

The Light of Western Stars

A Romance

By Zane Grey

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NEVER TOO LATE

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 "Si." 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. Stillwell tells her how Stewart beat up the sheriff to save her from arrest and then lit out for the border. Danny Mains, one of Stillwell's cowboys, has disappeared, with some of Stillwell's money. His friends link his name with the girl Bonita. Madeline gets a glimpse of life on a western ranch. Stewart sends Madeline his horse Majesty. She buys out Stillwell and "Her Majesty's Rancho" becomes famous. She finds her life work under "The Light of Western Stars."

CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

Sometimes she thought of her parents, sister, friends, of how they had persistently refused to believe she could or would stay in the West. They were always asking her to come home. She wrote that she would return to her old home some time, of course, for a visit; and letters such as this brought returns that amused Madeline, sometimes saddened her. Her father's business had been such that he could not leave it for the time required for a western trip, or else, according to his letter, he would have come for her. Mrs. Hammond could not have been driven to cross the Hudson river; her un-American idea of the wilderness westward was that Indians still chased buffalo on the outskirts of Chicago. Madeline's sister Helen had long been eager to come, as much from curiosity. Madeline thought, as from sisterly regard. And at length Madeline concluded that the proof of her breaking permanent ties might better be seen by visiting relatives and friends before she went back East. With that in mind she invited Helen to visit her during the summer, and bring as many friends as she liked.

No slight task indeed was it to oversee the many business details of Her Majesty's Rancho and to keep a record of them. Madeline found the course of business training upon which her father had insisted to be invaluable to her now. It helped her to assimilate and arrange the practical details of cattle-raising as put forth by the blunt Stillwell. She established an extensive vegetable farm, and she planted orchards. The climate was superior to that of California, and with abundant water, trees and plants and gardens flourished and bloomed in a way wonderful to behold. Here in the farming section of the ranch Madeline found employment for the little colony of Mexicans. Their lives had been as hard and barren as the dry valley where they had lived. But as the valley had been transformed by the soft, rich touch of water, so their lives had been transformed by help and sympathy and work. The children were wretched no more, and many that had been blind could now see, and Madeline had become to them a new and blessed Virgin.

Madeline looked abroad over these lands and likened the change in them and those who lived by them to the change in her heart. It may have been fancy, but the sun seemed to be brighter, the sky bluer, the wind sweeter. Certain it was that the deep green of grass and garden was not fancy, nor the white and pink of blossom, nor the blue and perfume of flower, nor the sheen of lake and the fluttering of new-born leaves. Where there had been monotonous gray there was now vivid and changing color. Formerly there had been silence both day and night; now during the sunny hours there was music. The whistle of prancing stallions pealed in from the grassy ridges. Innumerable birds had come and, like the northward-journeying ducks, they had tarried to stay. The song of meadow-lark and blackbird and robin, familiar to Madeline from childhood, mingled with the new and strange heart-throbbing song of the mockingbird and the piercing blast of the desert eagle and the melancholy moan of the turtle-dove.

CHAPTER VIII

El Capitan.

Stillwell's interest in the revolution across the Mexican line had manifestly increased with the news that Gene Stewart had achieved distinction with the rebel forces. Thereafter the old cattleman sent for El Paso and Douglas newspapers, wrote to ranchmen he knew on the big bend of the Rio Grande, and he would talk indefinitely to anyone who would listen to him. There appeared to be no doubt that

the cowboy had performed some daring feats for the rebels. Madeline found his name mentioned in several of the border papers. When the rebels under Madero stormed and captured the city of Juarez, Stewart did fighting that won him the name of El Capitan. This battle apparently ended the revolution. The capitulation of President Diaz followed shortly, and there was a feeling of relief among ranchers on the border from Texas to California. Nothing more was heard of Gene Stewart until April, when a report reached Stillwell that the cowboy had arrived in El Cajon, evidently hunting trouble. The old cattleman saddled a horse and started post-haste for town. In two days he returned, depressed in spirit. Madeline happened to be present when Stillwell talked to Alfred.

