal.

The cowboy's demeanor startled Madeline into anticipation of something dreadful. She was not deceived. From outside came the sound of a scuffle—a muffled shot, a groan, the thud of a falling body, a woman's low cry, and footsteps padding away in rapid retreat.

Madeline Hammond leaned weakly back in her seat, cold and sick, and for a moment her ears throbbed to the tramp of the dancers across the way and the rhythm of the cheap music. Then into the open door-place flashed a girl's tragic face, lighted by dark eyes and framed by dusky hair. The girl reached a slim brown hand round the side of the door and

held on as if to support herself. A long black scarf accentuated her gaudy attire.

"Senor—Gene!" she exclaimed; and breathless glad recognition made a sudden break in her terror.

"Bonita!" The cowboy leaped to her. "Girl! Are you hurt?"

"No, Senor."

He took hold of her. "I heard—somebody got shot. Was it Danny?"

"No, Senor."

"Did Danny do the shooting? Tell me, girl."

"No, Senor."

"I'm sure glad. I thought Danny was mixed up in that. He had Stillwell's money for the boys—I was afraid.... Say, Bonita, but you'll get in trouble. Who was with you? What did you do?"

"Senor Gene—they Don Carlos vaqueros—they quarrel over me. I only dance a leetle, smile a leetle, and they quarrel. I beg they be good—watch out for Sheriff Hawe... and now Sheriff Hawe put me in jail. I so frighten; he try make leetle love to Bonita once, and now he hate me like he hate Senor Gene."

"Pat Hawe won't put you in jail. Take my horse and hit the Peloncillo trail. Bonita, promise to stay away from El Cajon."

"Si, Senor."

He led her outside. Madeline heard the horse snort and champ his bit. The cowboy spoke low; only a few words were intelligible—"stirrups... wait... out of town... mountain... trail ... now ride!"

A moment's silence ensued, and was broken by a pounding of hoofs, a pattering of gravel. Then Madeline saw a big, dark horse run into the wide space. She caught a glimpse of wind-swept scarf and hair, a little form low down in the saddle. The horse was outlined in black against the line of dim lights. There was something wild and splendid in his flight.

Directly the cowboy appeared again in the doorway.

"Miss Hammond, I reckon we want to rustle out of here. Been bad goings-on. And there's a train due."

She hurried into the open air, not daring to look back or to either side. Her guide strode swiftly. She had almost to run to keep up with him. Many conflicting emotions confused her. She had a strange sense of this stalking giant beside her, silent except for his jangling spurs. She had a strange feeling of the cool, sweet wind and the white stars. Was it only her disordered fancy, or did these wonderful stars open and shut? She had a queer, disembodied thought that somewhere in ages back, in another life, she had seen these stars. The night seemed dark, yet there was a pale, luminous light—a light from the stars—and she fancied it would always haunt her.

Suddenly aware that she had been led beyond the line of houses, she spoke:

"Where are you taking me?"

"To Florence Kingsley," he replied.

"Who is she?"

"I reckon she's your brother's best friend out here." Madeline kept pace with the cowboy for a few moments longer, and then she stopped. It was as much from necessity to catch her breath as it was from recurring fear. All at once she realized what little use her training had been for such an experience as this. The cowboy, missing her, came back the few intervening steps. Then he waited, still silent, looming beside her.

"It's so dark, so lonely," she faltered. "How do I know... what warrant can you give me that you—that no harm will befall me if I go farther?"

"None, Miss Hammond, except that I've seen your face."

II. A SECRET KEPT

Table of Contents

Because of that singular reply Madeline found faith to go farther with the cowboy. But at the moment she really did not think about what he had said. Any answer to her would have served if it had been kind. His silence had augmented her nervousness, compelling her to voice her fear. Still, even if he had not replied at all she would have gone on with him. She shuddered at the idea of returning to the station, where she believed there had been murder; she could hardly have forced herself to go back to those dim lights in the street; she did not want to wander around alone in the dark.

And as she walked on into the windy darkness, much relieved that he had answered as he had, reflecting that he had yet to prove his words true, she began to grasp the deeper significance of them. There was a revival of pride that made her feel that she ought to scorn to think at all about such a man. But Madeline Hammond discovered that thought was involuntary, that there were feelings in her never dreamed of before this night.

Presently Madeline's guide turned off the walk and rapped at a door of a low-roofed house.

"Hullo—who's there?" a deep voice answered.

"Gene Stewart," said the cowboy. "Call Florence—quick!"

