

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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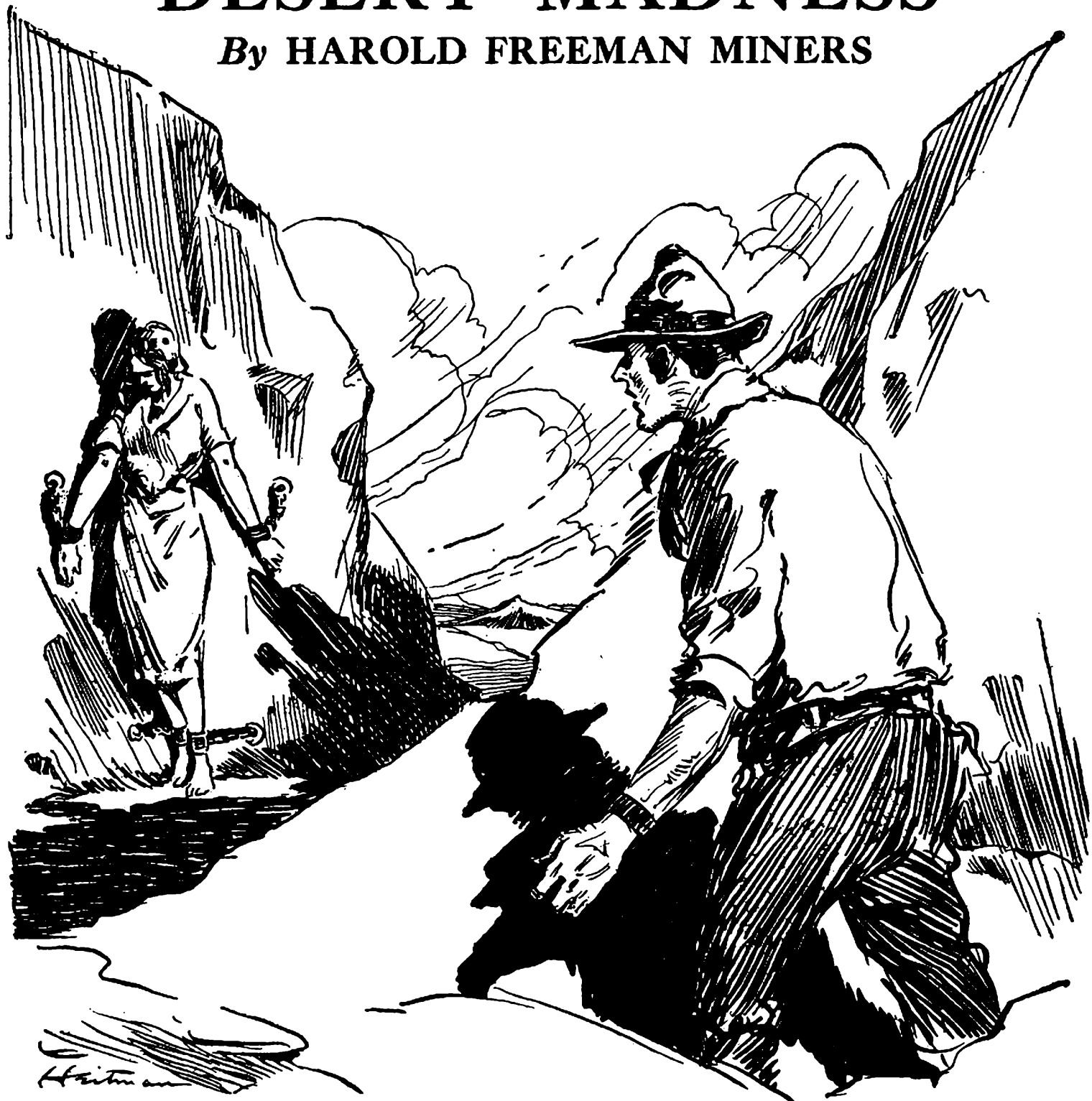
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*A Fanciful Novel of the Red Desert
Complete In This Issue*

DESERT MADNESS

By HAROLD FREEMAN MINERS



CHAPTER ONE

THE GIRL AND THE HANDCUFFS

FOR A LONG MOMENT the man surveyed with tired eyes the queer cleft in the canon wall and the beaten trail that led into it.

Finally he addressed the nearest of his two burros in a listless, half humorous voice:

"Well, Archibald, it looks interesting—what say we try it?"

Archibald made no reply. Archibald was asleep. Immediately upon the halting of the little cavalcade the burro had sunk into a state of dejection more apathetic than usual and had promptly gone to sleep. In fact, it is doubtful if Archibald had not been asleep the greater part of the afternoon.

"You don't care, eh, Archibald? Well, for that matter, neither do I. But let's consider this matter, old timer. For the last hundred years, more or less, we've been strolling around this accursed desert, and we have made the acquaintance of a few cottontail rabbits, one or two coyotes, and a rattlesnake. The rabbits showed their distaste for our society by running away; the coyotes did noth-

ing but deride us with mournful voices; the rattlesnake certainly showed no desire to be friendly. We've met no human being; we've discovered no fabulously rich gold mine; we've had our fill of scenery.

"There lies a well-beaten trail, disappearing into the face of solid rock. At its end lies mystery, adventure. Possibly romance. Also, possibly, cattle rustlers, who may greet us with anything but enthusiasm. In which case we'll throw in our lot with them, and I'll ride you across the desert to eternal glory. The idea intrigues me, Archibald. I think we shall investigate."

At this moment an over-industrious flea must have launched a determined attack on one of the few vulnerable parts of Archibald's anatomy, for he suddenly nodded his head vigorously.

"Ah, you agree with me? I knew you would. We will now follow the trail to adventure—or a sheep herder's camp. Let's go!"

Percy, the second burro, was with difficulty herded into the narrow trail. Archibald followed him with great reluctance, but finally the man succeeded in driving his tiny pack train into concerted action, and they slowly trudged up the narrow defile.

Stanley Ross had been exiled to the desert country because certain eminent New York doctors had come to the conclusion that he had contracted a disease which yields itself to treatment most readily in the dry desert uplands.

Ross had not been breathing the dry air of the desert for a month before he was as healthy as a prize fighter. The fact was that Stanley Ross had indulged in a certain pastime known as "reading the tape," and Nature had gone on a strike. The New York doctors had provided the first step toward recovery; the desert had done the rest.

But there had been another hurt that had not healed so readily—or at least Ross had so convinced himself. Stanley Ross fondly believed that he was heart-broken. The cause was a blonde bit of New York femininity who had fancied Ross for a while, but in the end had fancied the millions of an oil man more.

So he had stayed on in the West. A healthy restlessness had driven him out to explore the uncharted wastes of the vast Red Desert, and the ever changing wonders of rock, and sand, and sky, of sagebrush and cactus, of sparkling night-heavens had beckoned him on. For months now he had been wandering up and down this immeasurable wonderland, obeying every vagary of mind, exploring every nook and cranny that caught his itinerant fancy, his only com-

panions the two burros which he had so whimsically named.

Mirages had beckoned. Colors so bizarre that no artist had dared to give them to canvas had soothed his soul. Grotesqueries of rock and sand and canon had intrigued him.

Ross still believed that the old hurt was still present in his bosom. Actually he had been having a capital time for months, and the girl no longer mattered. However, he had allowed himself gradually to fall into a state of whimsical melancholy. What he needed was adventure. He was bored, but had he known what lay at the end of the thin twisting trail before him his boredom might not have been so acute.

The rock defile, through which the trail led, was narrow, and the walls were nearly perpendicular. The passage was twisting, but a tiny trickle of water gave promise of a broader canon farther up. The trail, while very narrow, was well-defined and worn deep. It looked as though it had been in constant use for years.

Ross had progressed along this strange passage for about a quarter mile when his attention was suddenly arrested by something on the canon wall. Involuntarily, he stopped. Instantly the burros halted as though their motive power was automatically turned off whenever their master stopped walking.

"Great Horned Toads!" ejaculated Ross in a low voice. "Archibald, do you see what I see, or has the sun gone to my head? Has the world slipped back three centuries, or is it actually nineteen-twenty-three? 'Tain't possible, Archibald, but nevertheless I see what I see!"

There, not thirty feet distant, was a girl—a pretty girl—and she was shackled to four great iron rings, fastened in the canon wall, by means of handcuffs, ankle fetters, and four heavy chains!

CHAPTER TWO

BROKEN SHACKLES AND A MYSTERY

ROSS stood spellbound. He could not believe his own eyes.

That he should meet a human being in this vast waste of rock and sand and cactus was possible. That he should find a girl chained to a rock, like a felon of the black ages, was nothing short of incredible.

There was no denying the girl's existence, however. She was there, and she was in need of help.

His incredulity shattered, Ross was beside the girl in a bound. Even a cursory glance showed her to be undeniably pretty, and it also showed her to be quite

as undeniably in a state of total exhaustion.

At Ross's approach, the girl raised her head with difficulty. Her eyes opened and she smiled slowly. Then her whole body suddenly fell forward against the chains that held her. She had fainted.