"Wal, it's sure amazin' strange about Gene. It's got me locoed. He arrived in El Cajon week or so ago. He was trained down like as if he'd been ridin' the range all winter. He had plenty of money—Mex, they said. An' all the Greasers was crazy about him. Called him El Capitan. He got drunk an' went roarin' round for Pat Hesse. You remember that Greaser who was plugged last October—the night Miss Majesty arrived? Wal, he's daid, an' people say that Pat is a-goin' to lay the killin' onto Gene. I reckon that's jest talk, though Pat is mean enough to do it, if he had the nerve. Anyway, if he was in El Cajon he kept mighty much to himself. Gene walked up an' down, up an' down, all day an' night, lookin' for Pat. Then Gene met Danny an' tried to get Danny drunk. An' he couldn't! What do you think of that? Danny hein't been drinkin'—wouldn't touch a drop. I'm sure glad of that, but it's so amazin' strange. Why, Danny was a fish for red liquor. I guess he an' Gene had some pretty hard words, though I'm not sure about that. Anyway, Gene went down to the railroad an' he got on an engine, an' he was in the engine when it pulled out. I jest had an idee, Miss Majesty. If I can get him, Gene Stewart is the cowboy I want for my foreman. He can manage this bunch of cow-punchers that are drivin' me dotty. What's more, since he's fought for the rebels an' got that name El Capitan, all the Greasers in the country will kneel to him. Now, Miss Majesty, we hein't got rid of Don Carlos an' his vaqueros yet. I don't like the looks of things a little bit. I'll tell you now that Don Carlos knows somethin' about the cattle I lost, an' that you've been losin' right along. That Greaser is hand an' glove with the rebels. I'm willin' to gamble that when he does get out he an' his vaqueros will make another one of the bands of guerrillas that are harassin' the border. This revolution ain't over yet. It's jest commenced. An' these gangs of outlaws are goin' to take advantage of it. We'll see some old times, mebby. Wal, I need Gene Stewart. I need him bad. Will you let me hire him, Miss Majesty? If I can get him straightened up?"

The old cattleman ended huskily. "Stillwell, by all means find Stewart, and do not wait to straighten him up. Bring him to the ranch," replied Madeline.

Thinking her, Stillwell led his horse away. Madeline had discovered that a good deal of her sympathy for Stillwell in his hunt for the reckless Stewart had insensibly grown to be sympathy for the cowboy. It was rather a paradox.

"Bill, put this in your pipe an' smoke it—none of them scraps Gene has had was over a woman! It used to be that when he was drunk he'd scrap over every pretty Greaser girl he'd run across. Wal, Gene's scrapin' now is jest to git shot up hisself, for some reason that only God Almighty knows."

Nels' story of how Stewart wept over his horse influenced Madeline powerfully. Her next move was to persuade Alfred to see if he could not do better with this doggedly bent cowboy. Alfred needed only a word of persuasion, for he said he had considered going to Rodeo of his own accord. He went, and returned alone. "Majesty, I can't explain Stewart's singular actions," said Alfred. "He has changed terribly. I fancy his once magnificent strength is breaking. It—it actually hurt me to look at him. I couldn't have fetched him back here—not as he is now. Bill did all any man could do for another. We've all done our best for Stewart. If you'd been given a chance perhaps you could have saved him. But it's too late. Put it out of mind now, dear."

Madeline, however, did not forget nor give it up. Days passed, and each one brought additional gossip of Stewart's headlong career toward the Yuma penitentiary. For he had crossed the line into Cochise county, Arizona, where sheriffs kept a stricter observance of law. Finally a letter came from a friend of Nels' in Chiricahua saying that Stewart had been hurt in a brawl there. This epistle inclosed a letter to Stewart from his sister. Evidently, it had been found upon him. It told a story of illness and made an appeal for aid. Nels' friend forwarded this letter without Stewart's knowledge, thinking Stillwell might care to help Stewart's family. Stewart had no money, he said.

The sister's letter found its way to Madeline. She read it, tears in her eyes. It told Madeline much more than its brief story of illness and poverty and wonder why Gene had not written home for so long. It told of motherly love, sisterly love, brotherly love—dear family ties that had not been broken. It spoke of pride in this El Capitan brother who had become famous. It was signed "your loving sister Letty."

Not improbably, Madeline revolved in her mind, this letter was one reason for Stewart's headstrong, long-continued abatement. It had been received

valor with the fighting rebels, and all this strange regard for him, especially that of her brother, made her exceedingly regret the cowboy's present behavior.

