

The Light of Western Stars

A Romance
By Zane Grey

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"I MET A LADY"

SYNOPSIS.—Arriving at the lonely little railroad station of El Cajon, New Mexico, Madeline Hammond, New York society girl, finds no one to meet her. While in the waiting room, a drunken cowboy enters, asks if she is married, and departs, leaving her terrified. He returns with a priest, who goes through some sort of ceremony, and the cowboy forces her to say "gl." Asking her name and learning her identity the cowboy seems dazed. In a shooting scrape outside the room a Mexican is killed. The cowboy lets a girl, Bonita, take his horse and escape, then conducts Madeline to Florence Kingsley, friend of her brother. Florence welcomes her, learns her story, and dismisses the cowboy, Gene Stewart. Next day Alfred Hammond, Madeline's brother, takes Stewart to task. Madeline exonerates him of any wrong intent. Alfred, son of a wealthy family, had been dismissed from his home because of his dissipation. Madeline sees that the West has redeemed him. She meets Stillwell, Al's employer, typical western ranchman.

CHAPTER III—Continued.

"Wal, wal, Al, this 's the proudest meetin' of my life," replied Stillwell, in a booming voice. He extended a huge hand. "Miss—Miss Majesty, sight of you is as welcome as the rain an' the flowers in an old desert cattleman."

Madeline greeted him, and it was all she could do to repress a cry at the way he crunched her hand in a grasp of iron. He was old, white-haired, weather-beaten, with long furrows down his cheeks and with gray eyes almost hidden in wrinkles. If he was smiling she fancied it a most extraordinary smile. The next instant she realized that it had been a smile, for his face appeared to stop rippling, the light died, and suddenly it was like rudely chiseled stone. The quality of hardness she had seen in Stewart was immeasurably intensified in this old man's face.

"Miss Majesty, it's plumb humilatin' to all of us that we wasn't on hand to meet you," Stillwell said. "I'm sure afraid it was a bit unpleasant for you last night at the station. Wal, I'm some glad to tell you that there's no man in these parts except your brother that I'd as lief hev met you as Gene Stewart."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, an' that's takin' into consideration Gene's weakness, too. I'm allus fond of sayin' of myself that I'm the last of the old gentlemen. Wal, Stewart's not a native westerner, but he's my pick of the last of the cowboys. Sure, he's young, but he's the last of the old style—the picturesque—an' ehvalrous, too. I make bold to say, Miss Majesty, as well as the old hard-ridin' kind. Folks are down on Stewart. An' I'm only sayin' a good word for him because he is down, an' mebbe last night he might hev scared you, you bein' fresh from the East."

Madeline liked the old fellow for his loyalty to the cowboy he evidently cared for; but as there had not seem anything for her to say, she remained silent.

"Miss Majesty, I reckon, bein' as you're in the West now, that you must take things as they come, an' mind



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each thing a little less than the one before. If we old fellers hedn't been that way we'd never hev lasted.

"Last night wasn't particular bad, rattin' with some other nights lately. There wasn't much doin'." But I had a hard knock. Yesterday when we started in with a bunch of cattle I sent one of my cowboys, Danny Mains, along ahead, carryin' money I hed to pay off hands an' my bills, an' I wanted that money to get in town before dark. Wal, Danny was held up. I don't distrust the lad. There's been strange Greausers in town lately, an'

mebbe they knew about the money comin'.

"Wal, when I arrived with the cattle I was some put to it to make ends meet. An' today I wasn't in no angelic humor. When I hed my business all done I went around pokin' my nose beah an' there, tryin' to get scent of that money. An' I happened in at a hall we hev that does duty for jail an' hospital an' election-post an' what not. Wal, just then it was doin' duty as a hospital. Last night was fiest night—these Greausers hev a fiesta every week or so—an' one Greauser who had been had hurt was layin' in the hall, where he hed been fetched from the station.

"The hall was full of cowboys, ranchers, Greausers, miners, an' town folks, along with some strangers. I was about to get started up this way when Pat Hawe come in.

"Pat, he's the sheriff. He come into the hall, an' he was roarin' about things. He was goin' to arrest Danny Mains on sight. Wal, I jest polite-like told Pat that the money was mine an' he needn't get riled about it. An' if I wanted to trail the thief I reckon I could do it as well as anybody.

"Then he cooled down a bit an' was askin' questions about the wounded Greauser when Gene Stewart comes in. Whenever Pat an' Gene come together it reminds me of the early days back in the 'seventies. Jest naturally everybody shut up. Fer Pat hates Gene, an' I reckon Gene ain't very sweet on Pat.

"Hello Stewart! You're the feller I'm lookin' fer," said Pat. "There was some queer goings-on last night that you know somethin' about. Danny Mains robbed—Stillwell's money gone—your roan horse gone—an' this Greauser gone, too. Now, seein' that you was up late an' prowlin' round the station where this Greauser was found, it ain't unreasonable to think you might know how he got plugged—is it?"