No stranger situation could be imagined than the finding of a beautiful girl chained to a rock in the midst of the great Red Desert. This, however, was a matter for future consideration. The girl needed immediate attention, and Ross's first thought was to release her.

When he examined her shackles Ross realized that release was not going to be easy. The four rings to which the chains were fastened were secured to the canon wall by means of heavy iron staples driven deep into fissures in the rock. A test of strength showed that nothing short of a charge of dynamite would ever loosen them.

The chains were comparatively heavy and well forged. A file was the only solution—and Ross did not possess a file.

Not till he examined the handcuffs did he see any hope of releasing the girl. These were not of the ordinary type. They were not the steel manacles of the sort used today, but were about two inches wide, heavy in construction and made of cast iron. The locking device was old-fashioned. They were a type of handcuff that had been obsolete for nearly three quarters of a century.

Having satisfied himself that they were really made of cast iron, Ross at once realized that it would be a comparatively easy task to free the girl. Securing a small rock for a hammer, he braced the girl back against the canon wall and held her wrist against the rock. A few well directed blows with the improvised hammer easily cracked the rusty cast iron and the handcuff fell away in two pieces.

The girl's wrist had been freed without more than slightly bruising the skin. The second handcuff was broken quite as easily. Ross gently lowered the girl to the ground.

Releasing her ankles was more difficult. The anklets were of heavier construction and harder to break without injuring the girl. However, by placing a rock under the anklet and being careful, Ross finally managed to shatter the cast iron without more than bruising the girl's slender ankles.

In an instant he had jerked the pack from one of the burros and spread his blanket roll out on the ground. Picking up the unconscious girl, he placed her on the blankets and improvised a pillow from his coat.

Almost opposite where the girl had been chained the tiny trickle of water had formed a miniature pool in the rocks. Seizing a tin cup from his camp outfit, Ross hurried to this pool, scooped up a cup of water, and in an instant was kneeling at the girl's side.

Dipping his fingers in the water, he flicked it across her face, then carefully bathed her forehead, and then set to chafing her wrists.

It was fully ten minutes before the girl showed any evidence of returning consciousness. Then her eyelids began to flutter. Finally she sighed deeply, and her eyes slowly opened.

Stanley Ross thought he had never seen such a look of abject terror as now appeared in the girl's eyes. It was as though she had just awakened from a terrible dream and was still laboring under its terrorizing influence. Such a look might have appeared in the eyes of a slave girl when Nero ruled in Rome.

For a moment, consciousness battled with that nightmare that had been seething through the girl's brain and finally won. Her eyes opened wide. A half smile slowly crossed her face. Whatever might have inspired her terror, the girl evidently recognized in Ross a friend.

Her lips, dry and parched, moved with difficulty, but Ross saw that they framed the word "Water!"

Lifting her head, he dampened the girl's lips from the cup and then allowed her to drink her fill. But weakness still held sway over her body, and she sank back on the blankets, exhausted. Her eyes closed again.

"Don't try to talk," advised Ross. "You just lie there and rest until I fix something for you. Then you can tell me about this thing."

For once in his life, Ross was glad that he had taken another man's advice. When he had started his desert pilgrimage an old prospector had advised him to include a few cans of soup in his outfit. Ross had demurred, seeing no use in packing superfluous weight, but the old desert rat had insisted.

Ross had included the soup. So far, he had had no use for it, but now it was to show its worth.

Collecting a few dry sticks from the stubby willows that grew around the pool, Ross soon had a tiny fire going. Opening a can of soup, he heated it over the fire and carried a cup of it to the girl.

"Oh, that's so good!" she murmured after she had drained the cup. "Thank you."

"Do you feel like talking?" asked Ross.

For a moment the girl regarded him with frank eyes. Then she shook her head wearily.

"Not—not just yet—please. I'm—so—tired." She sank back onto the blankets.

Realizing that, for the present, rest was the most important thing for her, Ross covered the girl with a blanket and set about his camp duties.

He finished unpacking his burros and turned them loose to pick at the scanty tufts of grass that grew along the seeping stream. This done, he set about preparing his own meal.

It was already dusk, and by the time he had cooked and eaten his supper darkness had settled down over the little canon. Washing his few dishes in the pool, Ross set them aside and turned his attention to finding enough firewood to keep the fire going.

In the darkness this was somewhat of a task, and Ross was absent from the camp for some little time. When he returned he saw that his strange guest had evidently fallen asleep.

Ross threw some wood on the fire and sat down with his back against a rock. Filling his pipe, he lighted it and leaned back to contemplate the events of the afternoon and evening.

His first mental reaction on finding the girl had been one of intense rage that any one, no matter what the cause or conditions, could be so utterly inhuman as to perpetrate such an act. He was still angry now, but he had cooled off to the extent that he could consider the affair calmly.

There seemed to be no off-hand explanation whatever. As far as Ross knew, there was no human habitation in all this desert waste, yet this trail up the little canon had been used frequently and recently, so somewhere up the winding trail must lie a solution to the mystery. But what it could be, or whether he could ever solve it, Ross could not imagine.

The whole affair was grotesque, bizarre. Why any one should chain a young girl to a rock wall in the midst of a heat-scorching desert was utterly incomprehensible. The girl was not gross or criminal-looking. On the contrary, she was pretty, delicate, and obviously refined. Her clothes bespoke a far different environment. How any one could be so inhuman as to subject her to such treatment was unfathomable.

Sitting there, smoking and watching the girl, mulling the strangeness of the affair over in his mind, Ross could offer himself no explanation. The only thing to do, apparently, was to wait for the

girl to awaken and then wait for her to talk.

At any rate, the adventure which he had craved seemed to be at hand. Where it would lead him he had no idea.

The fire gradually burned low. The girl slept on. Ross removed the pipe from his mouth. His head nodded. In half an hour the campfire had wasted to an ember.

The man's head had sunk forward onto his breast; his body had relaxed comfortably against its support. He, too, was asleep.

Hours crept by. . . .

With a start, Ross awoke. The first faint glow of dawn was creeping down into the little canon. It was morning.

Sheepishly, Ross rubbed his eyes, aware that he had allowed the healthy fatigue of a day in the desert to conquer his senses and bring sleep when he had intended to watch throughout the night.

Gradually the events of the evening before came back to him, and he looked across to where he had wrapped the girl in his blankets. The bed was empty!

The girl was gone!

CHAPTER THREE

ADVENTURE WITH A VENGEANCE

IN AN INSTANT Ross was on his feet, the sleep fog automatically cleared from his brain.

One glance was enough. The dawn was far enough advanced so that he could see both up and down the canon. It was patent that the girl had vanished during the darkness.

The whole affair was so utterly impossible, so unreal, so like an Arabian Nights adventure, that Ross was almost prone to believe that it had been merely a dream, a desert hallucination. Not until his eyes again sought the canon wall did he convince himself that he had not been laboring under some mental aberration.

There could be no denying his eyes, though. There were the four heavy chains fastened to the canon wall, and there were the four broken shackles, mute evidence that he had stumbled onto a situation as exotic as one of the desert's own mirages.

No, there could be no question that the girl had actually existed. Nor could there be any question that she had disappeared. The only living thing in sight was Archibald, who stood with head bowed over the dead embers of last night's fire in his usual state of ignoble dejection.

At first thought it seemed impossible that the girl could have left camp, unaided, and it seemed quite as certain that no one could have taken her away by force, without rousing Ross.

As he considered it, however, Ross realized that exhaustion would come quickly to one chained to the rock and exposed to the sun without food or water. Recuperation would probably come quite as quickly. The girl had had both water and nourishment the evening before, and it would have been quite possible for her to have gained sufficient strength to leave, had she so chosen. There seemed to be no other explanation.

"Well, Archibald," said Ross, falling into his whimsical habit of addressing the burro, "when I started this trip I thought that you and Percy were the only asses in the party. Now I am convinced there are three of us. Here I have just been craving adventure for months. Yesterday I blundered right onto the craziest kind of a mystery, and then I go to sleep and let the whole thing get away from me! Fools can't think, but I suppose they've got to eat," he finished to himself.

He set about preparing his breakfast, meanwhile pondering the affair. The more he pondered the more mysterious it became.

Breakfast finished, he washed his dishes and then stepped over to gather up his bed-roll. Instantly he stopped short. There before him, scratched in the level sand of the canon floor, was a message:

"Please go away. There is only great danger if you investigate further."

There could be no denying the sincerity of that message. Coupled with the silent testimony of the inhuman shackles, it meant that the girl, whoever she might be, was in real peril.

Regaining her strength, she had quietly slipped away in the night, but before going she had left behind a warning to the man who had released her. It was evident that she did not wish to draw a stranger into a danger which she considered hers alone.

The warning, however, reacted on Ross like a red rag on a bull. It was a challenge to his manhood, to his thirst for adventure. Somewhere up that narrow canon was mystery; and somewhere, too, was a girl in unknown danger, a girl who patently enough needed assistance and a friend.

It took but a few minutes to round up the burros and rope on the packs.