Meanwhile Stillwell was so earnest and zealous that one not familiar with the situation would have believed he was trying to find and reclaim his own son. He made several trips to little stations in the valley, and from these he returned with a gloomy face. Madeline got the details from Alfred. Stewart was going from bad to worse—drunk, disorderly, savage, sure to land in the penitentiary. Then came a report that hurried Stillwell off to Rodeo. He returned on the third day, a crushed man. He had been so bitterly hurt that no one, not even Madeline, could get out of him what had happened. He admitted finding Stewart, falling to induce him; and when the old cattleman got so far he turned purple in the face and talked to himself, as if dazed: "But Gene was drunk. He was drunk, or he couldn't he treated old Bill like that!"

Madeline was stirred with an anger toward the brutal cowboy that was as strong as her sorrow for the loyal old cattleman. And it was when Stillwell gave up that she resolved to take a hand. She yearned to have the faith in human nature that Stillwell had in Stewart.

too late—after he had squandered the money that would have meant so much to mother and sister. Be that as it might, Madeline immediately sent a bank-draft to Stewart's sister with a letter explaining that the money was drawn in advance on Stewart's salary. This done, she impulsively determined to go to Chiricahua herself.

Nels, when Madeline asked him to accompany her to Chiricahua, replied, reluctantly, that he would rather follow on his horse. However, she prevailed over his hesitancy, and with Florence also in the car they set out. For miles and miles the valley road was smooth, hard-packed, and slightly downhill. And when speeding was perfectly safe, Madeline was not averse to it. And when the car stopped in the wide, dusty street of Chiricahua Nels gladly tumbled out.

"Nels, we shall wait here in the car while you find Stewart," said Madeline. Nels crossed the railroad track and disappeared behind the low, flat houses. After a little time he reappeared and hurried up to the car. "Miss Hammond, I found him," said Nels. "He was sleepin'. I woke him. He's sober an' not bad hurt; but I don't believe you ought to see him. Mebbe Florence—"

"Nels, I want to see him myself. Why not? What did he say when you told him I was here?" "Shore I didn't tell him that. I jest says, 'Hullo, Gene?' an' he says, 'My Gawd! Nels! mebbe I ain't glad to see a human bein'.' He asked me who was with me, an' I told him Link an' some friends. I said I'd fetch them in. He hollered at that. But I went, anyway. Now, if you really will see him, Miss Hammond, it's a good chance. But shore it's a touchy matter, an' you'll be some sick at sight of him. He's layin' in a Greaser hole over here. Likely the Greasers hev been kind to him. But they're shore a poor lot."

Madeline did not hesitate a moment. "Thank you, Nels. Take me at once. Come, Florence."

They left the car, now surrounded by gaping-eyed Mexican children, and crossed the dusty space to a narrow lane between red adobe walls. Passing by several houses, Nels stopped at the door of what appeared to be an alleyway leading back. It was filthy. "He's in there, round that first corner. It's a patio, open an' sunny. An', Miss Hammond, if you don't mind, I'll wait here for you. I reckon Gene wouldn't like any fellers around when he sees you girls."

"Florence, you wait also," said Madeline, at the doorway, and turned in alone. And she had stepped into a broken-down patio littered with alfalfa straw and debris, all clear in the sunlight. Upon a bench, back toward her, sat a man looking out through the rents in the broken wall. He had not heard her. Madeline did not recognize Stewart. The side of his face exposed to her was black, bruised, bearded. His clothes were ragged and soiled. There were bits of alfalfa in his hair. His shoulders sagged. He made a wretched and hopeless figure sitting there, Madeline divined something of why Nels shrank from being present.

"Mr. Stewart. It is I, Miss Hammond, come to see you," she said. He grew suddenly perfectly motionless, as if he had been changed to stone. She repeated her greeting.

His body jerked. He moved violently as if instinctively to turn and face this intruder; but a more violent movement checked him. Madeline waited. How singular that this ruined cowboy had pride which kept him from showing his face! And was it not shame more than pride?

