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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"The sound of the little winds was a gay whistling whisper as they danced."



Child of the Winds

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A tender and fascinating story about a strange plateau in Turkistan where the winds from all over Earth converge

BRENT was drawn by the strong lure of gold to that legended tableland in innermost Turkistan called the Plateau of the Winds. There was an old rumor that lodes of unparal-

leled richness existed on that unvisited and almost unknown plateau.

Brent knew the place was supposed to lie more than a hundred miles west of the little village Yurgan, so he went to

Yurgan and tried to hire camels and drivers with which to cross the desert. There he learned that it was not going to be easy to reach the plateau.

One man he found, a young Turki named Dasan An, who had traveled just enough as the servant of other white men to make him contemptuous of his fellow-villagers. He affected white-man's clothes, spoke execrable English, and talked to Brent as though they were the only two civilized people in the place.

"Very afraid these ignorant people will not go with us as drivers," he told Brent confidentially. "They too afraid of the Plateau of the Winds."

"What is there there for them to be afraid of?" Brent demanded, and Dasan An smiled in superior fashion.

"They very ignorant people, sir. They afraid of the winds—they say that the Plateau of the Winds is the winds' sacred place and that the winds kill all people who try to go there. You see, they think winds are living things, not just air but alive. They say winds not bother men anywhere else but kill any men who go to their sacred plateau, so they not go there."

"Offer them more money," Brent told him irritably. "Tell them I'll give them double pay."

Dasan An held colloquy for a little with his swart-skinned fellows and then turned back to Brent. The cocksure contempt on his face deepened.

"They not go, sir. They say double money no use to a man after the winds kill him."

Brent swore. For a little time he pondered and then he made his resolution and turned back to Dasan An.

"Very well, we'll go without them," he informed him. "We can each ride a camel and lead one, and four camels will carry all the water and supplies we'll need."

"You mean we go just ourselves without anybody else drivers?" asked the Turki, his confidence a little dashed.

"That's what I mean," Brent said, and added, "Why not? You're not afraid of the winds too, are you?"

The Turki laughed noisily. "You are pleased make joke. Dasan An is not ignorant villager like these. I have been servant of white men and have been to Tehran."

"All right; see to getting the camels," Brent told him. "We'll start as soon as the outfit's ready."

That was in two days. In the already brassy glare of the rising sun they rode out of Yurgan with their stalking, sneering camels and pointed due west into the white wastes of salt desert.

FOUR days later the great, horizon-stretching wall of the Plateau of the Winds rose dimly in the distance ahead of them. That night they camped under it, a steep wall of brown rock a thousand feet high, extending north and south for many miles. And that night they heard winds blowing up there on the plateau.

They looked up into the darkness toward the plateau as they heard the distant tumult.

"Winds blowing very strong up there," said Dasan An, and Brent nodded.

"No doubt this plateau is the center of air-currents that meet and form constant winds, and that would explain why your people think it a sacred place where the winds gather."

"Listen to them blowing up there!" he added. "I'm glad we're not up there tonight."

For the winds they heard up on the plateau were strong. Their distant bellowing, shouting tumult came down through the night to Brent like a hubbub of great voices calling to each other.

good-humored, rollicking shouts of jovially brawling wind-giants.

They heard winds of all kinds in that moving uproar high on the plateau: winds that trumpeted and others that wailed and others that shrieked, winds so small that their passage was a whisper and winds so great that they roared; as though winds of all kinds had gathered there and were racing, rollicking, rushing together across the plateau. And as Brent and Dasan An listened they heard over the frolicking wind-voices a different sound. It was a high, silvery whistling, shrill and stabbing and joyous. It was almost the whistle of a screaming wind, yet there was a strange qualitative difference. It rose, fell, rose again and fell again, and as it ceased the wild wind-chorus stormed louder.

They listened until the uproar of winds had receded northward, died out of hearing. Then all was very still.

"Plenty windy up there, all right," Brent repeated, breaking the silence. "I hope it's not that bad tomorrow."

"Maybe better to wait until not so much wind before we try to climb plateau?" Dasan An suggested quickly.

"Nonsense, we're not going to let a little wind hold us back," Brent told him. "The sooner we get up onto the plateau, the better."

"That quite right, quite right," the Turki agreed hastily. "We not ignorant people to be afraid of winds."

