The Light of Western Stars

A ROMANCE by ZANE GREY

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CHAPTER XIX—Continued.
—17—

His white face loomed over hers. She closed her eyes. He rained kisses upon her face, but no more upon her mouth. On her closed eyes, her hair, her cheeks, her neck he pressed swift lips—lips that lost their fire and grew cold. Then he released her, and, lifting and righting her in the saddle, he still held her arm to keep her from falling.

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 this meaning.

"You can put one 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,

"Now You Can't Say You've Never Been Kissed," Stewart Said.

the certainty that she would kill Stewart if she held the gun an instant longer, tortured the self-accusing cry from her.

Stewart stooped to pick up the weapon.

"You might have saved me a h—l 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!"

Stewart leaped for the saddle of his horse, and with the flying mount crashed through the mesquites to disappear.

CHAPTER XX

The Secret Told.

Late in the night Madeline fell asleep. In the morning she was pale and languid, but in a mental condition that promised composure.

It was considerably after her regular hour that Madeline repaired to her office. The door was open, and just outside, tipped back in a chair, sat Stillwell.

"Mawnin', Miss Majesty," he said, as he rose to greet her with his usual courtesy. Madeline shrank inwardly, fearing his old lamentations about Stewart. Then she saw a dusty, rugged pony in the yard and a little burro drooping under a heavy pack. Both animals bore evidence of long, arduous travel.

"To whom do they belong?" asked Madeline.

"Them critters? Why, Danny Mains," replied Stillwell, with a cough that betrayed embarrassment.

"Is Danny Mains here?" she asked, in sudden curiosity.

The old cattleman nodded gloomily.

"Yep, he's byar, all right. Sloped in from the hills an', he hollered to see Bonita. He's loced, too, about that little black-eyed hussy. Why, he hardly said, 'Howdy, Bill,' before he began to ask wild an' eager questions. I took him in to see Bonita. He's been there more'n a half-hour now."

Rapid footsteps with an accompaniment of clinking spurs sounded in the hallway. Then a young man ran out upon the porch. He was a handsome, frank-faced boy. At sight of Madeline he slammed down his sombrero and, leaping at her, he possessed himself of her hands. His swift violence not only alarmed her, but painfully reminded her of something she wished to forget.

This cowboy bent his head and kissed her hands and wrung them, and when he straightened up he was crying.

"Miss Hammond, she's safe an' almost well, an' what I feared most ain't so, thank God," he cried. "Sure I'll never be able to pay you for all you've done for her. She's told me how she was dragged down here, how Gene tried to save her, how you spoke up for Gene an' her, too, how Monty at the last throwed his guns. Poor Monty! We were good friends, Monty an' I. There's Nels an' Nick an' Gene, he's been some friend to me; but Monty Price was—he was grand. He never knew, any more than you or Bill, here, or the boys, what Bonita was to me."

Stillwell's kind and heavy hand fell upon the cowboy's shoulder.

"Danny, what's all this queer gab?" he asked. "An' you're talkin' some liberty with Miss Hammond, who never seen you before. I see you're not drinkin'. Come, ease up now an' talk sense."

The cowboy's fine, frank face broke into a smile that flashed the tears from his eyes. Then he laughed. His laugh had a pleasant, boyish ring—a happy ring.

"Bill, old pal, stand bridle down a minute, will you?" Then he bowed to Madeline. "I beg your pardon, Miss Hammond, for seemin' rudeness. I'm Danny Mains. An' Bonita is my wife. I'm so crazy glad she's safe an' unharmed—so grateful to you that—why, sure it's a wonder I didn't kiss you outright."

"Bonita's your wife!" ejaculated Stillwell.

"Sure. We've been married for months," replied Danny, happily. "Gene Stewart did it. Good old Gene. I guess maybe I haven't come to pay him up for all he's done for me! You see, I've been in love with Bonita for two years. An' Gene—you know, Bill, what a way Gene has with girls—he was—well, he was tryin' to get Bonita to have me."

Madeline's quick, varying emotions were swallowed up in a boundless gladness. Something dark, deep, heavy, and somber was flooded from her heart. She had a sudden rich sense of gratitude toward this smiling, clean-faced cowboy whose blue eyes flashed through tears.

