

THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS

A Romance

by Zane Grey

Illustrations by IRWIN MYERS

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(Continued from last week.)

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—Arriving at the lonely little railroad station of El Cajon, New Mexico, Madeline Hammond, New York 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.

CHAPTER II.—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.

CHAPTER III.—Alfred, scion 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. Madeline learns Stewart has gone over the border.

CHAPTER IV.—Danny Malna, one of Stillwell's cowboys, has disappeared, with some of Stillwell's money. His friends link his name with the girl Bonita.

CHAPTER V.—Madeline gets a glimpse of life on a western ranch.

CHAPTER VI.—Stewart's horse comes to the ranch with a note on the saddle asking Madeline to accept the beautiful animal. With her brother's consent she does so, naming him "Majesty," her own pet nickname. Madeline, independently rich, arranges to buy Stillwell's ranch and that of Don Carlos, a Mexican neighbor.

CHAPTER VII.—Madeline feels she has found her right place, under the light of the western stars.

CHAPTER VIII.—Learning Stewart had been hurt in a brawl at Chiricahua, and knowing her brother's fondness for him, Madeline visits him and persuades him to come to the ranch as the boss of her cowboys.

CHAPTER IX.—Jim Nels, Nick Steele, and "Monty" Price are Madeline's chief riders. They have a feud with Don Carlos' vaqueros, who are really guerrillas. Madeline pledges Stewart to see that peace is kept.

CHAPTER X.—Madeline and Florence, returning home from Alfred's ranch, run into an ambush of vaqueros. Florence, knowing the Mexicans are after Madeline, decoys them away, and Madeline gets home safely but alone.

It was Alfred's voice.
"What's the matter?" asked Florence, as she slipped out of bed.
"Alfred, is there anything wrong?" added Madeline, sitting up.
The room was dark as pitch, but a faint glow seemed to mark the position of the window.
"Oh, nothing much," replied Alfred. "Only Don Carlos' rancho going up in smoke."
"Fire!" cried Florence, sharply.
"You'll think so when you see it. Hurry out."
Florence helped Madeline to dress. Then they hurriedly stumbled over chairs, and, passing through the dining room, went out upon the porch.
Away to the westward, low down along the horizon, she saw leaping red flames and wind-swept columns of smoke.
Stillwell appeared greatly perturbed.
"Al, I'm lookin' fer that ammunition to blow up," he said. "There was enough of it to blow the roof off the rancho."
"Bill, surely the cowboys would get that stuff out the first thing," replied Alfred, anxiously.
"I reckon so. But all the same, I'm worryin'. Mebbe there wasn't time. Supposin' that powder went off as the boys was goin' fer it or carryin' it out! We'll know soon. If the explosion doesn't come quick now we can figger the boys got the boxes out."
For the next few moments there was a silence of sustained and painful suspense. Florence gripped Madeline's arm. Madeline felt a fullness in her throat and a rapid beating of her heart. Presently she was relieved with the others when Stillwell declared the danger of an explosion needed to be feared no longer.
"Sure you can gamble on Gene Stewart," he added. "There! She's smolderin' down now. Reckon we-all might jest as well turn in again. It's only three o'clock."
Madeline awakened early, but not so early as the others, who were up and had breakfast ready when she went into the dining room. Stillwell was not in an amiable frame of mind. The furrows of worry lined his broad brow and he continually glanced at his watch, and growled because the cowboys were so late in riding over with the news. He gulped his breakfast, and while Madeline and the others ate theirs he tramped up and down the porch. Madeline noted that Alfred grew nervous and restless. Presently he left the table to join Stillwell outside.
"They'll slope off to Don Carlos' rancho and leave us to ride home alone," observed Florence.
"Do you mind?" questioned Madeline.
"No, I don't exactly mind; we've got the fastest horses in this country; but I've no hankering for a situation Gene Stewart thinks—"
Florence began disconnectedly, and