Thump of footsteps followed, a tap on a door, and voices. Madeline heard a woman exclaim: "Gene! here when there's a dance in town! Something wrong out on the range." A light flared up and shone bright through a window. In another moment there came a patter of soft steps, and the door opened to disclose a woman holding a lamp.

"Gene! Al's not—"

"Al is all right," interrupted the cowboy.

Madeline had two sensations then—one of wonder at the note of alarm and love in the woman's voice, and the other of unutterable relief to be safe with a friend of her brother's.

"It's Al's sister—came on to-night's train," the cowboy was saying. "I happened to be at the station, and I've fetched her up to you."

Madeline came forward out of the shadow.

"Not—not really Majesty Hammond!" exclaimed Florence Kingsley. She nearly dropped the lamp, and she looked and looked, astounded beyond belief.

"Yes, I am really she," replied Madeline. "My train was late, and for some reason Alfred did not meet me. Mr.—Mr. Stewart saw fit to bring me to you instead of taking me to a hotel."

"Oh, I'm so glad to meet you," replied Florence, warmly. "Do come in. I'm so surprised, I forget my manners. Why, Al never mentioned your coming."

"He surely could not have received my messages," said Madeline, as she entered.

The cowboy, who came in with her satchel, had to stoop to enter the door, and, once in, he seemed to fill the room. Florence set the lamp down upon the table. Madeline saw a young woman with a smiling, friendly face, and a profusion of fair hair hanging down over her dressing-gown.

"Oh, but Al will be glad!" cried Florence. "Why, you are white as a sheet. You must be tired. What a long wait you had at the station! I heard the train come in hours ago as I was going to bed. That station is lonely at night. If I had known you were coming! Indeed, you are very pale. Are you ill?"

"No. Only I am very tired. Traveling so far by rail is harder than I imagined. I did have rather a long wait after arriving at the station, but I can't say that it was lonely."

Florence Kingsley searched Madeline's face with keen eyes, and then took a long, significant look at the silent

Stewart. With that she deliberately and quietly closed a door leading into another room.

"Miss Hammond, what has happened?" She had lowered her voice.

"I do not wish to recall all that has happened," replied Madeline. "I shall tell Alfred, however, that I would rather have met a hostile Apache than a cowboy."

"Please don't tell Al that!" cried Florence. Then she grasped Stewart and pulled him close to the light. "Gene, you're drunk!"

"I was pretty drunk," he replied, hanging his head.

"Oh, what have you done?"

"Now, see here, Flo, I only—"

"I don't want to know. I'd tell it. Gene, aren't you ever going to learn decency? Aren't you ever going to stop drinking? You'll lose all your friends. Stillwell has stuck to you. Al's been your best friend. Molly and I have pleaded with you, and now you've gone and done—God knows what!"

"What do women want to wear veils for?" he growled. "I'd have known her but for that veil."

"And you wouldn't have insulted her. But you would the next girl who came along. Gene, you are hopeless. Now, you get out of here and don't ever come back."

"Flo!" he entreated.

"I mean it."

"I reckon then I'll come back to-morrow and take my medicine," he replied.

"Don't you dare!" she cried.

Stewart went out and closed the door.

"Miss Hammond, you—you don't know how this hurts me," said Florence. "What you must think of us! It's so unlucky that you should have had this happen right at first. Now, maybe you won't have the heart to stay. Oh, I've known more than one Eastern girl to go home without ever learning what we really are cut here. Miss Hammond, Gene

Stewart is a fiend when he's drunk. All the same I know, whatever he did, he meant no shame to you. Come now, don't think about it again to-night." She took up the lamp and led Madeline into a little room. "This is out West," she went on, smiling, as she indicated the few furnishings; "but you can rest. You're perfectly safe. Won't you let me help you undress—can't I do anything for you?"

"You are very kind, thank you, but I can manage," replied Madeline.

"Well, then, good night. The sooner I go the sooner you'll rest. Just forget what happened and think how fine a surprise you're to give your brother to-morrow."

With that she slipped out and softly shut the door.

As Madeline laid her watch on the bureau she noticed that the time was past two o'clock. It seemed long since she had gotten off the train. When she had turned out the lamp and crept wearily into bed she knew what it was to be utterly spent. She was too tired to move a finger. But her brain whirled.

