

"Are you a-scared, little girl, a-scared?" he guered again.

She resigned herself with eyes askance at the red-faced vexation of one of the strangers and laughed softly at the luxury of the situation.

"You're a divil," she said, "if thar ever was one—an' sich a kid. Why you're no more'n a kid, are you?"

He met the doting of her look with one as melting and leaned so close that their breaths mingled—that in the beating passion which encompassed them the menacing stir of feet and growl of voices behind passed unattended.

"Nell," he said, "you've never kissed me in yer life. Will you do it now—here—just once? Are you game, girlie, are you game?"

"Game!" She drew back a fraction and met the full career of his glance; then laughed again with a sudden break to it. "Oh you kiddie," she sighed, "you little kid!" Then dropped her chin forward on her hands again, her full, virile womanhood open to the caress.

Simultaneously almost and in response an oath ripped forth like the crack of a revolver and with the crash of an overturned table the big light that lit the room went suddenly out. The boy with an eye to trouble had reached it just in time, and the frenzied rush of half-drunken cattlemen broke noisily on chairs and impeding furniture.

Careless with an arm to the girl's waist slipped quietly out the side door. It was but a moment to his horse, and the girl stood watching him at the bottom of the front staircase as he mounted.

"You're a-goin' to get hurt some time," she warned in raised tones, "if you don't hev a better care on."

"Then you shouldn't make it so worth my while," he parried, as he dug in the spurs and threw back a kiss at her. "S' long!"

The next minute the hurtle of pursuit flung itself out on the veranda and a six-shooter snapped up the road

in vain distemper. The girl hurried up the rickety stairs and watched him out of sight from an upstairs window. She wondered vaguely why he had ridden in the wrong direction—away from the cattle ranch.

It was a good eighty miles and in the evening that Careless came up with his next amour. He had slept a stretch back farther and seen to his horse, so that man and animal were comparatively fresh, and there was really no need to stop, but the sight of the camp nestling snugly at the roadside with the brown smoke curling through overhanging poplars was too much for esthetic cowboy tastes, and he drew rein.

They met him in the manner of gypsies, the men with grunts and sullen looks, the women with calm, inquisitive, speculative eyes. They asked him no questions, however, and he asked them none. The supper on the stained oilcloth cover was a quiet, psychic affair, but afterward when he had crossed with silver the palm of the eldest of the three women and had her tell his fortune, they began to take an interest in him.

Careless, on his side, with the brown glow of the coffee he had drunk in his veins, was only too glad to be genial. With eloquent lips, eyes, and hands he told them stories of the cattle country—touching lightly but significantly on his own exploits and, by and by when warmed up to it he threw back his curly pate and laughed like one perfectly at home, and held out a frank, sparkling camaraderie to them. He did all this—did it dramatically—and, as he went on, the wholesome, weathered, nut-brown youth in the face of the youngest of the women crouched closer at him across the fire, taking on and reflecting a part of his ardour till she seemed to be dreaming there.

Unconsciously, perhaps, as he continued he addressed her more particularly as his best auditor—then suddenly in a pause in the narrative, they found themselves alone in their