

## CHAPTER XXII-Continued. -10-

He gave her a packet of telegrams. Madeline tore them open with shaking fingers, began to read with swift, dim eyes. Some were from Washington, assuring her of every possible service; some were from New York; others written in Spanish were from El Paso, and these she could not wholly translate in a brief glance. Would she never find Stillwell's message? It was the last. It was lengthy. It read:

"Bought Stewart's release. Also arranged for his transfer as prisoner of war. Both matters official. He's safe if we can get notice to his captors. Not sure I've reached them by wire. Afraid to trust it. You go with Link to Agua Prieta. Take the messages sent you in Spanish. They will protect you and secure Stewart's freedom. Take Nels with you. Stop for noth-Ing. Tell Link all-trust him-let him drive that car.

## "STILLWELL."

"Link, do you know the roads, the trails-the desert between here and Agua Prieta?" sae asked. Can an automobile be driven from here into worthern Mexico?"

"Sure. But it'd take time." , "We must do it in little time," she went on, in swift eagerness. "Otherwise Stewart may be-probably will be-be shot.

Link Stevens appeared suddenly to grow lax, shriveled, to lose all his pecullar pert brightness, to weaken and Bge.

"I'm only a-a cowboy, Miss Majesty." He almost faltered. It was a singular change in him. "Thet's an awful ride-down over the border. If by some luck I didn't smash the car I'd turn your hair gray. You'd never be no good after thet 'ride !"

"I am Stewart's wife," she answered him, and she looked at him, not conscious of any motive to persuade or allure, but just to let him know the greatness of her dependence upon him.

He started violently-the old action of Stewarf, the memorable action of Monty Price, This man was of the same wild breed.

Then Madeline's words flowed in a torrent. "I am Stewart's wife. I love him; I have been unjust to him; I swift water in the rainy season. It must save him. Link, I have faith in narrowed. When Link reached the

"He was sentenced to be shot Thurs-

day at sunset-tonight?"

"Yes. I regret that I can't give you definite information. If you are friends of Stewart's - relatives - I might find-"

"I am his wife," interrupted Madeline, "Will you please read these," She handed him the telegrams. "Ad vise me-help me, if you can?"

With a wondering glance at her the officer received the telegrams. He read several, and whistled low in amaze. His manner became quick. alert, serious,

"I can't read these written in Spanish, but I know the names signed." Swiftly he ran through the others. Why, these mean Stewart's release

stopped before the porch. Link had has been authorized. They explain tied two long, heavy planks upon the mysterious rumors we have heard car, one on each side, and in every here. Greaser treachery! For some available space he had strapped extra strange reason messages from the tires. A huge cask occupied one back rebel junta have failed to reach their seat, and another seat was full of tools destination. I'll go with you to Genand ropes. There was just room in eral Salazar, the rebel chief in comthis rear part of the car for Nels to mand. I know him. Perhaps we can squeeze in. Link put Madeline in front find out something." beside him, then bent over the wheel.

Nels made room for the officer. Link sent the car whirring across the line into Mexican territory. The road ended in an immense plaza, in the center of which was a circular structure that in some measure resembled a corral. It was a bull-ring, where the national sport of bull-fighting was carried on. the increase of speed. The buzz, the

Madeline caught a glimpse of tents inside, then her view was obstructed by a curious, pressing throng. The cavalry officer leaped from the car and pushed his way into the entrance.

How stifling was this crowded, illsmelling plaza! The sun, red and lowering, had sloped far down in the west. but still burned with furnace heat. A swarm of flies whirled over the car. The shadows of low-sailing buzzards crossed Madeline's sight. Then she saw a row of the huge, uncanny black birds sitting upon the tiled roof of a house. They had neither an air of sleeping nor resting. They were waiting. She fought off a horrible ghastly idea before its full realization.

Suddenly the crowd parted to let the cavalry officer and a rebel of striking presence get to the car.

