Fantoms of Peace

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Chapter I

DWIRE judged him to be another of those strange desert prospectors in whom there was some relentless driving power besides the lust for gold. He saw a stalwart man from whose lined face deep luminous eyes looked out with yearning gaze, as if drawn by something far beyond the ranges.

The man had approached Dwire back in the Nevada mining-camp, and had followed him down the trail leading into the Mohave. He spoke few words, but his actions indicated that he answered to some subtle influence in seeking to accompany the other.

When Dwire hinted that he did not go down into the desert for gold alone, the only reply he got was a singular flashing of the luminous eyes. Then he explained, more from a sense of duty than from hope of turning the man back, that in the years of his wandering he had met no one who could stand equally with him the blasting heat, the blinding storms, the wilderness of sand and rock and lava and cactus, the terrible silence and desolation of the desert.

„Back there they told me you were Dwire," replied the man. „I'd heard of you; and if you don't mind, I'd like to go with you."

„Stranger, you're welcome," replied Dwire. „I'm going inside"—he waved a hand toward the wide, shimmering, shadowy descent of plain and range—„and I don't know where. I may cross the Mohave into the Colorado Desert. I may go down into Death Valley."

The prospector swept his far-reaching gaze over the colored gulf of rock and sand. For moments he seemed to forget himself. Then, with gentle slaps, he drove his burro into the trail behind Dwire's, and said:

„My name's Hartwell."

They began a slow, silent march down into the desert. At sundown they camped near Red Seeps. Dwire observed that his companion had acquired the habit of silence so characteristic of the lone wanderer in the wilds—a habit not easily broken when two of these men are thrown together.

Next sunset they made camp at Coyote Tanks; the next at Indian Well; the following night at a nameless water-hole. For five more days they plodded down with exchange of few words. When they got deep into the desert, with endless stretches of drifting sand and rugged rock between them and the outside world, there came a breaking of reserve, noticeable in Dwire, almost imperceptibly gradual in his companion. At night, round their meager mesquit camp-fire, Dwire would remove his black pipe to talk a little. The other man would listen, and would sometimes unlock his lips to speak a word.

And so, as Dwire responded to the influence of his surroundings, he began to notice his companion, and found him different from any man he had encountered in the desert. Hartwell did not grumble at the heat, the glare, the driving sand, the sour water, the scant fare. During the daylight hours he was seldom idle; at night he sat dreaming before the fire, or paced to and fro in the gloom. If he ever slept, it must have been long after Dwire had rolled in his blanket and dropped to rest. He was tireless and patient.

Dwire's awakened interest in Hartwell brought home to him the realization that for years he had shunned companionship. In those years only three men had wandered into the desert with him, and they had found what he believed they had sought there—graves in the shifting sands. He had not cared to know their secrets; but the more he watched this latest comrade, the more he began to suspect that he might have missed something in these other men.

In his own driving passion to take his secret into the limitless abode of silence and desolation, where he could be alone with it, he had forgotten that life dealt shocks to other men. Somehow this silent comrade reminded him.

Two weeks of steady marching saw the prospectors merging into the Mohave. It was naked, rock-ribbed, sand-sheeted desert. They lost all trails but those of the coyote and wildcat, and these they followed to the water-holes.

At length they got into desert that appeared new to Dwire. He could not recognize landmarks near at hand. Behind them, on the horizon line, stood out a blue peak that marked the plateau from which they had descended. Before them loomed a jagged range of mountains, which were in line with Death Valley.

The prospectors traveled on, halting now and then to dig at the base of a mesa or pick into a ledge. As they progressed over ridges and across plains and through cañons, the general trend was toward the jagged range, and every sunset found them at a lower level. The heat waxed stronger every day, and the water-holes were harder to find.

One afternoon, late, after they had toiled up a white, winding wash of sand and gravel, they came upon a dry water-hole. Dwire dug deep into the sand, but without avail. He was turning to retrace the weary steps to the last water when his comrade asked him to wait.

Dwire watched Hartwell search in his pack and bring forth what appeared to be a small forked branch of a peach-tree. He firmly grasped the prongs of the fork, and held them before him, with the end standing straight out. Then he began to walk along the dry stream-bed.

