

fiercely, and she answered with a hot wrath that left him silent. Then she turned to Careless—still covering with his gun at his hip the two men who stood there transfixed and grinning evilly.

"Yer pony, stranger," she said with a bright glance, "an' I'll ride with youh a bit. It's all right now—they're not game."

Careless turned to her and laughed in the way he had, throwing the challenge of the words at those in front.

"I like yer style a heap," he said, his eyes shining with adoration, "an' you ken ride the whul darn way if you like an' think I'm good enough."

A minute later they had found their beasts and were down the trail with the rush of the cool night air in their faces. At the bottom of the incline beyond the bend the girl instinctively drew rein, and Careless hitching to a side seat on his saddle, pulled over till their limbs almost touched beneath the sleek, bellowing bodies of the nags. The moon was out at its brightest again, turning the place into a sort of fairy scene.

"I'm sorry," she said, breaking the silence for the first time. "They're not as bad as they look, maybe—only wanted yer siller, I guess—an' the old un's real good—I ken do as I like."

"Yer old man, I suppose?"

She nodded her head.

"Still yer not goin' back," he begged eagerly, a hand on her arm.

"W'y not?" but she waited with downcast eyes and a colour in her cheeks.

He leaned so close that he caught the warmth of her breath.

"Because," he said, "however you may raickon that bunch back thar, they'll never be up to you at any time, an' because I rather think I want yuh myself." He swept a hand to the sky and the plain in front of them. "It's a big, free world out thar," he went on, "an' we fit fine—let's ride it together."

She laughed softly, deliciously, the dream of it in her eyes, and for a

moment her head rested on his shoulder and he kissed her lips—then she drew back with a sigh of regret.

"Don't yer tempt me, stranger," she said with a touch of sternness; "I'm the old un's girl, an' I guess he needs me. If you want to—come back, though"—and her eyes coquetted the invitation—"You'll find us on this trail for six weeks, I raickon, an' there'll be nothin' to be afear'd of."

"But now," he insisted, stretching out a hand.

"Well, now, I raickon, it's time to go." She flicked up her pony and turned about at a walk.

He wheeled also, his body bent at her in the moonlight.

"But now, Mag," he repeated earnestly, "now!"

She laughed lightly, yet with significance. "I'll be lookin' for yer, maybe," she said. And with a challenging, backward glance, and a hand to her lips she dug in the spurs.

He watched her till she disappeared over the top of the incline, then rode slowly on, a dejected, spectral figure.

The trail lay wholly across the rippling prairie country after that. Mile on mile the land stretched away, clumped with poplars or an odd line of cottonwoods beside a stream, and here and there the gray sagebrush running to meet horse and rider. Always to the ever-receding bend of the horizon and with an easy, loping gait the cowboy rode ceaselessly, through occasional drab villages squatted dully in wide, shambly streets that belched a cloud of dust at the horse's hoofs, and, on, on into time and nothing; through hosts and hosts of blue lobelias that in the morning laughed up with dewy eyes and showered their fragrance in sacrifice.

Once in twenty-four hours he slept, ate, and picketed his horse, but returned to the journey with combative interest. Then in the hot noon of the third day thoroughly tired and worn out, he got down again and beneath the shade of some poplars fell into a long, troubled sleep—in which the