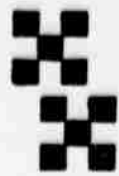


# The Light of Western Stars



## A Romance By Zane Grey

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CHAPTER XVI  
—13—  
Bonita.

Having exhausted all the resources of the mountain, such that had interested them, Madeline's guests settled quietly down for a rest, which Madeline knew would soon end in a desire for civilized comforts. They were almost tired of roughing it. Helen's discontent manifested itself in her remark, "I guess nothing is going to happen, after all."

Madeline awaited their pleasure in regard to the breaking of camp; and meanwhile, as none of them cared for more exertion, she took her walks without them, sometimes accompanied by one of the cowboys, always by the stag-hounds. One day, while walking alone, before she realized it she had gone a long way down a dim trail winding among the rocks. It was the middle of a summer afternoon, and all about her were shadows of the crags crossing the sunlit patches. The quiet was undisturbed. She went on and on, not blind to the fact that she was perhaps going too far from camp, but risking it because she was sure of her way back, and enjoying the wild, craggy recesses that were new to her. Finally she came out upon a bank that broke abruptly into a beautiful little glade. Here she sat down to rest before undertaking the return trip.

Suddenly Russ, the keeper of the stag-hounds, raised his head and growled. Madeline feared he might have scented a mountain-lion or wildcat. She quieted him and carefully looked around. The little glade was open and grassy, with here a pine tree, there a boulder. The outlet seemed to go down into a wilderness of canyons and ridges. Looking in this direction, Madeline saw the slight, dark figure of a woman coming stealthily along under the pines. Madeline was amazed, then a little frightened, for that stealthy walk from tree to tree was suggestive of secrecy, if nothing worse. Presently the woman was joined by a tall man who carried a package, which he gave to her. They came on up the glade and appeared to be talking earnestly. In another moment Madeline recognized Stewart. She had no greater feeling of surprise than had at first been hers. But for the next moment she scarcely thought at all—merely watched the couple approaching. In a flash came back her former curiosity as to Stewart's strange absence from camp, and then with the return of her doubt of him the recognition of the woman. The small, dark head, the brown face, the big eyes—Madeline now saw distinctly—belonged to the Mexican girl Bonita.

Stewart had met her there. This was the secret of his lonely trips, taken ever since he had come to work for Madeline. This secluded glade was a rendezvous. He had her hidden there. Quietly Madeline arose, with a gesture to the dogs, and went back along the trail toward camp. Succeeding her surprise was a feeling of sorrow that Stewart's regeneration had not been complete. Sorrow gave place to insufferable distrust that while she had been romancing about this cowboy, dreaming of her good influence over him, he had been merely base. Somehow it stung her. Stewart had been nothing to her, she thought, yet she had been proud of him. She tried to revolve the thing, to be fair to him, when every instinctive tendency was to expel him, and all pertaining to him, from her thoughts. And her effort at sympathy, at extenuation, failed utterly before her pride. Exerting her will-power, she dismissed Stewart from her mind.

Madeline did not think of him again till late that afternoon, when, as she was leaving her tent to join several of her guests, Stewart appeared suddenly in her path.

"Miss Hammond, I saw your tracks down the trail," he began, eagerly, but his tone was easy and natural. "I'm thinking—well, maybe you sure got the idea."

"I do not wish for an explanation," interrupted Madeline.

Stewart gave a slight start. His manner had a semblance of the old, cool sobriety. As he looked down at her it subtly changed.

What affronted, Madeline thought, to face her before her guests with an explanation of his conduct! Suddenly she felt an inward flash of fire that was pain, so strange, so incomprehensible, that her mind whirled. Then anger possessed her, not at Stewart, but at herself, that anything could rouse in her a raw emotion. He stood there, outwardly cool, serene, with level, haughty eyes upon Stewart; but inwardly she was burning with rage and shame.

"I'm sure not going to have you think—" He began passionately, but he broke off, and a slow, dull crimson blotched over the healthy red-brown of his neck and cheeks.

