

The Light of Western Stars

A Romance

By Zane Grey

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CHAPTER XVII—Continued.

—14—

An' I'll bet you a million pesos that if you got goin' onet, an' she seen you as I've seen you—wat, I know what she'd think of you. This old world ain't changed much. Some women may be white-skinned an' soft-eyed an' sweet-voiced an' high-souled, but they all like to see a man! Gene, here's your game. Let Don Carlos come along. Be civil. If he an' his gang are hungry, feed 'em. Take even a little overboardin' Greaser talk. Be blind if he wants his gang to steal somethin'. Let him think the women hev moved down to the ranch. But if he says you're lyin'—if he an' his gang as looks round to see the women—jest jump him same as you jumped Pat Howe. Me an' Monty'll hang back fer that, an' if your strong bluff don't go through, if the Don's gang even thinks of flashin' guns, then we'll open up. An' all I got to say is if them Greasers stand for real gunplay they'll be sure fast I ever seen."

"Nels, there are white men in that gang," said Stewart.

"Shore. But me an' Monty'll be thinkin' of that. If they start anythin' I'll hev to be shore quick."

"All right, Nels, old friend, and thanks," replied Stewart.

Nels returned to the campfire, and Stewart resumed his silent guard.

Madeline's guests sat talking in low voices until a late hour. The incident now began to take on the nature of Helen's long-yearned-for adventure. Some of the party even grew merry in a subdued way. Then, gradually, one by one they tired and went to bed.

To keep from thinking of Stewart and the burning anger he had caused her to feel for herself, Madeline tried to keep her mind on other things. But thought of him recurred, and each time there was a hot commotion in her breast hard to stifle. Intelligent reasoning seemed out of her power. In the daylight it had been possible for her to be oblivious to Stewart's deceit after the moment of its realization. At night, however, in the strange silence and hovering shadows of gloom, with the speaking stars seeming to call to her, with the moan of the wind in the pines, and the melancholy mourn of coyotes in the distance, she was not able to govern her thought and emotion.

She had inadvertently heard Nels' conversation with Stewart; she had listened, hoping to hear some good news or to hear the worst; she had learned both, and, moreover, enlightenment on one point of Stewart's complex motives. He wished to spare her any sight that might offend, frighten, or disgust her. Yet this Stewart, who showed a fineness of feeling that might have been wanting even in Boyd Harvey, maintained a secret rendezvous with that pretty, abandoned Bonita. Here always the hot shame, like a live, stinging, internal fire, abruptly ended Madeline's thought. The hours wore on, and at length, as the stars began to pale and there was no sound whatever, she fell asleep.

She was called out of her slumber. Day had broken bright and cool. The sun was still below the eastern crags. Ambrose, with several other cowboys, had brought up buckets of spring water, and hot coffee and cakes. Madeline's party appeared to be none the worse for the night's experience. Indeed, the meager breakfast might have been as merrily partaken of as it was hungrily had not Ambrose enjoined silence.

"They're expecting company down below," he said.

This information and the summary manner in which the cowboys soon led



"I Promise Not to Make Any Noise" Replied Madeline.

the party higher up among the ruined shelves of rock caused a recurrence of anxiety. Madeline insisted on not going beyond a projection of cliff from which she could see directly down into the camp.

"Ambrose, do you really think the guerrillas will come?" she asked.

"Sure. We know. Nels just rode in and said they were on their way up. Miss Hammond, can I trust you? You won't let out a squeal if there's a fight down there? Stewart told me to hide you out of sight or keep you from lookin'."

"I promise not to make any noise," replied Madeline.

Madeline arranged her coat so that she could lie upon it, and settled down

to wait developments. There came a slight rattling of stones in the rear. She turned to see Helen sliding down a bank with a perplexed and troubled expression. Ambrose sternly and heroically prepared to carry her back to the others. He laid hold of her. In a fury, with eyes blazing, Helen whispered:

"Let go of me! Majesty, what does this fool mean?"

