

The Light of Western Stars

A Romance

By Zane Grey

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CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

"It was absolutely impossible for Stewart to have been connected with that assault," went on Madeline, swiftly, "for he was with me in the waiting room of the station at the moment the assault was made outside. The door was open. I heard the voices of quarrelling men. The language was Spanish. I heard a woman's voice mingling with the others. It, too, was Spanish, and I could not understand. But the tone was beseeching. Then I heard footsteps on the gravel. Just outside the door then there were hoarse, furious voices, a scuffle, a muffled shot, a woman's cry, the thud of a falling body, and rapid footsteps of a man running away. Next, the girl Bonita staggered into the door. She was white, trembling, terror-stricken. She recognized Stewart, appealed to him. Stewart supported her and endeavored to calm her. He asked her if Danny Mains had been shot, or if he had done the shooting. The girl said no. She told Stewart that she had danced a little, flirted a little with vaqueros, and they had quarreled over her. Then Stewart took her outside and put her upon his horse. I saw the girl ride that horse down the street to disappear in the darkness."

While Madeline spoke another change appeared to be working in the man's face. His sharp features fixed in an expression of grief.

"That's mighty interestin', Miss Hammond, 'most as interestin' as a story book," he said. "I'd sure you're so obligin' a witness, I'd sure like to put a question or two. What time did you arrive at El Cajon that night?"

"It was after eleven o'clock," replied Madeline.

"Nobody there to meet you?"

"No."

"The station agent an' operator both gone?"

"Yes."

"How soon did this fellow Stewart show up?"

"Very soon after my arrival. I think—perhaps fifteen minutes, possibly a little more."

"An' what time was the Greaser shot?"

"Probably close to half past one. It was two o'clock when I looked at my watch at Florence Kingsley's house. Directly after Stewart sent Bonita away he took me to Miss Kingsley's. So, allowing for the walk and a few minutes conversation with her, I can pretty definitely say the shooting took place at about half past one."

Stillwell heaved his big frame a step closer to the sheriff.

"What're you drivin' at?" he roared, his face black again.

"Evidence," snapped Hawe.

Madeline marveled at this interruption; and as Stewart irresolutely drew her glance she saw him gray-faced as ashes, shaking, utterly unerved.

"I thank you, Miss Hammond," he said, huskily. "But you needn't answer any more of Hawe's questions. He—he's—he's—It's not necessary. I'll go with him now, under arrest. Bonita will corroborate your testimony in court, and that will save me from this—this man's spite."

Madeline, looking at Stewart, seeing a humility she at first took for cowardice, suddenly divined that it was not fear for himself which made him dread further disclosures of that night, but fear for her—fear of shame she might suffer through him.

Pat Hawe cocked his head to one side, like a vulture about to strike with his beak, and cunningly eyed Madeline.

"Considered as testimony, what you've said is sure important an' conclusive. But I'm calculatin' that the court will want to hev explained why you stayed from eleven-thirty till one-thirty in that waitin' room alone with Stewart."

His deliberate speech met with what Madeline imagined a remarkable reception from Stewart, who gave a tigerish start; from Stillwell, whose big hands tore at the neck of his shirt, as if he was choking; from Alfred, who now strode hotly forward, to be stopped by the cold and silent Nels; from Monty Price, who uttered a violent "Aw!" which was both a hiss and a roar.

In the rush of her thought Madeline could not interpret the meaning of these things which seemed so strange at that moment. But they were portentous. Even as she was forming a reply to Hawe's speech she felt a chill creep over her.

"Stewart detained me in the waiting room," she said, clear-voiced as a bell. "But we were not alone—all the time."

For a moment the only sound following her words was a gasp from Stewart. Hawe's face became transformed with a hideous amaze and joy.

"Detained?" he whispered, craning his lean and corded neck. "How's that?"

"Stewart was drunk. He—"

With sudden passionate gesture of despair Stewart appealed to her:

"Oh, Miss Hammond, don't! don't! don't!"

Then he seemed to sink down, head lowered upon his breast, in utter shame. Stillwell's great hand swept to the bowed shoulder, and he turned to Madeline.