"We will now proceed to rescue the fair maiden."

"Stick 'em up, an' do it quick!"

Ross whirled at the sound of the gruff voice—and found himself looking squarely into the muzzle of an ugly six-shooter. Behind it, was the most villainous-looking countenance Ross had ever seen.

"Come on! H'ist 'em up!" again jerked out the owner of the gun.

The situation was too unreal to be taken seriously.

"Ah, Archibald, the plot thickens! First we meet Beauty; now we meet the Beast. Point that gun the other way, my friend. It might go off and frighten my long-eared friend here. He's delicate, and I don't like to have his nerves shocked."

"H'ist them mits before I drill ya!"

Ross felt the muzzle of the gun jammed into his ribs, and a practised hand quickly searched his body. His automatic, carried for the sole purpose of exterminating rattlesnakes, was transferred to the other's pocket.

The vicious attitude of the gunman was far too real to be taken lightly. There was no doubt that he meant business.

"Ya can let 'em down now," said the gunman, stopping back.

Ross turned and surveyed his captor.

"If you don't mind telling me," he asked coldly, "to whom am I indebted for this early morning call?"

"Stow the flip gab. All I know is the big boss said to bring ya in, an' I'm bringin' ya."

"Then I'm to understand that I'm a captive?"

"Understan' anythin' ya please. Now git travelin'."

Resistance was hopeless. His air of reckless bravado gone, boiling inwardly at the indignity forced upon him, Ross swung and trudged off up the canon trail.

For perhaps a quarter of a mile the narrow canon cleaved straight through the rock. Then it suddenly began a series of intricate turns, as though it had attempted a passage and had been baffled and forced to take a new direction about every fifty feet.

For a while, Ross stalked on without speaking. Suddenly he turned his head and spoke.

"Just where are you taking me, and who is the 'big boss'?"

"Never mind askin' dam' fool questions. Keep movin'!"

After another quarter mile of sharp turns, the canon suddenly broadened, and Ross found himself looking out into a basin bounded on all sides by high, perpendicular rock walls, smooth and straight.

The basin was oval in shape, and near the center was a group of 'dobe buildings, five in number. Toward these the captor directed their progress.

As he advanced, Ross looked keenly for signs of life, but though he sought every possible nook and cranny with his gaze, he could see neither man nor beast. The place seemed to be absolutely deserted.

At the first building, a small 'dobe structure that stood somewhat apart from the others, Ross was ordered to halt. Opening a heavy door, the man motioned with his gun for him to enter. Ross stepped over the threshold, and instantly the door clanged shut behind him.

He heard the heavy bolt drop into place. Then he heard his captor walking away.

Then, for the first time, it dawned on Ross that he was actually a prisoner, and that he had been captured with some definite object in view.

The room in which he found himself was about twelve feet square. The walls were of 'dobe; the floor was of the same material, hard packed and smooth. There were two small windows, but both were heavily protected with thick iron bars, set deep in the hard-packed 'dobe. The furniture consisted of a crude table and chair.

A single test of strength showed Ross that he could never hope to open the door. A crowbar or an axe would be necessary for that, and there was no implement of any kind in the room. The walls were fully eighteen inches thick. Under the fierce heat of the desert the 'dobe had grown as hard as cement. Unless he received help from outside, there seemed to be no possibility of escape.

Time passed. Finally he ceased his idle wandering about the room and sank into the chair.

His pipe and tobacco still remained in his pocket. He took out his pipe, lighted it, and fell to considering his strange predicament.

It seemed that ages had passed before he detected approaching footsteps. The bolt was raised. The heavy door swung on its hinges. His captor stood outside, gun in hand. Behind him was a Chinaman, carrying a tray on which was food.

The Chinese entered the room, placed the tray on the table and arranged the food. As he was performing this service, he said in a low whisper, so low that his companion could not hear, "Missee say Wong flix good dinner."

"Come on, Chink, make it snappy!" snapped the man with the gun.

The door slammed. The bolt fell into place. Ross was alone again.

Dubiously, he surveyed the food. The words of the Chinese came back to him, "Misee say Wong fix good dinner."

So the girl knew that he was a captive. Well, all he could do was wait. But who was she? And what did his imprisonment mean?

In the meantime there was no reason for wasting a good dinner. Ross was hungry, and in twenty minutes the last scrap of food had disappeared.

Settling back in his chair, he again filled his pipe and prepared to await developments with as good grace as possible.

It was hours later that he heard footsteps nearing his prison.

CHAPTER FOUR

ROSS IS INVITED TO DINE

ROSS heard a key in the lock, and a moment later the heavy door swung open. It was the gunman again. He was evidently not mindful to take any chances with his prisoner, for he again was holding his revolver ready.

"Come on out!" he barked, motioning with the gun for Ross to step out of the room. "The big boss wants ya."

"Oh, he does?" returned Ross. "Maybe I'll find out now what all this is about."

"You'll find out all right. Mebbe find out more'n ya want."

"You know, I don't think I'm going to like you at all. I shouldn't be surprised if I had serious trouble with you yet. But lead on!"

Ross's persiflage was far from pleasing to the gunman. He glared malevolently at Ross for a moment, as if half-minded to inflict physical punishment, finally thought better of it, and then jerked out, "I ain't leadin'; I'm followin'. Git movin'!"

Ross was conducted to the largest of the group of 'dobe buildings, evidently used as a dwelling, and was ushered directly into a bedroom.

He had expected anything except what he now saw. The room was such as might have been found in a brown-stone mansion on Fifth Avenue. The floor was covered with a deep soft rug. There was a mahogany bed, with a spotless white spread, and a dressing-table of the same wood. To one side of the latter stood a full-length plate mirror.

"The big boss said ya was to shave, an' then ya was ta dress fer dinner. Yo'll find all tha togs there on that bed." The gunman directed Ross's attention to the bed with a flourish of his gun.

Ross looked. The garments on the bed comprised a complete evening outfit,

from studded shirt to patent-leather pumps.

He was surprised to find that the clothes fit him well. The pumps were a trifle tight and the suit was a bit snug, but a half hour later, when he surveyed himself in the long pier glass, he was well satisfied.

"All right, keeper, let's be on our way. I'm curious," he said.

His captor conducted him down the long veranda, and a moment later he was ushered into a large room where a table was laid for dinner.

CHAPTER FIVE

A STRANGE DINNER

BY THIS TIME Ross was prepared for almost anything, yet the room that he now stepped into was even more astounding than the bedroom.

In the center stood a table arranged for four. It fairly sparkled with glassware, silver and spotless linen. At one side of the room stood a huge buffet. Its top was well covered with glasses, liquor shakers and sundry bottles, the contents of which were obvious.

The occupants of the room chiefly held his attention, though. They were three, two men and a woman. Here, at last, he was to know the meaning of the strange events of the preceding twenty-four hours.

The two men were standing close together and had evidently been conversing. Both were in faultless evening dress. The girl stood apart; aloof, so it seemed. Despite her evening dress, Ross instantly recognized her as the girl he had found in the canon.

One of the men was young and exceedingly well built. His wide, heavily muscled shoulders suggested out-of-the-ordinary strength. His hair was wiry and red; its color was amply reflected in his ruddy complexion. The face was strong and would have been attractive but for one feature—the eyes. The eyes were small, deep-set, and far too close together. They might have been said to be piggish. The dull glint in them was not reassuring. Ross knew at once that he did not like this man.

It was the second of the two men, however, who was really striking. He was, in fact, an amazing figure. His stature was above the average height, over six feet, and he was thin to emaciation. Ross thought he had never seen so tall and yet so slender a man. He was so thin as to be ludicrous, yet there seemed to be a remarkable whipcord strength about him.

His face was narrow and as lean as his body. A thin, high nose divided a

pair of piercing black eyes. It was the eyes that struck instant attention. Their everchanging lights fairly gleamed. They seemed to be alive with a thousand fires.

The impression was instantly registered with Ross that here was a man who was possessed of unusual personal power, or who was stark mad. Those eyes could allow of no other conclusion.

As Ross was ushered into the room it was this strange individual who instantly stepped forward.

"Ah, our guest has arrived," he said. His voice was soft as velvet, yet it carried an irritating quality that was thin-edged and biting, and scarcely concealed. "Step right up, Mr. Waring; dinner will be served at once. Wong, the wine."

From somewhere the Chinese, Wong, had glided forth and, drawing out a chair, indicated Ross's place at the table. Immediately he had filled the glasses with a sparkling liquid. Ross recognized it as champagne.

There was no chance to reply. In fact, Ross was too bewildered to think of anything adequate to say. In a moment he would be himself again, but just now his wits were all at cross purposes.

As the elderly man greeted Ross, the girl and younger man took their places at the table as if they had only been waiting his arrival to proceed with the meal. As Ross stepped forward, at the servant's indication, his host reached out and lifted the wine glass at his plate.

"We will drink to the health of our guest," he said evenly.