At first amused, then amazed, then pityingly, and at last curiously, Dwire kept pace with Hartwell. He saw a strong tension of his comrade's wrists, as if he was holding hard against a considerable force. The end of the peach branch began to quiver and turn downward. Dwire reached out a hand to touch it, and was astounded at feeling a powerful vibrant force pulling the branch down. He felt it as a quivering magnetic shock. The branch kept turning, and at length pointed to the ground.

„Dig here," said Hartwell.

„What?" ejaculated Dwire.

He stood by while Hartwell dug in the sand. Three feet he dug—four—five. The sand grew dark, then moist. At six feet water began to seep through.

„Get the little basket in my pack," said Hartwell.

Dwire complied, though he scarcely comprehended what was happening. He saw Hartwell drop the basket into the deep hole and carefully pat it down, so that it kept the sides from caving in and allowed the water to seep through. While Dwire watched, the basket filled.

Of all the strange incidents of his desert career, this was the strangest. Curiously, he picked up the peach branch, and held it as he had seen Hartwell hold it. However, the thing was dead in his hands.

„I see you haven't got it," remarked Hartwell. „Few men have."

„Got what?" demanded Dwire.

„A power to find water that way. I can't explain it. Back in Illinois an old German showed me I had it."

„What a gift for a man in the desert!"

Dwire accepted things there that elsewhere he would have regarded as unbelievable. Hartwell smiled—the first time in all those days that his face had changed. The light of it struck Dwire.

Chapter II

THEY entered a region where mineral abounded, and their march became slower. Generally they took the course of a wash, one on each side, and let the burros travel leisurely along, nipping at the bleached blades of scant grass, or at sage or cactus, while the prospectors searched in the cañons and under the ledges for signs of gold.

Descending among the splintered rocks, clambering over boulders, climbing up weathered slopes, always picking, always digging—theirs was toilsome labor that wore more and more on them each day. When they found any rock that hinted of gold, they picked off a piece and gave it a chemical test. The search was fascinating.

They interspersed the work with long restful moments when they looked afar, down the vast reaches and smoky shingles, to the line of dim mountains. Some impelling desire, not all the lure of gold, took them to the top of mesas and escarpments; and here, when they dug and picked, they rested and gazed out at the wide prospect.

Then, as the sun lost its heat and sank, lowering, to dent its red disk behind far distant spurs, they halted in a shady cañon, or some likely spot in a dry wash, and tried for water. When they found it, they unpacked, gave drink to the tired burros, and turned them loose. Dead greasewood served for the camp-fire. They made bread and coffee and cooked bacon, and when each simple meal ended they were still hungry. They were chary of their supplies. They even limited themselves to one pipe of tobacco.

While the strange twilight deepened into weird night, they sat propped against stones, with eyes on the embers of the fire, and soon they lay on the sand with the light of great white stars on their dark faces.

Each succeeding day and night Dwire felt himself more and more drawn to Hartwell. He found that after hours of burning toil he had insensibly grown nearer to his comrade. The fact bothered him. It was curious, perplexing. And finally, in wonder, he divined that he cared for Hartwell.

He reflected that after a few weeks in the desert he had always become a different man. In civilization, in the rough mining-camps, he had been a prey to unrest and gloom; but once down on the great heave and bulge and sweep of this lonely world, he could look into his unquiet soul without bitterness. Always he began to see and to think and to feel. Did not the desert magnify men?

Dwire believed that wild men in wild places, fighting cold, heat, starvation, thirst, barrenness, facing the elements in all their primal ferocity, usually retrograded, descended to the savage, lost all heart and soul, and became mere brutes. Likewise he believed that men wandering or lost in the wilderness often reversed that brutal order of life, and became noble, wonderful, superhuman.

He had the proof in the serene wisdom of his soul when for a time the desert had been his teacher. And so now he did not marvel at a slow stir, stealing warmer and warmer along his veins, and at the premonition that he and Hartwell, alone on the desert, driven there, by life's mysterious and remorseless motive, were to see each other through God's eyes.