"Miss Majesty, I reckon you'd be wise to tell all," said the old cattleman, gravely. "There ain't one of us who could misunderstand any motive or act of yours. Maybe a stroke of

lightnin' might clear this murky air. Whatever Gene Stewart did that on-lucky night—you tell it."

Madeline's dignity and self-possession had been disturbed by Stewart's impertinence. She broke into swift, disconnected speech:

"He came into the station—a few minutes after I got there. I asked—to be shown to a hotel. He said there wasn't any that would accommodate married women. He grasped my hand—looked for a wedding-ring. Then I saw he was—he was intoxicated. He told me he would go for a hotel porter. But he came back with a padre—Padre Marcos. The poor priest was—terribly frightened. So was I. Stewart had turned into a devil. He fired his gun at the padre's feet. He pushed me onto a bench. Again he shot—right before my face. I—I nearly fainted. But I heard him cursing the padre—heard the padre praying or chanting—I didn't know what. Stewart tried to make me say things in Spanish. All at once he asked my name. I told him. He jerked at my veil. I took it off. Then he threw his gun down—pushed the padre out of the door. That was just before the vaqueros approached with Bonita. Padre Marcos must have seen them—must have heard them. After that Stewart grew quickly sober. He told me he had been drinking at a wedding—I remember, it was El Linton's wedding. Then he explained—the boys were always gambling—he wagered he would marry the first girl who arrived at El Cajon. I happened to be the first one. He tried to force me to marry him. The rest—relating to the assault on the vaquero—I have already told you."

Madeline ended, out of breath and panting, with her hands pressed upon her heaving bosom.

Hawe rolled his red eyes and threw back his head.

"Ho, ho, ho! Ho, ho, ho! Say, Sneed, you didn't miss any of it, did you? Haw, haw! Best I ever heard in all my born days. Ho, ho!"

Then he ceased laughing, and with glinting gaze upon Madeline, insolent and vicious and savage, he began to drawl:

"Wal now, my lady, I reckon your story, if it tallies with Bonita's an' Padre Marcos', will clear Gene Stewart in the eyes of the court." Here he grew slower, more biting, sharper and harder of face. "But you needn't expect Pat Hawe or the court to swallow that part of your story—about bel'n' detained unwillin'!"

Madeline had not time to grasp the sense of his last words. Stewart had convulsively sprung upward, white as chalk. As he leaped at Hawe Stillwell interposed his huge bulk and wrapped his arms around Stewart. There was a brief, whirling, wrestling struggle. Stewart appeared to be besting the old cattleman.

"Help, boys, help!" yelled Stillwell. "I can't hold him. Hurry, or there's gold to be blood spilled!"

Nick Steele and several cowboys leaped to Stillwell's assistance.

"Gene! Why, Gene?" panted the old cattleman. "Sure you're locoed—to act this way. Cool down! Cool down! Why, boy, it's all right. Jest stand still—give us a chance to talk to you. It's only ole Bill, you know—your ole pal who's tried to be a daddy to you. He's only wantin' you to hev sense—to be cool—to wait."

"Let me go! Let me go!" cried Stewart; and the poignancy of that cry pierced Madeline's heart. "Let me go, Bill, if you're my friend. I saved your life once—over in the desert. You

swore you'd never forget. Boys, make him let me go! Oh, I don't care what Hawe's said or done to me! It was that about her! Are you all a lot of Greasers? How can you stand it? D—n you for a lot of cowards! There's a bluff, I tell you." Then his voice broke, fell to a whisper. "Bill, dear ole Bill, let me go. I'll kill him! You know I'll kill him!"

"Gene, I know you'd kill him if you had an even break," replied Stillwell, soothingly. "But, Gene, why you ain't even packin' a gun! Ap' there's Pat lookin' nasty, with his hand nervous-like. He seen you hed no gun. He'd jump at the chance to plug you now, an' then holler about opposition to the

law. Cool down, son; it'll all come right."