Next morning they found a zigzag path up the plateau's side less than a mile from their camp, and started the climb. As they dragged the camels up from ledge to ledge, Brent saw that his companion looked constantly up toward the nearing rim.

IT WAS late afternoon by the time they scaled the last ledge and stood panting on the rim. The Plateau of the Winds

lay before them, a brown, barren plain. Miles in toward its center rose two tall pinnacles of rock, but all the rest was level, dusty, bare.

There were no winds blowing where they stood. The only visible sign of winds was a few thousand feet across the plateau where a group of little winds were moving, visible by the sand-whirls they raised from the plain, whisking and scurrying this way and that.

"There ought to be water at those rock-pinnacles," said Brent, gazing against the sun. "We could use it."

But Dasan An was staring at the distant sand-whirls. "See—small winds. Let us hope they not come near."

Brent turned and stared. "What, those little gusts? Why, they couldn't harm us."

"I hope they not come near," the Turki repeated, looking toward them.

"Come on, we'll try to get to those pinnacles before dark," Brent told him.

They started, Dasan An still keeping an eye upon the distant little sand-whirls as he tugged his unwilling lead-camel onward.

Brent was gazing at the rock-pinnacles ahead and wondering what chance they had of finding the legended lodes, even if they located water, when he heard Dasan An cry out suddenly in fear.

"The little winds! They come!"

He turned and saw that in fact the sand-whirls raised by the little winds were now gliding toward them. They looked like little sand-genii as they came on, and it struck him as odd that they should move so in a group. But he frowned when he turned back to his follower.

"Come along, Dasan," he said angrily. "Those winds are not big enough to bother us."

"They come!—they come!" babbled the Turki, almost incoherent with fear.

With a muttered curse Brent started back to shake some sense into him, and just then the little winds reached them. His eyes were filled for a moment with the sand they raised and he had to stop, temporarily blinded. As he stood rubbing his eyes he could feel and hear the little winds blowing all around and through them, whisking and darting about for all the world as though examining the party.

Then suddenly the little winds changed. The little whispering sounds they made became suddenly louder, angry. They pushed men and camels toward the plateau's rim!

Brent called through the flying sand of the miniature tempest for Dasan An to hold his camels. It was all they could do to hold the animals as the raging little gusts strove vainly to push them back.

The miniature wind-storm stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The little winds turned and raced back across the plateau toward the rock-pinnacles, a group of sand-whirls swiftly gliding.

Dasan An emitted a quavering, broken cry. "They have seen us! They have seen we are on the plateau and have gone to summon the great winds to come and kill us!"

"Great winds, nonsense!" Brent told him. "It was just a little flurry of gusts and now it's gone. Do you mean to tell me you're as superstitious as the villagers?"

But this appeal to Dasan An's vanity was in vain, for all his superior skepticism was gone in the panic that now filled him.

"It is not superstition—the winds *are* living, though I denied it!" he wailed. "They have seen us and know now we are here and unless we go back we shall die."

"Forget that stuff and get the packs fixed on those camels of yours," Brent ordered authoritatively. "Then we'll get going again and——"

He stopped. For he was looking at

Dasan An's face and as he spoke he saw it changing terribly. It became a swart mask of frozen fear, naked and awful. His eyes bulged with terror as he stared west.

Brent turned and looked, and felt a chill close round his heart. The whole western heavens had grown suddenly dark with clouds of sand lifted by great winds. A rapidly rising moaning filled the air.

He dropped his camel-ropes and leaped toward a near-by depression in the rocks, yelling to Dasan An.

"Get into here with me!" he yelled, "We can't hold the camels—let them go!"

"The winds!" he heard the Turki cry thinly. "The great winds come!"

Then as Brent threw himself into that little hollow he heard no more for the terrific roar of the advancing winds. He saw the camels bolt madly, squealing in terror. He saw Dasan An, staring at the oncoming sand-clouds like a man fascinated by the face of death, prostrate himself like a worshipper. Then to Brent it was as though hell had been suddenly dumped upon them, a hell of wind instead of flame. He lost almost all power to distinguish sensations as the great winds thundered down on them.

He saw Dasan An picked up by the winds and whirled down onto the rock plain. And again the winds lifted and smashed the Turki downward, and again, till his body was mere red pulp.