Automatically, Ross lifted his glass. The others did likewise. For an instant the four glasses were held aloft, the lights playing on their sparkling depths. Then the elderly man turned to Ross with a rather elaborate low bow and said in a voice that was like gray steel:

"Mr. Waring, allow us to drink to your most excellent good health—*for tomorrow you hang!*"

The words were like an icy blast. Up to that moment the whole affair had been rather ludicrous to Ross. He had realized that he was in danger at times, but that this danger would involve the loss of his life he had not for a moment imagined.

Now he realized that his very life was at stake; more than that, unless he could find some way to extract himself from his predicament, that he was sure to forfeit it. There could be no denying the import of the toast. Ross did not know why, but he did know that this tall, lean stranger with the mad eyes meant to kill him as sure as he stood there.

For a moment, the young New Yorker lost his complacency. He stood with the glass poised in his hand, his brain whirl-

ing. But this was only for a moment. In a second he had regained his poise. Raising the glass to his lips, he drained it to the bottom and turned to his host.

"Thank you, sir," he said carelessly, "for your kind wishes for my good health. I hate to dispute you, but I *don't* believe you will hang me in the morning. And my name is not Waring, either. It happens to be Ross."

"As you will, Mr. Waring, as you will. Any name would do as well. And I assure you I shall have the pleasure of hanging you in the morning. Let me warn you, too, Mr. Waring, not to attempt anything. I want this dinner peaceful. It is an engagement dinner," turning with an exaggerated bow to the girl, "the occasion of the betrothal of my dear niece to Mr. Beebe here. I *know* you will be interested in that, Mr. Waring. But just to forestall any idea you might have of providing any unnecessary entertainment I have stationed my friends, Mr. Garfin and Mr. Poole, at the door with instructions to shoot if you get unruly. Now, let us eat."

Ross glanced over his shoulder to find Garfin lounging in the door by which he had entered, a malignant smile wrinkling his face. In an opposite doorway lounged another individual fully as ugly looking as Garfin. This was evidently Poole. Both had guns. It was obvious that for the present no break for liberty was possible.

For the most part, that dinner was a nightmare to Ross. Afterward he wondered how he had managed to get through it.

After the first effusion, the elderly man made no effort to include Ross in the conversation. Glad of this respite, Ross attempted to collect his wits and to form some estimate of his predicament and of the people with whom he had to deal.

The elderly man carried on a continuous animated conversation, mostly with the man whom he had designated as Beebe. Several times he addressed himself to Ross, but always in such a manner that it was obvious no answer was expected. A number of times he included the girl in his conversation, but the only time she made reply was to answer a question, and then it was merely to say, "No, Uncle Arthur."

Once or twice Beebe addressed the elderly man as "Mr. Ward," so Ross concluded that his name was Arthur Ward. The girl's identity he was not able to learn, except that her first name was Virginia.

Beebe ignored Ross and by his attitude seemed to be currying favor with Ward. As for the girl, she remained silent, her

eyes downcast, palpably holding herself aloof. Once or twice Ross caught a fleeting message from her eyes. It seemed to him that she was in utter terror, yet in perfect control of her nerves.

In those flashing telegrams from her eyes Ross was sure he caught a mute appeal for help. If this was a betrothal dinner Ross felt sure that the betrothal was without the consent of one of the parties concerned, and he was determined then and there not only to effect his own escape but to aid the girl as well.

The food was excellent and perfectly served by the Chinese, yet Ross could not have told a single item, and he thought the dinner never would end. The presence of Garfin and Poole was mute evidence that for the present he could do nothing. When the meal finally came to an end and Ward pushed back his chair, it brought a feeling of distinct relief to the young man. Now at least was the beginning of the end.

"Now, Mr. Waring," said Ward suavely, "we will repair to my study, where I have a few things to say to you before we break up this very pleasant little party. I hardly think my niece will care to accompany us."

They rose from the table, and Ross was ushered into an adjoining room which was even more striking in its way than either of the others he had been in that evening.

A brisk fire burned on a wide hearth from above which looked down a magnificent ram's head. Other trophies of a similar nature adorned the other walls. Interspersed with these were guns, Indian weapons, horsehair lariats—in fact, every accoutrement and trophy of the old-time West. It was a rather remarkable collection, one which under different circumstances would have deeply interested Stanley Ross.

Instantly he knew where those curious antiquated shackles, which had bound the girl, had come from. Here were several similar pairs.

Ross was directed to a chair in front of the fire. Ward took another, facing him, while Beebe sat down on a wide bench on the far side of the fire. Ross waited expectantly.

Ward offered his guest a cigar. Selecting one for himself, he clipped its end very deliberately and lit it with aggravating leisure. Finally he leaned back in his chair and gazed steadily at Ross with his mad eyes. A tiny smile, cynical and cruel, crooked around his thin-lipped mouth.

"I could have had you killed at once, Mr. Waring," he said deliberately, his voice soft and well-modulated, yet biting,

burning, "but I did not choose to do that. Instead, I wanted to bring you here this evening so that you could fully realize just what a serious thing it is, and how useless it is to buck Arthur Ward. And then, too, I wanted my niece to know that I am to be obeyed absolutely."

"I suppose, Mr. Ward," asked Ross, "that it would be quite useless to tell you that my name is not Waring at all; that I do not even know any one of that name, or that I have never seen your niece, until last evening?"

"Quite useless, I can assure you, Mr. Waring. I am absolutely certain of your identity. I do not make mistakes.

"Mr. Waring, I never forget an injury. I remember forever, and my one bad trait is the fact that I always have revenge. I would have got you in the end, Waring, anyway, but your fool stunt of following my niece here saved me a lot of trouble. Waring, you should have known that of all people on earth you would have the least chance of marrying my niece.

"Tonight you can have the extreme pleasure of reflecting that you will hardly be dead before Virginia will be the wife of Beebe."

"And suppose she refuses?" asked Ross.

"We are a hundred miles from anywhere, Waring. Things could happen that would make Virginia glad to marry Beebe—or any one.

"One more thing, Waring, and then we will terminate this interview," Ward went on dispassionately. "I want you to know that this is only the beginning. I shall not be satisfied until I have exterminated your entire family. It may take me years, but I shall certainly have the pleasure of killing your brother and your father. It does not pay to do injury to Arthur Ward.

"You will have tonight to reflect on what might have been. In the morning I shall hang you.

"That is all I have to say, and since it will be quite useless for you to say anything you may as well return to your room. Mr. Garfin and Mr. Poole will see that you have safe conduct."

Ross knew that for the present he would have to submit. Resistance would be useless just now. He was one against four. The odds were too great. He could only wait, hoping that the night would bring opportunity.

However, before he went he could not resist a last display of bravado—bravado which he did not by any means feel.

Rising from his seat, Ross bowed low to Ward.

"Good-night, Mr. Ward. Thank you for a most excellent dinner and a most entertaining evening. And let me assure you that you will *not* hang me in the morning."

Turning on his heel, Ross passed out of the room.

CHAPTER SIX

A FORLORN HOPE

WHEN ROSS stepped out into the darkness his first thought was that he would make a dash for liberty. This hope died almost before it was born, though, for he felt the muzzle of a revolver pressed close to his ribs and Garfin's rasping voice growled into his ear:

"Make just one move fer a break an' I'll plug ya. The boss says he's goin' to hang ya in the morning, but I'd like to save him tha trouble."

Ross knew that Garfin was not indulging in idle words. The gunman would gladly kill him. Then, too, out in the shadows another form kept them close company. He knew this was Poole and that should he succeed in worsting Garfin his chance of escaping the second gunman's bullets was very remote. No, the time was not yet.

The three trudged back to Ross's one-room prison, and it was only a minute or two until the door had slammed on him, the bolt had fallen into place and the lock snapped its vicious message.

He was once more a prisoner.

Ross sought in the darkness for the crude chair and threw himself down into it. He knew that for the time being there was no chance of escape, so he gave himself up momentarily to a contemplation of his plight.

Who was this strange girl whom he had rescued, only to have her vanish into the night? Why had she not spoken tonight? Why had she given him no hint of action? Who was Beebe, that he would accept a betrothal which was obviously odious to the girl? And, lastly, who was Ward with his mad eyes?

Who was Waring, and what had he done to merit such malicious vengeance on the part of Ward?

These and many other questions Ross asked himself, but he had no satisfactory answer to any one of them. Only a jumble of baffling mystery presented itself. His brain seethed with impossible solutions, but he had to admit that actually he was completely at sea.

Only a few facts stood out which could be accepted as a basis on which to work.

He, Ross, had been taken for another man, Waring by name. Ward evidently hated Waring intensely and was determined to put him to death for a wrong,

either fancied or real. There could be no doubt, too, that Ward was, in a degree, insane.

What part Beebe was playing Ross could not determine, beyond the facts that he was in favor with Ward and that he wanted the girl and would take her on whatever terms he could get her.

The girl was obviously in great peril. It could be seen that she hated Beebe, but at the same time was powerless to resist any order of her uncle. Ross could readily see that she was in a position where death might well be preferable to what she was facing.

And, undeniably, there was the fact that he, Ross, was sure to meet death in the morning unless he could devise some way out of his dilemma.