"Madam, it is as I suspected," said the officer, quickly. "The messages directing Stewart's release never reached Salazar. They were intercepted. But even without them we might have secured Stewart's exchange if it had not been for the fact that one of his captors wanted him shot. This guerrilla intercepted the orders, and then was instrumental in taking Stewart to Mezquital. It is exceedingly sad. Why, he should be a free man this instant. I regret-"

"Who did this-this thing?" cried Madeline, cold and sick. "Who is the guerrilla?"

"Senor Don Carlos Martinez. He has been a bandit, a man of influence in Sonora. He is more of a secret agent in the affairs of the revolution than an active participator. But he has seen

tus, bursting the second front-wheel tire. Like demons indeed Link and Nels worked. Shuddering, Madeline felt the declining heat of the sun, saw with gloomy eyes the shading of the red light over the desert. She did not look back to see how near the sun was to the horizon. She wanted to ask Nels. Strange as anything on this terrible ride was the absence of speech. As yet no word had been spoken. Madeline wanted to shriek to Link to hurry. But he was more than humanly swift in all his actions. So with mute lips, with the fire in her beginning to chill, with a lifelessness menacing her spirit, she watched, hoped against hope,

rond. Quite suddenly she saw it, seemingly miles of clear, narrow lane disappearing like a thin, white streak in distant green. Perhaps Link Stevens' heart leaped like Madeline's. The huge car with a roar and a jerk seemed to answer Madeline's call, a cry no less poignant because it was slient.

prayed for a long, straight, smooth

Faster, faster, faster! The roar became a whining hum. Then for Madeline sound ceased to be anything-she could not hear. The wind was now heavy, imponderable, no longer a swift, plastic thing, but solld, like an onrushing wall. It bore down upon Madeline with such resistless weight that she could not move. The green of desert plants along the road merged in two shapeless fences, sliding at her from the distance. Objects ahead began to blue the white road, to grow streaky, like rays of light, the sky to take on more of a reddenic g haze.

That was Madeline's last clear sensation upon the ride. Blinded, dazed, she succumbed to the demands upon her strength. She reeled, fell back, only vaguely aware of a helping hand. Confusion seized her senses. All about her was a dark chaos through which she was rushing, rushing, rushing under the wrathful eye of a setting sun. But at an end of infinite time that rush ceased. Madeline lost the queer feeling of being disembodied by a frightfully swift careening through boundless distance. She distinguished voices, low at first, apparently far away. Then she opened her eyes to blurred but conscious sight.

The car had come to a stop. Link was lying face down over the wheel. Nels was rubbing her hands, calling to her. She saw a house with clean whitewashed wall and brown-tiled roof. Beyond, over a dark mountain range, peeped the last red curve, the last beautiful ray of the setting sun.

CHAPTER XXIII

At the End of the Road. Madeline saw that the car was surrounded by armed Mexicans. They presented a contrast to the others she had seen that day; she wondered a little at their silence, at their respectful front.

Suddenly a sharp spoken order opened up the ranks next to the house.

guerrillas feared to execute him here. and believed he might be aided to es-cape. So a detachment departed with him for Mezquital." "He was sentenced to be shot There. stant of realization and became sweet, full, strange,

Stewart shook hands with some one in the doorway. Then he looked up and down the road. The door closed behind him. Leisurely he rolled a cigarette, stood close to the wall while he scratched a match. Even at that distance Madeline's keen eyes caught the small flame, the first little puff of smoke.