He glimpsed the camels grasped by the mighty winds and brushed off the rim of the plateau. Then he felt the winds tearing at his own body and heard in his ears their terrible bellowing. It was a thunder of titanic rage, a wrathfulness beyond anything human, a colossal anger bent on rooting him out and beating him into a pulp.

Clawed by those awful winds, Brent

clung insensately to his little shelter, digging his fingers into the rock. He felt himself being pulled forth, and the mad bellowing was louder. The winds plucked him farther out of his shelter. He heard over their thunder a shrill, stabbing whistling as he was torn completely loose. The winds started to lift him bodily into the air.

He heard in that second the silver whistling stab swiftly, urgently. The winds dropped him again upon the rock.

Half-conscious only, Brent raised his head to see that the great winds' sand-clouds had withdrawn a little from him. Running toward him through the wild winds was a girl. A girl from whom came the silver whistling! A slim, bronzed girl clad in a flying white garment, bronzed legs and arms bare, her dull-gold hair flying backward like flame as she ran.

She was running toward him through the winds with a swiftness that made her seem a thing of air herself. He saw a face dynamically beautiful, gray-green eyes wide with emotion, fixed on himself. He heard the unearthly whistling stab again from this girl's lips and thought he heard the thunder of winds lessen still further. Then he heard and saw nothing as unconsciousness claimed him,

BRENT had no immediate memory of what had happened, when he awoke. He knew only that he lay in darkness on something soft and warm. He tried to remember where he was, and rapidly did remember. He remembered the climb onto the plateau, the winds that had battered Dasan An to death, that had seemed about to kill him also when they had suddenly lessened.

And just as the winds had lessened a girl had appeared, a girl with gray-green eyes who whistled silver-shrilly! Had that girl been real? And where was he now?

Brent sat up, and discovered he had

been lying on some soft skin rugs. He looked about him in the dark.

Gradually he made out that he was in a rocky chamber or natural cavern of considerable size. Fruits of different kinds and flowers and skins lay about, and a spring gleamed in the corner. At one end of the cavern a round aperture opened on a sky of thick stars.

Bewildered, he got to his feet and walked out of that opening. Out there in the starlight he saw that the cavern in which he had lain was in a towering pinnacle of weathered rock, and that another pinnacle was close by. But how had he come to these pinnacles?

Before him in the dim starlight stretched a ghost-like plain, the Plateau of the Winds. Out there not a hundred yards from him moved a slender figure in a brief white garment, running, darting, dancing—the girl he had seen as consciousness left him.

The girl was yet unaware of him. She was running and darting to and fro with incredible swiftness. And a half-dozen little winds were blowing around her, whisking little sand-whirls to the eye. Dart and twist as she might, the sand-whirls darted more swiftly after her. The sound of the little winds was a gay whistling whisper as they danced. And from the girl's lips came joyous whistling.

Suddenly she saw Brent. She stopped dead, looking toward him, then came slowly to him. He saw again in the starlight that dynamic beauty of her face. Her eyes looked into his, intently. They were wide eyes, clean and clear as wind-washed skies, clear beyond anything he had ever seen on earth, and in them flickering a wild pulse of freedom.

Around both him and the girl now whirled and whisked the little winds, the dancing sand-whirls. Brent felt them tugging at his coat, exploring his garments,

ruffling his hair, like mischievous children darting around two adults.

He stared at the girl, and then his amazement forced him into speech.

"By heaven, you're white!" he exclaimed. "Whatever you're doing here or however you got here, you're a white girl!"

The girl listened fascinatedly, on her face an oddly eager remembering expression. When she spoke, her voice had in it the high, silvery quality of that stabbing whistling.

"Girl?" she repeated, tentatively. Then she pointed a finger at her own breast. "Girl—Lora," she said.

"Your name's Lora?" Brent cried. "Then you must be English. I'm Brent—Dick Brent."

"Brent?" she repeated. Her clear brow was wrinkled in thought, her eyes shining with troubled excitement. "English?"

He caught her arm. He forgot all else in his excitement at finding this white girl on this lonely, unvisited plateau. How had she come here and how long had she stayed here? How had she lived here?

To Brent's rapid, excited questions she answered first only with a puzzled frown. Suddenly speech spilled hesitantly, jerkily from her in that sweet, high voice.

