

The Light of Western Stars

A ROMANCE by ZANE GREY

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"BUT YOU'RE NO THOROUGHbred. MAJESTY HAMMOND, ADIOS!"

For a moment Madeline sat on her horse with shut eyes. She dreaded the light.

"Now you can't say you've never been kissed," Stewart said. His voice seemed a long way off. "But that was coming to you, so be game. Here!"

She felt something hard and cold and metallic thrust into her hand. He made her fingers close over it, hold it. The feel of the thing revived her. She opened her eyes. Stewart had given her his gun. He stood with his broad breast against her knee, and she looked up to see that old mocking smile on his face.

"Go ahead! Throw my gun on me! Be a thoroughbred!"

Madeline did not yet grasp his meaning.

"You can put me down in that quiet place on the hill—beside Monty Price."

Madeline dropped the gun with a shuddering cry of horror. The sense of his words, the memory of Monty, the certainty that she would kill Stewart if she held the gun an instant longer, tortured the self-accusing cry from her.

Stewart stopped to pick up the weapon.

"You might have saved me a hell of a lot of trouble," he said, with another flash of the mocking smile. "You're beautiful and sweet and proud, but you're no thoroughbred! Majesty Hammond, adios!"

A bit tempestuous? Well, rather, but it's only one dramatic situation in a red-blooded story of the cattle range near the Mexican border. There are others a plenty. Madeline Hammond owns "Her Majesty's Rancho" and Stewart is her foreman. She is a transplanted Eastern girl who has come to love life under "The Light of the Western Stars." The life of the range has recreated a wealthy, spoiled society girl into a fine woman. And her influence has saved Stewart, a wild, handsome, brave, dissolute, efficient cowboy—a college man and a gentleman once. Of course they fall in love. But he glories in it, while she is slow to admit it even to herself. Of course, also, they clash—two dominant personalities. And then the girl is jealous—whereupon there is the dickens to pay. And what a dramatic ending!

The author? Why, Zane Grey. That should be enough to guarantee a stirring tale, with color and adventure and swift actions. He's the writer of the hour for outdoor Western stories, with success after success to his credit.

CHAPTER I

A Gentleman of the Range.

When Madeline Hammond stepped from the train at El Cajon, New Mexico, it was nearly midnight, and her first impression was of a huge dark space of cool, windy emptiness, strange and silent, stretching away under great blinking white stars.

"Miss, there's no one to meet you," said the conductor anxiously.

"I wired my brother," she replied. "He will be here presently. But, if he should not come—surely I can find a hotel?"

"There's lodgings to be had. If you'll excuse me—this is no place for a lady like you to be alone at night. It's a rough little town—mostly Mexicans, miners, cowboys. And they carouse a lot. Besides, the revolution across the border has stirred up some excitement along the line. Miss, I guess it's safe enough, if you—"

"Thank you. I am not in the least afraid."

As the train started to glide away Miss Hammond walked toward the dimly lighted station. She entered the empty waiting-room. An oil-lamp gave out a thick yellow light. A telegraph instrument clicked faintly.

Madeline Hammond crossed the waiting-room to a window and, holding aside her veil, looked out. At first she could discern only a few dim lights, and these blurred in her sight. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness she saw a superbly built horse standing near the window. Beyond was a bare square. Through a hole in the window-glass came a cool breeze, and on it breathed a sound that struck coarsely upon her ear—a discordant mingling of laughter and shout, and the tramp of boots to the hard music of a phonograph.

"Western revelry," mused Miss Hammond, as she left the window. "Now, what to do? I'll wait here. Perhaps the station agent will return soon, or Alfred will come for me."

As she sat down to wait she reviewed the causes which accounted for the remarkable situation in which she found herself. That Madeline Hammond should be alone, at a late hour, in a dingy little western railroad station, was indeed extraordinary.

The close of her debutante year had been marred by the only unhappy experience of her life—the disgrace of her brother and his leaving home. She dated the beginning of a certain thoughtful habit of mind from that time, and a dissatisfaction with the brilliant life society offered her.

There had been months of unrest, of curiously painful wonderment that her position, her wealth, her popularity no longer sufficed. She believed she had lived through the dreams and fancies of a girl to become a woman of the world. And she had gone on as before, a part of the glittering show, but no longer blind to the truth—that there was nothing in her luxurious life to make it significant. And at last she knew what she needed—to be alone, to brood for long hours, to gaze out on lonely, silent, darkening stretches, to watch the stars, to race her soul, to find her real self.

