

The Loom of the Desert

by
Idah Meacham Strobridge

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THE LOOM OF THE DESERT

To the courtesy of the editors of the “Argonaut,” “Out West,” “Criterion,” “Arena” and “Munsey’s”—in which publications many of these sketches have already seen print—is due their reappearance in more permanent form.



“The boy swayed backward—backward.”—

**To these—my dearest;
the FATHER and MOTHER who are my comrades still,
I dedicate
these stories of a land where we were pioneers.**



FOREWORD

There, in that land set apart for Silence, and Space, and the Great Winds, Fate—a grim, still figure—sat at her loom weaving the destinies of desert men and women. The shuttles shot to and fro without ceasing, and into the strange web were woven the threads of Light, and Joy, and Love; but more often were they those of Sorrow, or Death, or Sin. From the wide Gray Waste the Weaver had drawn the color and design; and so the fabric's warp and woof were of the desert's tone. Keeping this always well in mind will help you the better to understand those people of the plains, whose lives must needs be often sombre-hued.



MESQUITE

ISS GLENDOWER sat on the ranch-house piazza, shading her eyes from the white glare of the sun by holding above them—in beautiful, beringed fingers—the last number of a Boston magazine. It was all very new and delightful to her—this strange, unfinished country, and each day developed fresh charm. As a spectacle it was perfect—the very desolation and silence of the desert stirred something within her that the Back Bay had never remotely roused. Viewed from the front row of the dress circle, as it were, nothing could be more fascinating to her art-loving sense than this simple, wholesome life lived out as Nature teaches, and to feel that, for the time, the big, conventional world of wise insincerities was completely shut away behind those far purple mountains out of which rose the desert sun.

As for becoming an integral part of all this one's self—Ah, that was a different matter! The very thought of her cousin, Blanche Madison, and Roy—her husband—deliberately turning their backs on the refinements of civilization, and accepting the daily drudgery and routine of life on a cattle ranch, filled her with wondering amazement. When she fell to speculating on what their future years here would be, she shuddered. From the

crown of her sleek and perfectly poised little head, to the hollowed sole of her modishly booted foot, Miss Audrey Glendower was Bostonian.

Still, for the short space of time that she waited Lawrence Irving's coming, life here was full of charm for her—its ways were alluring, and not the least among its fascinations was Mesquite.

She smiled amusedly as she thought of the tall cowboy's utter unconsciousness of any social difference between them—at his simple acceptance of her notice. Miss Glendower was finding vast entertainment in his honest-hearted, undisguised adoration. She had come West for experiences, and one of the first (as decidedly the most exciting and interesting) had been found in Mesquite. Besides, it gave her something to write of when she sent her weekly letter to Lawrence Irving. Sometimes she found writing to him a bit of a bore—when topics were few.

But Mesquite—— The boy was a revelation of fresh surprises every day. There was no boredom where he was. Amusing; yes, that was the word. There he was now!—crossing the bare and hard beaten square of gray earth that lay between the ranch house and the corrals. Though he was looking beyond the piazza to where the other boys were driving a “bunch” of bellowing, dust-stirring cattle into an enclosure, yet she felt it was she whom his eyes saw. He was coming straight toward the house—and her. She knew it. Miss Glendower knew many things, learned in the varied experience of her eight-and-twenty years. Her worldly wisdom was more—much more—

than his would be at double his present age. Mesquite was twenty.

He looked up with unconcealed pleasure in her presence as he seated himself on the piazza—swinging his spurred heels against each other, while he leaned his head back against one of the pillars. Miss Glendower's eyes rested on the burned, boyish face with delight. There was something so naïve, so sweetly childish about him. It was simply delicious to hear his "Yes, ma'am," or his "Which?" Just now his yellow hair lay in little damp rings on his forehead, like a baby's just awakened from sleep. He sat with his big, dust-covered sombrero shoved back from a forehead guiltless of tan or freckles as the petals of a white rose. But the lower part of his face was roughened by wind and burned by the sun to an Indian red, making the blue eyes the bluer—those great, babyish eyes that looked out with a belying innocence from under their marvelous fringe of upcurling lashes. The blue eyes were well used to looking upon sights that would have shocked Miss Glendower's New England training, could she have known; and the babyish lips were quite familiar with language that would have made her pale with horror and disgust to hear. But then, she didn't know. Neither could he have understood her standpoint.

