

her complexion with cosmetics, Carole gave one last look of defiance at the mirror and went downstairs. Bill Stevens was crossing the living room toward the kitchen, his spurs jingling musically with each step.

"Hello," Carole called. "I want to see you, Bill."

"Yes, ma'am." Bill swung around, sweeping off his hat. But if Carole expected a pleased reaction at sight of her attire, she was disappointed. Bill stared at her impassively, maddeningly polite.

"Is there something I can do, ma'am?" "Yes," said Carole, striving to hide her anger. "We're planning a four-day camping trip up into the Big Bear Lake country. There will be four of us. Will you make the necessary preparations, please?"

"Why, ma'am, I'll be glad to. But I wouldn't advise the Big Bear country."

"No? Why not?" "Well," Bill hesitated. "It's a tough climb up there, and we're more than likely to strike rain in those high altitudes."

"If those are your only doubts I think we can forget them."

Bill twisted his hat. "The fact is, ma'am, that's not the only reason I'm against the trip. A report came in this morning that Wolf Brody escaped from prison last night. The Sheriff thinks he might be heading into the Big Bear country."

Carole's heart leaped. Here was a heaven-sent opportunity to show Bill Stevens that she wasn't the mollycoddle he thought her.

"Indeed? It seems a pity that one lone escaped convict should interrupt the pleasure of four people. Especially," she added, "when the quartet will be so ably protected."

"Ma'am, you haven't lived in these parts long enough to know about this Wolf Brody. He's a killer. He's cruel and ruthless and about as low as they come."

Carole laughed defiantly, derisively. "Really, Mr. Stevens, all criminals are cowards whether you find them in desperate straits or otherwise. Of course, if the possibility of meeting Mr. Wolf Brody bothers you I feel sure that Mr. Yancey can arrange to have some one else guide us."

A slow, red wave spread upward beneath the tan on Bill Stevens' neck and cheeks. The lines about his mouth grew hard.

"Ma'am, I guess I made a mistake warning you against Wolf Brody. I'll have the pack train ready and waiting for you and your friends by 7 o'clock tomorrow morning."

Carole felt a warm, comforting glow permeating her system. That flush that had burned beneath the tan on Bill Stevens' neck was the first satisfactory reaction he had betrayed to anything she had said or done. It was a victory. Her cheeks glowing with excitement.

Carole went out onto the veranda and



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invigorating air of early morning. They crossed the desert and camped that night near a spring in the foothills. After dinner Carole contrived to meet Bill Stevens away from camp. He was standing on a point of land from where the desert, bathed in the mellow light of a newly risen moon, was visible. He was alone, a dark, erect figure silhouetted against the brightness.

"It's gorgeous, isn't it?" she said, coming up from behind.

"Yes, ma'am. It sure is something to look at."

He didn't move or glance at her. She bit her lip.

"Bill, I've been wanting to tell you I'm sorry about yesterday. I mean, when I implied you might be afraid of running into Wolf Brody."

"Sho!" He faced her. "Ma'am, there's no need for you to apologize. The fact is, I am afraid."

"You are?" She stared at him. "Yes, ma'am. Wolf Brody is a bad hombre to meet up with. He's fast with a gun and he doesn't care what he does to a man."

A wave of disappointment swept through her. Somehow the admission didn't fit into the fine, brave ideal she had conjured. Then suddenly she knew he was lying. He was laughing at her again.

A helpless rage possessed her. Never in all her life had she felt so frustrated, so utterly and completely at the mercy of something that was beyond her power of control.

"Bill Stevens, sometimes I think you're a fool!"

"Ma'am," Bill said unperturbably, "I think we'd better be getting back to camp before the others miss us."

Carole lay on her bed of pine boughs for hours before dropping off to

sleep. Tears crept down her cheeks and she dashed them aside with an angry gesture.

Tomorrow, she thought, she would change her tactics. She'd show this fine, smart cowboy just how he rated with her.

And so the next day, instead of contriving to be near Bill Stevens whenever possible, she contrived to be with Ted Singer. To that young man's joy and bewilderment she became attentive, interesting, flirtatious.

He responded nobly, not suspecting that he was being used as a means to an end. But for all the emotion betrayed on the impassive features of Bill Stevens, Carole had ceased to exist. She was furious.

And then on the third noon in camp Carole, feeling unhappy and defeated, looked up from her tin plate and across the fire and into the eyes of the man she loved.

Her heart leaped. He had been watching her. Their eyes met for only a fleeting instant, but it was enough. In that brief look she read something in his expression that set the blood racing through her veins.

LEST she betray her feelings of exultation, she got up and strolled beyond the view of those seated by the fire. She found a seat on the brim of a narrow and deep canyon. Her heart was singing. Bill Stevens loved her. It was there in his eyes. It was unmistakable. He loved her. But his pride was too great to confess that love.

