



THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS

A Romance

by Zane Grey

Illustrations by IRWIN MYERS

CHAPTER XXII—Continued.

He gave her a packet of telegrams. Madeline tore them open with shaking fingers...

"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...

"Link, do you know the roads, the trails—the desert between here and Agua Prieta?" she asked.

"Sure. But it'd take time." "We must do it in little time," she went on, in swift eagerness.

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

"I'm only a—cowboy, Miss Majesty." "It's almost fathered. It was a singular change in him."

"I am Stewart's wife," she answered him, and she looked at him, not conscious of any motive to persuade or allure...

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...

"Miss Majesty, that ride figgers impossible, but I'll do it!" he replied. His jolting headway of the car gave place to a gliding rush.



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

cool, bright glance thrilled her. "I'll need maybe half an hour to go over the car and 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."

"A number of cowboys were waiting. She explained the situation and left them in charge of her home."

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

Madeline heard the buzz of the car. Link appeared, driving up the slope. He made a short, sliding turn and

stopped before the porch. Link had tied two long, heavy planks upon the car, one on each side, and in every available space he had strapped extra tires.

The car glided out of the yard, leaped from level to slope, and started swiftly down the road, out into the open valley.

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.

At length a mile of clean, brown slope, ridged and grooved like a wash-board, led gently down to meet the floor of the valley.

To Madeline's dismay, that road led down to a deep, narrow wash. The crossing would have been laborious for a horse; for an automobile it was impassable.

Soon he found one that seemed to suit him, for he tied 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.

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 car was bowling along a wide road upon the outskirts of a city. Madeline asked what place it could be.

"That last name seemed to stun Madeline. She heard no more, and saw little until the car stopped."

"It came at length, the bursting report. The car lurched, went on like a crippled thing, and halted, obedient to the master hand at the wheel."

"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."

"Yes," replied the officer. "Stewart is reported to have done reckless fighting and was captured. He got a Mexican sentence. He is known here along the border, and the news of his capture stirred up excitement. We did all we could to get his release. The

guerrillas feared to execute him here, and believed he might be aided to escape. So a detachment departed with him for Mezquital."

"He was sentenced to be shot Thursday 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. "Advise me—help me, if you can?"

With a wondering glance at her the officer received the telegrams. He read several, and whistled low in amazement. 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 has been authorized. They explain mysterious rumors we have heard here. Greaser treachery! For some strange reason messages from the rebel junta have failed to reach their destination."

"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."

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.

"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."

"Who did 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 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' time here," he said. His voice, like his hands, was uplifting. She wheeled to him in trembling impatience. 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 voiceless 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 chance—the 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 cactus far ahead, she 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.

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, fierce, bloody—it was Spanish.

The descent from that elevation was difficult, extremely hazardous, yet Link

drove fast. Then, in taking an abrupt curve, a grasping spear ruined another tire. This time the car rasped across the road into the cañon, 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, prayed for a long, straight, smooth route.

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 silent.

"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 solid, 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 blur the white road, to grow streaky, like rays of light, the sky to take on more of a reddening 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.

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. 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.

"Come," replied Montes, taking her arm. "Perdoname, Senora."

Senor Montes led Madeline through a hall to a patio, 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 attention 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 soldiers—an order that El Capitan is not to be shot. He is ignorant of his release. I shall give the signal for his freedom."

"Is there no possibility of a mistake?" faltered Madeline.

"None. My order included unloading 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 waited. No change manifested itself down the length of that lonely road. There was absolute silence in the room behind her. How terribly, infinitely long seemed the waiting!

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 to him in some other life.

"Who—are—you?" he whispered, hoarsely.

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

More than 30,000 persons are engaged in the paper pulp industry in Canada



"Who Are You?" He Whispered Hoarsely.

beyond shadow of doubt that he was waiving 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.

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