"What you do or think, Stewart, is no concern of mine."

"Miss—Miss Hammond! You don't believe—" faltered Stewart.

The crimson receded from his face, leaving it pale. His eyes were appealing. They had a kind of timid look that struck Madeline even in her anger. There was something begish

about him then. He took a step forward and reached out with his hand open-palmed in a gesture that was humble, yet held a certain dignity.

"But listen, never mind now what you think about me. There's a good reason—"

"I have no wish to hear your reason."

"But you ought," he persisted.

"Sir!"

Stewart underwent another swift change. He started violently. A dark tide shaded his face and a glitter leaped to his eyes. He took two strides—loomed over her.

"I'm not thinking about myself," he thundered. "Will you listen?"

"No," she replied; and there was freezing hauteur in her voice. With a slight gesture of dismissal, unmistakable in its finality, she turned her back upon him. Then she joined her guests.

Stewart stood perfectly motionless. Then slowly he began to lift his right hand in which he held his sombrero. He swept it up and up, high over his head. His tall form towered. With fierce suddenness he flung his sombrero down. He leaped at his black horse and dragged him to where his saddle lay. With one pitch he tossed the saddle upon the horse's back. His strong hand flashed at girths and straps. Every action was swift, decisive, fierce. Bounding for his bridle, which hung over a bush, he ran against a cowboy who awkwardly tried to avoid the onslaught.

"Get out of my way!" he yelled. Then with the same savage haste he adjusted the bridle on his horse.

"Mebbe you better hold on a minute, Gene, ole feller," said Monty Price.

"Monty, do you want me to brain you?" said Stewart, with the short, hard ring in his voice.

"Now, considerin' the high class of my brains, I oughter be real careful to keep 'em," replied Monty. "You can betcher life, Gene, I ain't goin' to git in front of you. But I jest says—Listen!"

Stewart raised his dark face. Everybody listened. And everybody heard the rapid beat of a horse's hoofs. The sun had set, but the park was light. Nels appeared down the trail, and his horse was running. In another moment he was in the circle, pulling his bay back to a sliding halt. He leaped off abreast of Stewart.

Madeline saw and felt a difference in Nels' presence.

"What's up, Gene?" he queried, sharply.

Nels' long arm shot out, and his hand fell upon Stewart, holding him down.

"Shore I'm sorry," said Nels, slowly. "Then you was goin' to hit the trail?"

"I am going to. Let go, Nels."

"Shore you ain't goin', Gene?"

"Let go, d—n you!" cried Stewart, as he wrestled free.

"What's wrong?" asked Nels, lifting his hand again.

"Man! Don't touch me!"

Nels stepped back instantly. He seemed to become aware of Stewart's

ain't beholdn' to Miss Hammond, neither. I'm my own boss, an' I'll do as I please. Sabe, senor?"

Nels' words were at variance with the meaning in his face.

"Gene, you sent me on a little scout down in the mountains, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," replied Stewart, with a new sharpness in his voice.

"Wal, shore you was so good an' right in your figgerin', as opposed to mine, that I'm sick with admirin' of you. If you hedn't sent me—wal, I'm reckonin' somethin' might hev happened. As it is we're shore up against a hell of a proposition!"

How significant was the effect of his words upon all the cowboys! Stewart made a fierce and violent motion, terrible where his other motions had been but passionate. Monty leaped straight up into the air in a singular action as suggestive of surprise as it was of wild acceptance of menace. Like a stalking giant Nick Steele strode over to Nels and Stewart. The other cowboys rose silently, without a word.

Madeline and her guests, in a little group, watched and listened, unable to divine what all this strange talk and action meant.

"Hold on, Nels, they don't need to hear it," said Stewart, hoarsely, as he waved a hand toward Madeline's silent group.

"Wal, I'm sorry, but I reckon they'd as well know fust as last. Mebbe the yearnin' wish of Miss Helen's for somethin' to happen will come true. Shore I—"

"Cut out the foshin'," rang out Monty's strident voice.

