

Then the true character of the man came out. He protested his unwavering devotion; positively refused to break the engagement; declared he would kill himself if she cast him off; vowed he would wait for her for years, and ended with a fervent appeal for pity, mercy and love. And she, in her much-magnified misery, believed all he said, and agreed that the engagement should continue. Emboldened by his success, he hinted at a clandestine marriage, but she became so angry that he skillfully withdrew the proposition.

No matters between them were much the same as before the receipt of her father's fiat, only that his visits at the house ceased, and she only met him now and then by an apparent accident. This state of affairs continued up to the time she left her aunt's for her western home, and at their last meeting Herbert had reminded her of her long given promise and assured her that he should come west within a year.

Now that home and old associations were so near at hand, there was no longer any doubt of her own feelings toward him. What she had half believed all the time was now a certainty. She did not love him in the least, and it was even doubtful if she liked him. She had been foolish—almost criminally so—in allowing the engagement to continue after her father's decisive order, but she was very young and Herbert had aroused her pity. She did not blame him in the least. She regretted the pain the truth would cause him, but she did not hesitate, and told him pointedly that she had been mistaken in her feelings toward him and that he must release her from the engagement.

She was very tender toward him, for she felt deeply sorry, but she insisted on his taking back the ring, which a year ago he had refused to do, with a decision which he could not shake. At first he pleaded with her, and when this failed he grew angry and threatening. Then her dignity and pride came to her rescue, and she cut the painful interview short, not, however, until Willis had assured her in an angry, menacing tone that he would not release her, and that she should see him again, and that he would yet win her or have his revenge. She laughed scornfully at this, and Willis, with an oath which he did not attempt to repress, picked up his hat and walked out.

A year passed. She heard nothing whatever from him, and the long silence and the active, free and unconstrained life of her western home almost effaced his now hateful memory from her mind. Still it had been an unhappy episode in her girlhood and had left its mark.

He was miles from Jess's thoughts this particular evening as she sat on the hitching post in front of the low house, carelessly swinging her heels to and fro, idly watching the brilliant sunset over the bold and rugged range of mountains forty miles away to the west. Down the road, half a mile away, a couple of cowboys were furiously chasing a refractory bull who refused to rejoin the herd, and she could hear their wild yells plainly, even at that distance. Her father had gone to town that morning, and would not return until the following day. Billy was somewhere with the herd, and she and old Phoebe were the only souls about the ranch.

Jess was in a particularly happy state this afternoon. Old Dan, that trusty though not beautiful steed, had recovered from a two weeks' indisposition, and a favorite shepherd of her own had brought both a litter of half a dozen thoroughbred pups. Besides this, she and Billy had become friends once more—not as they were once, of course, for they were both older and changed, but still they were very good friends again. For almost a year Billy had acted strangely and had neglected her shamefully. He was very kind and respectful all the time,

but he did not ride with her as of yore, and when left alone with her for a moment became oppressively embarrassed and suddenly remembered that he had forgotten something around the corral and left her abruptly. This was not a bit like Billy, and she resented it. But it continued until a few weeks ago, when she took him into her confidence once more and explained that her engagement to Herbert Willis had been broken for almost a year. She had always liked the big, smiling fellow exceedingly, and she was heartily glad when they became good friends once more, for Billy was useful in many ways. He had improved vastly in the past three years. He was much taller, and had grown a respectable, if bright red, moustache. He swore frightfully at times, when he thought himself out of the hearing of the "women folks," and, like all his men, found apparent solace in a semi-annual spree in town. He was the personification of good nature, but he resented a slight, fancied or intentional, with great promptness. He was, in fact, a typical cowboy of the west, much given to spurs, hat and six-shooters; a magnificent and daring rider; and as harmless as other mortals when not rubbed the wrong way.

Just now Jess was anxiously awaiting his coming, for he had promised her a scamper of a mile or two on old Dan's back to give that steed a little exercise, and if he lingered much longer it would be too dark. She was still kicking her heels against the post and beating an impatient tattoo on the pole with her brown fingers, when a horseman appeared far down the road. He was riding at a free gallop, and was the recreant Billy, of course. She watched him for a few moments until he came near enough for her to decide that it was not Billy, after all, and then her interest in him ceased. Supper would be ready in half an hour, and unless Billy appeared almost instantly their ride would not materialize. She was too vexed to pay any attention to the approaching stranger until he rode directly up to her and reined in his panting horse. Then she glanced up at him and sprang down from her perch instantly, with a cry she could not repress. It was Herbert Willis—Herber as smiling, handsome and debonair as ever through all the white dust that covered him.

She watched him leisurely dismount and tie his horse, with a white, scared face. Then he came forward, doffing his hat and extending his shapely, jeweled hand. She hesitated a moment and then gave him hers.

"Jessie!" he exclaimed rapturously. "My little sweetheart!" at the same time striving to raise her hand to his lips.

She snatched it away angrily, and all her usual self-possession returned.

"Mr. Willis," she said, "I told you a year ago that all this was ended."

"But you did not know what you were saying," replied Willis. "I never accepted your foolish decision, and I never will. I love you too well to release you, and I feel that your love is mine in spite of your cruel words."

"You are mistaken," she cried quickly; "I don't love you in the least, and I was only a foolish girl when I gave you that promise. I don't love anybody, I think."

Willis brightened. "Then let me teach you," he exclaimed. "I have come a thousand miles for a sight of your sweet face."

"You've been a precious long time on the road," she said cruelly.

"I have been sick for months in a New York hospital," he replied solemnly. "I have been very near to death's door, Jessie."

Jess's sympathy was at once aroused by this pitiful tale, and she expressed her profound sorrow.