Hartwell was a man who thought of himself last. It humiliated Dwire that in spite of growing keenness he could not hinder his companion from doing more than his share of the day's work. It spoke eloquently of what Hartwell might be capable of on the burdened return journey. The man was mild, gentle, quiet, mostly silent, yet under all his softness he seemed to be made of the fiber of steel. Dwire could not thwart him.

Moreover, he appeared to want to find gold for Dwire, not for himself. If he struck his pick into a ledge that gave forth a promising glint, instantly he called to his companion. Dwire's hands always trembled at the turning of rock that promised gold. He had enough of the prospector's passion for fortune to thrill at the chance of a strike; but Hartwell never showed the least trace of excitement.

And his kindness to the burros was something that Dwire had never seen equaled. Hartwell always found the water and dug for it, ministered to the weary burros, and then led them off to the best patch of desert growth. Last of all he bethought himself to eat a little.

One night they were encamped at the head of a cañon. The day had been exceedingly hot, and long after sundown the radiation of heat from the rocks persisted. A desert bird whistled a wild, melancholy note from a dark cliff, and a distant coyote wailed mournfully. The stars shone white until the huge moon rose to burn out all their whiteness.

Many times, since they started their wanderings, Dwire had seen Hartwell draw something from his pocket and peer long at it. On this night Dwire watched him again, and yielded to an interest which he had not heretofore voiced.

„Hartwell, what drives you into the desert?"

„Comrade, do I seem to be a driven man?" asked Hartwell.

„No. But I feel it. Do you come to forget?"

„I come to remember."

„Ah!" softly exclaimed Dwire.

Always he seemed to have known that. He said no more. He watched Hartwell rise and begin his nightly pace to and fro, up and down.

With slow, soft tread, forward and back, tirelessly and ceaselessly, the man paced his beat. He did not look up at the stars or follow the radiant track of the moon along the cañon ramparts. He hung his head. He was lost in another world. It was a world which the lonely desert made real. He looked a dark, sad, plodding figure, and somehow impressed Dwire with the helplessness of men.

„He is my brother," muttered Dwire.

He grew acutely conscious of the pang in his own breast, of the fire in his heart, the strife and torment of his own passion-driven soul. Dwire had come into the desert to forget a woman. She appeared to him then as she had looked when first she entered his life—a golden-haired girl, blue-eyed, white-skinned, red-lipped, tall and slender and beautiful. He saw her as she had become after he had ruined her—a wild and passionate woman, mad to be loved, false and lost, and still cursed with unforgettable allurements. He had never forgotten, and an old, sickening remorse knocked at his heart.

Rising, Dwire climbed out of the cañon to the top of a mesa, where he paced to and fro. He looked down into the weird and mystic shadows, like the darkness of his passion, and farther on down the moon-track and the glittering stretches that vanished in the cold, blue horizon.

The moon soared radiant and calm, the white stars shone serene. The vault of heaven seemed illimitable and divine. The desert surrounded him, silver-

streaked and black-mantled, a chaos of rock and sand, a dead thing, silent, austere, ancient, waiting, majestic. It spoke to Dwire. It was a naked corpse, but it had a soul.

In that wild solitude, the white stars looked down upon him pitilessly and pityingly. They had shone upon a desert that had once been alive and was now dead, and that would again throb to life, only to die. It was a terrible ordeal for Dwire to stand there alone and realize that he was only a man facing eternity; but that was what gave him strength to endure. Somehow he was a part of it all, some atom in that vastness, somehow necessary to an inscrutable purpose, something indestructible in that desolate world of ruin and death and decay, something perishable and changeable and growing under all the fixity of heaven. In that endless, silent hall of desert there was a spirit; and Dwire felt hovering near him fantoms of peace.

He returned to camp and sought his comrade.

„Hartwell, I reckon we're two of a kind. It was a woman who drove me into the desert. But I come to forget. The desert's the only place I can do that."

„Was she your wife?" asked the other.

„No."

A long silence ensued. A cool wind blew up the cañon, sifting the sand through the dry sage, driving away the last of the lingering heat. The camp-fire wore down to a ruddy ashen heap.

„I had a daughter," said Hartwell, speaking as if impelled. „She lost her mother at birth. And I—I didn't know how to bring up a girl. She was pretty and gay. She went to the bad. I tried to forget her and failed. Then I tried to find her. She had disappeared. Since then I haven't been able to stay in one place, or to work or sleep or rest."