"Danny Mains!" she said, tremulously and smilingly. "If you are as glad as your news has made me—if you really think I merit such a reward—you may kiss me outright."

With a bashful wonder, but with right hearty will, Danny Mains availed himself of this gracious privilege.

Stillwell snorted. The signs of his phenomenal smile were manifest, otherwise Madeline would have thought that snort an indication of furious disapproval.

"Bill, straddle your hair," said Danny. "You've gone back a heap these last few months, frettin' over your bad boys, Danny an' Gene. You'll need support under you while I'm throwin' my yarn. Story of my life, Bill." He placed a chair for Madeline. "Miss Hammond, beggin' your pardon again, I want you to listen, also. You've the face an' eyes of a woman who loves to hear of other people's happiness. Besides, somehow, it's easy for me to talk, lookin' at you."

Walking off the porch, he stood before the weary horse and burro. With the swift violence characteristic of men of his class he slipped the pack from the burro and threw saddle and bridle from the horse.

He untied the pack and, taking a small, heavy sack from it, he came back upon the porch. Deliberately he dumped the contents of the sack at Stillwell's feet. Piece after piece of rock thumped upon the floor. The pieces were sharp, ragged, evidently broken from a ledge; the body of them was white in color, with yellow veins and bars and streaks. Stillwell grasped up one rock after another, staged and stuttered, put the rocks to his lips, dug into them with his shaking fingers; then he lay back in his chair, head against the wall, and as he gaped at Danny the old smile began to transform his face.

Danny regarded Stillwell with lofty condescension. "Now, Bill, what've we got here, say, offhand?"

"Oh, Lord, Danny! I'm afraid to say. Look, Miss Majesty, lest look at the gold. I've lived among prospectors an' gold miners for thirty years, an' I never seen the beat of this."

"The Lost Mine of the Padres!" cried Danny, in stentorian voice. "An' it belongs to me!"

Stillwell made some incoherent sound as he sat up fascinated, quite beside himself.

"Bill, it was some long time ago since you saw me," said Danny, "Fact is, I know how you felt, because Gene kept me posted. I happened to run across Bonita, an' I wasn't goin' to let her ride away alone, when she told me she was in trouble. We hit the trail for the Peloncillos. Bonita had Gene's horse, an' she was to meet him up on the trail. We got to the mountains all right, an' nearly starved for a few days till Gene found us. He had got in trouble himself an' couldn't fetch much with him.

"We made for the crags an' built a cabin. I come down that day Gene sent his horse Majesty to you. Never saw Gene so broken-hearted. Well, after he started for the border Bonita an' I were hard put to it to keep alive. But we got along, an' I think it was then she began to care a little for me. Once I went to El Cajon an' run plumb into Gene. He was back from the revolution an' outfittin' up some. But I got away from him after doin' all I could to drag him out of town. A long time after that Gene trailed up to the crags an' found us. Gene had stopped drinkin', he'd changed wonderful, was fine an' dandy. It was then he began to pester the life out of me to make me marry Bonita. I was happy, so was she, an' I was some scared of spoilin' it. Gene's dog-gone hard to buck against! I had to give in, an' I asked Bonita to marry me. Well, she wouldn't at first—said she wasn't good enough for me. But I saw the marriage idea was workin' deep, an' I just kept on beatin' an deceivin' as I knew how. So it was my wantin' to marry Bonita—my bein' glad to marry her—that made her grow soft an' sweet an' pretty as a mountain quail. Gene fetched up Padre Marcos an' he married us."

Danny paused in his narrative, breathing hard, as if the memory of the incident described had stirred strong and thrilling feeling in him. Stillwell's smile was rapturous. Madeline leaned toward Danny with her eyes shining.

"Miss Hammond, an' you, Bill Stillwell, now listen, for this is strange. I've got to tell you. The afternoon Bonita an' I were married, when Gene an' the padre had gone, she left me for a little, an' when she came back she wore some pretty yellow flowers in her hair. She said some queer things about spirits follin' rocks down the canyon. Then she said she wanted to show me where she always sat an' waited an' watched for me when I was away. She led me around under the crags to a long slope. It was some pretty there—clear an' open, with a long sweep, an' the desert yawnin' deep an' red. There were yellow flowers on that slope, the same kind she had in her hair.