Madeline laughed. She knew Helen, and had marked the whisper, when ordinarily Helen would have spoken imperiously, and not low. Madeline explained to her the exigency of the situation. "I might run, but I'll never scream," said Helen. With that Ambrose had to be content to let her stay. However, he found her a place somewhat further back from Madeline's position, where he said there was less danger of her being seen. Then he sternly bound her to silence, carried a moment to comfort Christine, his wife, acting as maid to the ladies, and returned to where Madeline lay concealed. He had been there scarcely a moment when he whispered:

"I hear hosses. The guerrillas are comin'."

Madeline's hiding place was well protected from possible discovery from below. She could peep over a kind of parapet, through an opening in the tips of the pines that reached up to the cliff, and obtain a commanding view of the camp circle and its immediate surroundings. She could not, however, see far either to right or left of the camp, owing to the obstructing foliage. Presently the sound of horses' hoofs quickened the beat of her pulse and caused her to turn keener gaze upon the cowboys below.

Although she had some inkling of the course Stewart and his men were to pursue, she was not by any means prepared for the indifference she saw. Frank was asleep, or pretended to be. Three cowboys were lazily and unconcernedly attending to campfire duties, such as baking biscuits, watching the ovens, and washing tins and pots. The elaborate set of aluminum plates, cups, etc., together with the other camp fixtures that had done service for Madeline's party, had disappeared. Nick Steele sat with his back to a log, smoking his pipe. Another cowboy had just brought the horses closer into camp, where they stood waiting to be saddled. Nels appeared to be fussing over a pack. Stewart was rolling a cigarette. Monty had apparently nothing to do for the present except whistle, which he was doing much more loudly than melodiously. The whole ensemble gave an impression of careless indifference.

The sound of horses' hoofs grew louder and slower its beat. One of the cowboys pointed down the trail, toward which several of his comrades turned their head for a moment, then went on with their occupations.

Presently a shaggy, dusty horse bearing a lean, ragged, dark rider rode into the camp and halted. Another followed, and another. Horses with Mexican riders came in single file and stopped behind the leader.

"Buenos dias, senor," ceremoniously said the foremost guerrilla.

By straining her ears Madeline heard that voice, and she recognized it as belonging to Don Carlos. Stewart answered the greeting in Spanish, and waving his hand toward the campfire, added in English, "Get down and eat."

The guerrillas were anything but slow in complying. They crowded to the fire, then spread in a little circle and squatted upon the ground, laying their weapons beside them. The cowboys were not cordial in their reception of this visit, but they were hospitable. The law of the desert had always been to give food and drink to wayfaring men, whether lost or hunted or hunting.

"They appear to be friendly enough," whispered Madeline. "Ambrose, tell me—explain to me—the real thing."

"Sure. Gene thinks they're after you ladies—to carry you off. But Gene—Oh, Gene's some highfalutin in his ideas lately. Most of us boys think the guerrillas are out to rob—that's all."

Whatever might have been the secret motive of Don Carlos and his men, they did not allow it to interfere with a hearty appreciation of a generous amount of food. Then, as each and every one began to roll and smoke the inevitable cigarette of the Mexican, there was a subtle change in manner. They smoked and looked about the camp, off into the woods, up at the crags, and back at the leisurely cowboys. They had the air of men waiting for something.

"Senor," began Don Carlos, addressing Stewart. As he spoke he swept his sombrero to indicate the camp circle.

Madeline could not distinguish his words, but his gesture plainly indicated a question in regard to the rest of the camping party. Stewart's reply and the wave of his hand down the trail meant that his party had gone home. Stewart turned to some talk, and the guerrilla leader quietly smoked. He looked cunning and thoughtful. Presently a big-boned man with a bullet head and a blistered red face of evil consciousness got up and threw away his cigarette. He was an American.

"Hey, cull," he called in loud voice "ain't ye gona to cough up a drink?"

"My boys don't carry liquor on the trail," replied Stewart.

"How, law! I heard over in Rodeo that ye was gittin' to be shore some fer temperance," said this fellow. "I hate to drink water, but I guess I've gotter do it."