"Almost—I had forgotten—to talk!" she told him. "Until you came I had forgotten—men—people——"

"Forgotten them?" Brent said. "Then how long have you lived here alone?"

"Since—since——" Words seemed lacking to her and she held her hand waist-high from the ground. "Since I was so."

"You mean you've been here since you were a little girl?" Brent said incredulously.

Her head bobbed. She seemed struggling for long-forgotten words with which to express herself,

"My father and other men came here long ago, and I was with them. They hunted something. Gold? I do not know now."

"But what happened to your father and the others?" Brent wanted to know.

Her answer was simple, matter of fact. "The winds killed them. The winds have told me that they have killed many men who tried to come here."

Brent stared at her, staggered by her words. Yet strangely, too, something in him had expected those words, had sensed a strangeness in this girl that made her words seem ordinary coming from her, even though what she said was impossibly fantastic.

"The winds told you?" he said. "You talk as though the winds are living things."

Lora's eyes widened in wonder. "But of course they are," she said, staring at him in surprise.

Brent's denial was forceful. "That's nonsense! Winds are not living—they're just air!"

"Of course they are, but they are living air," Lora told him. "They move in the unliving air just as we living people move on the unliving earth, and like us some of them are great and some small, some strong and some weak. Their life is not our kind of life, but they are living and they know things. Do you think if they were not living they would answer me when I call them like this?"

Lora pursed her lips suddenly, and silver whistling notes stabbed up into the darkness from her tilted face. Then down from the upper night smote winds, loud, wild, trumpeting their strength. They seemed to circle the girl, blow round her and tug and push her and roar about her. The whisking little winds scattered as these strong gusts smote and whirled. A tumult of noisy winds whirled round the girl where a moment before had been

almost a calm. Brent heard Lora laugh into the shouting gusts, heard her whistling stab again, and saw the strong winds whip away and upward as suddenly as they had come.

"Now do you believe that the winds are living?" she cried with a silvery laugh.

"Of course I don't believe it," Brent told her. "That was just a little wind-flurry such as must be common here all the time. It hardly proves that the winds are anything but winds."

Lora stamped her foot angrily. "It is not so! I will call them again and show you——"

But Brent caught her arm as she raised her face. "No, don't—I'll believe they're living if you want me to. I'm not interested in the winds, but in you. How have you lived up here a dozen years or more on this barren plateau? How was it possible for you to live as a child, if your father and the others were killed?"

The girl's anger fled as quickly as it had come, and she took Brent's hand, led him into the dim cavern. She pointed to the soft skins, the fruits and the dark-gleaming spring in the cavern's corner.

"It is simple. I sleep on those, and there is what I eat and drink."

"But where can you get fresh fruits here?" Brent asked incredulously.

"I don't get them—the winds bring them to me, all I need," she answered simply.

Brent stared, and her nostrils quivered again in sudden anger. "You do not believe!"

"Of course I believe you," Brent said hastily. "After all, winds do pick up things of all kinds and carry them long distances. But how comes it that you were left living when your father and the others were killed?"

Before answering, Lora took his hand

in her own soft little hand and drew him down to sit by her side on the skins. Her face was intent, in the dim light from the opening, and a little frown was on her forehead. Brent watched her fascinatedly, the only sound the distant, ceaseless murmur of the winds.

Her voice was slow, still struggling for words. "Not much can I remember now of that time," she said. "My father and another white man I remember, and dark men that led big animals, on one of which I rode. And I remember the hard climb up onto this plateau. Then the great winds, coming across the plateau in their wrath and smiting all of us. I remember my father and the other men being hurled over the plateau's edge by the winds. I remember the cries of the falling men and the roaring of the winds.

"The winds picked me up too, lifted me into the air. But they did not kill me at once, perhaps because I was so small. They played with me! They tossed me through the air from one wind to another! They shouted with laughter, their anger forgotten, as they played with me. Then one wind took me from the others, a wind that was different from the rest. It was strong but was gentler, softer. It took me here to the rock-pinnacles and set me down. I cried for a long while and then slept, and when I woke that different wind was there again.

"It petted me, caressed me, touched and reassured me, so that I forgot my grief. It left, and after a time it came back with fruits and tanned skins and other things it put down before me. I knew it from all the other winds and I thought of it as the mother-wind, because it cared for me.