"When I heard the strange crack of rollin' rocks—heard them rattle down an' roll an' grow faint—I was some out of my head. But not for long. Them rocks were rollin' all right, only it was the weatherin' of the cliffs.

"An' there under the crags was a gold pocket.

"Then I was worse than loced. I went gold-crazy. I worked like seventeen burros. Bill, I dug a lot of gold-bearin' quartz. Bonita watched the trails for me, brought me water. That was how she come to get caught by Pat Hawe an' his guerrillas. Sure! Pat Hawe was so set on doin' Gene dirt that he mixed up with Don Carlos. Bonita will tell you some staggerin' news about that outfit. Just now my story is all gold."

Danny Mains got up and kicked back his chair. Blue lightning gleamed from his eyes as he thrust a hand toward Stillwell.

"Bill, old pal, put her there—give me your hand," he said. "You were always my friend. You had faith in me. Well, Danny Mains owes you, an' he owes Gene Stewart a good deal, an' Danny Mains pays. I want two pardners to help me work my gold mine. You an' Gene. Go fetch him; an' right here in this house, with my wife an' Miss Hammond as witnesses, we'll draw up a pardnership. Go find him, Bill. I want to show him this gold, show him how Danny Mains pays! An' the only bitter drop in my cup today is that I can't ever pay Monty Price."

Madeline watched the huge Stillwell and the little cowboy, both talking wildly, as they walked off arm in arm to find Stewart. She imagined something of what Danny's disappointment would be, of the elder man's consternation and grief, when he learned Stewart had left for the border. At this juncture she looked up to see a strange, yet familiar figure approaching. Padre Marcos!

Mention of Padre Marcos, sight of him, had always occasioned Madeline a little indefinable shock; and now, as he stepped to the porch, a shrunken, stooped, and sad-faced man, she was startled.

The padre bowed low to her.

"Senora, will you grant me audience? It is a matter of great moment, which you might not care to have any one hear."

Wonderingly Madeline inclined her head. The padre gently closed one door and then the others.

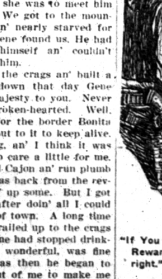
"Senora, I have come to disclose a secret—my own sinfulness in keeping it—and to implore your pardon. Do you remember that night Senor Stewart dragged me before you in the waiting-room at El Cajon?"

"Yes," replied Madeline.

"Senora, since that night you have been Senor Stewart's wife!"

Madeline became as motionless as stone. She seemed to feel nothing, only to hear.

"You are Senor Stewart's wife. I have kept the secret under fear of death. But I could keep it no longer.



"If You Really Think I Merit Such a Reward, You May Kiss Me Outright."

Senor Stewart may kill me now. Ah, Senora, it is very strange to you. You were so frightened that night, you knew not what happened. Senor Stewart threatened me. He forced you. He made me speak the secret. He made you speak the Spanish yes. And I, Senora, knowing the deeds of these sinful cowboys, fearing worse than disgrace to one so beautiful and so good as you, I could not do less than marry you truly. At least you should be his wife. So I married you, truly, in the service of my church."

"My God!" cried Madeline, rising.

"Hear me! I implore you, Senora, hear me out! Do not leave me! Do not look so—so— Ah, Senora, let me speak a word for Senor Stewart. He was drunk that night. He did not know what he was about. In the morning he came to me, made me swear by my cross that I would not reveal the disgrace he had put upon you. If I did he would kill me. Life is nothing to the American vaquero, Senora. I promised to respect his command, but I did not tell him you were his wife. He did not dream I had truly married you. He went to fight for the freedom of my country—Senora, he is one splendid soldier—and I brooded over the sin of my secret. If he were killed I need never tell you. But if he lived I knew that I must some day.