The night was far gone when he had finished considering these things. It was then that a plan of action first suggested itself to him. As it matured in his mind he realized that it was a forlorn hope; but his circumstances were so utterly desperate that there seemed nothing to do but give it a trial. He knew that its success would depend entirely on the element of surprise.

Having once settled in his mind what he should do, Ross threw himself down on the crude table and was soon sound asleep.

It was hardly daylight when he awoke, but he did not allow himself to drop back to sleep again. He was going to be ready.

It was fully three hours later that he heard approaching footsteps. Slipping quietly across the room, Ross flattened himself against the wall beside the door and waited.

The footsteps drew nearer and nearer. A key grated in the lock. It clicked. The bolt was raised. Slowly the door swung on its hinges.

Like a flash, Ross slipped from his hiding-place and darted through the doorway. The only human within sight was Garfin. Like a mad thunderbolt Ross bore down upon him.

Taken by surprise, Garfin barely had time to fire before Ross was upon him. Too startled to take definite aim, his bullet went wild. With a force that was terrific Ross struck him with the full impact of his body. The two went down in a tangled heap. Garfin's gun was knocked from his grasp and went spinning a dozen feet away.

Garfin was not without courage of a kind, but all his life he had depended on a gun to enforce his arguments. Physical combat had not been one of his long suits, and now he found himself no match for his younger antagonist.

Stan Ross was far from a weakling physically. Long months afoot in the desert had made him as hard as nails. Not so long ago he had been known as a football player of some note. Now he used that knowledge of rough-and-tumble combat to the fullest extent.

Taking Garfin by surprise, Ross had the initial advantage, and when the two went down he was on top. Striking, kicking, using the crushing force of his body, he went at the gunman in a demoniacal storm. For an instant it looked as though he would beat his enemy into insensibility before he could offer any material resistance.

But Garfin was fighting for his life and he knew it. He was not to be vanquished so easily. In a moment the two men were threshing and rolling on the ground in a fierce struggle.

Youth, however, was not to be denied. Those sledge-hammer blows were having a telling effect. Garfin was weakening. Gradually Ross was wearing him down.

Ross sought the throat of his enemy. Garfin's breath came in gasps. His eyes were bulging. Gradually Ross brought his knee up until it pressed into Garfin's stomach. A final effort would end the struggle. Slowly Garfin's head bent backward. Then—

A crashing, blinding blow caught Ross on his head. For a brief instant a million fires flamed before his eyes. Then utter blackness.

He slumped forward across the body of his antagonist.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WONG INTERVENES

WHEN ROSS returned to consciousness it was with a sense of bewilderment. His head seemed alive with shooting pains: his eyes burned intensely; his body was sore and stiff.

Gradually he fought the fog from his brain and opened his eyes. He was dimly aware that he was back in his prison room, stretched out on the table. Painfully he sat up.

And then he saw that he was not alone. There was another person in the room. As his eyes pierced the semi-gloom he was aware that the man before him was Arthur Ward.

Instantly his brain cleared, and he swung himself around to face his jailor.

Ward was standing in the center of the room, his feet wide apart, his hands behind his back. A sardonic smile disfigured his face.

"Well," he inquired, "so you decided not to die?"

"Yes, I decided not to die," said Ross. "I might remind you, too, that it is no

longer morning and I have not been hung."

"No, and you're not going to be, either. I have prepared a much more pleasant death for you."

"Thanks!"

"Don't waste your thanks," replied Ward. "Before you're through you'll be far from thanking me. You see, Waring, your little outbreak this morning set me to thinking. If you had taken things quietly I would have hung you, and it would all be over now. But you had to try to escape and that set me to thinking that hanging was too pleasant for you. It would be over too quickly. There would be no time for reflection. So I devised something really fitting for your case."

While Ward was speaking the man Poole had entered, carrying a wooden box which he deposited gingerly in one corner and then quickly withdrew. He seemed afraid.

"Yes, Waring," Ward went on, "I've planned a death for you that I like much better than hanging. And, damn your rotten soul to eternity," he snarled, "you'll know what real torture is before you go out!"

With a sudden movement, he whirled, kicked the lid from the box, darted through the doorway, and had crashed the door shut before Ross fairly realized what he was doing.

Half bewildered, it was a moment before he could attach any meaning to Ward's action. Then it dawned on him that there was a deep significance to the box which Poole had brought in. Some sinister portent lay in that box of wood.

Fascinated, Ross sat watching the box, realizing that it held his fate, scarce knowing what to expect, and certainly not expecting what developed.

For a long minute nothing happened. Ross grew nervous with the strain. Then a faint buzzing came from the box. Silence. Again came that strange sound. And again. A slithering rustle as of stiff silk rubbed together.

And then Ross's scalp prickled with horror and his blood fairly froze in his veins, for over the edge of the box appeared a hideous, swaying head! There came a second! A third! And then a fourth!

They were huge diamond-back rattle-snakes!

As Ross recognized the big diamond-backs he knew instantly that he was trapped. To step down onto the floor meant death, a horrible, grewsome death. To remain on the table—

Instinctively, he drew his feet up onto the table as the big reptiles left the box, one by one. He counted eight in all.

Ross gave himself up to black despair. Down there on the floor awaited a fate too hideous for words. . . .

IT MUST have been fully two hours later, and dusk was already settling down and darkening the room, when Ross heard footsteps.

They approached his prison. For a moment his heart leaped within him at the possibility of rescue. But the door did not open. Instead, he heard the taunting voice of Ward from outside:

"Oh, you're safe enough so far, Waring. They can't get you as long as you stay on that table. I planned that. Wasn't it kind of me to be so thoughtful? But there won't be any food and there won't be any water, and all the time you'll be going through hell. I planned that, too. And then there'll come a time when you can't stand it any longer. You'll either fall from the table from weakness, or you'll go mad and step down onto the floor. They'll always be waiting, Waring. And then they'll get you, damn you!" The voice, rising to a shrill crescendo of passion, ended in a burst of wild maniacal laughter.

Receding footsteps told him that Ward had gone away.

As the gloom deepened into utter darkness it seemed to Ross that he would go mad. His brain seethed with wild impulses. A hundred times he pictured himself lying there on the floor, a bloated, blackened thing. A hundred times he went through death. Only that hope which "springs eternal" kept him from stepping down onto the floor and making an end of it.

Gradually Ross quieted. He finally settled back against the wall in a state of apathy, little knowing or little caring when the end would come.

An hour passed.

Suddenly Ross became aware of an unusual sound. From somewhere in back of him came a low "*Hiss!*" so low as hardly to be heard. Stealthily, he raised himself to the height of the barred window and peered into the darkness.

Dimly he could make out a head outlined against the sky. A low, whispered voice spoke:

"*You take!*"

Unmistakably it was the voice of Wong. There was a grating sound as of something being passed between the bars.

Ross reached out his hand and it closed over cold steel.

An automatic!

"*You take!*" again came the whispered voice.

This time Ross found his hand closing over a cartridge belt.

"*Me bring Ga'fin. You shoot!*"

Like a ghost, the form at the window was gone without a sound.

With the feel of that cold steel in his hand Ross's spirits rose like a tide. All his waning confidence returned. He was instantly his own man again, confident, cool, without fear.

Quickly he buckled the belt around his waist. With sure fingers, he made certain that the gun was loaded. Slipping off the safety, he knelt on the table, facing the door, and waited.

Ross did not know whether he would ever leave that room alive, but he did know that the first men to open the door would die.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"YOU'LL SETTLE WITH ME"

ARTHUR WARD stood with his back to the big living-room fire, his feet wide apart, hands crossed behind his back, head lowered, eyes peering from beneath shaggy brows. It was a characteristic attitude and one which peculiarly expressed the man's calculated cruelty.

Beebe was seated on the wide fireplace bench, his feet stretched far in front of him. He was slowly smoking, his whole sprawling attitude one of indolent approval. Things were shaping themselves quite to the liking of Larson Beebe.

The girl, Virginia, was seated in a chair somewhat in front of her uncle. The wild look of her eyes and her agitated face told that she was going through an ordeal that was breaking her bit by bit.

"But, Uncle Arthur," she burst out, "surely you can't mean to do this terrible thing. Why, I don't love Mr. Beebe at all. I scarcely know him, and I don't want to marry anyone."

"My dear niece," replied Ward evenly, "love has no part in my scheme of things. Hate rules the world, and hate is my creed. Love makes people soft and indolent. Hate is the great inspirator. Hate makes the world go 'round.

"Sentiment has no place whatever in this marriage. It is entirely a marriage of convenience. Your personal inclinations have no weight whatever. I wish you to marry Beebe; therefore you will do it."

The girl's color had heightened as she listened to her uncle's ultimatum. As he finished, a grim expression of defiance settled on his face.

"Well, I won't!" she answered crisply.

"As you will, Virginia, but if you do not consent to marry Beebe within twenty-four hours I shall leave you here alone with him. I imagine after a couple

of weeks of that you'll be quite willing to marry him."

"Oh, you beast!" For an instant, as Ward's full meaning became clear to her, it looked as though the girl would faint.