Hartwell's words were peculiarly significant to Dwire. They distressed him. He had been wrapped up in his remorse for wronging a woman. If ever in the past he had thought of any one connected with her, he had long forgotten it; but the consequences of such wrong were far-reaching. They struck at the roots of a home. And here, in the desert, he was confronted by the spectacle of a splendid man—the father of a wronged girl—wasting his life because he could not forget—because there was nothing left to live for.

Suddenly Dwire felt an inward constriction, a cold, shivering clamp of pain, at the thought that perhaps he had blasted the life of a father. He shared his companion's grief. He knew why the desert drew him. Since Hartwell must remember, he could do so best in this solitude, where the truth of the earth lay naked, where the truth of life lay stripped bare. In the face of the tragedy of the universe, as revealed in the desert, what were the error of one frail girl, or the sorrow of one unfortunate man?

„Hartwell, it's bad enough to be driven by sorrow for some one you've loved, but to suffer sleepless and eternal remorse for the ruin of one you've loved—that is worse. Listen! In my younger days—it seems long ago now, yet it's only ten years—I was a wild fellow. I didn't mean to do wrong. I was just a savage. I gambled and drank. I got into scrapes. I made love to girls, and one, the sweetest and loveliest girl who ever breathed, I—I ruined. I disgraced her. Not knowing, I left her to bear the brunt of that disgrace alone. Then I fell into terrible moods. I changed. I discovered that I really and earnestly loved that girl. I went back to her, to make amends—but it was too late!"

Hartwell leaned forward a little in the waning camp-fire glow, and looked strangely into Dwire's face, as if searching it for the repentance and remorse that alone would absolve him from scorn and contempt; but he said nothing.

Chapter III

THE prospectors remained in that camp for another day, held by some rust-stained ledges that contained mineral. Late in the afternoon Dwire returned to camp, to find Hartwell absent. His pick, however, was leaning against a stone, and his coat lying over one of the packs. Hartwell was probably out driving the burros up to water.

Gathering a bundle of greasewood, Dwire kindled a fire. Then into his gold-pan he measured out flour and water.

Presently it was necessary for him to get into one of the packs, and in so doing he knocked down Hartwell's coat. From a pocket fell a small plush case, badly soiled and worn.

Dwire knew that this case held the picture at which Hartwell looked so often, and as he bent to pick it up he saw the face shining in the light. He experienced a shuddering ripple through all his being. The face resembled the one that was burned forever into his memory. How strange and fatal it was that every crag, every cloud, everything which attracted his eye, took on the likeness of the girl he loved!

He gazed down upon the thing in his hand. It was not curiosity; only a desire to dispel his illusion.

Suddenly, when he actually recognized the face of Nell Warren, he seemed to feel that he was paralyzed. He stared and gasped. The blood thrummed in his ears. This picture was Nell when she was a mere girl. It was youthful, soft, pure, infinitely sweet. A tide of emotion rushed irresistibly over him.

The hard hoofs of the burros, cracking the stones, broke the spell that held Dwire, and he saw Hartwell approaching.

„Nell was his daughter!" whispered Dwire.

Trembling and dazed, he returned the picture to the pocket from which it had fallen, and with bent head and clumsy hands he busied himself about the campfire. Strange and bewildering thoughts raced through his mind. He ate little; it seemed that he could scarcely wait to be off; and when the meal was ended, and work done, he hurried away.

As thought and feeling multiplied, he was overwhelmed. It was beyond belief that out of the millions of men in the world two who had never seen each other could have been driven into the desert by memory of the same woman. It brought the past so close. It showed Dwire how inevitably all his spiritual life was governed by what had happened long ago.

That which made life significant to him was a wandering in silent places where no eye could see him with his secret. He was mad, blinded, lost.

Some fateful chance had thrown him with the father of the girl he had wrecked. It was incomprehensible; it was terrible. It was the one thing of all possible happenings in the world of chance that both father and lover would have declared unendurable. It would be the scoring of unhealed wounds. In the

thoughtful brow, the sad, piercing eye, the plodding, unquiet mood of the other, each man would see his own ruin.