She had at first no control over it, and a thousand thronging sensations came and went and recurred with little logical relation. There were the roar of the train; the feeling of being lost; the sound of pounding hoofs; a picture of her brother's face as she had last seen it five years before; a long, dim line of lights; the jingle of silver spurs; night, wind, darkness, stars. Then the gloomy station, the shadowy blanketed Mexican, the empty room, the dim lights across the square, the tramp of the dancers and vacant laughs and discordant music, the door flung wide and the entrance of the cowboy. She did not recall how he had looked or what he had done. And the next instant she saw him cool, smiling, devilish—saw him in violence; the next his bigness, his apparel, his physical being were vague as outlines in a dream. The white face of the padre flashed along in the train of thought, and it brought the same dull, half-blind, indefinable state of mind subsequent to that last nerve-

breaking pistol-shot. That passed, and then clear and vivid rose memories of the rest that had happened—strange voices betraying fury of men, a deadened report, a moan of mortal pain, a woman's poignant cry. And Madeline saw the girl's great tragic eyes and the wild flight of the big horse into the blackness, and the dark, stalking figure of the silent cowboy, and the white stars that seemed to look down remorselessly.

This tide of memory rolled over Madeline again and again, and gradually lost its power and faded. All distress left her, and she felt herself drifting. How black the room was—as black with her eyes open as it was when they were shut! And the silence—it was like a cloak. There was absolutely no sound. She was in another world from that which she knew. She thought of this fair-haired Florence and of Alfred; and, wondering about them, she dropped to sleep.

When she awakened the room was bright with sunlight. A cool wind blowing across the bed caused her to put her hands under the blanket. She was lazily and dreamily contemplating the mud walls of this little room when she remembered where she was and how she had come there.

How great a shock she had been subjected to was manifest in a sensation of disgust that overwhelmed her. She even shut her eyes to try and blot out the recollection. She felt that she had been contaminated.

Presently Madeline Hammond again awoke to the fact she had learned the preceding night—that there were emotions to which she had heretofore been a stranger. She did not try to analyze them, but she exercised her self-control to such good purpose that by the time she had dressed she was outwardly her usual self. She scarcely remembered when she had found it necessary to control her emotions. There had been no trouble, no excitement, no unpleasantness in her life. It had been ordered for her—tranquil, luxurious, brilliant, varied, yet always the same.

She was not surprised to find the hour late, and was going to make inquiry about her brother when a voice arrested her. She recognized Miss Kingsley's voice addressing some one outside, and it had a sharpness she had not noted before.

"So you came back, did you? Well, you don't look very proud of yourself this mawnin'. Gene Stewart, you look like a coyote."

"Say, Flo if I am a coyote I'm not going to sneak," he said.

"What 'd you come for?" she demanded.

"I said I was coming round to take my medicine."

"Meaning you'll not run from Al Hammond? Gene, your skull is as thick as an old cow's. Al will never know anything about what you did to his sister unless you tell him. And if you do that he'll shoot you. She won't give you away. She's a thoroughbred. Why, she was so white last night I thought she'd drop at my feet, but she never blinked an eyelash. I'm a woman, Gene Stewart and if I couldn't feel like Miss Hammond I know how awful an ordeal she must have had. Why, she's one of the most beautiful, the most sought after, the most exclusive women in New York City. There's a crowd of millionaires and lords and dukes after her. How terrible it'd be for a woman like her to be kissed by a drunken cowpuncher! I say it—"

"Flo, I never insulted her that way," broke out Stewart.

"It was worse, then?" she queried, sharply.

"I made a bet that I'd marry the first girl who came to town. I was on the watch and pretty drunk. When she came —well, I got Padre Marcos and tried to bully her into marrying me."

"Oh, Lord!" Florence gasped. "It's worse than I feared.... Gene, Al will kill you."

"That'll be a good thing," replied the cowboy, dejectedly.

"Gene Stewart, it certainly would, unless you turn over a new leaf," retorted Florence. "But don't be a fool." And here

she became earnest and appealing. "Go away, Gene. Go join the rebels across the border—you're always threatening that. Anyhow, don't stay here and run any chance of stirring Al up. He'd kill you just the same as you would kill another man for insulting your sister. Don't make trouble for Al. That'd only make sorrow for her, Gene."

The subtle import was not lost upon Madeline. She was distressed because she could not avoid hearing what was not meant for her ears. She made an effort not to listen, and it was futile.

"Flo, you can't see this a man's way," he replied, quietly. "I'll stay and take my medicine."

"Gene, I could sure swear at you or any other pig-head of a cowboy. Listen. My brother-in-law, Jack, heard something of what I said to you last night. He doesn't like you. I'm afraid he'll tell Al. For Heaven's sake, man, go down-town and shut him up and yourself, too."

Then Madeline heard her come into the house and presently rap on the door and call softly:

"Miss Hammond. Are you awake?"

"Awake and dressed, Miss Kingsley. Come in."