she ended evasively. Madeline did not press the point, although she had some sense of misgiving. Stillwell tramped in, shaking the floor with his huge boots; Alfred followed him, carrying a field-glass.
"Not a hoss in sight," complained Stillwell. "Somethin' wrong over Don Carlos' way. Miss Majesty, it'll jest as well fer you an' Flo to hit the home trail. We can telephone over an' see that the boys know you're comin'."
Alfred, standing in the door, swept the gray valley with his field-glass.
"Bill, I see running stock-horses or cattle; I can't make out which. I guess we'd better rustle over there."
Both men hurried out, and while the horses were being brought up and saddled Madeline and Florence put away the breakfast dishes, then speedily donned spurs, sombreros and gauntlets.
"Here are the horses ready," called Alfred. "Flo, that black Mexican horse is a prince."
The girls went out in time to hear Stillwell's good-by as he mounted and spurred away. Alfred went through the motions of assisting Madeline and Florence to mount, which assistance they always flouted, and then he, too, swung up astride.
"I guess it's all right," he said, rather dubiously. "You really must not go over toward Don Carlos'. It's only a few miles home."
"Sure it's all right. We can ride, can't we?" retorted Florence. "I declare he and Al were sure rattled."
Florence dismounted and went into the house. She left the door open. Madeline had some difficulty in holding Majesty. It struck Madeline that Florence stayed rather long indoors. Presently she came out with sober face and rather tight lips.
"I couldn't get anybody on the phone. No answer. I tried a dozen times."
"Why, Florence?" Madeline was more concerned by the girl's looks than by the information she imparted.
"The wife's been cut," said Florence. Her gray glance swept swiftly after Alfred, who was now far out of earshot. "I don't like this a little bit. Heah's where I've got to 'figger,' as Bill says."
She pondered a moment, then hurried into the house, to return presently with the field-glass that Alfred had used. With this she took a survey of the valley, particularly in the direction of Madeline's ranch-house. This was hidden by low, rolling ridges which were quite close by.
"Anyway, nobody in that direction can see us leave heah," she mused. "There's mesquite on the ridges. We've got cover long enough to save us till we can see what's ahead."
"Florence, what—what do you expect?" asked Madeline, nervously.
"I don't know. There's never any telling about Greasers. I wish Bill and Al hadn't left us. Still, come to think of that, they couldn't help us much in case of a chase. We'd run right away from them. Besides, they'd shoot. I guess I'm as well satisfied that we've got the job of getting home on our own hands. We don't dare follow Al toward Don Carlos' rancho. We know there's trouble over there. So all that's left is to hit the trail for home. Come, let's ride. You stick like a Spanish needle to me."
A heavy growth of mesquite covered the top of the first ridge, and the trail went through it. Florence appeared cautious, deliberate, yet she lost no time. She was ominously silent. Madeline's misgivings took definite shape in the fear of vaqueros in ambush.
Upon the ascent of the third ridge, which Madeline remembered was the last uneven ground between the point she had reached and home, Florence exercised even more guarded care in advancing. Before she reached the top of this ridge she dismounted, looped her bridle round a dead snag, and, motioning Madeline to wait, she slipped ahead through the mesquite out of sight. Madeline waited, anxiously listening and watching. All of a sudden she saw Majesty's ears were held up. Then Florence's face, now strangely white, showed round the turn of the trail.
"S-s-s-sh!" whispered Florence, holding up a warning finger. She reached the black horse and petted him, evidently to still an uneasiness he manifested. "We're in for it," she went on. "A whole bunch of vaqueros hiding among the mesquite over the ridge! They've not seen or heard us yet. We'd better risk riding ahead, cut off the trail, and beat them to the ranch. Madeline, you're white as death! Don't faint now!"
"I shall not faint. But you frighten me. Is there danger? What shall we do?"
"There's danger. Madeline, I wouldn't deceive you," went on Florence, in earnest whisper. We should—Al should have listened to Gene! I believe—I'm afraid Gene knew!"
"Knew what?" asked Madeline.