Dwire's pain reached to despair when he felt this insupportable relation between Hartwell and himself.

Something within him cried out and commanded him to reveal his identity. Hartwell would kill him, probably, but it was not fear of death that put Dwire on the rack. He had faced death too often to be afraid. It was the thought of adding torture to this long-suffering man whom he had come to love.

All at once Dwire swore that he would not augment Hartwell's trouble, or let him stain his hands with blood, however just that act might be. He would reveal himself, but he would so twist the truth of Nell's sad story that the father would lose his agony and hate, his driving passion to wander over this desolate desert.

This made Dwire think of Nell as a living, breathing woman. She was somewhere beyond the dim horizon line. She would be thirty years old—that time of a woman's life when she was most beautiful and wonderful. She would be in the glare and glitter, sought and loved by men, in some great and splendid city. At that very moment she would be standing somewhere, white-gowned, white- faced, with her crown of golden hair, with the same old haunting light in her eyes—lost, and bitterly indifferent to her doom.

Dwire gazed out over the blood-red, darkening desert, and suddenly, strangely, unconsciously, the strife in his soul ceased. The moment that followed was one of incalculable realization of change, in which his eyes seemed to pierce the vastness of cloud and range and the mystery of gloom and shadow—to see with strong vision the illimitable space of sand and rock. He felt the grandeur of the desert, its simplicity, its truth, and he learned at last the lesson it taught.

No longer strange or unaccountable was his meeting with Hartwell. Each had marched in the steps of destiny, and as the lines of their fates had been inextricably tangled in the years that were gone, so now their steps had crossed and turned them toward one common goal.

For years they had been two men marching alone, answering to an inward and driving search, and the desert had brought them together. For years they had wandered alone, in silence and solitude, where the sun burned white all day and the stars burned white all night, blindly following the whisper of a spirit. But now Dwire knew that he was no longer blind. Truth had been revealed—wisdom had spoken—unselfish love had come—and in this flash of revelation Dwire felt that it had been given him to relieve Hartwell of his burden.

Chapter IV

DWIRE returned to camp. As always, at that long hour when the afterglow of sunset lingered in the west, Hartwell was plodding to and fro in the gloom.

„I'm wondering if Hartwell is your right name," said Dwire.

„It's not," replied the other.

„Well, out here men seem to lose old names, old identities. Dwire's not my real name."

Hartwell slowly turned. It seemed that there might have been a suspension, a blank, between his usual quiet, courteous interest and some vivifying, electrifying mood to come.

„Was your real name Warren?" asked Dwire.

Hartwell moved with sudden start.

„Yes," he replied.

„I've got something to tell you," Dwire went on. „A while back I knocked your coat down, and a picture fell out of your pocket. I looked at it. I recognized it. I knew your daughter Nell."

„You!"

The man grasped Dwire and leaned close, his eyes shining out of the gloom.

„Don't drag at me like that! Listen. I was Nell's lover. I ruined her. I am Gail Hamlin!"

Hartwell became as a man struck by lightning, still standing before he fell.

„Yes, I'm Hamlin," repeated Dwire.

With a convulsive spring Hartwell appeared to rise and tower over Dwire. Then he plunged down upon him, and clutched at his throat with terrible, stifling hands. Dwire fought desperately, not to save his life, but for breath to speak a few words that would pierce Hartwell's maddened mind.

„Warren, kill me, if you want," gasped Dwire; „but wait! It's for your own sake. Give me a little time! If you don't, you'll never know. Nell didn't go to the bad!"

Dwire felt the shock that vibrated through Hartwell at those last words. He repeated them again and again.

As if wrenched by some resistless force, Hartwell released Dwire, staggered back, and stood with uplifted, shaking hands. The horrible darkness of his face showed his lust to kill. The awful gleam of hope in his luminous eyes revealed what had checked his fury.

