

interruption ensued. A short distance away, around the bend in the trail, the quick nervous outbreak of a horse's hoofs swung suddenly to them—and one of the women uttered in high, shrill tones, "'Ere's Mag!"

It was the immediate signal to the circle about to fall into waiting and silence.

A moment later and the rider had come up and dismounted with a leap, displaying in the twitching, tongued half-light a three-quarter skirt and a comely form. Then, having loosed her horse with the celerity of long practice, she moved over to the fire, whip in hand.

Met with a jargon of greetings and questions, she stood staring around at them and blinking an extremely lovely pair of eyes at the light—then her glance suddenly fell on Careless and darted back to the others with swift inquiry.

The chief answered her for some short time in his own tongue, during which she darted bright little glances at the cowboy who had risen to his feet with a profound doffing of his sombrero; then as if accepting the introduction she bowed in a friendly way, and motioning him to sit down while she placed herself opposite, proceeded to inspect him thoroughly—the vital, clear-cut face with its power of eye and the lithe, graceful buck-skinned form. His frank admiration evidently bothered her not a bit, and she met it at length with a little of her own that was quite as frank.

She was nineteen or twenty, probably, with features inexpressibly charming in their natural invitation; dark with a clear skin and a cloud of hair, and of medium height though queenly even in her unfashioned skirt. The masterly, passionate turn of the lips seemed to haunt the whole face and the eyes gleamed out at times with just the slightest frown.

"So you're a cowpuncher?" she interrogated in a somewhat harsh though rich voice when her inspection was over. "You mayn't alwus hev been that though, hev you?"

Careless shook his head retrospectively, in the manner of one looking back through infinite tragic experience and laughing up again.

"No, I mayn't alwus hev been that," he signified.

"Wot do they call yeuh?"

"Careless, just!"

The girl threw back her head and laughed a round throaty gurgle that caught the cowboy's tenor. "Well, yeuh do look it," she emphasized. "Yeuh do look it."

Then suddenly the whole camp became infected and laughed too—laughed with its eyes on Careless and with the firelight making its widespread faces ghoulis, all but the chief who still retained his grim, hovering, statuesque silence.

With a swift glance in his direction the girl the next moment leaned forward with a quick change of tone.

"Yeuh ben't gawing to stay here all night, I raickon," she suggested with a covert meaning in her eyes that Careless in the noonday of his chivalry failed to heed.

"That all depends, I raickon, on the lettin'."

"Mag," growled the chief with a black look at her, "yeuh mind yer own bisness. It's free ground 'ere, I guess—an' he's got money to pay."

The girl met his gaze squarely, combatively for a moment, then with a shrug of her shoulders turned to one of the men who had come out of the shadow with a violin.

"Gawin' to scrape some, Sammy?" she drawled. "Better give it to the stranger—perh'ps he ken play?" Then catching assent in the cowboy's face, she made a precipitous dart for the instrument, interrupting the gawky, mournful strain the man was drawing