He went to the spring, sprawled down to drink, and all of a sudden he thrust his arm down in the water to bring forth a basket. The cowboys in the hurry of packing had neglected to remove this basket; and it contained bottles of wine and liquors for Madeline's guests. They had been submerged in the spring to keep them cold. The guerrilla fumbled with the lid, opened it, and then got up, uttering a loud roar of delight.

Stewart made an almost imperceptible motion as if to leap forward; but he checked the impulse. "Guess my party forgot that. You're welcome to it."

Like bees the guerrillas swarmed around the lucky finder of the bottles. The drink did not last long, and it served only to liberate the spirit of



Like Bees the Guerrillas Swarmed Around the Lucky Finder of the Bottles.

recklessness. The several white on-laws began to prow around the camp; some of the Mexicans did likewise; others waited, showing by their ill-concealed expectancy the nature of their thoughts.

It was the demeanor of Stewart and his comrades that puzzled Madeline. Apparently they felt no anxiety or even particular interest. Don Carlos, who had been covertly watching them, now nudged his scrutiny open, even aggressive. The guerrilla leader seemed undecided, but not in any sense puzzled.

In her growing excitement Madeline had not clearly heard Ambrose's low whispers and she made an effort to distract some of her attention from those below to the cowboy crouching beside her.

The quality, the note of Ambrose's whisper had changed. It had a slight sibilant sound.

"Don't be mad if sudden-like I clap my hands over your eyes, Miss Hammond," he was saying. "Somethin' brewin' below. I never seen Gene so cool. That's a dangerous sign in him. And look, see how the boys are workin' together! Oh, it's slow and accident-like, but I know it's sure not accident. That foxy Greaser knows, too. But maybe his men don't. If they are wise they haven't sense enough to care. The Don, though—he's worried. It's Nels and Monty he's watchin'. And well he need to! There, Nick and Frank have settled down on that log with Body. They don't seem to be packin' guns. But look how heavy their vests hang. A gun in each side! Those boys can pull a gun and flop over that log quicker than you can think. Do you notice how Nels and Monty and Gene are square between them guerrillas and the trail up here? It doesn't seem on purpose, but it is. Look at Nels and Monty. How quiet they are confabbin' together, paying no attention to the guerrillas. I see Monty look at Gene, then I see Nels look at Gene. Well, it's up to Gene. And they're goin' to back him, I reckon, Miss Hammond, there'd be dead Greasers round that camp long ago if Nels and Monty were foot-loose. They're beholdin' to Gene. That's plain. And, Lord! how it tickles me to watch them! Both packin' two forty-fives, butts swingin' clear. There's twenty-four shots in them four guns. And there's twenty-three guerrillas. If Nels and Monty ever throw guns at that close range, why, before you'd know what was up there'd be a pile of Greasers. There! Stewart said somethin' to the Don. I wonder what. I'll gamble it was somethin' to get the Don's outfit all close together. Sure! Greasers have no sense. But them white guerrillas, they're lookin' some dubious. What-eva's comin' off will come soon, you can bet. I wish I was down there. But maybe it won't come to a scrap. Stewart's set on avoidin' that. He's a wonderful chap to get his way. Lord, though, I'd like to see him go after that overboardin' Greaser! See! the Don can't stand prosperly. All this strange behavior of cowboys is beyond his pulque-soaked brains. Then he's a Greaser. If Gene doesn't knock him on the head presently he'll begin to

get over his scare, even of Nels and Monty. But Gene'll pick out the right time. Never saw Nels in but one fight, then he just shot a Greaser's arm off for tryin' to draw on him. But I've heard all about him. And Monty! Monty's the real old-fashioned gun-man. What I don't understand is how Monty keeps so quiet and easy and peaceful-like. That's not his way, with such an outfit lookin' for trouble. O-ha! Now for the grand bluff. Looks like no fight at all!"

The guerrilla leader had ceased his restless steps and glances, and turned to Stewart with something of bold resolution in his aspect.