„Comrade," panted Dwire, „it's no stranger that you should kill me than that we should meet out here. But give me a little time. Listen! I want to tell you. I'm Hamlin—I'm the man who broke Nell's heart. Only she never went to the bad. You thought wrong—you heard wrong. When she left Peoria, and I learned my true feelings, I hunted her. I traced her to St. Louis. She worked there, and on Sundays sang in a church. She was more beautiful than ever. The men lost their heads about her. I pleaded and pleaded with her to forgive me—to marry me—to let me make it all up to her. She forgave, but she would not marry me. I would not give up, and so I stayed on there. I was wild and persistent; but Nell had ceased to care for me. Nor did she care for any of the men who courted her. Her trouble had made her a good and noble woman. She was like a nun. She came to be loved by women and children—by every one who knew her.

„Then some woman who had known Nell in Peoria came to St. Louis. She had a poison tongue. She talked. No one believed her; but when the gossip got to Nell's ears, she faded—she gave up. It drove her from St. Louis. I traced her—found her again. Again I was too late. The disgrace and shock, coming so near a critical time for her, broke her down, and—she died. You see you were mistaken. As for me—well, I drifted West, and now for a long time I've been taking to the desert. It's the only place where I can live with my remorse. It's the only place where I can forget she is dead!"

„Dead! Dead all these years!" murmured Hartwell, brokenly. „All these years that I've thought of her as—"

„You've thought wrong," interrupted Dwire. „Nell was good, as good as she was lovable and beautiful. I was the one who was evil, who failed, who turned my back on the noblest chance life offers to a man. I was young, selfish, savage. What did I know? But when I got away from the world and grew old in thought and pain I learned much. Nell was a good woman."

„Oh, thank God! Thank God!" cried Hartwell, and he fell on his knees.

Dwire stole away into the darkness, with that broken cry quivering in his heart.

How long he absented himself from camp, or what he did, he had no idea. When he returned, Hartwell was sitting before the fire, and once more he appeared composed. He spoke, and his voice had a deeper note, but otherwise he seemed as usual. The younger man understood, then, how Hartwell's wrath had softened.

Dwire experienced a singular exaltation in the effect of his falsehood. He had lightened his comrade's burden. Wonderfully it came to him that he had also lightened his own. From that moment he never again suffered a pang in his thought of Nell. Subtly and unconsciously his falsehood became truth to him, and he remembered her as he had described her to her father.

He saw that he had uplifted Hartwell, and the knowledge gave him happiness. He had rolled away a comrade's heavy, somber grief; and, walking with him in the serene, luminous light of the stars, again he began to feel the haunting presence of his fantoms of peace.

In the moan of the cool wind, in the silken seep of sifting sand, in the distant rumble of a slipping ledge, in the faint rush of a shooting star, he heard these fantoms of peace coming, with whispers of the long pain of men at the last made endurable. Even in the white noonday, under the burning sun, these fantoms came to be real to him. And in the dead silence, the insupportable silence of the midnight hours, he heard them breathing nearer on the desert wind—whispers of God's peace in the solitude.

Chapter V

DWIRE and Hartwell meandered on down into the desert. There came a morning when the sun shone angry and red through a dull, smoky haze.

„We're in for sand-storms," said Dwire. „We'd better turn back. I don't know where we are, but I think we're in Death Valley. We'd better get back to the last water."

But they had scarcely covered a mile on their back trail when a desert-wide, moaning, yellow wall of flying sand swooped down upon them. Seeking shelter in the lee of a rock, they waited, hoping that the storm was only a squall, such as frequently whipped across the open places.

The moan increased to a roar, the dull red slowly dimmed, to disappear in the yellow pall, and the air grew thick and dark. Dwire slipped the packs from the burros. He feared the sand-storms had arrived some weeks ahead of their usual season.

The men covered their heads and patiently waited. The long hours dragged, and the storm increased in fury. Dwire and Hartwell wet scarfs with water from the canteens, bound them round their faces, and then covered their heads.

The steady, hollow bellow of flying sand went on. It flew so thickly that enough sifted down under the shelving rock to weight the blankets and almost bury the men. They were frequently compelled to shake off the sand to keep from being borne to the ground. And it was necessary to keep digging out the packs, for the floor of their shelter rose higher and higher.

They tried to eat, and seemed to be grinding only sand between their teeth. They lost the count of time. They dared not sleep, for that would have meant being buried alive. They could only crouch close to the leaning rock, shake off the sand, blindly dig out their packs, and every moment gasp and cough and choke to fight suffocation.