"Oh! You've rested. You look so—so different. I'm sure glad. Come out now. We'll have breakfast, and then you may expect to meet your brother any moment."

"Wait, please. I heard you speaking to Mr. Stewart. It was unavoidable. But I am glad. I must see him. Will you please ask him to come into the parlor a moment?"

"Yes," replied Florence, quickly; and as she turned at the door she flashed at Madeline a woman's meaning glance. "Make him keep his mouth shut!"

Presently there were slow, reluctant steps outside the front door, then a pause, and the door opened. Stewart stood bareheaded in the sunlight. Madeline remembered with a kind of shudder the tall form, the embroidered buckskin vest, the red scarf, the bright leather wristbands, the wide silver-buckled belt and chaps. Her glance seemed

to run over him swift as lightning. But as she saw his face now she did not recognize it. The man's presence roused in her a revolt. Yet something in her, the incomprehensible side of her nature, thrilled in the look of this splendid dark-faced barbarian.

"Mr. Stewart, will you please come in?" she asked, after that long pause.

"I reckon not," he said. The hopelessness of his tone meant that he knew he was not fit to enter a room with her, and did not care or cared too much.

Madeline went to the door. The man's face was hard, yet it was sad, too. And it touched her.

"I shall not tell my brother of your—your rudeness to me," she began. It was impossible for her to keep the chill out of her voice, to speak with other than the pride and aloofness of her class. Nevertheless, despite her loathing, when she had spoken so far it seemed that kindness and pity followed involuntarily. "I choose to overlook what you did because you were not wholly accountable, and because there must be no trouble between Alfred and you. May I rely on you to keep silence and to seal the lips of that priest? And you know there was a man killed or injured there last night. I want to forget that dreadful thing. I don't want it known that I heard—"

"The Greaser didn't die," interrupted Stewart.

"Ah! then that's not so bad, after all. I am glad for the sake of your friend—the little Mexican girl."

A slow scarlet wave overspread his face, and his shame was painful to see. That fixed in Madeline's mind a conviction that if he was a heathen he was not wholly bad. And it made so much difference that she smiled down at him.

"You will spare me further distress, will you not, please?" His hoarse reply was incoherent, but she needed only to see his working face to know his remorse and gratitude.

Madeline went back to her room; and presently Florence came for her, and directly they were sitting at breakfast. Madeline Hammond's impression of her brother's friend had to be reconstructed in the morning light. She felt a wholesome, frank, sweet nature. She liked the slow Southern drawl. And she was puzzled to know whether Florence Kingsley was pretty or striking or unusual. She had a youthful glow and flush, the clear tan of outdoors, a face that lacked the soft curves and lines of Eastern women, and her eyes were light gray, like crystal, steady, almost piercing, and her hair was a beautiful bright, waving mass.

Florence's sister was the elder of the two, a stout woman with a strong face and quiet eyes. It was a simple fare and service they gave to their guest; but they made no apologies for that. Indeed, Madeline felt their simplicity to be restful. She was sated with respect, sick of admiration, tired of adulation; and it was good to see that these Western women treated her as very likely they would have treated any other visitor. They were sweet, kind; and what Madeline had at first thought was a lack of expression or vitality she soon discovered to be the natural reserve of women who did not live superficial lives. Florence was breezy and frank, her sister quaint and not given much to speech. Madeline thought she would like to have these women near her if she were ill or in trouble. And she reproached herself for a fastidiousness, a hypercritical sense of refinement that could not help distinguishing what these women lacked.

"Can you ride?" Florence was asking. "That's what a Westerner always asks any one from the East. Can you ride like a man—astride, I mean? Oh, that's fine. You look strong enough to hold a horse. We have some fine horses out here. I reckon when Al comes we'll go out to Bill Stillwell's ranch. We'll have to go, whether we want to or not, for when Bill learns you are here he'll just pack us all off. You'll love old Bill. His ranch is run down, but the range and the rides up in the mountains—they are beautiful. We'll hunt and climb,

and most of all we'll ride. I love a horse—I love the wind in my face, and a wide stretch with the mountains beckoning. You must have the best horse on the ranges. And that means a scrap between Al and Bill and all the cowboys. We don't all agree about horses, except in case of Gene Stewart's iron-gray."

"Does Mr. Stewart own the best horse in the country?" asked Madeline. Again she had an inexplicable thrill as she remembered the wild flight of Stewart's big dark steed and rider.