"Gracias, senor," he said. "Adios." He swept his sombrero in the direction of the trail leading down the mountain to the ranch; and as he completed the gesture a smile, crafty and jeering, crossed his swarthy face.

Ambrose whispered so low that Madeline scarcely heard him. "If the Greaser goes that way he'll find our horses and get wise to the trick. Oh, he's wise now! But I'll gamble he never even starts on that trail."

Neither hurriedly nor guardedly Stewart rose out of his leaning posture and took a couple of long strides toward Don Carlos.

"Go back the way you came," he fairly yelled; and his voice had the ring of a bugle.

Ambrose nudged Madeline; his whisper was tense and rapid: "Don't miss nothin'. Gene's called him. What-eva's comin' off will be here quick as lightnin'. See! I guess maybe that Greaser don't savvy good U. S. lingo. Look at that dirty yellow face turn green. Put one eye on Nels and Monty! That's great—just to see 'em. Just as quiet and easy. But oh, the difference! Look and stiff—that means every muscle is like a rawhide riata. They're watchin' with eyes that can see the workin's of them Greasers' minds. Now there ain't a hoss-herd between them Greasers and h—!"

Don Carlos gave Stewart one long malignant stare; then he threw back his head, swept up the sombrero, and his evil smile showed gleaming teeth.

"Senor—" he began.

With magnificent bound Stewart was upon him. The guerrilla's cry was throttled in his throat. A fierce wrestling ensued, too swift to see clearly; then heavy, sodden blows, and Don Carlos was beaten to the ground. Stewart leaped back. Then, crouching with his hands on the butts of guns at his hips, he yelled, he thundered at the guerrillas. He had been quicker than a panther, and now his voice was so terrible that it curdled Madeline's blood, and the menace of deadly violence in his crouching position made her shut her eyes. But she had to open them. In that single instant Nels and Monty had leaped to Stewart's side. Both were bent down, with hands on the butts of guns at their hips. Nels' piercing yell seemed to divide Monty's roar of rage. Then they ceased, and echoes clapped from the crags. The silence of those three men crouching like tigers about to leap was more menacing than the nerve-racking yell.

Then the guerrillas wavered and broke and ran for their horses. Don Carlos rolled over, rose, and staggered away, to be helped upon his mount. He looked back, his pale and bloody face that of a thwarted demon. The whole band got into action and were gone in a moment.

"I knew it," declared Ambrose. "Never seen a Greaser who could face gun-play. That was some warn. And Monty Price never flashed a gun! He'll never get over that. I reckon, Miss Hammond, we're some lucky to avoid trouble. Gene had his way, as you seen. We'll be makin' tracks for the ranch in about two shakes."

"Why?" whispered Madeline, breathlessly. She became conscious that she was weak and shaken.

"Because the guerrillas sure will get their nerve back, and come sneakin' on our trail or try to head us off by ambushin'," replied Ambrose. "That's their way. Otherwise three cowboys couldn't bluff a whole gang like that. Gene knows the nature of Greasers. They're white-livered. But I reckon we're in more danger now than before, unless we get a good start down the mountain. There! Gene's callin'. Come! Hurry!"

Helen had slipped down from her vantage point, and therefore had not seen the last act in that little capture drama. It seemed, however, that her desire for excitement was satisfied, for her face was pale and she trembled when she asked if the guerrillas were gone.

Ambrose hurried the three women over the rough rocks, down the cliff. The cowboys below were saddling horses in haste. Swiftly, with regard only for life and limb, Madeline, Helen, and Christine were lowered by lassoes and half carried down to the level. By the time they were safely down the other members of the party appeared on the cliff above. They were in excellent spirits, appearing to treat the matter as a huge joke.