The storm finally blew itself out. It left the prospectors heavy and stupid for want of sleep. Their burros had wandered away, or had been buried in the sand.

Far as eye could reach, the desert had marvelously changed; it was now a rippling sea of sand-dunes. Away to the north rose the peak that was their only guiding mark. They headed toward it, carrying a shovel and part of their packs.

At noon the peak vanished in the shimmering glare of the desert. Dwire and Hartwell pushed on, guided by the sun. In every wash they tried for water. With the forked branch in his magnetic hands, Hartwell always succeeded in locating water, and always they dug and dug; but the water lay too deep.

Toward sunset, in a pocket under a cañon wall, they dug in the sand and found water; but as fast as they shoveled the sand out, the sides of the hole caved in, and darkness compelled them to give up. Spent and sore, they fell, and slept where they lay through that night and part of the next day. Then they succeeded in getting water, quenched their thirst, filled the canteens, and cooked a meal.

Here, abandoning all their outfit except the shovel, the basket with a scant store of food, and the canteens, they set out, both silent and grim in the understanding of what lay before them. They traveled by the sun, and, after dark, by the north star. At dawn they crawled into a shady wash and slept till afternoon. Hours were wasted in vain search for water. Hartwell located it, but it lay too deep.

That night, deceived by a hazy sky, they toiled on, to find at dawn that they had turned back into Death Valley. Again the lonely desert peak beckoned to them, and again they wearily faced toward it, only to lose it in the glare of the noonday heat.

The burning day found them in an interminably wide plain, where there was no shelter from the fierce sun. They were exceedingly careful with their water, though there was absolute necessity of drinking a little every hour.

Late in the afternoon they came to a cañon which they believed to be the lower end of the one in which they had last found water. For hours they traveled toward its head. After night had set in, they found what they sought. Yielding to exhaustion, they slept, and next day were loath to leave the water-hole. Cool night spurred them on with canteens full and renewed strength.

The day opened for them in a red inferno of ragged, wind-worn stone. Like a flame the sun glanced up from the rock, to scorch and peel their faces. Hartwell went blind from the glare, and Dwire had to lead him.

Once they rested in the shade of a ledge. Dwire, from long habit, picked up a piece of rock and dreamily examined it. Its weight lent him sudden interest. It had a peculiar black color. He scraped through the black rust to find that he held a piece of gold.

Around him lay scattered heaps of black pebbles, bits of black, weathered rock, and pieces of broken ledge. All contained gold.

„Hartwell! See it! Feel it! Gold! Gold everywhere!“

But Hartwell had never cared, and now he was too blind to see.

Dwire was true to such instinct for hunting gold as he possessed. He built up stone monuments to mark his strike. Then he filled his pockets with the black pebbles. As he was about to turn away, he came suddenly upon a rusty pick. Some prospector had been there before him. Dwire took hold of the pick handle, to feel it crumble in his hand. He searched for further evidence of a prior discoverer of the ledge of gold, but was unsuccessful.

Then Dwire and Hartwell dragged themselves on, resting often, wearing out, and at night they dropped. In the morning, as they pressed on, Dwire caught sight of the bleached bones of a man, half hidden in hard-packed sand. He did not speak of his gruesome find to Hartwell; but after a little he went back and erected a monument of stones near the skeleton. It was not the first pile of white bones that he had found in Death Valley. Then he went forward to catch up with his comrade.

That day Hartwell’s sight cleared, but he began to fail, to show his age. Dwire saw it, and gave both aid and encouragement.

The blue peak once more appeared to haunt them. It loomed high and apparently close. The ascent toward it was heart-breaking, not in steepness, but in its league after league of long, monotonous rise. Dwire knew now that there was but one hope—to make the water hold out, and never stop to rest; but Hartwell was growing weaker, and had to rest often.

The burning white day passed, and likewise the white night, with its stars shining so pitilessly cold and bright. Dwire measured the water in his canteen by the feel of its weight. Evaporation by heat consumed as much as he drank.

He found opportunity in one of the rests, when he had wetted his parched mouth and throat, to pour a little water from his canteen into Hartwell’s.