Suddenly Madeline was transfixed by a terrible sound. Her startled glance shifted from the anxious group round Stewart to see that Monty Price had leaped off the porch. He crouched down with his hands below his hips, where the big guns swung. From his distorted lips issued that sound which was combined roar and bellow and Indian war-whoop, and, more than all, a horrible warning cry. He was quivering, vibrating. His eyes, black and hot, were fastened with most piercing intentness upon Hawe and Sneed.

"Git back, Bill, git back!" he roared. "Git 'em back!"

With one lunge Stillwell shoved Stewart and Nick and the other cowboys upon the porch. Then he crowded Madeline and Alfred and Florence to the wall, tried to force them farther. His motions were rapid and stern. But falling to get them through door and windows, he planted his wide person between the women and danger. Madeline grasped his arm, held on, and peered fearfully from behind his broad shoulder.

"You, Hawe! You, Sneed!" called Monty, in that same wild voice. "Don't you move a finger or an eyelash!"

Madeline's faculties nerved to keen, thrilling divination. She grasped the relation between Monty's terrible cry and the strange hunched posture he had assumed.

"Nels, git in this!" yelled Monty; and all the time he never shifted his intent gaze as much as a hair's-breadth from Hawe and his deputy. "Nels, chase away them two fellers hangin' back there. Chase 'em, quick!"

These men, the two deputies who had remained in the background with the pack-horses, did not wait for Nels. They spurred their mounts, wheeled, and galloped away.

"Now, Nels, cut the girl loose," ordered Monty.

Nels ran forward, jerked the halter out of Sneed's hand, and pulled Bonita's horse in close to the porch. As he slit the rope which bound her she fell into his arms.

"Hawe, git down!" went on Monty. "Face front an' stiff!"

The sheriff swung his leg, and, never moving his hands, with his face now a deathly, sickening white, he slid to the ground.

"Line up there beside your guerrilla pard. There! You two make a d—n fine pletoor, a d—n fine team of plizen coyote an' a cross between a wild mule an' a Greaser. Now listen!"

Monty made a long pause, in which his breathing was plainly audible.

Madeline's eyes were riveted upon Monty. Her mind, swift as lightning, had gathered the subtleties in action and word succeeding his domination of the men. Violence, terrible violence, the thing she had felt, the thing she had feared, the thing she had sought to eliminate from among her cowboys, was, after many months, about to be enacted before her eyes. It had come at last. She had softened Stillwell, she had influenced Nels, she had changed Stewart; but this little black-faced, terrible Monty Price now rose, as it were, out of his past wild years, and no power on earth or in heaven could stay his hand. With eyes slowly hazing red, she watched him; she listened with thrumming ears; she waited, slowly sagging against Stillwell.

"Hawe, if you an' your dirty pard hev loved the sound of human voice, then listen an' listen hard," said Monty. "Fer I've been goin' contrary to my ole style jest to hev a talk with you. You all but got away on your nerve, didn't you? 'Cause why? You roll in here like a mad steer an' flash yer badge an' talk mean, then almost bluff away with it. You heard all about Miss Hammond's cowboy outfit stoppin' drinkin' an' cussin' an' packin' guns. They've took on religion an' decent livin', an' sure they'll be easy to hobbie an' drive to jail. Hawe, listen. There was a good an' noble an' be-otiful woman come out of the East somewheres, an' she brought a lot of sunshine an' happiness an' new ideas into the tough lives of cowboys. I reckon it's beyond you to know what she come to mean to them. Wal, I'll tell you. They-all went clean out of their heads. They-all got soft an' easy an' sweet-tempered. They got so they couldn't kill a coyote, a crippled calf in a mud-hole. Even me—an' ole, worn-out, hobbie-legged, burned-up cowman like me! Do you git that? An' you, Mister Hawe, you come along, not satisfied with ropin' an' beatin', an' Gaw knows what else, of that friendless little Bonita; you come along an' face the lady we fellers honor an' love an' reverence, an' you—you—H—P's fire!"

With whistling breath, foaming at the mouth, Monty Price crouched lower, hands at his hips, and he edged inch by inch farther out from the porch, closer to Hawe and Sneed. Madeline saw them only in the blurred fringe of her sight. They resembled specters. She heard the shrill whistle of a horse and recognized Majesty calling her from the corral.