"I talked to the mother-wind and I thought it heard me. I was not afraid any longer, for I knew the winds would not hurt me. The other great winds came and picked me up and would have played

with me again, but the mother-wind took me from them and would not let them have me.

"In time the winds all came to know me and to be accustomed to me. They brought me food and fruits and things they picked up in distant places where men lived. I came to know one wind from another, and to know the great and mighty winds and the smaller, weaker ones, and the little winds that were smallest of all.

"I listened to the sounds the winds made to one another and to me, and I learned to whistle sounds much like those, to speak to them. And though they could not hear as we hear, I knew somehow that they sensed my whistling, and answered it, and so I became able to talk with them.

"And winds from over all the earth have talked to me, and I to them. For somehow this plateau is a gathering-spot of all the winds, and from all over earth they come here and go again, coming and going high above the earth where men can not know of them. Here they mix and meet and play, and here I have talked with winds from all the world.

"But many of the great winds stay here almost all the time, and among them is the mother-wind. Never since I came here has the mother-wind gone for long. It is the mother-wind that I love best of all the winds, yet all of them I love."

BRENT had listened, rapt in a fascination beyond reason, but now he was forced to voice his incredulity as Lora stopped.

"But girl, this is fantastic, impossible! Winds are not living—you have lived so long with only the winds for company that you have come to think them so. How could a wind talk or hear? How could a wind speak to you and understand you?"

Lora shook her head. "That I do not know, but they do speak and they do hear. They understand my whistling and I understand their sounds. All things I ask they will do for me, or bring to me. Did I not stop them from killing you when they were about to slay you as they did your companion and your animals?"

Brent stared at her. "You mean that you think that wind-storm stopped because you told the winds to stop?"

Lora nodded. "Of course. When I saw you I whistled for them to let you go, and they did so, though they were very unwilling, still wrathful with you. They helped me bring you here to the pinnacles, though they did not want to do that either."

He shook his head. "I can understand your believing all this," he said, half to himself. "No doubt there are always winds up on this high plateau, and no doubt it was a freak of currents that saved you when the winds annihilated your father's party. It's natural enough you should personify the winds that have been your only companions here, too, and fancy that you could talk to them and they to you. But when it comes to telling me that——"

Brent broke off suddenly, aware of an abrupt weakness. He swayed a little and Lora darted quickly to her feet.

"But you are still tired, weak," she said. "I had forgotten that you must be so."

She took some of the tanned skins and made a soft little couch across the cavern from her own.

"Sleep now," she said simply, and when Brent lay down, she lay down as simply upon her own skin-couch.

Weak and sore from the battering of the winds, Brent drifted almost at once into sleep, the distant wind-voices outside in his ears. He woke the next morning to find the cavern gold-bright with sun-

light slanting through the opening, and wondered where he was until he heard outside a gay, silvery whistling. He sprang instantly to his feet and went outside, to find Lora standing whistling near by.

She saw him emerge and cried, "Brent, she has come to me already this morning! The mother-wind!"

"What?" said Brent incredulously.

"See, it is she!" Lora exclaimed, her face bright with happiness. "I have been telling her about you——"

Brent saw that a wind was in fact blowing around the girl, gently ruffling her hair, the sound of it a soft, crooning note.

Lora whistled briefly, the silver-shrill notes tumbling over one another. The wind paused in its caressing of her and moved toward Brent.

Brent felt unreasoning panic as that wind touched him. He wanted to run but told himself it was only a wind, only a moving mass of air. He stood there while it touched him softly, as though examining him, investigating him.

Then its touch changed and was no longer investigatory but caressing. He felt its touch against his cheek like the airiest of airy fingers, warm breath on his hair like that of a loving parent. Its strong, crooning note in his ears was infinitely reassuring, calming. His heart expanded in strange warmth.

That warm, strong wind circled him and Lora for a few moments longer, then with a final ruffling of the girl's hair left them. Brent saw it moving westward across the plain, raising the dust a little. He felt strangely content, like a child that has been petted, pacified.

"She liked you, Brent!" Lora was saying. "I could tell that the mother-wind liked you."

Brent told himself that he would have

to fall in with the girl's strange fancy. It would do no harm.

"I'm glad she did," he said. And he *did* feel glad, though he told himself it was wholly an unreasoning gladness.