"Senora, I pray you, do not misunderstand my mission. Beyond my confession to you I have only a duty to tell you of the man whose wife you are. But I am a priest and I can read the soul. The ways of God are inscrutable. I am only a humble instrument. You are a noble woman, and Senor Stewart is a man of desert iron forged anew in the crucible of love. Quien sabe? Senor Stewart swore he would kill me if I betrayed him. But he will not lift his hand against me. For the man bears you a very great and pure love, and it has changed him. To love you above the spirit of the flesh; to know you are his wife, his, never to be another's except by his sacrifice; to watch you with a secret glory of joy and pride; to stand, while he might, between you and evil; to find his happiness in service; to wait, with never a dream of telling you, for the hour to come when to leave you free he must go out and get Bonita'd shot? Senora, that is beautiful. It is sublime, it is terrible. It has brought me to you with my confession. So I beseech you in my humble office as priest, as a lover of mankind, before you send Stewart to his death, to be sure there is here no mysterious dispensation of God. I pray you, Senora, before you let Stewart give you freedom at such cost be sure you do not want his love, lest you cast away something sweet and ennobling which you yourself have created."

CHAPTER XXI

News of Stewart.

Blinded, like a wild creature, Madeline Hammond ran to her room. She felt as if a stroke of lightning had shattered the shadowy substance of the dream she had made of real life. The wonder of Danny Mains' story, the strange regret with which she had realized her injustice to Stewart, the astounding secret as revealed by Padre Marcos—these were forgotten in the sudden consciousness of her own love. She liberated the thought that knocked at the gates of her mind. With quivering lips she whispered it. Then she spoke aloud:

"I will say it—hear it. I—I love him!"

In a nature like hers, where strength of feeling had long been inhibited as a matter of training, such a transforming surprise as sudden consciousness of passionate love required time for its awakening, time for its sway.

By and by that self-confirming moment came, and Madeline Hammond faced not only the love in her heart, but the thought of the man she loved.

Suddenly, as she raged, something in her—this dauntless new personality—took arms against indictment of Gene Stewart. Right mind rallied above him and his life. She saw him drunk, brutal; she saw him abandoned, lost. Then out of the picture she had of him thus slowly grew one of a different man—weak, sick, changed by shock, growing strong strangely, spiritually altered, liberty loved like an eagle, secretive, tireless, faithful, soft as a woman, hard as iron to endure, and at the last noble.

"Oh, it is all terrible!" she cried. "I am his wife. His wife! That meeting with him—the marriage—then his fall, his love, his rise, his silence, his pride! And I can never be anything to him. Could I be anything to him? I, Madeline Hammond? But I am his wife, and I love him! His wife! I am the wife of a cowboy! That might be undone. Can my love be undone? Ah, do I want anything undone? He is gone, gone! Could he have meant—I will not, dare not think of that. He will come back. No, he never will come back. Oh, what shall I do?"

* * * * *

And on the morning of the next day, when Madeline went out upon the porch, Stillwell, haggard and stern, with husky, incoherent word handed her a message from El Cajon. She read:

"El Capitan Stewart captured by rebel soldiers in fight at Agua Prieta yesterday. He was a sharpshooter in the federal ranks. Sentenced to death Thursday at sunset."

CHAPTER XXII

The Ride.

"Stillwell!"

The old cattleman stood mute before her, staring at her white face, at her eyes of flame.

"Stillwell! I am Stewart's wife!"

"My Gawd, Miss Majesty!" he burst out. "I knowed somethin' turrible was wrong. Aw, sure it's a pity—"

"Do you think I'll let him be shot when I know him now, when I'm no longer blind, when I love him?" she asked, with passionate swiftness. "I will save him. This is Wednesday morning. I have thirty-six hours to save his life. Stillwell, send for Link and the car!"

She went into her office. Her mind worked with extraordinary rapidity and clearness. Her plan, born in one lightninglike flash of thought, necessitated the careful wording of telegrams to Washington, to New York, to San Antonio. These were to senators, representatives, men high in public and private life, men who would remember her and who would serve her to their utmost. Never before had her position meant anything to her comparable with what it meant now. Never in all her life had money seemed the power that it was then. If she had been poor! A shuddering chill froze the thought at its inception. She dispelled heartbreaking thoughts. She had power. She had wealth. She would set into operation all the unlimited means these gave her—the wires and pulleys and strings underneath the surface of political and international life, the open, free, purchasing value of money or the deep, underground, mysterious, incalculably powerful influence moved by gold. She could save Stewart.

When she went outside the car was there with Link, helmet in hand, a cool, bright gleam in his eyes, and with Stillwell, losing his haggard misery, beginning to respond to Madeline's spirit.

