

THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS

A Romance

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(Continued from last week.)

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—Arriving at the lonely 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 "I do." Asking her name and learning her identity the cowboy seems fazed. In a shooting scrape outside a 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, son of a wealthy family, had been dismissed from his home because of his disposition. Madeline sees that the West has redeemed him. He meets Stillwell, Alf's employer, typical western ranchman. Madeline learns Stewart has gone over the border.

CHAPTER IV.—Danny Mains, 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 Mexican, persuades Madeline, decays them away, and Madeline gets home safely but alone.

CHAPTER XI.—A raiding guerrilla band carries off Madeline. Stewart follows alone. The leader is a man with whom Stewart had served in Mexico. He releases the girl, arranging for ransom. Returning home with Stewart, Madeline finds herself strangely stirred.

CHAPTER XII.—Madeline's sister Helen, with a party of eastern friends, arrives at the ranch, craving excitement.

CHAPTER XIII.—For the guests' entertainment a game of golf is arranged. Stewart interrupts the game, insisting the whole party return at once to the house. He tells Madeline her guests are not safe while the Mexican revolution is going on, and urges them to go up to the mountains out of danger. They decide to do so.

CHAPTER XIV.—The guerrillas leave during the night, without making trouble. Madeline and her guests, with the cowboys, go up to the mountains.

CHAPTER XV.—Edith Wayne pleads with Madeline to return to the East, but she refuses.

CHAPTER XVI.—Wandering in the mountains, Madeline sees Stewart with the girl Bonita, and comes to the worst conclusions. At camp Stewart offers to explain. Madeline will not listen. Stewart, in a rage, starts to leave camp. Nels brings news that Don Carlos and his followers are coming.

CHAPTER XVII.—The women are concealed, and the approach of the guerrillas awaited. They come, blustering, but Stewart's determined attitude cowards them, and they leave hastily. The party at once begins its return to the ranch.

CHAPTER XVIII.—
The Sheriff of El Cajon.

About the middle of the forenoon of that day Madeline reached the ranch. Her guests had all arrived there late the night before, and wanted only her presence and the assurance of her well-being to consider the last of the camping trip a rare adventure. They reported an arduous ride down the mountain, with only one incident to lend excitement. On the descent they had fallen in with Sheriff Howe and several of his deputies, who were considerably under the influence of drink and very greatly enraged by the escape of the Mexican girl Bonita. Have had used insulting language to the ladies and, according to Ambrose, would have inconvenienced the party on some pretext or other if he had not been sharply silenced by the cowboys.

Madeline's guests were two days in recovering from the hard ride. On the third day they leisurely began to prepare for departure. This period was doubly trying for Madeline. Her sister and friends were kindly and earnestly persistent in their entreaties that she go back East with them. She desired to go. It was not going to matter; it was how and when and under what circumstances she was to return that roused in her disturbing emotion. Before she went East she wanted to have fixed in mind her future relation to the ranch and the West. When the crucial hour arrived she found that the West had not claimed her yet. These old friends had warned cold ties.

It turned out, however, that there need be no hurry about making the decision. Madeline would have welcomed any excuse to procrastinate; but, as it happened, a letter from Al-

fred made her departure out of the question for the present. He wrote that his trip to California had been very profitable, that he had a proposition for Madeline from a large cattle company, and, particularly, that he wanted to marry Florence soon after his arrival home and would bring a minister from Douglas for that purpose.

Madeline went so far, however, as to promise Helen and her friends that she would go East soon, at the very latest by Thanksgiving. With that promise they were reluctantly content to say goodbye to the ranch and to her. Helen's eyes had a sweet, grave, yet mocking light as she said: "Majesty, bring Stewart with you when you come. He'll be the rage."

Madeline treated the remark with the same merry lightness with which it was received by the others; but after the train had pulled out and she was on her way home she remembered Helen's words and looks with something almost amounting to a shock. Any mention of Stewart, any thought of him, displeased her.

