

"Why didn't your friends take you in?" she asked innocently.

"They are dead," he replied solemnly, with a dramatic air. "I have had a great sorrow since I last saw you, Jessie. You are all I have now to love."

Jess was up in arms again as soon as the now thoroughly hateful subject was mentioned.

"Mr. Willis," she cried vehemently, "I will not have you talk to me like that any more. I will be your friend, if you wish, but nothing—absolutely nothing—more."

The man smiled half mockingly, and came quite close to her. He had had a wide and varied experience with women, and felt comfortably sure of his power and ultimate success.

The sudden western twilight had come on while they were talking and the moon was just peeping over the corner of the house behind them. The boys were late with the stock; supper would be late, and Phoebe would scold, but Jess felt that this affair with Herbert must be settled once and for all even if she missed supper entirely.

"Jess," he said, bending over her so close that she could feel his warm breath on her cheek, and sinking his voice to a low, passionate and tremulous tone, "I have loved you well and truly ever since we met, and I have been loyal and faithful. You must not cast me off, dearest. I am all alone in the world now except your own sweet self, and you will love me after a little. I will teach you."

He was working on her sympathies now, and because she felt sorry for him and believed his woeful tale of desolation, she repressed the sharp reply which almost forced itself to her lips and remained silent.

Her silence emboldened Willis. It was to him a sign that her resolution was weakening. He had seen other women far more proud and stately than Jess yield to his soft and eloquent entreaties, and he felt that victory was within his grasp. So sure was he that he slipped his arm around her and endeavored to draw her head down on his shoulder. She struggled violently for a moment to free herself, and her beautiful hair came down all about her shoulders. Willis had never seen her look half so lovely as at this instant in the hazy semi-twilight. For the moment he was certain that he really loved her and would willingly marry her if she had not a cent in the world and thus wreck all his chances of future independence. Stooping quickly, he pressed his lips to hers and held her so close that she almost panted for breath.

This was too much for Jess.

"Let me go!" she cried angrily. "Let me go! How dare you! Oh, I hate you—I hate you!"

"I won't let you go," he replied; "I—"

"Yes, you will," interrupted a rude voice, and two big hands caught him by the shoulders and flung him violently against the pole. "You'll let her go, mister, I guess, if she wants to."

"Billy!" cried Jess hysterically. "Oh, I'm so glad!"

Willis, whatever else he might be, was no coward when it came to a trial of strength, and he was violently angry. Recovering his balance almost instantly, he sprang forward and struck at Billy full in the face. Billy was anticipating the blow, and promptly closed with him. His superior weight and strength gave him a slight advantage, but Willis was active and skillful. In a moment the struggle brought them almost over the terrified girl. Then she saw in the pale moonlight something bright and flashing in Willis's hand. He struck Billy once, twice, and the latter loomed his bold and staggered back a step or two. She was too dead with horror to cry out as Billy fell to his knees, swearing and struggling desper-

ately to draw his revolver, and it was almost a relief to her when a blinding flash, instantly followed by another and another, told that, weak and stricken as he was, he had finally succeeded.

She closed her eyes and must have lost consciousness, for when she opened them again she heard the faint echoing of a horse's feet galloping madly far down the road, and Billy lay flat on his back in the dust, at her feet, quite still. Old Phoebe was yelling vociferously in the kitchen and vowing that the Indians were upon them from all quarters, and that they would surely be scalped, while two of the boys who had been busy at the corral were hurrying forward, alarmed by the three rapid shots, which to them always spoke of trouble.

And this—what was this, warm and sticky all over her hands and dress, and even on her face? It was blood—Billy's blood—which had spurted all over her when Willis's cruel knife had struck him. And Willis, the coward, had murdered him—her best and only friend—and then had fled when the harm was done. Dropping on her knees in the deep dust, she raised Billy's heavy head in her arms, and, pushing back the long hair, kissed him almost before the very eyes of the two approaching cowboys.

Hastily they carried him into the house and summoned the shrieking Phoebe. That estimable old creature was a capital nurse, and proved exceedingly useful, as soon as she could be convinced that there were really no Indians around. She even forgot that the roast was still in the oven and probably burning on both sides, while she stood by and directed the stripping of Billy to the waist. Two wounds were visible, one in the left arm and one in the breast, from which the thick, almost black, blood was slowly oozing, so close to the heart that it made Jess deathly sick and faint, and she hastily left the room. Phoebe, however, had served a whole season in the south as a hospital nurse, and had seen too many legs and arms sawed off to allow a trifling matter like this to effect her nerves. She gave her orders quickly and coherently, and in a moment one of the boys was stumbling about in the kitchen in search of hot water and a towel, mildly swearing to himself at his own awkwardness, while the other was rapidly tearing one of Phoebe's own aprons into long strips for bandages.

Phoebe herself had not been idle. From some dark and remote corner of the room she brought forth a big, black bottle which smelled like brandy, and, hurriedly filling a glass, held it to Billy's white lips. He coughed and almost strangled, but this, although it made the blood flow faster from the cuts, was a sign to her that he was still alive. Then she washed and dressed the wounds with the dexterity of a professional nurse, and declared that the boy wasn't hurt so bad after all, though, to be sure, he had lost a powerful sight of blood. She ridiculed the idea of riding the necessary twenty miles and back for a doctor, and declared she was as good as any doctor in the land, which was, doubtless, true. Then she had recourse again to the black bottle, and, after tasting it generously herself to make sure it was really brandy, gave Billy another glassful. This had the desired effect, and in a few moments he opened his eyes. He looked all around the room apparently seeking something which he did not find, and then closed his eyes wearily and groaned.

"He'll have to have 'nother dose," remarked Phoebe, filling the glass and again satisfying herself that it was really and actually brandy. "Sing'lar how much stim'ants a human bein' can dissolve when there's loss of blood like this. I bled once from the nose for four days and four mild nights, and they gave me, I know, a gallon of strong sperrits, and it never had no effect at all—no more than so much water."