Stewart then took to the middle of the road and leisurely began his walk. Madeline watched him, with pride, love, pain, glory combating for a mastery over her. This walk of his seemingly took longer than all her hours of awakening, of strife, of remorse, longer than the ride to find him. She felt that it would be impossible for her to walt till he reached the end of the road. Yet in the hurry and riot of her feelings she had fleeting panics. She wanted to run to meet him. Nevertheless, she stood rooted to her covert behind the window, living that terrible walk with him to the uttermost thought of home, sister, mother, sweetheart, wife, life itself-every thought that could come to a man stalking to meet his executioners. With all that tumult in her mind and heart Madeline still fell prey to the incomprehensible variations of emotion possible to a woman. Every step Stewart took thrilled her. She had some strange, subtle intuition that he was not unhappy, and that he believed



"Who Are You?" He Whispered Hoarsely.

beyond shadow of doubt that he was waiking to his death. His steps dragged a little, though they had begun to be swift. The old, hard, physical, wild nerve of the cowboy was perhaps in conflict with spiritual growth of the finer man, realizing too late that life ought not to be sacrificed. Then the dark gleam that was his face took shape, grew sharper and clearer. He was stalking now, and there was a suggestion of impatience in his stride. It took these hidden Mexicans a long time to kill him! At a point in the middle of the road, even with the corner of a house and opposite to Madeline's position, Stewart halted stockstill. He presented a fair, bold mark to his executioners, and he stood there motionless a full moment. That wait was almost unendurable for Madeline. Perhaps it was only a moment, several moments at the longest, but the time seemed a year Stewart's face was scornful, hard. Did he suspect treachery on the part of his captors, that they meant to play with him as a cat with a mouse, to murder him at leisure? Madeline was sure she caught the old. inscrutable, mocking smile fleeting across his lips. He held that position for what must have been a reasonable time to his mind, then with a laugh and a shrug he threw the cigarette into the road. He shook his head as If at the incomprehensible motives of men who could have no fair reasons now for delay. He made a sudden violent action that was more than a straightening of his powerful frame. It was the old instinctive violence. Then he faced north. Madeline read his thought, knew he was thinking of her, calling her a last silent farewell. He would serve her to his last breath, leave her free, keep his secret. That picture of him, dark-browed, fire-eyed, strangely sad and strong, sank indelibly into Madeline's heart of hearts. The next instant he was striding forward, to force by bold and scornful presence a speedy fulfillment of his sentence. Madeline stepped into the door, crossed the threshold. Stewart staggered as if indeed the bullets he expected had pierced him in mortal wound. His dark face turned white, His eyes had the rapt stare, the wild fear of a man who saw an apparition. yet who doubted his sight. Perhaps he had called to her as the Mexicans called to their Virgin; perhaps he imagined sudden death had come unawares, and this was her image appearing te bim in some other life. "Who - are - you?" he whispered, hoarsely.



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rou. I beseech you to do your best for Stewart's sake-for my sake. I'll risk the ride gladly-bravely. I'll not care where or how you drive. I'd far rather plunge into a canyon-go to my death on the rocks-than not try to save Stewart."

How beautiful the response of this rude cowboy-to realize his absolute unconsciousness of self, to see the haggard shade burn out of his face, the old, cool, devil-may-care spirit return to his eyes, and to feel something wonderful about him then! It was more than will or daring or sacrifice. A blood-tie might have existed between him and Madeline.

"Miss Majesty, thet ride figgers im possible, but I'll do it !" he replied. His



## "Can an Automobile Be Driven From Here Into Northern Mexico?"

cool, bright glance thrilled her. "FH need mebbe half an hour to go over the car an' to pack on what I'll want."

She could not thank him, and her reply was merely a request that he tell-Nels and other cowboys off duty to come up to the house. When Link had yone Madeline gave a moment's thought to preparations for the ride.

A number of cowboys were waiting. She explained the situation and left them in charge of her home. With that she asked Nels to accompany her down into the desert.

"Why, Miss Majesty, I'm powerful proud to go. If you're goin' down emong the Greasers you want me."

Madeline heard the buzz of the car. Link appeared, driving up the slope. Is made a short sliding turn and all we could to get his release. The difficult, extremely hazardous, yet Link | emotion swayed her. Like a retreat- | Canade

narrowest points he got out of the car and walked from place to place. Once with a little jump he cleared the wash. Then Madeline noted that the farther rim was somewhat lower. In a flash she divined Link's intention. He was hunting a place to jump the car over the crack in the ground.