"Yes, and that's all he does own," replied Florence. "Gene can't keep even a quirt. But he sure loves that horse and calls him—"

At this juncture a sharp knock on the parlor door interrupted the conversation. Florence's sister went to open it. She returned presently and said:

"It's Gene. He's been dawdlin' out there on the front porch, and he knocked to let us know Miss Hammond's brother is comin'."

Florence hurried into the parlor, followed by Madeline. The door stood open, and disclosed Stewart sitting on the porch steps. From down the road came a clatter of hoofs. Madeline looked out over Florence's shoulder and saw a cloud of dust approaching, and in it she distinguished outlines of horses and riders. A warmth spread over her, a little tingle of gladness, and the feeling recalled her girlish love for her brother. What would he be like after long years?

"Gene, has Jack kept his mouth shut?" queried Florence; and again Madeline was aware of a sharp ring in the girl's voice.

"No," replied Stewart.

"Gene! You won't let it come to a fight? Al can be managed. But Jack hates you and he'll have his friends with him."

"There won't be any fight."

"Use your brains now," added Florence; and then she turned to push Madeline gently back into the parlor.

Madeline's glow of warmth changed to a blank dismay. Was she to see her brother act with the violence she now associated with cowboys? The clatter of hoofs stopped before the door. Looking out, Madeline saw a bunch of dusty, wiry horses pawing the gravel and tossing lean heads. Her swift glance ran over the lithe horsemen, trying to pick out the one who was her brother. But she could not. Her glance, however, caught the same rough dress and hard aspect that characterized the cowboy Stewart. Then one rider threw his bridle, leaped from the saddle, and came bounding up the porch steps. Florence met him at the door.

"Hello, Flo. Where is she?" he called, eagerly. With that he looked over her shoulder to espy Madeline. He actually jumped at her. She hardly knew the tall form and the bronzed face, but the warm flash of blue eyes was familiar. As for him, he had no doubt of his sister, it appeared, for with broken welcome he threw his arms around her, then held her off and looked searchingly at her.

"Well, sister," he began, when Florence turned hurriedly from the door and interrupted him.

"Al, I think you'd better stop the wrangling out there." He stared at her, appeared suddenly to hear the loud voices from the street, and then, releasing Madeline, he said:

"By George! I forgot, Flo. There is a little business to see to. Keep my sister in here, please, and don't be fussed up now."

He went out on the porch and called to his men:

"Shut off your wind, Jack! And you, too, Blaze! I didn't want you fellows to come here. But as you would come, you've got to shut up. This is my business."

Whereupon he turned to Stewart, who was sitting on the fence.

"Hello, Stewart!" he said.

It was a greeting; but there was that in the voice which alarmed Madeline.

Stewart leisurely got up and leisurely advanced to the porch.

"Hello, Hammond!" he drawled.

"Drunk again last night?"

"Well, if you want to know, and if it's any of your mix, yes, I was-pretty drunk," replied Stewart.

It was a kind of cool speech that showed the cowboy in control of himself and master of the situation—not an easy speech to follow up with undue inquisitiveness. There was a short silence.

"Damn it, Stewart," said the speaker, presently, "here's the situation: It's all over town that you met my sister last night at the station and—and insulted her. Jack's got it in for you, so have these other boys. But it's my affair. Understand, I didn't fetch them here. They can see you square yourself, or else—Gene, you've been on the wrong trail for some time, drinking and all that. You're going to the bad. But Bill thinks, and I think, you're still a man. We never knew you to lie. Now what have you to say for yourself?"

"Nobody is insinuating that I am a liar?" drawled Stewart.

"No."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. You see, Al, I was pretty drunk last night, but not drunk enough to forget the least thing I did. I told Pat Hawe so this morning when he was curious. And that's polite for me to be to Pat. Well, I found Miss Hammond waiting alone at the station. She wore a veil, but I knew she was a lady, of course. I imagine, now that I think of it, that Miss Hammond found my gallantry rather startling, and—"

At this point Madeline, answering to unconsidered impulse, eluded Florence and walked out upon the porch.

Sombreros flashed down and the lean horses jumped.

"Gentlemen," said Madeline, rather breathlessly; and it did not add to her calmness to feel a hot flush in her cheeks,

"I am very new to Western ways, but I think you are laboring under a mistake, which, in justice to Mr. Stewart, I want to correct. Indeed, he was rather—rather abrupt and strange when he came up to me last night; but as I understand him now, I can attribute that to his gallantry. He was somewhat wild and sudden and—sentimental in his demand to protect me—and it was not clear whether he meant his protection for last night or forever; but I am happy to say be offered me no word that was not honorable. And he saw me safely here to Miss Kingsley's home."