"Always the mother-wind stays near the plateau, near me," Lora confided as they walked across the rock plain. "Many other winds stay here too, but most come and go from the far places. Even little ones like those."

She pointed as she spoke toward a chaotic little group of small sand-whirls dancing about not far away. As she pointed, the little wind-whirls changed direction, suddenly glided toward the girl and the man; came, Brent told himself, like children who had suddenly sighted a beloved person.

The girl laughed, threw out her arms as though welcoming the little winds. They whisked and whirled merrily, gleefully, around girl and man, combating, conflicting, a flurry of quick gusts.

It was senseless, Brent told himself, to let himself be affected by the girl's fancies. Yet he found himself against his reason thinking of these little winds as living, playing, even as she did.

SWIFTLY as they had come, the little winds whipped away, chasing one another across the plain.

Lora laughed. "They are but very small winds, those, yet I love them almost the most."

Brent asked, "Lora, have you never wanted to leave this plateau? To find other people?"

She turned the clear gaze of her gray-green eyes on him. "Why should I want people when I have the winds?"

"But surely you don't want to live here on this plateau always, even with the winds?"

She shook her head as though explain-

ing something obvious. "But I couldn't leave the winds!"

Her soft, bronzed arms suddenly circled Brent's neck and she looked up into his face like a pleading, affectionate child.

"I want to stay here, and now that you have come I want you to stay here with me. You will, Brent?"

Brent's arms tightened involuntarily around her and he drew a long breath as he answered.

"I'll stay," he said, "for a little while, at least."

Brent stayed. He told himself that it was but for a short time, that in a few days he would cure the girl of her fancies about the winds and that she would leave with him. But he could not change Lora's ideas regarding the winds. And Brent, against his will, against every conscious thought of his reason, found himself insensibly coming to share her viewpoint.

He found himself thinking of the winds as living things, and not just moving air. He found himself distinguishing one wind from another, just as he might one person from another. The great, strong winds that boomed solemn and majestic, the smaller, wilder winds that soared in and away, the little winds that whisked and played on the plateau—he could not keep from thinking of them as one might think of living people.

And there was that strong, gentle wind that Lora called the mother-wind. Every morning when he and Lora emerged from the cavern the mother-wind was there to greet and touch them. And every morning they found there fruits and things that Lora said the winds had brought.

Brent's reason told him that it was not impossible in this high place of strange wind-currents for freak currents constantly to bring objects a long distance and drop them. But reason alone could not combat the strange influence that the girl's belief had upon Brent.

From early morning until late night there were always winds about Lora, it seemed, even more than elsewhere on that plateau of winds. Whether or not they were living as she believed, the girl truly lived with the winds as companions, Brent saw.

And soon it seemed to him that no companions could be more wonderful, more swift and beautiful, than these that blew round all the round world, that roared and whistled and sang with life infinitely above the life of all poor things that grubbed on earth.

They were companions that could be wilder than any else in the world, as when they thundered across the plateau in tremendous wind-charges, Brent and Lora running with them and the girl's sweet whistling stabbing.

They could be playful, as when the strong gusts darted and jerked around the laughing two until they ran to the cavern for shelter. But only the mother-wind among them could be tender with that warm tenderness Brent felt each time that wind blew round him.

To Brent the world he had left came to seem unreal, and he had almost forgotten the quest that had brought him to the plateau. All that was real to him now was Lora and the plateau and the companioning winds. All, until one night sudden awakening came to Brent.

THAT night when he and Lora entered the cavern something made him take her suddenly into his arms and kiss her. She resisted for a moment, then suddenly returned his kiss. Brent's face was set with abrupt resolve when they separated.

"Lora, we're going to leave here!" he exclaimed. "I love you and we're going back together to the world, our world."

Lora's eyes were shining, but troubled. "But the winds?"

"You'll leave them for me, now?" Brent pressed her.

She hesitated. Brent heard the bursting uproar of rollicking winds outside and held his breath. Then she came closer into his arms.

"Brent, I'll go with you!" she cried. "Wherever you wish!"

But a few moments later the trouble came again into her clear face.

"But the winds," she repeated. "I am afraid, somehow, that they will not let me go."

Brent laughed. He had shaken off the influence of the plateau completely, now.

"After all, they're only winds," he said, and then added to reassure her, "Why should they stop you when you say they love you?"