"That's all!" roared Monty, in a voice now strangling. Lower and lower he bent, a terrible figure of ferocity,

streaks of fire—streaks of smoke. Then a crashing volley deafened her. It ceased as quickly. Smoke veiled the scene. Slowly it drifted away to disclose three fallen men, one of whom, Monty, leaped on his left hand, a smoking gun in his right. He watched for a movement from the other two. It did not come. Then, with a terrible smile, he slid back and stretched out.

"Now, both you armed officers of the law, come on! Flash your guns! Throw 'em, an' be quick! Monty Price is done! There'll be daylight through you both before you fan a hammer! But I'm givin' you a chance to sting me. You holler law, an' my way is the ole law."

His breath came quicker, his voice grew hoarser, and he crouched lower. All his body except his rigid arms quivered with a wonderful muscular convulsion.

"Dogs! Skunks! Buzzards! Flash them guns, or I'll flash mine! Aha!"

To Madeline it seemed the three stiff, crouching men leaped into instant and united action. She saw

whip, spurred him. Stewart's iron arm held the horse. Then Madeline, in a flash of passion, struck at Stewart's face, missed it, struck again, and hit. With one pull, almost drawing her from the saddle, he tore the whip from her hands. It was not that action on his part, or the sudden strong masterfulness of his look, so much as the livid mark on his face where the whip had lashed that quieted, if it did not check, her fury.

"That's nothing," he said, with something of his old audacity. "That's nothing to how you've hurt me."

Madeline battled with herself for control. This man would not be denied. About him now there was only the ghost of that finer, gentler man she had helped to bring into being. The piercing dark eyes he bent upon her burned her, went through her as if he were looking into her soul. Then Madeline's quick sight caught a fleeting doubt, a wistfulness, a surprised and saddened certainty in his eyes, saw it shade and pass away. Her woman's intuition, as keen as her sight, told her Stewart in that moment had sustained a shock of bitter, final truth.

For the third time he repeated his question to her. Madeline did not answer; she could not speak.

"You don't know I love you, do you?" he continued, passionately. "That ever since you stood before me in that hole at Chiricahua I've loved you? You can't see I've been another man, loving you, working for you, livin' for you? You won't believe I've turned my back on the old wild life, that I've been decent and honorable and happy and useful—your kind of a cowboy? You couldn't tell, though I loved you, that I never wanted you to know it, that I never dared to think of you except as my angel, my holy Virgin? What do you know of a man's heart and soul? How could you tell of the love, the salvation of a man who's lived his life in the silence and loneliness? Who could teach you the actual truth—that a wild cowboy, faithless to mother and sister, drunk in memory, riding a hard, drunken trail straight to hell, had looked into the face, the eyes of a beautiful woman infinitely beyond him, above him, and had loved her that he was saved—that he became faithful again—that he saw her face in every flower and her eyes in the blue heaven?"

Madeline was mute. She heard her heart thundering in her ears.

Stewart leaped at her. His powerful hand closed on her arm. She trembled. His action presaged the old instinctive violence.

"No; but you think I kept Bonita up in the mountains, that I went secretly to meet her, that all the while I served you I was—Oh, I know what you think! I know now. I never knew till I made you look at me. Now, say it! Speak!"

White-hot, blinded, utterly in the fiery grasp of passion, powerless to stem the rush of a word both shameful and revealing and fatal, Madeline cried:

"Yes!"

He had wrenched that word from her, but he was not subtle enough, nor versed in the mystery of woman's motive enough, to divine the deep significance of her reply.

For him the word had only literal meaning confirming the dishonor in which she held him. Dropping her arm, he shrunk back, a strange action for the savage and crude man she judged him to be.

"But that day at Chiricahua you spoke of faith," he burst out. "You said the greatest thing in the world was faith in human nature. You said you had faith in me! You made me have faith in myself!"

His reproach, without bitterness or scorn, was a lash to her old egoistic belief in her fairness. She had preached a beautiful principle that she had failed to live up to.

"You think I am vile," he said. "You think that about Bonita! And all the time I've been . . . I could make you ashamed—I could tell you—"

His passionate utterance ceased with a snap of his teeth. His lips set in a thin, bitter line. The agitation of his face preceded a conclusive wrestling of his shoulders.