Then, like a wild beast at bay, she turned on Beebe in a burst of blazing fury.

"And you, Larson Beebe, what have you to say? Are you going to be a party to this? Are you as much a beast as my uncle?"

Beebe regarded her tolerantly for a moment out of his piggish eyes before he spoke. A catlike smile of satisfaction curved his lips. He answered slowly, indolently:

"Virginia, I am wild about you. I want you, and I am going to have you. As long as you refuse to love me I'm not at all particular how I get you. One way suits me as well as another."

The girl turned back to her uncle. Her hands went out in an imploring gesture. For an instant she seemed about to plead. Then she evidently thought better of it.

"I suppose you understand, Uncle Arthur," she asked in a low cold voice, "that I will kill myself before I will let this happen?"

"My dear Virginia, you do not seem to understand the situation at all: You are absolutely in my power. You cannot kill yourself because I will not permit it. I will not give you the chance. You will do exactly as I say."

"Not yet, Ward! First, you'll settle with me!"

Stanley Ross stood in the doorway. But it was not the Stanley Ross, urbane, bored, carefree, who, a few days before, had whimsically sought adventure up an unknown canon trail. He had found adventure now, and it had used him roughly. His face and hands were grimy. His clothes were dirty and torn. One sleeve had been almost rent from his shoulder. His hair was riotously disheveled and clotted with blood. Down one side of his face extended a great splash of dirty dried blood.

In his right hand was an ugly-looking automatic, and in his face and eyes was a look of savage fury.

At the sound of Ross's voice, Ward whirled and whipped out a gun. But he was too late, for Ross, with a steadiness and coldness belied by the savagery of his face and figure, had fired. A look of unutterable amazement overspread the face of Arthur Ward. He wavered on his feet for a moment, and then, when a spot of red began to widen on his shirt front, he toppled backward, lifeless.

Almost at the same instant a hatchet hurtled through the room and buried its blade deep in the wall beside Larson Beebe, missing his head by the merest fraction of an inch. Wong was going into action. Beebe slid forward from his seat and ducked to temporary safety behind the table.

Ward had not had time to aim, but he had instinctively pulled the trigger. The bullet caught Ross on the head and cut a long shallow furrow just above his left temple. The wound itself was not serious, but for a moment it blinded Ross. That moment was fatal, for as he roused himself from the shock he knew that he had forgotten Poole.

Instantly Ross whirled to face the other doorway, but was too late. The heavy bullet spun him half around. For an instant he fought to retain his balance. Then he pitched forward onto the floor.

Painfully, with almost a superhuman effort, Ross raised himself with one hand and deliberately shot Poole through the chest.

Then, mercifully, consciousness was blotted out.

CHAPTER NINE

VIRGINIA EXPLAINS

WHEN ROSS returned to consciousness it was to a blurred, feverish, pain-wracked world.

He did not know where he was or what had happened. He only knew that his head was bandaged and splitting with pain; that his shoulder was stiff and sore, incapable of being moved even the fraction of an inch, and that it pained with a dull, throbbing hurt; that his eyes burned and blurred; and that his entire body burned with ten thousand fires.

Of one thing more was Ross conscious. That was the girl. When she saw that Ross had temporarily come out of the fog she hurried to his side and answered the unasked question on his lips by holding a cup of cold water to them. She seemed to have been waiting for ages to do just that.

Ross drank gratefully, but when he would have questioned her she laid her finger across his lips and said;

"*Sh-h-h-ush!* Not now. We'll talk when you feel better. Just now you need sleep more than anything else."

And Stanley Ross obeyed. In an instant he was asleep, a wild, feverish sleep that brought no rest.

There followed days of half consciousness, half nightmare; days when Ross neither knew nor cared what happened,

when wild delirium alternated with painful reality.

He was far too ill to make any inquiries about anything that had happened. In fact, he was only conscious of the fact that whenever the fog lifted the girl always seemed to be present—a ministering angel who brought cooling draughts, and soothing applications for his head and shoulders.

Finally there came a day when Ross awoke to a sane world. The fever fog had departed from his brain. His head no longer throbbed and beat like a thousand devils. His shoulder was sore and stiff, but it no longer was filled with maddening pain. He was weak, very weak, but the world was once more interesting and he was acutely aware of a most prodigious appetite.

Ross was aware that he was in the room to which he had been conducted by Garfin on the night of the strange dinner. Beyond that, he was not interested. He was aware that the girl was still acting as his nurse.

At meal time the Chinese, Wong, came in with a tray. He was still too weak to care as to the whereabouts of the others, or what had happened on the night of the fight.

He did learn that the girl's name was Virginia Carver, but that was all.

In less than a week he was sitting out on the long veranda every afternoon. With returning strength came returning curiosity. He wanted to know the story of this strange habitation in the desert and to learn just what had happened on the night Wong had aided him to escape.

Several times he broached the subject to the girl, but each time she put him off with the statement that he was not yet strong enough to talk. The excuse was obviously becoming threadbare, however, as his health improved.

One afternoon, while Ross was sitting on the veranda, the girl came out and took a seat opposite him. It was patent that the time for explanations had come.

"I suppose, Mr. Ross," began Virginia Carver, "that you have been wondering just what this whole thing is about, and you certainly are entitled to an explanation. I don't know how I am ever going to thank you for what you have done for me. You were very brave."

"Well, suppose you forget about the thanks, Miss Carver," said Ross, visibly embarrassed. "I *would* like to know all about this queer affair, though. I thought Arabian Nights were ancient history, but I'm about ready to believe anything."

"In order for you to understand I'll have to take you back about seven years," explained the girl. "At that

time my uncle, Arthur Wand, was one of the biggest operators in Wall Street. All his life he has been a very peculiar man; eccentric; always doing queer things for which there seemed no explanation, and never taking any one into his confidence.

"In the Street he was known as a plunger. He made a great deal of money. Just how much I have no idea beyond the fact that he was always very generous with my mother, his sister. But at one time he must have been very wealthy indeed.

"Seven years ago it seems that he plunged too heavily and got caught. His fortune was practically wiped out. When everything was settled up he was still a wealthy man—that is, he was probably worth a half million dollars—but the great bulk of his fortune was gone.

"He fought fiercely to keep from going under. There were days and nights at a time when I don't think he slept at all. He was like a wild man, but the combination against him was too great and he went under.

"At first we thought he was going to lose his mind. For weeks he acted very queer. Finally he seemed to get a hold on himself and he appeared rational.

"He settled up his business, and then suddenly disappeared. He left no word where he was going—just dropped out of sight. That was seven years ago, and for two years we heard nothing from him. Five years ago I got a letter from him asking me to visit him here. I came and found things just about as you see them now.

"He seemed perfectly rational and contented. Of course, he was queer and erratic, but he had always been that. He seemed to have forgotten Wall Street entirely and spent most of his time making a collection of the accoutrements of horse and man of the old-time West. I doubt if there is a finer collection in existence.

"He did a lot of entertaining, too, for his old friends, inviting them out for long visits. Here his eccentricity cropped out, for he insisted on going to great lengths to have everything just as it would be in New York. There must be fifteen dress suits in the house, and he always asked every one to dress for dinner. He imported wines and foods. Wong has been with him ever since he has been here and he is an excellent cook.

"I came out every year. He was always very kind to me and has made every effort to entertain me. I thought he acted a little more queer each year, and I often wondered if he was not a little unbalanced mentally.

"When I came out this year there was a great change. I saw at once that he was quite mad. He imagined that he was being persecuted by the Warings, and kept Poolé and Garfin, New York gunmen, to protect him. The Warings were the people who engineered his defeat in Wall Street, and Uncle Arthur hated them intensely. He not only imagined they were persecuting him, but he also imagined that the younger Waring, whom I have never seen, was trying to marry me. This seemed to be an obsession with him.

"When I got here I found that Larson Beebe was Uncle Arthur's guest. I had met Mr. Beebe in New York several times, and I detested him. I had good reason to. He—well, I have always despised him.

"Just what his hold or influence on Uncle Arthur was I haven't the slightest idea, but I had hardly arrived before Uncle Arthur began to insist that I marry him.

"Of course, I refused, and it was then that Uncle Arthur's insanity came to the surface. He had always been kindness itself, but now he suddenly became the very incarnation of cruelty. While there was no question but that he was entirely mad, yet in his madness his brain was as shrewd and cunning as ever.

"When I refused to marry Beebe he began to practice his cruelties on me in an effort to break my will. I was utterly at his mercy, for there was no way that I could escape. All I could do was submit.

"The culmination of his indignities was to chain me to the rocks where you found me. Whether he would have left me there till I was dead I hardly know, but I think not. His brain was so unbalanced that it would be hard to tell.

"I ran away that night because I knew he would kill you if he found you with me. Evidently he had Garfin watching me, or he would not have learned that you had released me. He was obsessed with the idea that you were the younger Waring.

"The rest of the story you know. I dare not think of what would have happened to me if you had not come to my rescue, Mr. Ross."

"But what really happened the night I escaped?" asked Ross.