She said slowly, "That is why I fear that they will not wish to let me go."

Brent busied himself in making skin bottles to hold water and fruit. Two mornings later he and Lora started.

Before they left the pinnacles the wind she called the mother-wind blew round her for minutes while she whistled.

Her clear eyes were near to tears as she turned to Brent. "I was telling the mother-wind—good-bye," she said.

"Tell her good-bye for me, too," said Brent, laughing, and seriously Lora whistled quick silvery notes.

The strong, soft wind touched Brent, blew over him, and at that airy, loving touch he felt suddenly a little ashamed of his flippancy.

He and Lora started eastward across the plateau. Little winds frisked and played around them, and now and then some of the greater winds came down from the upper air to whirl around them. But not now did Lora whistle greetings to any of them.

But when they neared the plateau's rim, the winds changed. Their sounds had now a puzzled, anxious note, it

seemed to Brent's slightly strained nerves. He told himself it was well they were getting away from a place that so easily bred such fancies.

The winds began to push them back from the rim with increasing force as they neared it. Lora turned a white face to Brent.

"They do not want me to go farther, Brent," she said.

He took her hand in his. "We're not going to stop just for winds," he said. "Come on."

But the winds now were blowing them back more and more strongly from the plateau's rim. And more winds seemed gathering, their voices becoming a shouting tumult.

Though Brent and Lora bent their heads and pushed forward with all their strength, the winds forced them back, not violently but strongly, determinedly. Their tumult grew angrier.

"Brent, it is as I said, they will not let me go!" cried Lora over the wind-roar. "If we go farther they will kill you for taking me!"

"It's just freak winds—there are always strange winds at the edge of a height like this!" he shouted back.

"We must go back—before they kill you!" she repeated, clinging to him, her face taut with concern.

Brent slowly assented. "All right, we'll go back for this time."

THEY started back toward the pinnacles. Slowly the winds' angry tumult subsided around them.

Again they whirled playfully around the girl, but Lora did not heed them. And her face still was white when she and he reached the cavern.

"They would have killed you for trying to take me away, Brent!" she said. "We dare not try again."

"We'll try again," said Brent, his chin

setting hard. "A bunch of 'winds can't scare me."

But when he saw the girl's face he added quickly, "We'll try it when it's not so windy there by the rim."

Her face became thoughtful. "If we went at night when the winds are playing elsewhere on the plateau, they would not see us go."

Brent reflected. "It certainly should be less windy there at night," he said, to himself. Then he added quickly to Lora, "We'll try it tonight!"

That night they waited in the cavern after darkness fell, and did not go out, though they heard the winds moving and shouting all around the rock-pinnacles. At last they heard the great wind-tumult move off across the plateau.

They went out then, and found all still outside. In trumpeting, frolicking tumult the winds were receding northward, the sound of them coming back dimly. Brent and Lora at once started eastward across the plateau.

They met no wind now as they crossed it. The distant wind-uproar they still heard as they started down the plateau's side, but when they reached the desert plain below and headed east, it faded.

Morning found them many miles from the plateau, which had dwindled to a thin brown line on the horizon behind them. All around them stretched the white wastes of the salt desert, flat and dead.

"No winds bothering us now!" Brent said. "I knew we'd be all right once we got off that wind-swept plateau."

Lora looked back. "I fear that they will follow when they miss us," she said. "And they can follow swiftly!"

Brent shook his head. "They're only winds. Now that you're away from that plateau you'll come to see that."

She said nothing, but he marked that

ever and again she turned to look back as they forged east that day.

That afternoon she uttered a little cry and pointed back to where great clouds of sand moved on the desert, like towering genii of the wastes.

"They have followed, Brent!" she cried. "They search for us!"

Brent looked, and felt a strange chill; yet he kept his voice steady. "It's only some sand-clouds, Lora. We must keep on going."

They went on, but now Brent too turned each few minutes to look back at those monstrous clouds of blown sand that moved here and there across the desert behind them.

The sand-clouds seemed searching all the desert as they advanced, indeed; yet even so they came closer and closer to the hastening pair. There were scores of those towering sand-giants, scores of great winds advancing across the desert.

Soon they could hear the distant roaring of those mighty winds. And then Lora stopped.

"Brent, we must hide!" she cried. "It is our only chance—to find some place of hiding until the great winds are gone."