He was only the product of his environment, and one of the best things that it had taught him was to have no disguises. So he sat today looking up at his lady with all his love showing in his face.

Then, in the late afternoon warmth, as the day's red ball of burning wrath dropped down behind the western desert rim of their little world, he rode beside her, across sand hills where

sweet flowers began to open their snow-white petals to the night wind's touch, and over barren alkali flats to the postoffice half a dozen miles away.

There was only one letter waiting for Miss Glendower that night. It began:

"I will be with you, my darling, twenty-four hours after you get this. Just one more day, Love, and I may hold you in my arms again! Just one more week, and you will be my wife, Audrey. Think of it!"

She had thought; she was thinking now. She was also wondering how Mesquite would take it. She glanced at the boy as she put the letter away and turned her horse's head toward home. Such a short time and she would return to the old life that, for the hour, seemed so strangely far away! Now—alone in the desert with Mesquite—it would not be hard to persuade herself that this was all there was of the world or of life.

As they loped across the wide stretch of desert flats that reached to the sand hills, shutting the ranch from sight, the twilight fell, and with it came sharp gusts of wind that now and then brought a whirl of desert dust. Harder and harder it blew. Nearer and nearer—then it fell upon them in its malevolence, to catch them—to hold them in its uncanny clasp an instant—and then, releasing them, go madly racing off to the farther twilight, moaning in undertone as it went. Then heat lightning struck vividly at the horizon, and the air everywhere became surcharged with the electric current of a desert sand storm. They heard its roar coming up the valley. Audrey Glendower felt her nerves a-tingle. This, too, was an experience! In sheer

delight she laughed aloud at the excitement showing in the quivering horses—their ears nervously pointing forward, and their nostrils distended, as with long, eager strides they pounded away over the wind-beaten levels.

Then the storm caught them at its wildest. Suddenly a tumbleweed, dry and uprooted from its slight moorings somewhere away on the far side of the flats, came whirling toward them broadside in the vortex of a mad rush of wind in which—without warning—they were in an instant enveloped. As the great, rolling, ball-like weed struck her horse, Miss Glendower took a tighter grip on the reins and steadied herself for the runaway rush into the dust storm and the darkness. The wild wind caught her, shrieked in her ears, tore at her habit as though to wrest it from her body, dragged at the braids of heavy hair until—loosened—the strands whipped about her head, a tangled mass of stinging lashes.

She was alone—drawn into the maelstrom of the mad element; alone—with the fury of the desert storm; alone—in the awful darkness it wrapped about her, the darkness of the strange storm and the darkness of the coming night. The frightened, furious horse beneath her terrified her less than the weird, rainless storm that had so swiftly slipped in between her and Mesquite, carrying her away into its unknown depths. Where was he? In spite of the mastering fear that was gaining upon her, in spite of her struggle for courage, was a consciousness which told her that more than all else—that more than everyone else in the world—it was Mesquite she wanted. Had others, to the number of a great army, ridden down to her rescue she would have turned away from them all to reach out

her arms to the boy vaquero. Perhaps it was because she had seen his marvelous feats of daring in the saddle (for Mesquite was the star rider of the range), and she felt instinctively that he could help her as none other; perhaps it was because of the past days that had so drawn him toward her; perhaps (and most likely) it was because he had but just been at her side. However it might be, she was praying with all her soul for his help—for him to come to her—while mile after mile she rode on, unable to either guide or slacken the stride of her horse. His pace had been terrific; and not until it had carried him out of the line of the storm, and up from the plain into the sand hills, did he lessen his speed. Then the hoofs were dragged down by the heavy sand, and the storm's strength—all but spent—was left away back on the desert.

She felt about her only the softest of West winds; the dust that had strangled her was gone, and in its place was the syringa-like fragrance of the wild, white primroses, star-strewing the earth, as the heavens were strewn with their own night blossoms.