"What did Helen mean?" mused Madeline. And she pondered. That mocking light in Helen's eyes had been simply an ironical glint, a cynical gleam from that worldly experience so suspicious and tolerant in its wisdom. The sweet gravity of Helen's look had been a deeper and more subtle thing. Madeline wanted to understand it, to divine in it a new relation between Helen and herself, something fine and sisterly that might lead to love. The thought, however, revolving around a strange suggestion of Stewart, was poisoned at its inception, and she dismissed it.

Upon the drive in to the ranch, as she was passing the lower lake, she saw Stewart walking listlessly along the shore. When he became aware of the approach of the car he suddenly awakened from his aimless sauntering and disappeared quickly in the shade of the shrubbery. This was not by any means the first time Madeline had seen him avoid a possible meeting with her. Somehow the act had pained her, though affording her a relief. She did not want to meet him face to face.

It was annoying for her to guess that Stillwell had something to say in Stewart's defense. The old cattleman was evidently distressed. Several times he had tried to open a conversation with Madeline relating to Stewart; she had evaded him until the last time, when his persistence had brought a cold and final refusal to hear another word about the foreman. Stillwell had been crushed.

As days passed Stewart remained at the ranch without his old faithfulness to his work. Madeline was not moved to a kinder frame of mind to see him wandering dejectedly around. It hurt her, and because it hurt her she grew all the harder.

A telegram from Douglas, heralding the coming of Alfred and a minister, put an end to Madeline's brooding, and she shared something of Florence Kingsley's excitement. The cowboys were as eager and gossipy as girls. It was arranged to have the wedding ceremony performed in Madeline's great hall-chamber, and the dinner in the cool, flower-scented patio.

Alfred and his minister arrived at the ranch in the big white car. They appeared considerably wind-blown. In fact, the minister was breathless, almost sightless, and certainly hatless. Alfred, used as he was to wind and speed, remarked that he did not wonder at Nels' aversion to riding a feather cannon-ball. The imperturbable Link took off his cap and goggles and, consulting his watch, made his usual apologetic report to Madeline, deploring the fact that a teamster and a few stray cattle on the road had held him down to the manana time of only a mile a minute.

Arrangements for the wedding brought Alfred's delighted approval. When he had learned all Florence and Madeline would tell him he expressed a desire to have the cowboys attend; and then he went on to talk about California, where he was going to take Florence on a short trip.

On the following day Alfred and Florence were married. Florence's sister and several friends from El Cajon were present, besides Madeline, Stillwell, and his men. It was Alfred's express wish that Stewart attend the ceremony. Madeline was amused when she noticed the painfully suppressed excitement of the cowboys. For them a wedding must have been an unusual and impressive event. She began to have a better understanding of the nature of it when they cast off restraint and pressed forward to kiss the bride. In all her life Madeline had never seen a bride kissed so much and so heartily, nor one so flushed and disheveled and happy. This indeed was a joyful occasion.

The dinner began quietly enough with the cowboys divided between embarrassment and voracious appetites

that they evidently feared to indulge. Wine, however, loosened their tongues, and when Stillwell got up to make the speech everybody seemed to expect of him they greeted him with a roar.

Stillwell was now one huge, mountainous smile. He was so happy that he appeared on the verge of tears. He rambled on ecstatically till he came to raise his glass.

"An' now, girls an' boys, let's all drink to the bride an' groom; to their sincere an' lastin' love; to their happiness an' prosperity; to their good health an' long life. Let's drink to the union of the East with the West. No man full of red blood an' the real breath of life could resist a Western girl an' a good boss an' God's free hand—that open country out there. So we claim Al Hammond, an' may we be true to him. An', friends, I think it fittin' that we drink to his sister an' to our hopes. Health to the lady we hope to make our Majesty! Health to the man who'll come ridin' out of the West, a fine, big-hearted man with a fast boss an' a strong rope, an' may he win an' hold her! Come, friends, drink."

A heavy pound of horses' hoofs and a yell outside arrested Stillwell's voice and halted his hand in midair.

The patio became as silent as an unoccupied room.