"Go away," he muttered. "Mr. Stewart!" she began. "I have come to help you. Will you let me?" "For God's sake! You—you—" he choked over the words. "Go away!" "Stewart, perhaps it was for God's sake that I came," said Madeline, gently. "Surely it was for yours—and your sister's—" Madeline bit her tongue, for she had not meant to betray her knowledge of Letty.

He groaned, and, staggering up to the broken wall, he leaned there with his face hidden. Madeline reflected that perhaps the slip of speech had been well. "Stewart, please let me say what I have to say?" He was silent. And she gathered courage and inspiration.

"Stillwell is deeply hurt, deeply grieved that he could not turn you back from this—this fatal course. My brother is, also. They wanted to help you. And so do I. I have come, thinking somehow I might succeed where they have failed. Nels brought your sister's letter. I—I read it. I was only the more determined to try to help you, and indirectly help your mother and Letty. Stewart, we want you to come to the ranch. My cowboys are without a capable leader. Will you come?" "No," he answered. "But Stillwell wants you so badly."

"Stewart, I want you to come." His replies had been hoarse, loud, furious. All his motions, like his speech, had been violent. "Will you please go away?" he asked. "Stewart, certainly I cannot remain here longer if you insist upon my go-

ing. But why not listen to me when I want so much to help you? Why?" "I'm a d—d blackguard," he burst out. "But I was a gentleman once, and I'm not so low that I can stand for you seeing me here."

"When I made up my mind to help you I made it up to see you wherever you were. Stewart, come away, come back with us to the ranch. When you are among friends again you will get well. You will be your old self. The very fact that you were once a gentleman, that you come of good family, makes you owe so much more to yourself. Why, Stewart, think how young you are! It is a shame to waste your life. Come back with me."

"Miss Hammond, this was my last plunge," he replied, despondently. "It's too late." "At least make an effort, Stewart. Try!" "No. There's no use. I'm done for. Please leave me—thank you for—"

He had been savage, then sullen, and now he was grim. Madeline all but lost power to resist his strange, deadly, cold finality. No doubt he knew he was doomed. Yet something halted her—held her even as she took a backward step. And she became conscious of a subtle change in her own feeling. She had come into that squalid hole, Madeline Hammond, earnest enough, kind enough in her own intentions; but she had been almost imperious—a woman habitually, proudly used to being obeyed. She divined that all the pride, blue blood, wealth, culture, distinction, all the impersonal condescending persuasion, all the fatuous philanthropy on earth would not avail to turn this man a single hair's-breadth from his downward career to destruction. She was going to fall to help him. She experienced a sensation of impotence that amounted almost to distress. The situation assumed a tragic keenness.

"Stewart! look at me," she asked. He shuddered. He was abject, crushed. He dared not show his swollen, blackened face. His fierce, cramped posture revealed more than his features might have shown; it betrayed the torturing shame of a man of pride and passion, a man who had been confronted in his degradation by the woman he had dared to enshrine in his heart. It betrayed his love. "Listen, then," went on Madeline, and her voice was unsteady. "Listen to me, Stewart. You can shake off this desperate mood and be a man."

"No," he cried. "Listen to me again. Somehow I know you're worthy of Stillwell's love. Will you come back with us—for his sake?" "No. It's too late, I tell you." "Stewart, the best thing in life is faith in human nature. I have faith in you. I believe you are worth it."

"You're only kind and good—saying that. You can't mean it." "I mean it with all my heart," she replied, a sudden rich warmth suffusing her body as she saw the first sign of his softening. "Will you come back—if not for your own sake or Stillwell's—then for mine?" "What am I to such a woman as you?"

"A man in trouble, Stewart. But I have come to help you, to show my faith in you." "If I believed that, I might try," he said. "Listen," she began, softly, hurriedly. "My word is not lightly given. Let it prove my faith in you. Look at me now and say you will come." He heaved up his big frame as if trying to cast off a giant's burden, and then slowly he turned toward her. His face was a blotched and terrible thing. The physical brutalizing marks were there, and at that instant all that appeared human to Madeline was the dawning in dead, furnace-like eyes of a beautiful light.

"I'll come," he whispered, huskily. "Give me a few days to straighten up, then I'll come."

"But, Majesty, remember he's a composite of tiger breed and forked lightning!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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(TO BE CONTINUED.)



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