Just above the purple-black bar of the horizon burned a great blood-red star in the sky. It danced and wavered before her—rising and falling unsteadily—and she realized that her strength was spent—that she was falling. Then, just as the loosened girth let the saddle turn with her swaying body, a hand caught at her bridle-rein, and——

Ah, she was lying sobbing and utterly weak, but unutterably happy, on Mesquite's breast—Mesquite's arms about her! She made no resistance to the passionate kisses the boyish lips laid half fearfully on her face. She was only glad of the sweetness of

it all; just as the sweetness of the evening primroses (so like the fragrance of jasmine, or tuberose, or syringa) sunk into her senses. So she rested against his breast, seeing still—through closed eyelids—the glowing, red star. She was unstrung by the wild ride and the winds that had wrought on her nerves. It made yielding so easy.

At last she drew back from him; and instantly his arms were unlocked. She was free! Not a second of time would he clasp her unwillingly. Neither had spoken. Nor, after resetting the saddle, when he took her again in his arms and lifted her, as he would a little child, upon her horse, did they speak. Only when the ranch buildings—outlined against the darkness—showed dimly before them, and they knew that the ride was at an end, did he voice what was uppermost in his mind.

“Yo’ don’t—— Yo’ ain’t—— Oh, my pretty, yo’ ain’t mad at me, are yo’?”

“No, Mesquite,” came the softly whispered answer.

“I’m glad o’ that. Shore, I didn’t mean fur to go an’ do sech a thing; but—— Gawd! I couldn’t help it.”

But when lifting her down at the ranch-house gate he would have again held her sweetness a moment within his clasp, Miss Glendower (she was once again Miss Glendower of the great world) let her cool, steady voice slip between:

“The letter I got tonight is from the man I am to marry in a week. He will be here tomorrow. But, I want to tell you—— Mesquite—— I want you to know that I—I shall always remember this ride of ours. Always.”

Mesquite did not answer.

“Good-night, Mesquite.” She waited. Still there was no reply.

Mesquite led the horses away and Miss Glendower turned and went into the house. Being an uneducated cowboy he was remiss in many matters of courtesy.

When Lawrence Irving arrived at the Madison ranch, his host, in the list of entertainment he was offering the Bostonian, promised an exhibition of bronco riding that would stir even the beat of that serene gentleman’s well regulated pulse.

“This morning,” said Madison, “I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to get my star bronco buster out for your edification, Lawrence, for the boys have been telling me that he has been ‘hitting the jug’ pretty lively down at the store for the past twenty-four hours (he’s never been much of a drinker, either), but when I told him Miss Glendower wanted to show you the convolutions of a bucking horse, it seemed to sober him up a bit, and he not only promised to furnish the thrills, but to do the business up with all the trimmings on—for he’s going to ride ‘Sobrepaso,’ a big, blaze-face sorrel that they call ‘the man killer,’ and that every vaquero in the country has given up unconquered. Mesquite himself refused to mount him again, some time ago; but today he is in a humor that I can’t quite understand—even allowing for all the bad whiskey that he’s been getting away with—and seems not only ready but eager to tackle anything.”

“I’m grateful to you, Rob,” began Irving, “for——”

“Oh, you’ll have to thank Audrey for the show! Mesquite is doing it solely for her sake. He has been her abject slave ever since she came.”

Both men laughed and looked at Miss Glendower, who did not even smile. It might have been that she did not hear them. They rose and went out to the shaded piazza where it was cooler. The heat was making Miss Glendower look pale.