"Well—you shot both Uncle Arthur and Poole," she replied hesitatingly.

"Did I—did I—" he floundered helplessly.

"Yes," she replied evenly. "Providence helped your aim that night. Wong buried them both. No, Mr. Ross," she finished, as she noted the look on his face, "don't feel that way about it. If

you hadn't killed them they would have killed you, and I would have suffered a fate worse than death. Under the circumstances I cannot feel sorry."

"What happened to Beebe?" asked Ross, curious as to the fate of that dubious individual.

"That's a mystery. He simply disappeared that night and we have not seen him since. Wong just barely missed him that night with a hatchet. I think he is deathly afraid of Wong. At any rate, he is gone. And now, Mr. Ross, I want to ask you a question: How did you manage to escape from your prison that night? Wong won't tell me a thing. He just grins when I ask him, and I suspect I owe a great deal to Wong."

"You surely do, Miss Carver," answered Ross fervently. "That Chinaman is a wonder. In some way he got hold of my automatic and cartridge belt. He passed them to me through the window, and then, under some pretense, got Garfin to come and open the door. Then—well, Garfin won't ever bother us again."

CHAPTER TEN

A NEW DANGER

WITH the passing days, Ross found new strength and new interest. His head was already healed and his shoulder, beyond being stiff, no longer bothered him. While still somewhat weak, he was able to walk about as he pleased.

He found it very pleasant to pass the afternoons away on the long veranda. Here he was often joined by Virginia Carver, and the two spent hours together that were very pleasant. In fact, Ross suddenly became acutely aware that he was taking more than a passing interest in this girl.

Virginia Carver was exceedingly lovely. Moreover, she was of a type and personality that particularly appealed to Stanley Ross. While she was nursing him through his illness he had found her presence very pleasing. Now that he was nearly well, her companionship was becoming even more delightful, and he realized that, as far as he was concerned, friendship was ripening into something more definite. As he continued to improve he knew that the time was fast approaching when they would have to leave this desert oasis.

He found his mind continually recurring to Larson Beebe. How had he managed to disappear so completely that night? Where had he gone? What was he doing now? Ross could not dismiss the idea that they would hear from Beebe again, and that when they did it would mean trouble.

This conviction was the more firmly fixed in his mind by the actions of Virginia Carver. Ross felt sure that the girl was deeply worried over something; she seemed anxious and nervous; she appeared to be continually watching and listening for something. Intuition told Ross that the cause of her perturbation was Beebe.

Intuition again told him that perhaps Wong could throw some light on the situation. The next time that the Chinese appeared on the veranda Ross stopped him.

"Wong," he said, "Miss Carver seems to be worried about something. Do you know what it is? Is it about Beebe? Do you know where he is?"

Wong's face betrayed not a single glimmer of comprehension.

"No savvy," he said.

"Yes, you do savvy, too. What's wrong here? Where's Beebe?"

Wong glanced hurriedly up and down the veranda as though he feared some one would overhear him. Then he jerked a meaning finger toward the mouth of the little canon.

"Him there," he said in a low voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Him hide in canon. Kill all we go out."

"We don't have to go out that way."

"No other way can go," explained Wong.

"What! You mean to tell me that's the only way out of this place? Why can't we go out over the cliffs?"

"No can do," replied the Chinese, and was gone before Ross could question him further.

So that was it! The canon was the only way out of the basin, and Beebe was hiding down there, waiting to pot them as they came out. Quite a neat little idea! So that was why Virginia Carver was carrying that worried look.

Ross went straight to the girl. He found her in the dining-room.

"Miss Carver," he asked, "why didn't you tell me that Beebe was down in that canon?"

"Well, I couldn't see any use worrying you with that while you were so ill," she replied, smiling. "And then, too, Mr. Ross, I think you are a little inclined to do impulsive things, and it seems to me you have ran risks enough on my account."

Ross ignored this last.

"Then he really is there?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Ross, he is, and I am afraid that we are in rather a bad way. He has all the advantage."

"But isn't there any way out of this place except through that canon?"

"None at all. Uncle Arthur selected this place for that very reason. There was a trail up the cliff, but he dynamited that away. Unless we develop wings we'll go out through that canon or not at all."

Ross pondered for a moment. Finally he asked, "I wonder why he hasn't tried to kill Wong and me at night?"

"There are at least two reasons, I think," answered the girl. "The first is that Larson Beebe is a very cautious man. He will not risk a single hair of his head if it is not necessary. If he came up here he might get hurt. If he stays there he is perfectly safe and we haven't a single chance of getting by."

"Another thing, I think he is deathly afraid of Wong. He came up in the night twice and stole provisions. Since then Wong has been watching. I don't think he ever sleeps."

"Well, we can outlast him anyway, Miss Carver."

"But that's just what we can't do, Mr. Ross. Our provisions are very low." The girl was gravely serious now. "Unless we can find some solution, I'm afraid he is going to starve us out very soon. It looks like we were trapped."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WONG HAS AN IDEA

ROSS woke the next morning keenly aware of the seriousness of their predicament. As soon as breakfast was over he set out to examine the walls of the basin.

If he had any hope that there was a means of escape over the cliffs he was soon disillusioned. Nowhere was there a break in the walls. They were as perpendicular as a plumb-line and as smooth as basalt. Nothing but a fly could have scaled those cliffs.

The only way out led through the narrow twisting canon below. And there Larson Beebe lay in wait like a cat at a rat-hole. Ross realized that there was little or no chance for him or Wong to get through the canon alive. Beebe had all the advantage.

Ross returned to the house and sat down on the veranda. He ran over a dozen possible schemes for escape, and in the end he had to conclude that they were all impossible.

In fact, his only conclusion was that he would give what fortune he possessed to have Larson Beebe's neck within the grasp of his two hands. That, however, seemed to be a remote possibility. If anything, the situation would be reversed.

Ross had about exhausted his whole range of impossible schemes when Wong

appeared on the veranda. The Chinese wore an enigmatical smile on his usually inscrutable face. It was patent that he was well pleased with something.

"You come," he addressed Ross. "Got something show."

Ross rose and followed Wong, who led the way to one of the 'dobe outbuildings. Opening the door, he motioned Ross to enter.

The room was a work-shop of sorts, but what instantly attracted attention were two enormous kites leaning against the wall.

"You see?" inquired Wong.

"Yes, I see," said Ross, "only I don't. What's the idea, Wong?"

"Misha Beebe kill everybody we go down canon. No can climb out. Wong make klite. Klite climb out."

"Guess I'm pretty thick, Wong. I don't get it yet."

"When Wong little bloy China he fly many klites. Not forget how. Fly klite now. Klite lift lope top cliff. We climb lope. Go way."

"By George, Wong, I believe you've got it," cried Ross in admiration. "But will it work?"

"Can do" nodded Wong.

"But how will you fasten the rope at the top of the cliff, Wong?"

"Wong good klite flyer. Two klites lift big loop. Drop loop over tree top side cliff. Two ends hang down. Mlake slip knot. Pull one lope. All done."

"Wong, you're a wonder! I believe it'll work. Worth trying anyway."

"Can do. Try tomorrow if wind come."

Ross hurried away to find Virginia Carver.

"Miss Carver," he hailed her joyously, "Wong has got a scheme to get us out of here, and I believe it will work. He has constructed two enormous kites down there in the workshop. He claims they will lift a rope, and he says he can drop it over one of those stunted pines at the top of the cliff. We climb the rope and leave friend Beebe down in the canon to hold the bag. Are you game?"

"Of course I am," replied the girl, surprised that he should even question her gameness.

"I knew you would be. We're going to try it tomorrow. You had better make two packs of food."

"Two packs? Don't I carry anything?" asked the girl.

"Miss Carver," said Ross gravely, "it's a long way to civilization, and it is going to be a big tax on your strength to make it without carrying anything."

"I'll make it," said Virginia Carver, as she turned away.

The following morning Ross was eager for the experiment, but it was nearly noon before a breeze came up strong enough to lift the kites.

Virginia Carver came out, clad in flannel shirt, whipcord breeches and high laced boots. It was a costume well suited to the work ahead, but it accentuated the girl's slimness, made her appear almost frail. There was no frailty there, though. Rather was she supple with the suppleness of a braided cable, and the girl had the grace of a fine Toledo blade. Once again Stanley Ross became acutely aware that Virginia Carver had become an exceedingly important interest in his life.

Wong had instructed Ross in his scheme for escape. Ross saw at once that he had not intended to lift a rope heavy enough to hold a human being. Instead Wong had unearthed from one of the storehouses a very stout light line.

The plan was to lift the bight of the line with the two kites and drop it over a stunted pine growing out at an angle near the top of the north cliff. A heavier rope could then be attached to one end of this and drawn up and over the tree, making it possible to climb out.

Ross saw instantly that the plan was all right if the kites could be manipulated. That was Wong's job, and he seemed quite confident.

All three knew that they must work quickly. If Larson Beebe discovered their scheme there was no telling what desperate action he might attempt.