Then it was she had first thought of visiting the brother who had gone

west to cast his fortune with the gentlemen. As it happened, she had friends who were on the eve of starting for California, and she made a quick decision to travel with them. When she calmly announced her intention of going out west her mother had exclaimed in consternation; and her father, surprised into pathetic memory of the black sheep of the family, had stared at her with glistening eyes.

"Why, Madeline! You want to see that wild boy?" Then he had reverted to the anger he still felt for his wayward son, and he had forbidden Madeline to go. Her mother forgot her haughty poise and dignity. Madeline stood her ground, even to reminding them that she was twenty-four and her own mistress. In the end she had prevailed.

Madeline had planned to arrive in El Cajon on October 3, her brother's birthday, and she had succeeded, though her arrival occurred at the twenty-fourth hour. Her train had been several hours late. Whether or not the message had reached Alfred's hands she had no means of telling, and the thing which concerned her now was the fact that she had arrived and he was not there to meet her.

As Madeline sat waiting in the yellow gloom she heard the faint, intermittent click of the telegraph instrument, the low hum of wires, the occasional stamp of an iron-shod hoof, and a distant vacant laugh rising above the sounds of the dance. She became conscious of a slight quickening of her pulse. Madeline had only a limited knowledge of the West. Like all of her class, she had traveled Europe and had neglected America. She had been astounded at the interminable distance she had traveled, and if there had been anything attractive to look at in all that journey she had passed it in the night.

A faint sound like the rattling of thin chains diverted Madeline's attention. At first she imagined it was made by the telegraph wires. Then she heard a step. The door swung wide; a tall man entered, and with him came the clinking rattle. She realized then that the sound came from his spurs.

"Will you please direct me to a hotel?" asked Madeline, rising.

The cowboy removed his sombrero, and the sweep he made with it and the accompanying bow, despite their exaggeration, had a kind of rude grace. He took two long strides toward her.

"Lady, are you married?"

In the past Miss Hammond's sense of humor had often helped her to overlook critical exactions natural to her breeding. She kept silence, and she imagined it was just as well that her veil hid her face at the moment. She had been prepared to find cowboys rather striking, and she had been warned not to laugh at them.

This gentleman of the range deliberately reached down and took up her left hand. Before she recovered from her start of amazement he had stripped off her glove.

"Fine spark, but no wedding ring," he drawled. "Lady, I'm glad to see you're not married."

women. Bad business for hotels to have married women. Keeps the boys away. You see, this isn't Reno."

Then he laughed rather boyishly, and from that, and the way he slouched on his sombrero, Madeline realized he was half drunk. As she instinctively recoiled she not only gave him a keener glance, but stepped into a position where a better light shone on his face. It was like red bronze, bold, raw, sharp. Like that of all women whose beauty and charm had brought them much before the world, Miss Hammond's intuition had been developed until she had a delicate and exquisitely sensitive perception of the nature of men and of her effect upon them. This crude cowboy, under the influence of drink, had affronted her; nevertheless, whatever was in his mind, he meant no insult.

"I shall be greatly obliged to you if you will show me to the hotel," she said.

"Lady, you wait here," he replied, slowly, as if his thought did not come swiftly. "I'll go fetch the porter."

She thanked him, and as he went out, closing the door, she sat down in considerable relief. It occurred to her that she should have mentioned her brother's name. Then she felt to wondering what living with such uncouth cowboys had done to Alfred. She alone of her family had ever believed in any latent good in Alfred Hammond, and her faith had scarcely survived the two years of silence.

Waiting there, she again found herself listening to the moan of the wind through the wires. Then Madeline heard a rapid pattering, low at first and growing louder, which presently she recognized as the galloping of horses. She went to the window, thinking, hoping her brother had arrived. But as the clatter increased to a roar, shadows sped by—lean horses, flying manes and tails, sombreroed riders, all strange and wild in her sight. Recalling what the conductor had said, she was at some pains to quell her uneasiness. Then out of the gloom two figures appeared, one tall, the other slight. The cowboy entered, pulling a disheveled figure—that of a priest, a padre, whose mantle had manifestly been disarranged by the rude grasp of his captor. Plain it was that the padre was extremely terrified.