"Stewart laughed kind of cold, an' he rolled a cigarette, all the time eyein' Pat, an' then he said if he'd plugged the Greauser it'd never hev been sich a bunglin' job.

"I can arrest you on suspicion, Stewart, but before I go that far I want some evidence. I want to find out what's become of your boss. You've never lent him since you hed him, an' there ain't enough raiders across the border to steal him from you. It's got a queer look—that boss bein' gone. You was drunk last night?"

"Stewart never batted an eye.

"You met some woman on Number Eight, didn't you?" shouted Hawe.

"I met a lady," replied Stewart, quiet an' menacin' like.

"You met Al Hammond's sister, an' you took her up to Kingsley's. An' cinch this, my cowboy cavalier, I'm goin' up there an' ask this grand dame some questions, an' if she's as close-mouthed as you are I'll arrest her!"

Gene Stewart turned white. I fer one expected to see him jump like lightnin', as he does when he's riled sudden. But he was calm an' he was thinkin' hard. Presently he said:

"Pat, that's a fool idee, an' if you do the trick it'll hurt you all the rest of your life. There's absolutely no reason to frighten Miss Hammond. An' tryin' to arrest her would be sich a d-d outrage as won't be stood fer in El Cajon. If you're sore on me send me to jail. I'll go. If you want to hurt Al Hammond, go an' do it some man kind of way. Don't take your spite out on us by insultin' a lady who has come hyar to hev a little visit. We're had enough without bein' low-down as Greausers."

"It was a long talk for Gene, an' I was as surprised as the rest of the fellers. It was plain to me an' others who spoke of it afterward that Pat Hawe hed forgotten the law an' the officer in the man an' his hate.

"I'm a-goin', an' I'm a-goin' right now!" he shouted.

"Stewart seemed kind of chokin', an' he seemed to hev been bewildered by the idee of Hawe's confrontin' you.

"An' finally he burst out: 'But, man, think who it is! It's Miss Hammond! If you see her, even if you was locoed or drunk, you—couldn't do it!'

"'Couldn't I? Wal, I'll show you d-n quick. What do I care who she is? Them swell eastern women—I've heard of them. They're not so much. This Hammond woman—'

"Suddenly Hawe shut up, an' with his red mug turnin' green he went for his gun."

Stillwell paused in his narrative to get breath, and he wiped his moist brow. And now his face began to lose its craginess. It changed, it softened, it rippled and wrinkled, and all that strange mobility focused and shone in a wonderful smile.

"An' then, Miss Majesty, then there was somethin' happened. Stewart took Pat's gun away from him and throwed it on the floor. An' what followed was beautiful. Sure it was the beautifullest sight I ever seen. Only it was over so soon! A little while after, when the doctor came, he hed another patient besides the wounded Greauser, an' he said that this new one would require about four months to be up an' around cheerfull-like again. An' Gene

Stewart hed hit the trail for the border."

CHAPTER IV

A Ride From Sunrise to Sunset.

Next morning, when Madeline was aroused by her brother, it was not yet daybreak; the air chilled her, and in the gray gloom she had to feel around for matches and lamp. Her usual languid manner vanished at a touch of the cold water. Presently, when Alfred knocked on her door and said he was leaving a pitcher of hot water outside, she replied, with chattering teeth, "Th-thank y-you, b-but I d-don't need any now." She found it necessary, however, to warm her numb fingers before she could fasten hooks and



"Well, if I Haven't Some Color!" She Exclaimed.

buttons. And when she was dressed she marked in the dim mirror that there were tinges of red in her cheeks.

"Well, if I haven't some color!" she exclaimed.

Breakfast waited for her in the dining-room. The sisters ate with her. Madeline quickly caught the feeling of brisk action that seemed to be in the air. Then Alfred came stamping in.

"Majesty, here's where you get the real thing," he announced, merrily. "We're rushing you off. I'm sorry to say; but we must hustle back to the ranch. The fall round-up begins tomorrow. You will ride in the buckboard with Florence and Stillwell. I'll ride on ahead with the boys and fix up a little for you at the ranch. It's a long ride out—nearly fifty miles by wagon-road. Flo, don't forget a couple of robes. Wrap her up well. And hustle getting ready. We're waiting."

A little later, when Madeline went out with Florence, the gray gloom was lightening. Horses were champing bits and pounding gravel.

"Mawnin', Miss Majesty," said Stillwell, gruffly, from the front seat of a high vehicle.

Alfred bundled her up into the back seat, and Florence after her, and wrapped them with robes. Then he mounted his horse and started off.

