

# **Agua Dulce**

Mary Austin

# Table of Contents

<u>Agua Dulce</u> .....	1
<u>Mary Austin</u> .....	1

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THE Los Angeles special got in so late that day that if the driver of the Mojave stage had not, from having once gone to school to me, acquired the habit of minding what I said, I should never have made it. I hailed it from the station, and he swung the four about in the wide street as the wind swept me toward the racked old coach in a blinding whirl of dust.

It wrapped my skirts about the iron gear of the coach as I climbed to the seat beside the driver, and, as we dropped the town behind us, lifted my hat and searched out my hairpins. But it was the desert wind Note: [illustration omitted] and the smell it carried was the smell of marrow-fat weed and gilies after the sun goes down; so, because I had been very unhappy away from it, and was now drunk with the joy of renewal, and as in my case there would be no time for a toilet proper to the road until we came to the Eighteen-Mile House, I was satisfied merely to cling to the pitching front of the coach and let the wind do what it would. The sky was alight and saffron-tinted, the mountains bloomed with violet shadows; as we came whirling by the point of Dead-Man we saw the wickiups of the Paiutes, and the little hearth fires all awink among the sage. They had a look of home.

"There's some," said the driver to the desert at large, "that thinks Indians ain't properly folks, but just a kind of cattle;" then, as we jolted forward in a chuck, he swore deeply and brought the team about, putting back my instinctive motion to steady the lurching stage with a gesture so sharp and repellent that I sat up suddenly in offence.

"Don't you go for to mind me," he said, only half mindful himself of what he had done, and went on staring after the hearth fires of the Paiutes. By which I knew there was a story there that had something to do with the twilight fires and the homey look of the little huts. Hours later, when we came out on the mesa above Red Rock, white star-froth flecking the black vault over us and the road white between the miles of low black sage before, we had got to this point in it.

"It was out there," he said, waving his whip toward the gulf of blackness, "when I was doin' assessment work for McKenna, nigh to the end of nowhere, I . . . took up with an Indian woman." He hurried past this admission with intent to cover it from possible reproach, telling how McKenna had dumped him with three months' grub by a water-hole called Agua Dulce, distant a mile or two from the claims he was expected to work.

"Because," he said, "it was cheaper than packin' water, me bein' alone, and McKenna, for some reason I never rightly guessed, keen to keep the business on the quiet. McKenna would be visitin' me once a month or so, and I 'lowed I wouldn't be lonesome much," he laughed, "and I didn't after I . . . took up with Catameneda.

"Seems like white women can't get to understand why a man takes up with a mahala. They think it's just badness and so they're down on it . . . maybe it is with some. . . . but not when they are like . . . like me . . . and Catameneda. . . . There's something away down in a man that his own womenfolks never understand . . . an' you spend all your life trying to keep them from understanding . . . though when there's one that does she plays hell with you. . . . It ain't badness. . . . I don't know rightly what, only it ain't all bad . . . but Catameneda . . . she understood . . . and I was glad to have her."

## Agua Dulce

The wind died along the sage and there was no sound under heaven louder than the grind of the wheels and the clink of the harness chains. Presently he returned upon his track to say that he had been a month at Agua Dulce, going and returning from the mines each day to his little camp kit, laid under a square of canvas with stones upon it to keep it from the wind. He had cached the bulk of his supplies behind the spring and congratulated himself on it when at the close of one day he found a camp of Indians at Agua Dulce.

"You know how it is with these desert tribes," said the stage-driver, "every camp looks as if it might have been there for a hundred years, and when they go there's no more left than a last year's bird-nest. They just scramble up out of nothing and melt away in the sand like a horned toad. But they was friendly . . . sort of . . . when you got to know them . . . and the men talked English considerable. . . . Evenings, when a kind of creepy chill comes on, they get around their little fires and crack their jokes . . . good jokes, too . . . there was one old buck real comical . . . he used to explain them in English afterward. And when they sang their songs . . . when the fires were lit and the voices came out of the dark, and you couldn't see the dirt nor the color of their skins, you would sort of forget they wasn't your own folks.

"And so," he said after a longer silence, "when the camp went on another pasear . . . Catameneda . . . she stayed." That was all I was ever to know of that phase of it. "Catameneda . . . stayed." That and the flicker in his voice cast up from the things in him that only the Indian woman could understand, that lit the situation through his scanty speech like the glow of those vanished fires.

. . . "It was a sort of pretty place at Agua Dulce," said he. "The spring came out from the black rock into a basin with a gurgly sound. There was a pink flowering bush behind it and a smitch of green where it ran over into the sand . . . and the rest was sage-brush, little and low; and crumply, colored hills. There were doves came and built in the flowering shrubs, for they hadn't no fear of man . . . and 'Maneda, she fed them."

He was silent, letting his whip-lash trail outside in the sand, and I had a long time in which to consider how young he was, and how much younger he must have been when he drank sweet water out there at Agua Dulce, before he began again.

"She was mighty lovin'," he said, and suddenly I saw the whole tale, as I had constructed it ahead of his halting speech, fall apart and rebuild itself to a larger plan as he went on to say how, when he came from the mine at night and had no caress for her, she would begin to droop and to grieve, to flood with tears and heavy sobbing like a hurt child, which he could still in a moment with a hand upon her hair. And how he would pretend a harshness at times, to see her flash and glow with the assurance of tenderness renewed, which he laughed at her for never learning. Sweet water indeed, at Agua Dulce!