They, and the ranch hands who saw “Sobrepaso” (“the beautiful red devil,” Mrs. Madison called him) brought out into the gray, hard beaten square that formed the arena, felt a thrill of nervous expectancy—a chilling thrill—as Mesquite made ready to mount. The horse was blindfolded ere the saddle was thrown on; but with all the fury of a fiend he fought—in turn—blanket, and saddle, and cincha. The jaquima was slipped on, the stirrups tied together under the horse’s belly, and all the while his squeals of rage and maddened snorts were those of an untamed beast that would battle to the death. The blind then was pulled up from his eyes, and—at the end of a sixty-foot riata—he was freed to go bucking and plunging in a fury of uncontrolled wrath around the enclosure. At last sweating and with every nerve twitching in his mad hatred of the meddling of Man he was brought to a standstill, and the blind was slipped down once more. He stood with all four feet braced stiffly, awkwardly apart, and his head down, while Mesquite hitched the cartridge belt (from which hung his pistol’s holster) in place; tightened the wide-brimmed, battered hat on his head; slipped the strap of a quirt on his wrist; looked at the fastenings of his big-rowelled, jingling spurs; and then (with a quick, upward glance at Miss Glendower—the first he had

given her) he touched caressingly a little bunch of white primroses he had plucked that morning from their bed in the sand hills and pinned to the lapel of his unbuttoned vest.

Mesquite had gathered the reins into his left hand, and was ready for his cat-like spring into place. His left foot was thrust into the stirrup—there was the sweep of a long leg thrown across the saddle—a sinuous swing into place, and Mesquite—“the star rider of the range” had mounted the man killer. Quickly the blind was whipped up from the blood-shot eyes, the spurred heels gripped onto the cincha, there was a shout from his rider and a devilish sound from the mustang as he made his first upward leap, and then went madly fighting his way around and around the enclosure.

Mesquite sat the infuriated animal as though he himself were but a part of the sorrel whirlwind. His seat was superb. Miss Glendower felt a tremor of pride stir her as she watched him—pride that her lover should witness this matchless horsemanship. She was panting between fear and delight while she watched the boy’s face (wearing the sweet, boyish smile—like, yet so unlike—the smile she had come to know in the past weeks), and the yellow curls blowing back from the bared forehead.

“Sobrepaso” rose in his leaps to great heights—almost falling backward—to plunge forward, with squeals of rage that he could not unseat his rider. The boy sat there, a king—king of his own little world, while he slapped at the sorrel’s head and withers with the sombrero that swung in his hand. Plunging and leaping, round and round—now here and now there—about the enclosure they went, the horse a mad hurricane and

his rider a centaur. Mesquite was swayed back and forth, to and fro, but no surge could unseat him. Miss Glendower grew warm in her joy of him as she looked.

Then, somehow (as the “man killer” made another great upward leap) the pistol swinging from Mesquite’s belt was thrown from its holster, and—striking the cantle of the saddle as it fell—there was a sharp report, and a cloud-like puff (not from the dust raised by beating hoofs), and a sound (not the terrible sounds made by a maddened horse), and the boy swayed backward—backward—with the boyish smile chilled on his lips, and the wet, yellow curls blowing back from his white forehead that soon would grow yet whiter.

Miss Glendower did not faint, neither did she scream; she was one with her emotions held always well in hand, and she expressed the proper amount of regret the occasion required—shuddering a little over its horror. But to this day (and she is Mrs. Lawrence Irving now) she cannot look quite steadily at a big, red star that sometimes burns in the West at early eve; and the scent of tuberose, or jasmine, or syringa makes her deathly sick.



THE REVOLT OF MARTHA SCOTT

HERE was nothing pleasing in the scene. It was in that part of the vast West where a gray sky looked down upon the grayer soil beneath; where neither brilliant birds nor bright blossoms, nor glittering rivulets made lovely the place in which human beings went up and down the earth daily performing those labors that made the sum of what they called life. Neither tree nor shrub, nor spear of grass showed green with the healthy color of plant-life. As far as the eye could reach was the monotonous gray of sagebrush, and greasewood, and sand. The muddy river, with its myriad curves, ran between abrupt banks of soft alkali ground, where now and then as it ate into the confining walls, portions would fall with a loud splash into the water. A hurrying, treacherous river—with its many silent eddies—it turned and twisted and doubled on itself a thousand times as it wound its way down the valley. Here, where it circled in a great curve called “Scott’s Bend,” the waters were always being churned by the ponderous wheel of a little quartz-mill, painted by storm and sunshine in the leaden tones of its sad-colored surroundings.

On the bluff above, near the ore platform, were grouped a dozen houses. Fenceless, they faced the mill, which day after

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