It had as decided an effect as any preceding words or action. Perhaps it was the last thing needed to transform these men, doing unaccustomed duty as escorts of beautiful women, to their natural state as men of the wild.

"Tall us what's what," said Stewart, cool and grim.

"Don Carlos an' his guerrillas are campin' on the trails that lead up here. They've got them trails blocked. By tomorrow they'd hev us corralled. Mebbe they meant to surprise us. He's got a lot of Greasers an' outlaws. They're well armed. Now, what do they mean? You-all can figger it out to suit yourselves. Mebbe the Don wants to pay a sociable call on our ladies. Mebbe his gang is come hungry, as usual. Mebbe they want to steal a few hosses, or anything they can lay hands on. Mebbe they mean wuss, too. Now, my idea is this, an' mebbe it's wrong. I long since separated from love with Greasers. That black-faced Don Carlos has got a deep game. That two-bit of a revolution is leavin' hard times. The rebels want American intervention. They'd stretch any point to make trouble. We're only ten miles from the border. Suppose them guerrillas got our crowd across that border? The United States cavalry would foller. You-all know what they'd mean. Mebbe Don Carlos' mind works that way. Mebbe it don't. I reckon we'll know soon. An' now, Stewart, whatever the Don's game is, shore you're the man to outfigger him. Mebbe it's just as well you're good an' mind about somethin'. An' I'm going to resign my job because I want to feel unbeholdn' to anybody. Shore it struck me long since that the old days hed come back for a little spell, an' there I was trailin' a promise not to hurt any Greaser."

CHAPTER XVII

Don Carlos.

Stewart took Nels, Monty and Nick Steele aside out of earshot, and they evidently entered upon an earnest colloquy. Presently the other cowboys were called. They all talked more or less, but the deep voice of Stewart predominated over the others. Then the consultation broke up, and the cowboys scattered.

"Rustle, you Indians!" ordered Stewart.

The ensuing scene of action was not reassuring to Madeline and her friends. They were quiet, awaiting some one to tell them what to do. At the offset the cowboys appeared to have forgotten Madeline. Some of them ran off into the woods, others into the open, grassy places, where they rounded up the horses and burros. Several cowboys spread tarpaulins upon the ground and began to select and roll small packs, evidently for hurried travel. Nels mounted his horse to ride down the trail. Monty and Nick Steele went off into the grove, leading their horses. Stewart climbed up a steep jumble of stone between two sections of low, cracked cliff back of the camp. Madeline's friends all inquired of her: Was there real danger? Were the guerrillas coming? Would a start be made at once for the ranch? Why had the cowboys suddenly become so different? Madeline answered as best she could; but her replies were only conjecture, and modified to allay the fears of her guests. Helen was in a white glow of excitement.

Soon the cowboys appeared riding barebacked horses, driving in others and the burros. Some of these horses were taken away and evidently hidden in deep recesses between the crags. The string of burros were packed and



"What You Do or Think, Stewart, is No Concern of Mine."

white, wild passion. Again Stewart moved to mount.

"Nels, don't make me forget we've been friends," he said.

"Shore I ain't forgettin'," replied Nels. "An' I resign my job right here an' now!"

His strange speech checked the mounting cowboy. Stewart stepped down from the stirrup. Then their hard faces were still and cold while their eyes locked glances.

Madeline was as much startled by Nels' speech as Stewart. Quick to note a change in these men, she now sensed one that was unfathomable.

"Resign?" questioned Stewart.

"Shore. What'd you think I'd do under circumstances such as has come up?"

"But see here, Nels, I won't stand for it."

"You're not my boss no more, an' I

sent off down the trail in charge of a cowboy. Nick Steele and Monty returned. Then Stewart appeared, clambering down the break between the cliffs.

His next move was to order all the baggage belonging to Madeline and her guests taken up the cliff. This was strenuous toil, requiring the need of lassoes to haul up the effects.