As Madeline gazed about her and listened to her companions, the sun rose higher and grew warm and soared and grew hot; the horses held tirelessly to their steady trot, and mile after mile of rolling land slipped by.

From the top of a ridge Madeline saw down into a hollow where a few of the cowboys had stopped and were sitting round a fire, evidently busy at the noonday meal. Their horses were feeding on the long, gray grass.

"Wal, smell of that burnin' grease-water makes my mouth water," said Stillwell. "I'm sure hungry. We'll noon hyar an' let the hosses rest. It's a long pull to the ranch."

During lunch-time Madeline observed that she was an object of manifest great interest to the three cowboys. She returned the compliment, and was amused to see that a glance their way caused them painful embarrassment. They were grown men—one of whom had white hair—yet they acted like boys caught in the act of stealing a forbidden look at a pretty girl.

"Cowboys are sure all flirts," said Florence, as if stating an uninteresting fact. But Madeline detected a merry twinkle in her clear eyes. The cowboys heard, and the effect upon them was magical. They fell to shamed confusion and to hurried useless tasks.

"Haw, haw!" roared Stillwell. "Florence, you jest hit the nail on the head. Cowboys are all plumb flirts. I was wonderin' why them boys nooned hyar. This ain't no place to noon. Ain't no grazin' or wood burnin' or nuttin'. Them boys jest held up, throwed the packs an' waited fer us. It ain't so surprisin' fer Booty an' Ned—they're young an' coltish—but Nels there, why, he's old enough to be the paw of both you girls. It sure is amazin' strange."

A silence ensued. The white-haired cowboy, Nels, fussed aimlessly over the campfire, and then straightened up with a very red face.

"Bill, you're a dog-gone liar," he said. "I reckon I won't stand to be classed with Booty an' Ned. There ain't no cowboy on this range that's more appreciatin' of the ladies than me, but I shore ain't ridin' out of my way. I reckon I hev enough ridin' to do. Now, Bill, if you've sich dog-gone good eyes mebbe you seen somethin' on the way out?"

"Nels, I hev't seen nothin'," he replied, bluntly.

"Jest take a squint at these hoss tracks," said Nels, and he drew Stillwell a few paces aside and pointed to large hoofprints in the dust. "I reckon you know the hoss that made them?"

"Gene Stewart's roan, or I'm a son-of-a-gun!" exclaimed Stillwell, and he dropped heavily to his knees and began to scrutinize the tracks. Nels, whoever was straddlin' Stewart's boss met somebody. An' they hauled up a bit, but didn't git down."

"Tolerable good for you, Bill, thet reasonin'," replied the cowboy. "I reckon you know what hoss made the other tracks?"

"I'm thinkin' hard, but I ain't sure." "It was Danny Mains' bronc." "How do you know that?" demanded Stillwell, sharply.

"Bill, the left front foot of that little hoss always wears a shoe that sets crooked. Any of the boys can tell you. I'd know that track if I was blind."

"Nels, you don't think the boy's sloped with that little hussy, Bonita?"

"Bill, he shore was sweet on Bonita, same as Gene was, an' Ed Linton before he got engaged, an' all the boys. She's shore chain-lightnin', that little black-eyed devil. Danny might hev sloped with her all right. Danny was held up on the way to town, an' then in the shame of it he got drunk. But he'll show up soon."

"Wal, mebbe you an' the boys are right. I believe you are. Nels, there ain't no doubt on earth about who was ridin' Stewart's boss?"

"That's as plain as the hoss' tracks." "Wal, it's all amazin' strange. It beats me. I wish the boys would ease up on drinkin'. I was pretty fond of Danny an' Gene. I'm afraid Gene's done fer, sure. If he crosses the border where he can fight it won't take long fer him to get plugged. I guess I'm gettin' old. I don't stand things like I used to."

"Bill, I reckon I'd better hit the Pelonchillo trail. Mebbe I can find Danny."

"I reckon you had, Nels," replied Stillwell. "But don't take more'n a couple of days. We can't do much on the round-up without you. I'm short of boys."

That ended the conversation. Stillwell immediately began to hitch up his team, and the cowboys went out to fetch their strayed horses. Madeline had been curiously interested, and she saw that Florence knew it.

"Things happen, Miss Hammond," she said, soberly, almost sadly.

Madeline thought, and then straightaway Florence began brightly to hum a tune and to busy herself repacking what was left of the lunch. Madeline suddenly conceived a strong liking and respect for this Western girl.

Soon they were once more bowing along the road down a gradual incline, and then they began to climb a long ridge that had for hours hidden what lay beyond. That climb was rather tiresome, owing to the sun and the dust and the restricted view.

Presently, at the top of the steep ascent, Stillwell got out and walked, leading the team. During this long climb fatigue claimed Madeline, and she drowsily closed her eyes, to find when she opened them again that the glaring white sky had changed to a steel-blue. The sun had sunk behind the foothills and the air was growing chilly. Stillwell had returned to the driving-seat and was chuckling to the horses. Shadows crept up out of the hollows.