Ambrose put Christine on a horse and rode away through the pines; Frankie Slade did likewise with Helen. Stewart led Madeline's horse up to her, helped her to mount, and spoke one stern word. "Wait!" Then as fast as one of the women reached the level she was put upon a horse and taken away by a cowboy escort. Few words were spoken. Haste seemed to be the great essential. The horses were urged, and, once in the trail, spurred and led into a swift trot. One cowboy drove up four pack-horses, and these were hurriedly loaded with the party's baggage. Castleton and his companions mounted, and galloped off to catch the others in the lead. This left Madeline behind with Stewart and Nels and Monty.

After that heads near the trail a few miles down," Nels was saying, as he tightened his saddle-girth. "That hollow leads into a big canyon. Once in that, it'll be every man fer hisself. I reckon there won't be anythin' worse than a rough ride."

Nels smiled reassuringly at Madeline, but he did not speak to her. Monty took her canteen and filled it at the spring and hung it over the pommel of her saddle. He put a couple of biscuits in the saddle-bag.

"Don't forget to take a drink an' a bite as you're ridin' along," he said. "An' don't worry, Miss Majesty. Stewart'll be with you, an' me an' Nels hangin' on the back trail."

His somber and sullen face did not change in its strange intensity, but the look in his eyes Madeline felt she would never forget. Left alone with these three men, now stripped of all pretense, she realized how fortune had favored her and what peril still hung in the balance. Stewart swung astride his big black, spurred him, and whistled. At the whistle Majesty jumped, and with swift canter followed Stewart. Madeline looked back to see Nels already up and Monty handing him a rifle. Then the pines hid her view.

Once in the trail, Stewart's horse broke into a gallop. Majesty changed his gait and kept at the black's heels. Stewart called back a warning. The low, wide-spreading branches of trees might brush Madeline out of the saddle. Fast riding through the forest along a crooked, obstructed trail called forth all her alertness.

Before long Stewart wheeled at right angles off the trail and entered a hollow between two low bluffs. Madeline saw tracks in the open patches of ground. Here Stewart's horse took to a brisk walk.

At last Madeline was brought to a dead halt by Stewart and his horse blocking the trail. Looking up, she saw they were at the head of a canyon that yawned beneath and widened its gray-walled, green-patched slopes down to a black forest of fir. Retracting her gaze, Madeline saw pack-horses cross an open space a mile below, and she thought she saw the stag hounds. Stewart's dark eyes searched the slopes high up along the craggy escarpments. Then he put the black to the descent.

He led off to the right, zigzagging an intricate course through the roughest ground Madeline had ever ridden over. He crashed through cedars, threaded a tortuous way among boulders, made his horse slide down slanting banks of soft earth, picked a slow and cautious progress across weathered slopes of loose rock. Madeline followed, finding in this ride a tax on strength and judgment. It was dust and heat, a parching throat, that caused her to think of time; and she was amazed to see the sun sloping to the west. Stewart never stopped; he never looked back; he never spoke.

"After a mile or so of easy travel the ground again began to fall decidedly, sloping in numerous ridges, with draws between. Soon night shadowed the deeper gullies. Madeline was refreshed by the cooling of the air.

Stewart traveled slowly now. The banks of coyotes seemed to startle him. Often he stopped to listen. And during one of those intervals the silence was broken by sharp rifle shots. Madeline could not tell whether they were near or far, to right or left, behind or before. Evidently Stewart was both alarmed and baffled. He dismounted. He went cautiously forward to listen. Madeline fancied she heard a cry, low and far away. It was only that of a coyote, she convinced herself, yet it was so wailing, so human, that she shuddered. Stewart came back. He slipped the bridle of both horses, and he led them. Every few paces he



He Went Cautiously Forward to Listen.

stopped to listen. He changed his direction several times, and the last time he got among rough, rocky ridges. The iron shoes of the horses cracked on the rocks. That sound must have penetrated far into the forest. It perturbed Stewart, for he searched for softer ground. Meanwhile the shadows merged into darkness. The stars shone. The wind rose. Madeline believed hours passed.

In More Modern Times. A girl used to want to know if he had enough to start up housekeeping with; now she wants to know if he has enough to pay alimony.—Cincinnati Enquirer.

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