"Get ready to climb," said Stewart, turning to Madeline's party.

"Where?" asked Helen.

He waved his hand at the ascent to be made. Exclamations of dismay followed his gesture.

"Mr. Stewart, is there danger?" asked Dorothy; and her voice trembled.

"This was the question Madeline had upon her lips to ask Stewart, but she could not speak it.

"No, there's no danger," replied Stewart, "but we're taking precautions we all agreed on as best."

Dorothy whispered that she believed Stewart lied. Castleton asked another question, and then Harvey followed suit. Mrs. Beck made a timid query.

"Please keep quiet and do as you're told," said Stewart, bluntly.

At this juncture, when the last of the baggage was being hauled up the cliff, Monty approached Madeline and removed his sombrero. His black face seemed the same, yet this was a vastly changed Monty.

"Miss Hammond, I'm givin' notice I resign my job," he said.

"Monty! What do you mean? What does Nels mean now, when danger threatens?"

"We jest quit. That's all," replied Monty, tersely. He was stern and somber; he could not stand still; his eyes roved everywhere.

Castleton jumped up from the log where he had been sitting, and his face was very red.

"Mr. Price, does all this blooming fuss mean we are to be robbed or attacked or abducted by a lot of ragamuffin guerrillas?"

"You've called the bet."

Dorothy turned a very pale face toward Monty.

"Mr. Price, you wouldn't—you couldn't desert us now? You and Mr. Nels—"

"Desert you?" asked Monty, blankly.

"Yes, desert us. Leave us when we may need you so much, with something dreadful comin'."

Monty uttered a short, hard laugh as he bent a strange look upon the girl.

"Me an' Nels is purty much scared, an' we're goin' to slope. Miss Dorothy, bein' as we've rustled round so much, it sorta hurts us to see nice young girls dragged off by the hair."

Dorothy uttered a little cry and then became hysterical. Castleton for once was fully aroused.

"By Gad! You and your partner are a couple of blooming cowards. Where now is that courage you boasted of?"

Monty's dark face expressed extreme sarcasm.

"Look, in my time I've seen some bright fellers, but you take the cake. It's most marvelous how bright you are. Figger'n' me an' Nels so correct. Say, look, if you don't git rustled off to Mexico an' roped to a cactus bush you'll hev a swell story for your English chums. Bah Jove! You'll tell 'em how you seen two old-time gun-men run like scared jack-rabbits from a lot of Greasers. Like I—I you will!"

"Monty, shut up!" yelled Stewart, as he came hurriedly up. Then Monty slouched away, cursing to himself.

Madeline and Helen, assisted by Castleton, worked over Dorothy, and with some difficulty quieted her. Stewart passed several times without noticing them, and Monty, who had been so ridiculously eager to pay every little attention to Dorothy, did not see her at all. Rude it seemed; in Monty's case more than that. Madeline hardly knew what to make of it.

Stewart directed cowboys to go to the head of the open place in the cliff and let down lassoes. Then, with little waste of words, he urged the women toward this rough ladder of stones.

"We want to hide you," he said, when they demurred. "If the guerrillas come we'll tell them you've all gone down to the ranch. If we have to fight you'll be safe up there."

Helen stepped boldly forward and let Stewart put the loop of a lasso round her and tighten it. He waved his hand to the cowboys above.

"Just walk up, now," he directed Helen.

It proved to the watchers to be an easy, safe and rapid means of scaling the steep passage. The men climbed up without assistance. Edith Wayne and Madeline climbed last, and once up, Madeline saw a narrow bench, thick with shrubs and overshadowed by huge, leaning crags. There were holes in the rock, and dark fissures leading back. It was a rough, wild place. Tarpaulins and bedding were then hauled up, and food and water. The cowboys spread comfortable beds in several of the caves, and told Madeline and her friends to be as quiet as possible, not to make a light, and to sleep dressed, ready for travel at a moment's notice.