By this time I knew the story had come to some uncommon end that lifted it beyond the vulgar adventure of satiety and desertion, for there was no yellowness in the boy that he should blab upon the tenderness of women. There was a good hour yet until we came to Coyote Holes, and I meant to have it all out of him by then. The end had come very quickly. It began in their growing careless through happiness and neglecting the cache. Then one day when he was at the mine, and Catameneda setting snares for quail in the black rock, a thieving prospector rifled it and left them wofully short of food. Five days of desertness lay between them and any possible base of supplies, and McKenna was not due until the twenty-ninth. They took stock and decided to hold out on short rations until he came. They were very merry about it, being so young, and Catameneda knew the way to piece out their fare with roots and herbs. She promised him he should learn to eat lizards yet, as Indians do. And then suddenly the boy fell sick of a dysentery, which he thought might have come from some mistaken economy of Catameneda's in the matter of canned food. And while he was prostrated with that, came the sand-storm. The girl had sensed it, Indian fashion, days before it came, but he was loggy with weakness and the want of proper care, and let her warning pass. Then came a night of gusty flaws; the morning showed a wall of yellow cloud advancing on them from the south.

## Agua Dulce

All that country around Agua Dulce is solid rock, and fluctuant sand that moves before the wind with a small shrill rustle, and no trail can lie in it when the wind blows more than twenty–four hours. On this occasion it blew for three days.

"Time was," said the driver, "I'd lie awake nights to mill it over and over. Times I'd think I could have done better, times again I didn't know as I could. I was too sick to think much and 'Maneda was mighty uneasy, all for gettin' forward on the trail to meet McKenna who would be comin' toward us. She calculated he would stop at Beeman's till the storm was past, not knowin' we were short. And the wind would blow three days. I don't know how she knew, but she knew. She kept holding up her fingers to show me how many days, and forgetting what English I had taught her; and between that and me being fair locoed with sickness, I gave in. I don't know if we wouldn't have done better to stick it out at Agua Dulce. And again I don't know as we would."

They took the canteen and such food as they had and set out for the next water–hole; by noon the sand–storm overtook them. The push of the wind was steady and they tacked along the edge of it without too much discomfort. The boy was pitifully weak, and Catameneda laughed as she braced him with her firm young body. The dark fell early, the wind increased and roared against them, the boy chilled in the night, grew feverish, and Catameneda was reduced to hiding the canteen to save their scanty drink. By all counts they should have reached the first water–hole that day, but did not until the next noon. And the storm had been before them. The sand lay clean white and drifted smooth over all that place. Come another winter, the spring would work its way to the surface perhaps, but now they could not so much as guess where to dig for it. They walked on and on, Catameneda leading with his hand in hers. This day they faced the wind. The girl's hair blew back and he held it to his eyes to shield them from the tormenting sting of the sand. The water and food held out better than he expected.

He said that he thought Catameneda must have waked him in the night when there was a lull in the wind, for he seemed to remember crawling long distances on hands and knees, and other times he leaned upon her body and heard her voice, but did not seem to see her. Always they travelled in a fury of wind and a biting smother of sand.

"I don't know how 'Maneda pulled me through," he said, "but she did. All I remember was the beginning of the basalt wall at the root of Black Mountain, and right away after that the drip of the spring, though it's two mile from where the rock begins. I was long past bein' hungry, but I jest naturally swallowed in that water; and it ain't any great water neither, not like the water at Agua Dulce. But Catameneda she didn't seem to care for none."

He paused so long here that if I had not known his kind very well I should have thought it all the story he meant to let me have, but at last:

"I reckon I was light–headed," he said, "else I should have sensed what was the matter, but I don't know but it was best as it was. I couldn't have done nothin'. We lay on the sand far spent and sick, the wind was going down and we could breathe better under the wall. I heard her kind of choke up every little, and by and by she was talking quiet–like, in her own language, and I made out she wanted her mother . . . she wasn't more than seventeen, I should think. . . . It was cold, too, and I'd lost my blanket somewhere back on the trail, not bein' able to say where. . . . I snuggled her up in my arms, kind of shivery–like . . . and by and by . . . she knew me, puttin' her hand up to my face a way she had . . . and sayin' in English, as I had taught her . . . 'Vera good boy, mucha like.' . . . And it didn't seem no time at all after that when it was broad morning and the wind was down . . . her hair on my face . . . and she was heavy on my arm. . . ."

"I sat up and laid her on the sand. . . . It was too much for her . . . all she had been through . . . bein' so young . . . and she had given me all the food and all the water . . . though I hadn't felt to know it before. I knew it as soon as I looked at her. . . . I reckon she had a hemorrhage or something . . . there was blood on her face and sleeves like she wiped it from her mouth."

## Agua Dulce

Out in the blackness toward Agua Dulce a coyote howled, and night freshened for a sign of morning.

"McKenna came through by noon and we buried her," he finished, simply, "under a pink flowering bush because she loved it. I worked on a ranch in the valley for two years after that. . . . I couldn't Note: [illustration omitted] seem to abide the desert for a spell . . . nor the little fires . . . but I got over that . . . you know how that is."

"Yes, I know how that is."

"But I don't suppose anybody knows," he went on, reflectively, "how it is that I don't think of her dead any more, nor any of that hard time we had . . . only sometimes when it's spring like this and I smell sage-brush burning . . . it reminds me . . . of some loving way she had out there . . . at Agua Dulce."

A man's story like that is always so much more satisfactory because he tells you all the story there is, what happened to him and how he felt about it, supposing his feelings are any part of the facts in the case, but with a woman it is not so. She never knows much about her feelings unless they are pertinent to the story, and then she leaves them out.