Madeline waved her hand at the si-

lent cowboys on the porch. Not an

The car glided out of the yard,

leaped from level to slope, and started

swiftly down the road, out into the

open valley. Each stronger rush of

dry wind in Madelne's face marked

roar of wheels, of heavy body in flight,

increased to a continuous droning

hum. The wind became an insupport-

able body moving toward her, crush-

ing her breast, making the task of

breathing most difficult. To Madeline

the time seemed to fly with the speed

Cactus barred the way, rocks barred

the way, gullies barred the way, and

these Nels addressed in the grim

humor with which he was wont to

view tragic things. Again and again

Link used the planks to cross washes

in sand. Presently he came to a

ditch where water had worn deep into

them, measuring distance carefully,

and then started across. The danger

was in ditching the machine. One of

the planks split, sagged a little, but

Link made the crossing without slip.

slope, ridged and grooved like a wash-

board, led gently down to meet the

floor of the valley, where the scant

grama-grass struggled to give a tinge

of gray. The road appeared to be-

come more clearly defined, and could

be seen striking straight across the

To Madeline's dismay, that road

led down to a deep, narrow wash. The

crossing would have been laborsome

for a horse; for an automobile it was

impassable. Link drove back to the

road, crossed it, and kept on down the

line of the wash. It was a deep cut in

red earth, worn straight down by

At length a mile of clean, brown

the road. Without hesitation he placed

of miles.

valley.

audible good-by was spoken.

Soon he found one that seemed to suit him, for he tled his red scarf upon a greasewood-bush. Then, returning to the car, he clambered in, backed up the gentle slope and halted just short of steeper ground. Hunching low over the wheel, he started, slowly at first. then faster, and then faster. The great car gave a spring like a huge tiger. The impact of suddenly formed wind almost tore Madeline out of her seat

She felt Nels' powerful hands on her shoulders. She closed her eyes. The jolting headway of the car gave place to a gliding rush. This was broken by a slight jar, and then above the hum and roar rose a cowboy yell. Madeline walted with strained nerves for the expected crash. It did not come. Opening her eyes, she saw the level valley floor without a break. She had not even noticed the instant when the car had shot over the wash.

A strange breathlessness attacked her, and she attributed it to the celerity with which she was being carried along. Pulling the hood down over her face, she sank low in the seat. The whir of the car now seemed to be a world-filling sound. There was a long. blank period from which she awakened to feel an arm supporting her. Then she rallied. The velocity of the car had been cut to the speed to which she was accustomed. Throwing back the hood, she breathed freely again, recovered fully.

The car was bowling along a wide road upon the outskirts of a city. Madeline asked what place it could be, "Douglas," replied Link. "An' jest

around is Agua Prieta!" That last name seemed to stun Madeline. She heard no more, and saw little until the car stopped. Nels spoke to some one. Then sight of khaki-clad soldiers quickened Madeline's faculties. She was on the boundary-line between the United States and Mexico, and Agua Prieta, with its white and blue-walled houses, Its brown-tiled roofs, lay before her. A cavalry officer approached the car, stared, and removed his sombrero,

"Can you tell me anything about Stewart, the American cowboy who was captured by rebels a few days ago?" asked Madeline.

"Yes," replied the officer. "Stewart is reported to have done reckless fighting and was captured. He got a Mexican sentence. He is known her ? along the border, and the news of his capture stirred up excitement. We did

guerrilla service."

"Don Carlos! Stewart in his power! Oh, God !" Madeline sank down, almost overcome. Then two great hands, powerful, thrilling, clasped her shoulders, and Nels bent over her.

"Miss Majesty, shore we're wastin' ime here," he said. His voice, like his hands, was uplifting. She wheeled to him in trembling importunity. How cold, bright, blue the flash of his eyes! They told Madeline she must not weaken. But she could not speak her thought to Nels-could only look at Link.