"No, no!" he panted. Was it his answer to some mighty temptation? Then, like a bent sapling released, he sprang erect. "But I'll be the man—the dog—you think me!"

He laid hold of her arm with rude, powerful clutch. One pull drew her sliding half out of the saddle into his arms. She fell with her breast against his, not wholly free of stirrups or horse, and there she hung, utterly powerless. Maddened, writhing, she tore to release herself. All she could accomplish was to twist herself, raise herself high enough to see his face. That almost paralyzed her. Did he mean to kill her? Then he wrapped his arms around her and crushed her tighter, close to him. She felt the pound of his heart; her own seemed to have frozen. Then he pressed his burning lips to hers. It was a long, terrible kiss. She felt him shake.

"Oh, Stewart! I—implore—you—let—me—go!" she whispered.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A Fruitless Quest.

"I don't believe I'll ever reach my end," remarked the dog as he was spinning around in a futile effort to catch the tip of his tail.—New Orleans States.

CHAPTER XIX

Unbridled.

In waking and sleeping hours, Madeline Hammond could not release herself from the thrilling memory of that tragedy. She was haunted by Monty Price's terrible smile. Only in action of some kind could she escape; and to that end she worked, she walked and rode. She even overcame a strong feeling, which she feared was unreasonable disgust, for the Mexican girl Bonita, who lay ill at the ranch, bruised and feverish, in need of skillful nursing.

One afternoon she rode down to the alfalfa fields, round them, and back up to the spillway of the lower lake, where a group of mesquite-trees, owing to the water that seeped through the sand to their roots, had taken on bloom and beauty of renewed life. Under these trees there was shade enough to make a pleasant place to linger. Madeline dismounted, desiring to rest a little.

Her horse, Majesty, tossed his head and flung his mane and switched his tail at the flies. He would rather have been cutting the wind down the valley slope. Madeline sat with her back against a tree, and took off her sombrero. Suddenly Majesty picked up his long ears and snorted. Then Madeline heard a slow pad of hoofs. A horse was approaching from the direction of the lake. Madeline had learned to be wary, and, mounting Majesty, she turned him toward the open. A moment later she felt glad of her caution, for, looking back between the trees, she saw Stewart leading a horse into the grove. She would as lief have met a guerrilla as this cowboy.

Majesty had broken into a trot when a shrill whistle rent the air. The horse leaped and, wheeling so swiftly that he nearly unseated Madeline, he charged back straight for the mesquites. Madeline spoke to him, cried angrily at him, pulled with all her strength upon the bridle, but was helplessly unable to stop him. He whistled a piercing blast. Madeline realized then that Stewart, his old master, had called him and that nothing could turn him. She gave up trying, and the horse thumped into an aisle between the trees and, stopping before Stewart, whinnied eagerly.

"I want to talk to you," said Stewart.

Madeline started, turned to him, and now she saw the earlier Stewart, the man who reminded her of their first meeting at El Cajon, of that memorable meeting at Chiricahua.

"I want to ask you something," he went on. "I've been wanting to know something. That's why I've hung on here. But now I'm going over—over the border. And I want to know. Why did you refuse to listen to me?"

At his last words that hot shame, tenfold more stinging than when it had before humiliated Madeline, rushed over her, sending the scarlet in a wave to her temples. Biting her lips to hold back speech, she jerked on Majesty's bridle, struck him with her

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"Yes," said Gen. Grant, "we are doing pretty well, but Albert Sidney Johnston will be in Chicago in thirty days." This remark he repeated a number of times.

Soon thereafter Grant received a report that the Confederates were retreating. Later he received a report: "General, they are gone."

"No," Grant replied, "Johnston is coming around some other way."

Finally a report came in, "No enemy in sight."

After a pause, Grant said solemnly, and, as it turned out, prophetically, "Albert Sidney Johnston is dead."—New York World.

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Ends.

"The waiter is very attentive. I wonder what end he has in view."

"His tip, of course."

Perhaps a woman loves secrets because of the pleasure it affords her to let them escape.

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