Madeline Hammond gazed in bewilderment at the little man, so pale and shrunken, and a protest trembled upon her lips; but it was never uttered, for this half-drunk cowboy now appeared to be a cool, grinning devil; and stretching out a long arm, he grasped her and swung her back to the bench.

"You stay there!" he ordered.

His voice, though neither brutal nor harsh nor cruel, had the unaccountable effect of making her feel powerless to move. No man had ever before addressed her in such a tone. It was the woman in her that obeyed—not the personality of proud Madeline Hammond.

The padre lifted his clasped hands as if supplicating for his life, and began to speak hurriedly in Spanish. Madeline did not understand the language. The cowboy pulled out a huge gun and brandished it in the priest's face. Then he lowered it, apparently to point it at the priest's feet. There was a red flash, and then a thundering report that stunned Madeline. The room filled with smoke and the smell of powder. When she could see distinctly through the smoke she experienced a sensation of immeasurable relief that the cowboy had not shot the padre. But he was still waving the gun, and now appeared to be dragging his victim toward her. What possibly could be the drunken fool's intention? This must be, this surely was a cowboy trick. Madeline no sooner thought of it than she made certain her brother was introducing her to a Wild West amusement. She could scarcely believe it, yet it must be true. Probably he stood just outside the door or window laughing at her embarrassment.

Anger checked her panic. She straightened up with what composure this surprise had left her and started for the door. But the cowboy barred her passage—grasped her arms. Then Madeline divined that her brother could not have any knowledge of this indignity. It was no trick. Poise, dignity, culture—all the acquired habits of character—fled before the instinct to fight. She was athletic. She fought. She struggled desperately. But he forced her back with hands of iron. She had never known a man could be so strong.

"What—do you—mean?" she panted.

"Dearie, ease up a little on the bridle," he replied, gaily.

Madeline thought she must be dreaming. She could not think clearly. She not only saw this man, but also felt his powerful presence. And the shaking priest, the haze of blue smoke, the smell of powder—these were not unreal.

Then close before her eyes burst another blinding red flash, and close at her ears bellowed another report. Unable to stand, Madeline slipped down onto the bench. Her drifting faculties refused clearly to record

what transpired during the next few moments; presently, however, as her mind steadied somewhat, she heard, though as in a dream, the voice of the padre hurrying over strange words. It ceased, and then the cowboy's voice stirred her.

"Lady, say Si—Si. Say it—quick! Say it—Si!"

From sheer suggestion, a force irresistible at this moment when her will was clamped by panic, she spoke the word.

"And now, lady—so we can finish this property—what's your name?"

Still obeying mechanically, she told him.

He stared for a while, as if the name had awakened associations in a mind somewhat befogged. He leaned back unsteadily.

"What name?" he demanded.

"Madeline Hammond. I am Alfred Hammond's sister."

He put his hand up and brushed at an imaginary something before his eyes. "You're not—Majesty Hammond?"

How strange—stranger than anything that had ever happened to her before—was it to hear that name on the lips of this cowboy! It was a name by which she was familiarly known, though only those nearest and dearest to her had the privilege of using it. And now it revived her dulled faculties, and by an effort she regained control of herself.

"You are Majesty Hammond," and this time he affirmed wonderingly rather than questioned.

Madeline rose and faced him.

"Yes, I am."

He slammed his gun back into its holster.

"Well, I reckon we won't go on with it, then."

"With what, sir? And why did you force me to say Si to this priest?"

"I reckon that was a way I took to show him you'd be willing to get married."

"Oh! . . . You—you! . . ." Words failed her.

This appeared to galvanize the cowboy into action. He grasped the padre and led him toward the door, cursing

and threatening, no doubt enjoining secrecy. Then he pushed him across the threshold and stood there breathing hard and wrestling with himself.

"Here—wait—wait a minute, Miss Hammond," he said, huskily. "You could fall into worse company than mine—though I reckon you sure think not. I'm pretty drunk, but I'm—all right otherwise. Just wait—a minute."

She stood quivering and blazing with wrath, and watched this savage fight his drunkenness. Madeline saw the dark, damp hair lift from his brows as he held it up to the cool wind.

The cowboy turned and began to talk.