"It figgers impossible, but I'll do it !" said Link Stevens, in answer to her volceless query.

"Can I get a permit to go into the interior-to Mezquital?" asked Madeline of the officer.

"You are going on? Madam, it's a forlorn hope. Mezquital is a hundred miles away. But there's a chancethe barest chance if your man can drive this car. The Mexicans are either murderous or ceremonious in their executions. The arrangements for Stewart's will be elaborate. But, barring unusual circumstances, it will take place precisely at the hour designated. You need no permit. Your messages are official papers. But to save time, perhaps delay, I suggest you take this Mexican, Senor Montes, with you. He outranks Don Carlos and knows the captain of the Mezquital detachment."

"I thank you, sir. I shall not forget your kindness," concluded Madeline, The white, narrow road flashed out of the foreground, slipped with inconceivable rapidity under the car. When she marked a clump of cattus far ahead is seemed to shoot at her, to speed behind her even the instant she noticed it. Nevertheless, Madeline knew Link was not putting the car to its limit. Swiftly as he was flying, he held something in reserve. And every leaf and blade and branch of cactus bore wicked thorns, any one of which would be fatal to a tire.

It came at length, the bursting re port. The car lurched, went on like a crippled thing, and halted, obedient to the master hand at the wheel, Swift as Link was in replacing the tire, he lost time. The red sun, more sullen. duskier as it neared the black, hold horizon, appeared to mock Madeline. to eye her in derision.

Link leaped in, and the car sprang ahead. The road began to wind up; it turned and twisted in tantalizing, lazy curves; it was in no hurry to surmount a hill that began to assume proportions of a mountain; it was leisurely, as were all things in Mexico except strife. That was quick, flerce, bloody-it was Spanish.

The descent from that elevation was

Senor Montes appeared in the break. coming swiftly. His dark face wore a smile; his manner was courteous, Important, authoritative,

"Senora, you got here in time. El Capitan Stewart will be free." "Free!" she whispered.

She rose, reeling. "Come," replied Montes, taking her arm. "Perdoneme, Senora.

Senor Montes led Madeline through a hall to a patlo, and on through a large room with flooring of rough, bare boards that rattled, into a smaller room full of armed quiet rebels facing an open window.

Montes directed Madeline's attenton to a man by the window. A loose scarf of vivid red hung from his hand.

"Senora, they were waiting for the sun to set when we arrived," said Montes. "The signal was about to be given for Senor Stewart's walk to death."

"Stewart's walk !" echoed Madeline. "Ah, Senora, let me tell you his sentence-the sentence I have had the honor and happiness to revoke for you."

Stewart had been court-martialed and sentenced according to a Mexican custom observed in cases of brave soldiers to whom honorable and fitting executions were due. His hour had been set for Thursday when the sun had sunk. Upon signal he was to be liberated and was free to walk out into the road, to take any direction he pleased. He knew his sentence : knew that death awaited him, that every possible avenue of escape was blocked by men with rifles ready. But he had not the slightest idea at what moment or from what direction the bullets were to come.

"Senora, we have sent messengers to every squad of waiting soldiersan order that El Capitan is not to be shot. He is ignorant of his release, 1 shall give the signal for his freedom." "Is there no-no possibility of a mistake?" faltered Madeline, "None. My order included unload-

ing of rifles." "Don Carlos?"

"He is in irons, and must answer to General Salazar," replied Montes, With a heart stricken by both joy

and agony, she saw Montes give the signal. Then she walted. No change mani-

fested itself down the length of that lonely road. There was absolute sitence in the room behind her. How terribly, infinitely long seemed the waiting!

Suddenly a door opened and a tall men stepped out.

Madeline recognized Stewart, She had to place both hands on the window-sill for support, while a storm of

She tried to lift her hands, failed. tried again, and held them out, trembling.

"It is I. Majesty. Your wife!" [THE END]

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