"Never mind now. Listen. We Jaren't take the back trail. We'll go on. I've a scheme to fool that grinning Don Carlos. Get down, Madeline—hurry!"
Madeline dismounted.
"Give me your white sweater. Take it off—And that white hat! Hurry, Madeline." She had divested herself of sombrero and jacket, which she held out to Madeline. "Heah, take these. Give me yours. Then get up on the black. I'll ride Majesty. Rustle now, Madeline. This is no time to talk."
"But, dear, why—why do you want—? Ah! You're going to make the vaqueros take you for me!"
"You guessed it. Will you—?"
"I shall not allow you to do anything of the kind," returned Madeline. It was then that Florence's face, changing, took on the hard, stern sharpness so typical of a cowboy's. Madeline had caught glimpses of that expression in Alfred's face, and on Stewart's when he was silent, and on Stillwell's always. It was a look of iron and fire—unchangeable, unquenchable will. There was even much of



"Give Me Your White Sweater. Take It Off—and the White Hat; Hurry, Madeline."

violence in the swift action whereby Florence compelled Madeline to the change of apparel.
"It'd been my idea, anyhow, if Stewart hadn't told me to do it," said Florence, her words as swift as her hands. "Don Carlos is after you—you, Miss Madeline Hammond! He wouldn't ambush a trail for any one else. He wants you for some reason. So Gene thought, and now I believe him. Well, we'll know for sure in five minutes. You ride the black; I'll ride Majesty. We'll slip around through the brush, out of sight and sound, till we can break out into the open. Then we'll split. You make straight for the ranch. I'll cut loose for the valley where Gene said positively the cowboys were with the cattle. The vaqueros will take me for you. They'll chase me. And you'll be on a fast horse. He can take you home ahead of any vaqueros. But you won't be chased. I'm staking all on that. Trust me, Madeline. If it were only my calculation, maybe I'd—It's because I remember Stewart. That cowboy knows things. Come, this heah's the safest and smartest way to fool Don Carlos." Madeline felt herself more forced than persuaded into acquiescence. She mounted the black and took up the bridle. In another moment she was guiding her horse off the trail in the tracks of Majesty. Florence led off at right angles, threading a slow passage through the mesquite. She favored sandy patches and open aisles between the trees and was careful not to break a track. Often she stopped to listen. This detour of perhaps half a mile brought Madeline to where she could see open ground, the ranch-house only a few miles off, and the cattle dotting the valley. She had not lost her courage, but it was certain that these familiar sights somewhat lightened the pressure upon her breast. Excitement gripped her. The shrill whistle of a horse made both the black and Majesty jump. Florence quickened the gait down the slope. Soon Madeline saw the edge of the brush, the gray-bleached grass and level ground.
Florence waited at the opening between the low trees. She gave Madeline a quick, bright glance.
"All over but the ride! That'll sure be easy. Bolt now and keep your nerve!"
When Florence wheeled the fiery roan and screamed in his ear Madeline seemed suddenly to grow lax and helpless. The big horse leaped into thundering action. Florence's hair streamed on the wind and shone gold in the sunlight. Then hoarse shouts unclamped Madeline's power of movement, and she spurred the black into the open.
He wanted to run and he was swift. Madeline loosened the reins—laid them loose upon his neck. His action was strange to her. He was hard to ride. But he was fast, and she cared for nothing else. She was running away from something; what that was she did not know. But she remembered Florence, and she wanted to look back, yet hated to do so for fear of the nameless danger Florence had mentioned.
Madeline listened for the pounding of pursuing hoofs in her rear. Involuntarily she glanced back. On the mile or more of gray level between her and the ridge there was not a horse, a man, or anything living. She wheeled to look back on the other side, down the valley slope.