Through the open doors and windows of Madeline's chamber burst the sounds of horses stamping to a halt, then harsh speech of men, and a low cry of a woman in pain.

Rapid steps crossed the porch, entered Madeline's room. Nels appeared in the doorway. Madeline was surprised to see that he had not been at the dinner-table. She was disturbed at sight of his face.

"Stewart, you're wanted outdoors," called Nels, bluntly. "Monty, you slope out here with me. You, Nick, an' Stillwell—I reckon the rest of you had better shut the doors an' stay inside."

Nels disappeared. Quick as a cat Monty glided out. Madeline heard his soft, swift steps pass from her room into her office. He had left his guns there. Madeline trembled. She saw Stewart get up quietly and without any change of expression on his dark, sad face leave the patio. Nick Steele followed him. Stillwell dropped his wine-glass. As it broke, shivering the silence, his huge smile vanished. His face set into the old craginess and the red slowly thickened into black. Stillwell went out and closed the door behind him.

Then there was a blank silence. The enjoyment of the moment had been rudely disrupted. Madeline glanced down the lines of brown faces to see the pleasure fade into the old familiar hardness.

"What's wrong?" asked Alfred, rather stupidly. The change of mood had been too rapid for him. Suddenly he was awakened, thoroughly aroused at the interruption. "I'm going to see who's butted in here to spoil our dinner," he said, and strode out.

He returned before any one at the table had spoken or moved, and now the dull red of anger mottled his forehead.

"It's the sheriff of El Cajon!" he exclaimed, contemptuously. "Pat Howe with some of his touch deputies come to arrest Gene Stewart. They've got that poor little Mexican girl out there tied on a horse. Confound that sheriff!"

Madeline calmly rose from the table, eluding Florence's retreating hand, and started for the door. The cowboys jumped up. Alfred barred her progress.

"Alfred, I am going out," she said.

"No, I guess not," he replied.

"That's no place for you. Maybe there'll be a fight. You can do nothing. You must not go."

"Perhaps I can prevent trouble," she replied.

As she left the patio she was aware that Alfred, with Florence at his side and the cowboys behind, were starting to follow her. When she got out of her room upon the porch she heard several men in loud, angry discussion. Then, at sight of Bonita helplessly and cruelly bound upon a horse, pale and disheveled and suffering, Madeline experienced the thrill that slight or mention of this girl always gave her. It yielded to a hot pang in her breast—that live pang which so shamed her. But almost instantly, as a second glance showed an agony in Bonita's face, her bruised arms where the rope bit deep into the flesh, her little brown hands stained with blood,

Madeline was overcome by pity for the unfortunate girl and a woman's righteous passion at such barbarous treatment of one of her own sex.

The man holding the bridle of the horse on which Bonita had been bound was at once recognized by Madeline as the big-bodied, bullet-headed guerrilla who had found the basket of wine in the spring at camp. Redder of face, blacker of beard, coarser of aspect, evidently under the influence of liquor, he was as fierce-looking as a gorilla and as repulsive. Besides him there were three other men present, all mounted on weary horses. The one in the foreground, gaunt, sharp-featured, red-eyed, with a pointed beard, she recognized as the sheriff of El Cajon.

Stillwell saw Madeline, and, throwing up his hands, roared to be heard.

This quieted the gesticulating, quarreling men.

"Wal now, Pat Howe, what's drivin' you like a locoed steer on the rampage?" demanded Stillwell.

"Keep in the traces, Bill," replied Howe. "You savvy what I come fer. I've been bidin' my time. But I'm ready now. I'm hyar to arrest a criminal."

The huge frame of the old cattleman jerked as if he had been stabbed. His face turned purple.

"What criminal?" he shouted, hoarsely.

The sheriff flicked his quirt against his dirty boot, and he twisted his thin lips into a leer.

"Why, Bill, I knowed you hed a no-good outfit ridin' this range; but I wasn't wise that you hed more'n one criminal."

"Cut that talk! Which cowboy are you wantin' to arrest?"

Howe's manner altered.

"Gene Stewart," he replied, curtly.