Pride! Her heart leaped. Pride was all that stood in the way of complete happiness for them both. Pride—such a silly, simple thing. A barrier so easily beaten down.

Made restless by her own thoughts,

"You won't get plugged. I'll see to it no one has a gun but me."

"And how about Brody himself? Ain't he supposed to be running wild up in that country?"

"Brody was brought in by the Sheriff late this afternoon, which is a fact that only you and I know about."

SHORTY scratched his chin and looked thoughtful. Suddenly he grinned. "O. K., boss. I got me a hunch that the Hastings dame is the one you want scared most. I don't like her, either, so I reckon it might be fun at that."

"Shorty," said Bill Stevens unsmilingly, "the Hastings dame has more dudes jammed into one."

Shorty set out from the ranch two hours behind the camping party. He hadn't shaved for two days, and his natural heavy growth produced a most ferocious aspect. The clothes he wore were tattered, discarded garments he had dug out of his warbag.

That night he made a cold camp five miles south of Bill Stevens' party. He got off to an early start the next morning and by noon was watching the movements of the dude outfit from the summit of a rocky ridge. He followed with his eyes the progress of Carole as she set out alone; he witnessed her observance of the tryst between Bill and May Carlton. This puzzled him, but he supposed Bill knew what he was about.

He kept track of Carole on her mad dash through the forest and saw her fling herself down on the moss bed. Then he left his high perch and made his way toward the clearing.

Shorty felt that he had done a pretty good job of making himself up to resemble Wolf Brody, but he did not anticipate such a completely devastating result. But, of course, he could not know the ragged condition of Carole's nerves.

Playing his part as he felt it should be played, he let out a roar. Carole stopped short, emitted a frightened bleat and swooned.

Shorty was dazed. Swooning women weren't in his line. He stared about rather desperately and was relieved no end when a cowboy appeared on the edge of the clearing. The cowboy was Bill Stevens.

"Doggone!" said Shorty. "It looks to me like that was a cockeyed idea of yours, Bill. The dame couldn't take it. She's down for the count."

"Shut up!" rapped Bill. "Get back to camp and tell the folks Carole's been found and is safe. Go on, beat it!" And Bill kneeled and lifted Carole's still form tenderly.

Carole opened her eyes and sat up with a start. For a moment she thought the man bending over her was Wolf Brody.

"Bill! Oh, Bill!" She clutched at the back of her neck. "You're the most despicable man I've ever known."

"All of which makes me more convinced that you're a thoroughbred. As soon as you cool off we'll seal this compact with a kiss."

He waited, smiling. Carole looked up into his bronzed face. She felt the strength of his arms about her. She felt the heat and anger going out of her body. She felt a sweet, delicious ecstasy that was worth all the weeks of misery.

When presently Bill Stevens bent over her cheeks were still flushed and her eyes alive. She lifted up her face and their lips met in a tender and eternal kiss.

the bunch."

Carole gasped. "Why—you—you—who are you to criticize? My friends no good? Listen, cowboy, you tend to your cattle punching and don't concern yourself about me or my crowd. Why, I've never been so insulted in my life. I—I'll report you for this!"

"I see. Then I didn't misjudge you, after all."

"Misjudge me? Who are you to judge me at all? Who are you to condemn anybody? Are you some sort of god? Do you flirt with and kiss every girl who comes your way and then berate her behind her back? What kind of man are you?"

"So you saw me kissing Miss Carlton? I'm glad. It was for your benefit. You see, I didn't want to. I merely did it to give you a taste of your own medicine. You flirted with Singer for my benefit. I merely returned the compliment. Do you know why? Because I love you. Because I loved you from the moment you arrived here."

"Love me? Oh, such idiotic talk! Love me? Oh, what a fool you are!" Without realizing it, her voice was close to hysteria. It required all her will power to keep from bursting into tears. Then suddenly Bill Stevens took her into his arms. She struggled furiously. "Splendid!" he cried. "Marvelous! I knew you didn't belong with that crowd. I knew you were high-spirited and didn't care a damn what anybody thought. In fact, it gave you a feeling of satisfaction to defy the gasps of decent folks. Then you fell in love with me—"

"Fell in love with you! Why, you egotistical—"

"Sure you did. I'm not blind. I knew it from the first. You regretted your past, the reputation you've gained from traveling with that crowd. Yet when I gave you the chance a minute ago to convince me you weren't like them you didn't take it. You were loyal to your friends. You wouldn't let them down, even at the risk of losing the man you loved."

"BILL STEVENS, I hate you! I think you're the most despicable man I've ever known."

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