

"It's Jack," she said, half aloud. "I wonder why he is so early. He scarcely ever comes till dusk."

Then, seeing him look up toward her as he advanced, she waved her hand to him. In a few moments he had reached her side.

"Good evening, Marion," he said, as he removed his broad sombrero from his head and flung it negligently upon the ground, revealing a sunbrowned, though singularly handsome face, set with a pair of laughing gray eyes. "You seem surprised to see me."

"Why, yes, I am, a little," she confessed. "I didn't expect you so soon."

"Oh, well, it is Saturday, and so I quit work earlier than usual. Besides I'd much rather be here with you than alone down in the gulch."

"All imagination," she retorted, smiling up at him. "You know you don't mean it."

"But I do, though," he said, earnestly. "And then I had a special reason to come so early this evening."

"Indeed!" she replied in a doubting voice. "I would like to know what that special reason is."

"You'll find out soon enough," he answered. "The truth is, I am going to ask you a very serious question—very serious—and I want you to give me an answer to it."

"Oh, dear. I am sure I can never do it, if it's serious. I never can be serious. I thought it was a riddle, perhaps."

"Yes, but you can answer it, and that in one syllable, too," he insisted.

"Go ahead, then," she commanded, looking at him all unsuspectingly, "and don't keep me waiting."

He leaned down till her brown hair brushed his cheek and gently whispered a few words in her ear—whispered them so low that even the trees might not hear what he said.

Then she glanced up again, but the expression of her face had changed.

"Oh, Jack, I had never even dreamed of this. I thought we would ever be only friends, as we always have been. No, Jack, I can't marry you, because I don't love you except as a sister would."

"But you might learn to do so," he pleaded. "Is there no ray of hope?"