"On what charge?"

"Fer killin' a Greaser one night last fall."

"So you're still harpin' on that? Pat, you're on the wrong trail. You can't lay that killin' onto Stewart. The thing's ancient by now. But if you insist on bringin' him to court, let the arrest go today—we're havin' some fiesta hyar—an' I'll fetch Gene in to El Cajon."

"Nope. I reckon I'll take him when I got the chance, before he slopes."

"I'm givin' you my word," thundered Stillwell.

"I reckon I don't hev to take your word, Bill, or anybody else's."

Stillwell's great bulk quivered with his rage, yet he made a successful effort to control it.

"See hyar, Pat Howe, I know what's reasonable. Law is law. But in this country there always has been an 'is now a safe an' sane way to proceed with the law. Mebbe you've forgot that. I'm a-goin' to give you a hunch. Pat, you're not overkilled in these parts. You've rid too much with a high hand. Some of your deals hev been shady, an' don't you overlook what I'm sayin'. But you're the sheriff, an' I'm respectin' your office. I'm respectin' it this much. If the milk of human decency is so soured in your breast that you can't hev a kind feelin', then try to avoid the unpleasantness that'll result from any contrary move on your part today. Do you get that hunch?"

"Stillwell, you're threatenin' an officer," replied Howe, angrily. "I come to arrest him, an' I'm goin' to."

"So that's your game!" shouted Stillwell. "We'll all be glad to get you straight, Pat. Now listen, you cheap, red-eyed coyote of a sheriff! You don't care how many enemies you make. You know you'll never get office again in this county. What do you care now? It's amazin' strange how earnest you are to hunt down the man who killed that particular Greaser. I reckon there's been some dozen or more killin's of Greasers in the last year. Why don't you take to trillin' some of them killin's? I'll tell you why. You're afraid to get near the border. An' your hate of Gene Stewart makes you want to hound him an' put him where he's never been yet—in jail. You want to spite his friends. Wal, listen, you lean-jawed, skunk-bitten coyote! Go ahead an' try to arrest him!"

Stillwell took one mighty stride off the porch. His last words had been cold. His rage appeared to have been

As Stewart appeared the Mexican girl suddenly seemed vitalized out of her stupor. She strained at her bonds, as if to lift her hands beseechingly. A flush animated her haggard face, and her big eyes lighted.

"Senor Gene!" she moaned. "Help me! I so seek. They beat me, rope me, mos' keel me. Oh, help me, Senor Gene!"

"Shut up, er I'll gag you," said the man who held Bonita's horse.

"Muzzle her. Sneed, if she blabs again," called Howe.

Madeline felt something tense and strained working in the short silence. Was it only a phase of her thrilling excitement? Her swift glance showed the faces of Nels and Monty and Nick to be brooding, cold, watchful. She wondered why Stewart did not look toward Bonita. He, too, was new

dark-faced, cool, quiet, with something ominous about him.

"Have I'll submit to arrest without any fuss," he said, slowly, "if you'll take the ropes off that girl."

"Nope," replied the sheriff. "She got away from me onct. She's hawg-tied now, an' she'll stay hawg-tied."

Madeline thought she saw Stewart give a slight start. But an unaccountable dimness came over her eyes, at brief intervals obscuring her keen sight.

"All right, let's hurry out of here," said Stewart. "You've made annoyance enough. Ride down to the corral with me. I'll get my horse and go with you."

"Hold on!" yelled Howe, as Stewart turned away. "Not so fast. Who's doin' this? You'll ride one of my pack-horses, an' you'll go in irons."

"You want to handcuff me?" queried Stewart, with sudden swift start of passion.

"Want to? Haw, haw! Nope, Stewart, that jest my way with hoss-thieves, raiders Greasers, murderers, an' sich. See hyar, you Sneed, git off an' put the irons on this man."

The guerrilla called Sneed slid off his horse and began to fumble in his saddle-bags.

Stillwell was gazing at Stewart in a kind of imploring amaze.

"Gene, you ain't goin' to stand fer them handcuffs?" he pleaded.