The sight of Florence riding Majesty in zigzag flight before a whole troop of vaqueros blanched Madeline's cheek and made her grip the pommel of her saddle in terror. That strange gait of her roan was not his wonderful stride. Could Majesty be running wild? It flashed over Madeline that Florence was putting the horse to some such awkward flight as might have been expected of an eastern girl frightened out of her wits. Madeline made sure of this when, after looking again, she saw that Florence, in spite of the horse's breaking gait and the irregular course, was drawing slowly and surely down the valley.
Madeline had not lost her head to the extent of forgetting her own mount and the nature of the ground in front. When, presently, she turned again to watch Florence, uncertainty ceased in her mind. The strange features of that race between girl and vaqueros were no longer in evidence. Majesty was in his beautiful, wonderful stride, low down along the ground, stretching, with his nose level and straight for the valley. Between him and the lean horses in pursuit lay an ever-increasing space. He was running away from the vaqueros. Florence was indeed "riding the wind," as Stewart had aptly expressed his idea of flight upon the fleet roan.

A dimness came over Madeline's eyes, and it was not all owing to the sting of the wind. She rubbed it away, seeing Florence as a flying dot in a strange blur. What a daring, intrepid girl! This kind of strength—and eye, splendid thought for a weaker sister—was what the West inculcated in a woman.
The next time Madeline looked back Florence was far ahead of her pursuers and going out of sight behind a low knoll. Assured of Florence's safety, Madeline put her mind to her own ride and the possibilities awaiting at the ranch. She remembered the failure to get any of her servants or cowboys on the telephone. To be sure, a windstorm had once broken the wire. But she had little real hope of such being the case in this instance. She rode on, pulling the black as she neared the ranch.

It was perhaps fortunate for her, she thought, that the climb up the slope cut the black's speed so she could manage him. He was not very hard to stop. The moment she dismounted, however, he jumped and trotted off. At the edge of the slope, facing the corral, he halted to lift his head and snout up his ears. Then he let out a piercing whistle and dashed down the lane.
Madeline, prepared by that warning whistle, tried to fortify herself for a new and unexpected situation; but as she espied an unfamiliar company of horsemen rapidly riding down a hollow leading from the foothills she felt the return of fears gripping at her like cold hands, and she fled precipitously into the house.

(To be continued.)

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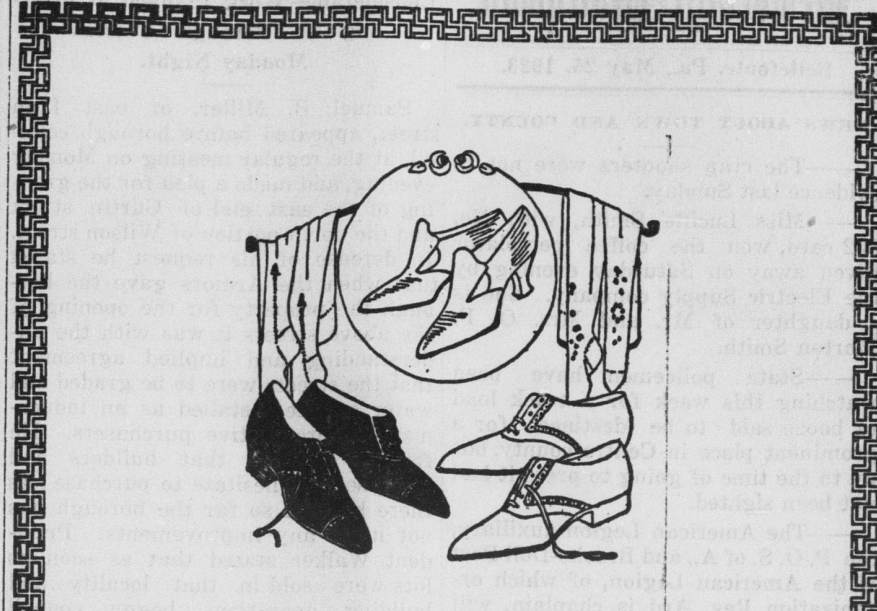
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