Madeline deplored the discomfort

and distress but felt no real alarm. She was more inclined to evasive kindness here than to sincerity, for she had a decided uneasiness. The swift change in the manner and looks of her cowboys had been a shock to her. The last glance she had of Stewart's face, then stern, almost sad, and haggard with worry, remained to augment her foreboding.

Darkness appeared to drop swiftly down; the coyotes began their haunting, mournful howls; the stars showed and grew brighter; the wind moaned through the tips of the pines. The cowboys below had built a fire, and the light from it rose in a huge, fan-shaped glow. Madeline peered down from the cliff. The distance was short, and occasionally she could distinguish a word spoken by the cowboys. They were unconcernedly cooking and eating.

Presently Nick Steele silenced the campfire circle by raising a warning hand. The cowboys bent their heads, listening. Madeline listened with all her might. She heard one of the hounds whine, then the faint beat of horse's hoofs. The beat of hoofs grew louder, entered the grove, then the circle of light. The rider was Nels. He dismounted, and the sound of his low voice just reached Madeline.

"Gene, it's Nels. Somethin' doin'." Madeline heard one of the cowboys call, softly.

"Send him over," replied Stewart.

Nels stalked away from the fire.

"See here, Nels, the boys are all right, but I don't want them to know



"By Gad! You and Your Partner Are a Couple of Blooming Cowards."

everything about this mix-up," said Stewart, as Nels came up. "Did you find the girl?"

Madeline guessed that Stewart referred to the Mexican girl Bonita.

"No. But I met"—Madeline did not catch the name—"an' he was wild. He was with a forest-ranger. An' they said Pat Howe had trailed her an' was takin' her down under arrest."

Stewart muttered deep under his breath, evidently cursing.

"Wonder why he didn't come on up here?" he queried, presently. "He can see a trail."

"Wal, Gene, Pat knewed you was here all right, for the ranger said Pat hed wind of the guerrillas, an' Pat said if Don Carlos didn't kill you—which he hoped hed do—then it'd be true enough to put you in jail when you come down."

"He's dead set to arrest me, Nels."

"An' he'll do it, like the old lady who kept tavern out West. Gene, the reason that red-faced coyote didn't trail you up here is because he's scared. He allus was scared of you. But I reckon he's shore scared to death of me an' Monty."

"Well, we'll take Pat in his turn. The thing now is, when will that Greaser stalk us, and what'll we do when he comes?"

"My boy, there's only one way to handle a Greaser. I shore told you that. He means rough toward us. He'll come smilin' up, an' scoble like, insinnuatin' an' sweeter 'n a woman. But he's treacherous; he's wuss than an Indian. An', Gene, we know for a positive fact how his gang hev been operatin' between these hills an' Agua Prieta. We know jest about what the rebel war down there amounts to. It's guerrilla war, an' shore some harvest time for a lot of cheap thieves an' outcasts."

"Oh, you're right, Nels. I'm not disputin' that," replied Stewart. "If it wasn't for Miss Hammond and the other women, I'd rather enjoy seeing you and Monty open up on that bunch. I'm thinkin' I'd be glad to meet Don Carlos. But Miss Hammond! Why, Nels, such a woman as she is would never recover from the sight of real pay, let alone any stunts with a rope. These eastern women are different. I'm not befitting our western women. It's in the blood. Miss Hammond is—"

"Shore she is," interrupted Nels; "but she's got a d—n sight more spunk than you think she us, Gene Stewart. I'm no thick-skulled cow. I hed hate somethin' powerful to hev Miss Hammond see any rough work, let alone me an' Monty startin' somethin'. An' me an' Monty'll stick to you, Gene, as long as seems reasonable. Mind, ole feller, beginn' your pardon, you're shore stuck on Miss Hammond, an' over tender not to hurt her feelin's or make her sick by lettin' some blood. We're in bad here, an' mebbe we'll hev to fight. Sabe, senor? Wal, if we do you can jest gamble that Miss Hammond'll be game.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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