"Yes," replied the cowboy. "Bill, old friend, I'm an outsider here. There's no call for Miss Hammond and—and her brother and Florence to be worried further about me. Their happy day has already been spoiled on my account. I want to get out quick."

"Wal, you might be too d—n considerate of Miss Hammond's sensitive feelin's." There was now no trace of the courteous, kindly old rancher. He looked harder than stone. "How about my feelin's? I want to know if you're goin' to let this sneak-in coyote, this last gasp of the old run-guzzlin' frontier sheriff, put you in irons an' hawg-tie you an' drive you off to jail?"

"Yes," replied Stewart, steadily.

"Wal, by Gawd! You, Gene Stewart! What's come over you? Why, man, go in the house, an' I'll tend to this feller. Then tomorrow you can ride in an' give yourself up like a gentleman."

"No. I'll go. Thanks, Bill, for the way you and the boys would stick to me. Hurry, Howe, before my mind changes."

His voice broke at last, betraying the wonderful control he had kept over his passions. As he ceased speaking he seemed suddenly to become spiritless. He dropped his head.

When the man Sneed came forward, jingling the iron fetters, Madeline's blood turned to fire. She would have forgiven Stewart then for lapsing into the kind of cowboy it had been her blind and sickly sentiment to abhor. This was a man's West—a man's game. At that moment, with her blood hot and racing, she would have gloried in the violence which she had so deplored; she would have welcomed the action that had characterized Stewart's treatment of Don Carlos; she had in her the sudden dawning temper of a woman who had been assimilating the life and nature around her and who would not have turned her eyes away from a harsh and bloody deed.

But Stewart held forth his hands to be manacled. Then Madeline heard her own voice burst out in a ringing, imperious "Wait!"

Sneed dropped the manacles. Stewart's face took on a chalky whiteness. Howe, in a slow, stupid embarrassment beyond his control, removed his sombrero in a respect that seemed wrung from him.

"Mr. Howe, I can prove to you that Stewart was not concerned in any way whatever with the crime for which you want to arrest him."

The sheriff's stare underwent a blinking change. He coughed, stammered, and tried to speak. Manifestly, he had been thrown completely off his balance. Astonishment slowly merged into discomfiture.

"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 quarreling 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 waqueros, 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 Howe. His sharp features fixed in an expression of craft.

"That's mighty interestin', Miss Hammond, most as interestin' as a story book," he said. "Now, since you're obbligin' 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 feller Stewart show up?" Howe continued, with a wry smile.

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

"An' what time was the Greaser shot?" queried Howe, with his little eyes gleaming like coals.

"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 Howe.

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

"I thank you, Miss Hammond," he said, huskily. "But you needn't answer any more of Howe's questions. 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 Howe 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 Howe'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. How'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. Mebbe a stroke of lightning might clear this murky air. Whatever Gene Stewart did that on-lucky night—you tell it."

(To be continued.)



He Was So Happy That He Appeared on the Verge of Tears.



"Senor Gene!" She Moaned. "Help Me! I So Seek."

transferred to Howe. The sheriff had begun to stutter and shake a lanky red hand at the cattleman when Stewart stepped out.

"Here, you fellows, give me a chance to say a word."

Superintendents to Meet at State College.

The annual gathering of public school superintendents of the State, held in connection with the summer session of The Pennsylvania State College, will take place this year during the week of August 6 to 11. According to dean Will Grant Chambers, of the college school of education, a greater attendance than ever before is anticipated. There were 150 at the conference last year.

State Superintendent A. S. Cook, of Maryland, and Dr. Lee L. Driver, head of the bureau of rural education of the Pennsylvania State Department of Public Instruction, will lead the conference and discussions, while Dr. S. Parkes Cadman, of Brooklyn, noted publicist and lecturer, will give a series of lectures during the week. Other members of the State Department of Public Instruction will discuss phases of school administration of interest to the superintendents. A conference for attendance officers under the direction of W. S. Demison, director of the Attendance Bureau of the State Department, will also be held during the same week.