"You see—I was pretty drunk," he inhaled. "There was a fiesta—and a wedding. I do fool things when I'm drunk. I made a fool bet I'd marry the first girl who came to town. . . . If you hadn't worn that veil—the fellows were joshing me—and Ed Linton was getting married—and everybody always wants to gamble. . . . I must have been pretty drunk."

"Explanations are not necessary," she interrupted. "I am very tired—distracted. The hour is late. Have you the slightest idea what it means to be a gentleman?"

His bronzed face burned a flaming crimson.

"Is my brother here—in town to-night?" Madeline went on.

"No. He's at his ranch."

"But I wired him."

"Like as not the message is over in his box at the P. O. He'll be in town tomorrow. He's shipping cattle for Stillwell."

"Meanwhile I must go to a hotel. Will you please—"

If he heard her last words he showed no evidence of it. A noise

outside had attracted his attention. Madeline listened. Low voices of men, the softer liquid tones of a woman, drifted in through the open door. She spoke in Spanish, and the voices grew louder. Then the woman's voice, hurried and broken, rising higher, was eloquent of vain appeal.

The cowboy's demeanor started Madeline into anticipation of something dreadful. She was not deceived. From outside came the sound of a scuffle—a muffled shot, a groan, the thud of a falling body, a woman's low cry, and footsteps padding away in rapid retreat.

Madeline Hammond leaned weakly back in her seat, cold and sick, and for a moment her ears throbbled to the tramp of the dancers across the way and the rhythm of the cheap music. Then into the open door-place flashed a girl's trifle face, lighted by dark eyes and framed by dusky hair. The girl reached a slim brown hand round the side of the door and held on as if to support herself.

"Senor—Gene!" she exclaimed; and breathless glad recognition made a sudden break in her terror.

"Bonita!" The cowboy leaped to her. "Girl! Are you hurt?"

"No, senor."

He took hold of her. "I heard—somebody got shot. Was it Danny?"

"No, senor."

"Did Danny do the shooting? Tell me, girl."

"No, senor."

"I'm sure glad. I thought Danny was mixed up in that. He had still—"

"Say, Bonita, but you'll get in trouble. Who was with you? What did you do?"

"Senor Gene—they Don Carlos vaqueros—they quarrel over me. I only dance a leete, smile a leete, and they quarrel. I beg they be good—"

"Watch out for Sheriff Howe . . . and now Sheriff Howe put me in jail. I so frighten; he try make leete love to Bonita once, and now he hate me like he hate Senor Gene."

"Pat Howe won't put you in jail. Take my horse and hit the Peloncillo trail. Bonita, promise to stay away from El Cajon."

"Si, Senor."

He led her outside. Madeline heard the horse snort and champ his bit. The cowboy spoke low; only a few words were intelligible—"stirrups . . . wait . . . out of town . . . mountain . . . trail . . . now ride."

A moment's silence ensued, and was broken by a pounding of hoofs, a pattering of gravel. Then Madeline saw a big, dark horse run into the wide space. She caught a glimpse of wind-swept scarf and hair, a little form low down in the saddle. The horse was outlined in black against the line of dim lights. There was something wild and splendid in his flight.

Directly the cowboy appeared again in the doorway.

"Miss Hammond, I reckon we want to rustle out of here. Been bad goings-on. And there's a train due."

She hurried into the open air, not daring to look back or to either side. Her guide strode swiftly. She had almost to run to keep up with him.

Suddenly aware that she had been led beyond the line of houses, she spoke:

"Where are you taking me?"

"To Florence Kingsley," he replied. "Who is she?"

"I reckon she's your brother's best friend out here."

Madeline kept pace with the cowboy for a few moments longer, and then she stopped. It was as much from necessity to catch her breath as it was from recurring fear. The cowboy, missing her, came back the few intervening steps. Then he waited, still silent, looming beside her.

"It's so dark, so lonely," she faltered. "How do I know . . . what warrant can you give me that you—that no harm will befall me if I go farther?"

"None, Miss Hammond, except that I've seen your face."

"I shall not tell my brother of your—your rudeness to me."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Shakespeare's Vocabulary Rivalled.

Probably no living poet has a more extensive vocabulary than Gabriele d'Annunzio, who is to visit Paris in the spring of this year. "Most people," he once said, "use only 800 words. I employ 15,000, which I cull from different volumes, some taken from an old book on agriculture, some from an old translation of Ovid, others from Machiavelli's works. Old Italian authors are my daily bread."

Women Compared With Clocks.

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