"Wal, Flo," said Stillwell. "I reckon we'd better hev the rest of that there lunch before dark."

"You didn't leave much of it," laughed Florence, as she produced the basket from under the seat.

While they ate, the short twilight shaded and gloom filled the hollows. Madeline was glad to have the robes close around her and to lean against Florence. There were drowsier spells in which she lost a feeling of where she was, and these were disturbed by the jolt of wheels over a rough place. Then came a blank interval, short or long, which ended in a more violent lurch of the buckboard. Madeline awoke to find her head on Florence's shoulder. She sat up laughing and apologizing for her laziness. Florence assured her they would soon reach the ranch.

CHAPTER V

The Round-Up.

It was a crackling and roaring of fire that awakened Madeline next morning, and the first thing she saw was a huge stone fireplace in which lay a bundle of blazing sticks. Some one had kindled a fire while she slept. For a moment the curious sensation of being lost returned to her. She just dimly remembered reaching the ranch and being taken into a huge house and a huge, dimly lighted room. And it seemed to her that she had gone to sleep at once, and had awakened without remembering how she had gotten to bed.

With a knock on the door and a cheerful greeting, Florence entered, carrying steaming hot water.

"Good mawnin', Miss Hammond. Hope you slept well. You sure were tired last night. I imagine you'll find this old ranch-house as cold as a barn. It'll warm up directly. Al's gone with the boys and Bill. We're to ride down on the range after a while when your baggage comes. Breakfast will be ready soon, and after that we'll look about the place."

Madeline was charmed with the old

Spanish house, and the more she saw of it the more she thought what a delightful home it could be made. All the doors opened into a courtyard, or patio, as Florence called it. The house was low, in the shape of a rectangle, and so immense in size that Madeline wondered if it had been a Spanish barracks. Florence led the way out on a porch and waved a hand at a vast, colored void. "That's what Bill likes," she said.

At first Madeline could not tell what was sky and what was land. The immensity of the scene stunned her faculties of conception. She sat down in one of the old rocking-chairs and looked and looked, and knew that she was not grasping the reality of what stretched wondrously before her.

"We're up at the edge of the foothills," Florence said. "It'll sure take you a little while to get used to being up high and seeing so much. That's the secret—we're up high, the air is clear, and there's the whole bare world beneath us. Here—see that cloud of dust down in the valley? It's the round-up. The boys are there, and the cattle. Wait, I'll get the glasses."

"The round-up! I want to know all about it—to see it," declared Madeline. "Please tell me what it means, what it's for, and then take me down there."

"It'll sure open your eyes, Miss Hammond. I'm glad you care to know. Your brother would have made a big success in this cattle business if it hadn't been for crooked work by rival ranchers. He'll make it yet, in spite of them."

"Indeed he shall," replied Madeline. "But tell me, please, all about the round-up."

"Well, in the first place, every cattleman has to have a brand to identify his stock. Without it no cattleman, nor half a hundred cowboys, if he had so many, could ever recognize all the cattle in a big herd. There are no fences on our ranges. They are all open to everybody. Every year we have two big round-ups, but the boys do some branding all the year. A calf should be branded as soon as it's found. This is a safeguard against cattle-thieves. We don't have the rustling of herds and bunches of cattle like we used to."

"We have our big round-up in the fall, when there's plenty of grass and water, and all the riding-stock as well as the cattle are in fine shape. The cattlemen in the valley meet with their cowboys and drive in all the cattle they can find. Then they brand and cut out each man's herd and drive it toward home. Then they go on up or down the valley, make another camp, and drive in more cattle. It takes weeks."

For Madeline the morning hours flew by, with a goodly part of the time spent on the porch gazing out over that ever-changing vista. At noon a teamster drove up with her trunks. Then while Florence helped the Mexican women get lunch Madeline unpacked part of her effects and got out things for which she would have immediate need. After lunch she changed her dress for a riding-habit and, going outside, found Florence waiting with the horses.

As Madeline rode along she made good use of her eyes. The soil was sandy and porous, and she understood why the rain and water from the few springs disappeared so quickly. What surprised her was the fact that, though she and Florence had seemed to be riding quite awhile, they had apparently not drawn any closer to the round-up. The slope of the valley was noticeable after some miles had been traversed.

Gradually black dots enlarged and assumed shape of cattle and horses moving round a great dusty patch. In another half-hour Madeline rode behind Florence to the outskirts of the

scene of action. A roar of tramping hoofs filled her ears. The lines of marching cattle had merged into a great, moving herd half obscured by dust.

"I hope I have found myself—my work, my happiness, here under the light of that western star."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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