Chapter VI

WHEN dawn came, the bare peak glistened in the rosy sunlight. Its bare ribs stood out, and its dark lines of cañons. It seemed so close; but in that wonderfully clear atmosphere, before the dust and sand began to blow, Dwire could not be deceived as to distance—and the peak was a hundred miles away!

Muttering low, Dwire shook his head, and again found opportunity to pour a little water from his canteen into Hartwell’s.

The zone of bare, sand-polished rock appeared never to have an end. The rising heat waved up like black steam. It burned through the men's boots, driving them to seek relief in every bit of shade, and here a drowsiness made Hartwell sleep standing. Dwire ever kept watch over his comrade.

Their marches from place to place became shorter. A belt of cactus blocked their passage. Its hooks and spikes, like poisoned iron fangs, tore grimly at them.

At infrequent intervals, when chance afforded, Dwire continued to pour a little water from his canteen into Hartwell’s.

At first Dwire had curbed his restless activity to accommodate the pace of his elder comrade; but now he felt that he was losing something of his instinctive and passionate zeal to get out of the desert. The thought of water came to occupy his mind. Mirages appeared on all sides. He saw beautiful clear springs and heard the murmur and tinkle of running water.

He looked for water in every hole and crack and cañon; but all were glaring red and white, hot and dry—as dry as if there had been no moisture on that desert since the origin of the world. The white sun, like the surface of a pot of boiling iron, poured down its terrific heat. The men tottered into corners of shade, and rose to move blindly on.

It had become habitual with Dwire to judge his quantity of water by its weight, and by the faint splash it made as his canteen rocked on his shoulder. He began to imagine that his last little store of liquid did not appreciably diminish. He knew he was not quite right in his mind regarding water; nevertheless he felt this to be more of fact than fancy, and he began to ponder.

When next they rested, he pretended to be in a kind of stupor, but he covertly watched Hartwell. The man appeared far gone, yet he had cunning. He cautiously took up Dwire's canteen, and poured water into it from his own.

Dwire reflected that he had been unwise not to expect this very thing from Hartwell. Then, as his comrade dropped into weary rest, the younger man lifted both canteens. If there were any water in Hartwell's, it was only very little. Both men had been enduring the terrible desert thirst, concealing it, each giving his water to the other, and the sacrifice had been all for naught. Instead of ministering to either man's parched throat, the water had evaporated.

When Dwire made sure of this, he took one more drink, the last. Then, pouring the little water left into Hartwell's canteen, he threw his own away.

Hartwell discovered the loss.

„Where's your canteen?" he asked.

„The heat was getting my water, so I drank what was left and threw the can away. „

„My son!" said Hartwell gently.

Then he silently compelled Dwire to drink half his water, and drank the other half himself.

They did not speak again. In another hour speaking was impossible. Their lips dried out; their tongues swelled to coarse ropes. Hartwell sagged lower and lower, despite Dwire's support.

All that night Dwire labored on under a double burden. In the white glare of the succeeding day Hartwell staggered into a strip of shade, where he fell, wearily lengthened out, and seemed to compose himself to rest.

It was still in Dwire to fight sleep—that last sleep. He had the strength and the will in him to go on a little farther; but now that the moment had come, he found that he could not leave his comrade.

While sitting there, Dwire's racking pain appeared to pass out in restful ease. He watched the white sun burn to gold, and then to red, and sink behind bold mountains in the west.

Twilight came suddenly. It lingered, slowly turning to gloom. The vast vault of blue-black lightened to the blinking of stars; and then fell the serene, silent, luminous desert night.

Dwire kept his vigil. As the long hours wore on, he felt stealing over him the comforting sense that he need not forever fight sleep.

A wan glow flared behind the dark, uneven horizon, and a melancholy, misshapen moon rose to make the white night one of shadows. Absolute silence claimed the desert. It was mute. But something breathed to Dwire, telling him when he was alone. He covered the dark, still face of his comrade from the light of the stars.

That action was the severing of his hold on realities. They fell away from him in final separation. Vaguely, sweetly, dreamily, he seemed to behold his soul.

Then up out of the vast void of the desert, from the silence and illimitableness, trooped his fantoms of peace. Majestically they formed about him, marshaling and mustering in ceremonious state, and moved to lay upon him their passionless serenity.