"But it's senseless to hide from winds," he exclaimed. "They're not hunting us—it's only your fancy."

"I know they hunt us and that they will kill you if they find us," she said swiftly. "We must——"

She stopped suddenly, uttered a little despairing cry and pointed.

"It is too late! They have found us!"

She was pointing at a little whirl of lifted sand moving over the desert close beside them, nearing them.

That little wind stopped, whirled round as though in maddest excitement, then darted back toward the distant huge sand-genii.

"They have found us!" Lora repeated. "Brent, I want to die too if you are killed!"

"We're neither of us going to be killed!" Brent told her. "Come on."

They hastened forward, running now. The distant wind-roar behind them became louder, louder, yet they did not look back. Their feet slipped in the sand as they ran. Louder still swelled the bellowing roar, and now the desert about them seemed darkened swiftly.

LORA fell, and Brent stooped to help her up.

"It is useless!" she sobbed over the oncoming thunder. "We can not outrun them. They come, Brent! But if you die I die also!"

With one arm around the girl, Brent stared westward like a pigmy fascinated by giants about to destroy him. Across the desert toward them thundered a colossal host of winds, mighty sand-clouds from which came an ear-dazing bellowing, wrathful, raging. There were scores of them, and there were many scores of smaller sand-clouds, great winds and small, charging down together on the two tiny humans.

Lora broke suddenly from Brent's arm and ran forward toward the charging wind-host, whistling wildly, frantically. The winds picked her up and whirled her aside like a toy, setting her down far to the right, holding her safe there.

Brent saw and knew one instant's thankfulness that the girl was safe. Then the raging winds reached him.

He felt himself whirled high, high, into the air as though by colossal hands. In his ears was a thunderous bellowing of stupendous, elemental anger, and over it he heard Lora's distant scream.

He was poised high for an instant, then whirled down with awful force to-

ward the hard desert. He closed his eyes before the annihilating shock.

There was no shock! Out of the grasp of the thundering winds that held him he was suddenly snatched and whirled aside by another wind—a strong, warm wind that set Brent down beside Lora, then held man and girl as they clung together—a wind that he recognized, the wind that Lora had called the mother-wind!

Came a terrific roaring from the other winds, a heart-checking outburst of wild wind-fury. They charged thunderously forward, sought to tear Brent and Lora from the grasp of the mother-wind.

It seemed an inferno of raging gusts, a hell of cyclonic attack, but still that strong, soft wind held firmly man and girl. A wild conflict of combating winds. But soon that conflict subsided. The great winds' raging died, their thunder lessened. They began to move away, blowing toward the west.

And as they blew, their strong wind-voices were loud, but not in wrath now. It seemed that they uttered a great chorus of sorrow. A mighty sadness of farewell.

Still around Brent and Lora moved one wind, strong, soft, warm, touching them as they clung together, caressing them. They felt that light touch as of airy fingers on their cheeks, soft loving stroking of their hair, soft crooning in their ears. Then that wind too was gone and all was still.

Lora pressed against Brent, her arm around his neck. "It was the mother-wind, Brent! She saved you for me—she saved you from the others and made them let us go!"

Brent's dazed mind, with a great effort, caught at the commonplace world of everyday. "It was the craziest and most freakish wind-storm I've ever seen," he said. "Come on, Lora, I think we'll make it all right now to Yurgan."

BRENT got with Lora to Yurgan all right, and to the world beyond. And now that he and she are once more part of that world, that time up on the Plateau of the Winds seems to him almost some strange dream. It seems impossible now that even for a moment he should have allowed himself to fancy that the winds could be living things.

Yet even now Brent is not quite certain in his own mind. For Lora still is very sure that the winds live, and not all his rational explanations can shake what she believes. And Brent himself, remembering some things, must wonder.

Of one thing he is sure, that wherever he and his wife go there seem more

winds than anywhere else. And he does not like that. He does not like to see the winds that seem to gather round her, even though to please him she no more whistles wildly to them, and even though he tells himself that it is only fancy.

Neither does Brent like to awake at night and find Lora awake beside him, listening to winds rattling the shutters and sighing in the trees and wailing pleadingly outside the windows, as though entreating her to return, luring her with trumpeted promises of the old tameless freedom. For though Brent tells himself that winds are only winds, he is still afraid that some night she will answer that call.