"Link, drive Stillwell to El Cajon in time for him to catch the El Paso train," she said. "Wait there for his return and if any message comes from him, telephone it at once to me."

Then she gave Stillwell the telegrams to send from El Cajon and drafts to cash in El Paso. She instructed him to go before the rebel junta, then stationed at Juarez, to explain the situation, to bid them expect communications from Washington officials requesting and advising Stewart's exchange as a prisoner of war, to offer to buy his release from the rebel authorities.

There was a crack, a muffled sound bursting into a roar, and the big car jerked forward to bound over the edge of the slope, to leap down the long incline, to shoot out upon the level valley floor and disappear in moving dust.

Madeline endured patiently, endured for long interminable hours while hold fast to hope with indomitable will.

No message came. At sunset she went outdoors, suffering a torment of accumulating suspense. Darkness fell. She prayed for the sun not to rise, not to begin its short twelve-hour journey toward what might be a fatal setting for Stewart. But the dawn did lighten swiftly, she thought, remorselessly. Daylight had broken, and this was Thursday!

Sharp ringing at the telephone bell startled her, roused her into action. She ran to answer the call.

"Hello—hello—Miss Majesty!" came the hurried reply. "This is Link talkin'. Messages for you. Favorable, the operator said. I'm to ride out with them. I'll come a-hummin'."

That was all. Madeline heard the bang of the receiver as Stevens threw it down. Favorable! Then Stillwell had been successful. Her heart leaped. Suddenly she became weak and her hands failed of their accustomed deftness. It took her what seemed a thousand years to dress. Breakfast meant nothing to her except that I helped her to pass dragging minutes.

Finally a low hum, mounting swift in to a roar and ending with a sharp report, announced the arrival of the car. If her feet had kept pace with her heart she would have raced out to meet Link.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Family of Dwarfs.

Among the interesting accounts of dwarfs is that of Count Joseph Borclaski, who is said to have been "the son of well-formed parents of whom the first, the fifth and the sixth were Joseph, who wrote a history of his own life, records that his eldest brother was three feet six inches; then came Joseph himself, whose height at twenty was two feet ten inches, and at thirty, three feet three inches. He was succeeded by three others, the middle one being a girl who died of smallpox, being then two feet two inches, but of admirable proportions. John Borclaski was very well proportioned, was married to a woman of ordinary size, who brought him several well-formed children, and died at Bank's cottage, near Duram, in 1837, at the age of ninety-eight, a great age for an ordinary man and without an example in the history of the dwarfs."

Single Devotion.

"Don't they get on well together?"

"I'll say they don't. They have twin pews in church."—Life.

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Religion as Needed.

The soldiers marched to the church and halted in the square outside. One wing of the edifice was undergoing repairs, so there was room for only half the regiment.

"Sergeant," ordered the captain, "tell the men who don't want to go to church to fall out."

A large number quickly availed themselves of the privilege.

"Now, sergeant," said the captain, "dismiss all the men who did not fall out and march the others in—they need it most."—The Continent.

The School of Marriage.

"After all, my dear, one of a pair of lovers is always more deeply in love—and that is the one that suffers."

"Yes, but the other one is the bored party—and I find that thought consoling."—La Vie Parisienne.

Fortunately for masculine vanity, the average woman is short on the sense of humor.

When two women argue the winner is the one who can talk the fastest.

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"You say you wouldn't marry the best man in the world?"

"Emphatically," answered the haughty girl.

"Then there's no use my proposing."

"Oh, but you're not quite the best man in the world, are you?"—Washington Star.

Tears will often win a jury if backed up by sufficient good looks.

Some men are fully as contrary as some women.

Some folks never put off until tomorrow the creditors they can put off for thirty days.

Distance prolongs the life of many friendships.

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Time and Trees.

A consideration not given much thought at the time of selecting trees for planting is the matter of permanency, says the American Tree association of Washington, D. C. The association welcomes you to the tree-planting army and asks you to report your tree planting. Entire streets sometimes a whole town, are planted with short-lived and inferior trees, when a little additional forethought and patience would have brought about an equally desirable and more lasting effect. It is, therefore, much more desirable to plant comparatively long-lived trees, such as the oak and sycamore.

Some men are so mean that they even refuse to let their wives have the last word.

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