Wong and Ross quickly got the first big kite into action. It rose readily, but on attaining a height of fifty feet flopped drunkenly. It did not fall, however—merely dipped and darted. This did not appear to bother Wong at all. He simply gave the kite string to Virginia Carver to hold while he quickly flew the second kite with Ross's help.

Wong and Ross each took command of a kite now. Slowly paying out cord, they allowed the kites to rise. When the kites had risen to a height of about seventy-five feet the cords attached to the bight of the line suddenly became taut and the line began to rise from the ground.

It was then that Ross saw that as a designer of kites Wong most emphatically knew his business, for the instant the weight of the line was borne by the kites in that instant they ceased their drunken plungings and flew steadily.

Ross's heart leaped within him, for he knew now that Wong's scheme would work and that they were going to circumvent Larson Beebe. Up, up, the kites rose. A hundred feet! Two hundred! Five! A thousand!

The two kites were about thirty feet apart, and when it was obvious that the line was higher than the cliff wall Wong and Ross began to walk slowly forward. Their objective was a single low pine growing at an outward angle near the top of the cliff. Aiming carefully at this, Wong and Ross brought the kites to a position where an end of the line dangled on each side of the tree and against the cliff. The bight of the line was slightly above the tree, and the kites were pulling it forward.

"Missee, you grab ropes," shouted Wong.

Quickly divining what was wanted of her, Virginia Carver grasped the ends of the dangling lines.

"Let glo!" shouted Wong again.

Instantly he and Ross released the kite cords. The kites plunged drunkenly down out of sight over the top of the cliff. The bight of the line dropped neatly over the pine tree and slid down its trunk to the roots. The thing was done!

Ross wanted to shout for pure joy. Elation showed in Virginia Carver's every feature. As for Wong, the author of this daring scheme, he merely grinned, and went swiftly to work.

Somewhere in one of the buildings Wong had discovered a coil of light rope. It had undoubtedly been brought in to be made up into lariats, for it was very pliable and exceedingly strong—strong enough to support the weight of a heavy man.

One end of this was fastened to a free end of the line over the tree. When Wong pulled sharply on the opposite end of the smaller line it slipped readily over the tree trunk. In a minute or two the end of the rope had been pulled up over the tree trunk and back to the canon floor. Thus was the light line replaced by the heavier one.

There was no place to anchor one of the rope ends so Wong simply tied a loop in one end of the rope, passed the other end through it, making a running noose, and quickly ran it up to the tree. Wong's kites had proved their worth. The means of escape was provided and ready.

"Wong go first," said the Chinese. Without argument or permission, the intrepid Wong was assuming the risk of proving the safety of the rope. By way of explanation he added to Ross, "You shoulda no stlong. No can pull Missee up, Wong can do."

Wong grasped the rope in his hands, and with the agility of a cat, feet on the canon wall, passed himself, hand over hand, up the face of the cliff. It seemed

hardly a minute before he was at the top and had scrambled over the edge.

In a moment his head reappeared and he called down to Ross to send up the food packs, canteens, and blankets. This was but the work of a moment, and Wong quickly drew them to the top.

So far everything had gone well, and there was no sign of Beebe. It looked as though they were going to make good their escape.

When Wong let the rope down again Ross fashioned a loop in the end of it, which he passed over Virginia Carver's head and secured it under her arms.

"Now, Miss Carver, if you will take hold of the rope with both hands I think Wong can pull you up safely," he said. "If you hit against the cliff push yourself away with your feet."

The girl did not answer him, but she smiled confidently. She accepted her part in the escape with what appealed to Stanley Ross as being splendid courage.

Slowly but very steadily, Wong began to raise the girl. The little Chinese seemed to be made of steel, for, without stopping once or increasing or decreasing the speed, he drew Virginia Carver to the top of the cliff and helped her over the edge. It was a feat of which a man twice his size might have been justly proud.

When the rope came down again Ross lost no time. A hasty glance toward the mouth of the tiny canon revealed no sight of Beebe. Grasping the rope, Ross began his ascent.

His shoulder bothered him somewhat, but it was not more than two or three minutes before he, too, was at the cliff top.

They were free!

CHAPTER TWELVE

AN ENDING AND A BEGINNING

STANLEY ROSS drew himself over the edge of the cliff, where Virginia Carver and Wong were waiting, and scrambled to his feet. He was exuberant.

"Well, Miss Carver, I guess we're safe all right, thanks to Wong here," he exulted. "All that remains now is to make tracks away from this accursed place."

"So you think you're safe, eh?" snarled a cold voice.

Ross whirled to find himself facing Larson Beebe. Beebe was covering him steadily with a big automatic, and his deep set, piggish eyes had an insane light in them.

Ross's heart sank within him. He had expected an attack from Beebe from below, but that he might be waiting for

them on the cliff top never entered his head. He was utterly helpless now. Beebe had the drop on him and could kill him twice over before he could draw his own gun. Moreover, it was certain Beebe intended doing that very thing.

Ross was filled with a sense of futility, impotency. That he was about to die he did not consider. He was merely disgusted with himself for allowing himself to be checkmated when the game was practically won.

"So you thought you could get away?" Beebe was going on. It was obvious that he, too, was nearly insane. "Thought I was asleep, eh? I knew what was up as soon as I saw the kites. I could have got you then, but I figured the easiest and safest way would be to slip up here and wait behind a rock till you were all up. You wouldn't be looking for me and I could pot you easily. Well, I'm here and you're due for a long journey.

"Thought you could outwit Larson Beebe, eh? I'm just going to shoot you and your precious Chink friend here now and kick you over the cliff. Then I'm going to take Virginia and—"

Ross was conscious that Wong's right hand whipped to the base of his skull just above the collar of his blouse. In the same instant it came away again and now it held a long, thin, slender glittering blade!

There was another movement of Wong's hand so swift that he could not follow it. Ross only knew that a look of utterly blank amazement had overspread Larson Beebe's face. It was as though Beebe had seen a miracle performed before his eyes and could not fathom it.

Then, suddenly, Ross saw what had happened. The hilt of the knife that Wong had held was protruding from Larson Beebe's ribs!

For an instant Beebe wavered on his feet. His fingers relaxed and his gun clattered to the rocks. He pitched forward onto his face.

"Can do," muttered Wong. "One day kick Wong. Not kick again."

THAT NIGHT the three camped beside a little water-hole several miles down the main canon. Around the tiny campfire they made their plans for getting out of the desert.

Ross knew the general direction to take, and he felt confident that by taking it easy the girl would be able to make the journey on foot. Virginia Carver was confident.

The following morning Ross was awakened by footsteps on the rocks. He raised up to see two long-eared animals making their way down the trail to the water-hole. It was Archibald and Percy!

Ross let out a shout that instantly roused his companions.

"There's your ship of the desert that's going to carry you back to civilization," he called, as Virginia raised up from her blankets.

The girl did not comprehend. She gazed at the two animals in astonishment for a moment.

"But they're wild, aren't they?" she asked.

"Just as wild as two snails," said Ross. "Those two estimable gentlemen brought me into this desert, and they're going to take us out."

When breakfast had been finished Ross noticed that Wong was busily engaged in rearranging the weight of the packs.

"Never mind the packs, Wong. Friend Archibald here can carry Miss Carver and Percy can handle the supplies. You and I will go light, Wong," Ross explained.

"No can do," replied Wong. "Me no go you."

"What do you mean, Wong?"

"Wong go that way," answered the Chinese, pointing to the south.

"You go that way," asked Ross, perplexed. "Why? You're going with Miss Carver and me."

Wong shook his head. "Wong kill man. Think not stay in 'Nited States. Go Mexiclo."

"Nonsense, Wong," said Ross. "Miss Carver and I can easily fix that."

"Think not. Wong go Mexiclo. Got blother there. Buy li'le res'rant."

Ross saw that there was no use in trying to dissuade Wong. There was no combating such a nature. After a few moments Ross asked:

"Wong, where you going in Mexico?"

"Go Wa'iz."

"Going to Juarez, eh? What's your full name?"

"Name? Wong Chen Chek."

"All right, Wong. In about two months you go to the postoffice and inquire for a registered package. You'll find enough money in it to buy the best little restaurant in Juarez."

Wong grinned. "Thlank you."

Swinging his pack to his shoulder, he swung down the trail without more ado.

"Goo' bye. Goo' bye, Missee," came back to Ross and Virginia Carver.

A half hour later the Chinese disappeared from view far down the canon. Ross turned to the girl.

Virginia Carver was gazing far out over the jumble of rocks and sand that is the Red Desert to where the mists of the morning were dissolving into the shifting haze of the rising sun.

For a moment Ross watched her without speaking. Fresh and vibrant with youth, she was lovely beyond words.

"I guess we had best be going now," he said. Then his voice stumbled, "Miss Carver—Virginia—when we get out of here—I've—I've something to say to you."

For a long moment the girl continued to look far into the colorful haze of the desert. Then she turned toward Ross. A peculiarly tender little smile wreathed her mouth. Her eyes were swimming pools of unshed tears.

Her voice faltered, "Would—would you mind—saying it now—Stanley?"

THE END.