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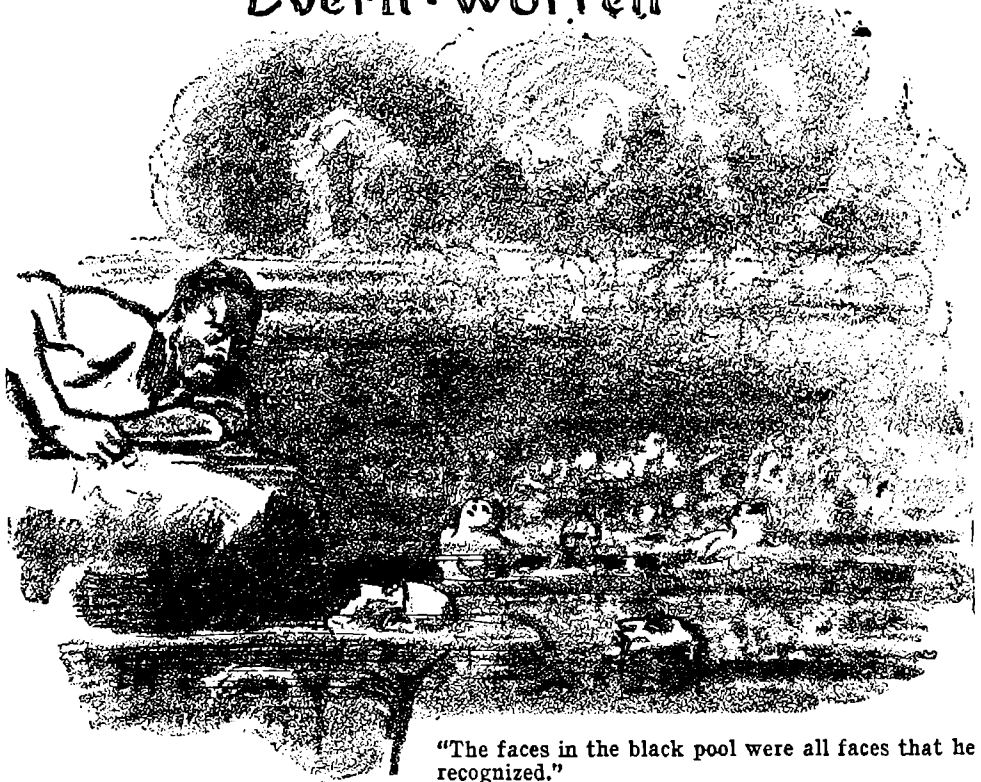
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The Elemental Law

Everil Worrell



"The faces in the black pool were all faces that he recognized."

GRAY above, gray beneath, gray ahead and behind—a compass boxed in gray. So it had been for endless hour after endless hour, since the swelter of hail and wind had subsided and fallen behind. Everything seemed to have fallen away behind the two lonely adventurers. It was hard to believe in the possibility of anything lying before them.

"And yet I can't feel we're as alone as we seem. When the lightning was flashing once a second and shooting our shadow ahead of us through the fog, it showed me *something*—once a second shadow on the clouds, and once a line of black against the glare, like an arrow in silhouette. Either my

eyes have gone bad, or there's another plane far from home—in this mess!"

Without the head-phones, communication would have been more difficult. The phones lightened the curse of loneliness; there might, at least, be comradeship in the face of death. But in the face of death, Van Ryder's smile retained its supereciliousness.

"Good thing you're not a flyer, Wildreth!" he retorted. "You're seeing and imagining things—me, I'm going to die sane, anyway! Your double shadow—why, man, you make me laugh! I've seen six cloud shadows of my own plane at once, with the lightning forking around me. Your tiny line of black—perhaps it was a phantom plane! The ghost of

one of the men who've disappeared on darn fool stunts like this. What chance—what chance under heaven could there be, that two planes would meet up where *we* are—the point of that being that nobody but God Himself could tell us where that is? You make me tired——”

Van Ryder's hoarse yell stopped abruptly. There were no words for the glory that burst upon their straining eyes; there were no words for the emotion that twisted their faces.

Gray above, gray beneath, gray behind—but ahead a flash of blue, a glimmer of white and a streak of yellow—a picture compact and beautiful as a mirage, yet no mirage, as the man with the sardonic smile that did not change and the eyes that were no longer tortured, knew. Already the plane was swooping into a long downward glide. It would cross the line of white, which was foam, and skim over the yellow beach—and then ground anywhere, in a vast expanse of yellow that opened out before them.

It was Wildreth who spoke first: “And so it's life, after all. I hadn't expected it!”

“Not anybody but a fool would have expected it, with no juice to fly an hour longer. But—desert!” Van Ryder muttered, his hands steady on the controls. “Desert! Africa! We haven't missed the continent, of course, though we missed our way. What desert? What desert comes right down to the sea?”

“I know another with an answer we'll have to furnish,” his companion offered in a tone wherein relief and anxiety mingled oddly. “How do we get away from an African desert that comes down to the sea, without a boat, and without fuel for your plane?”

They were silent after that, while the landing was accomplished. And then the mere feeling of solid ground beneath the feet was a thing to uplift the heart. Pale yellow was the endless sand, and shining, and the murk out of which they had burst suddenly as

though an invisible wall which hemmed them in had melted magically to let them through, was drawing away to seaward.

There were a few birds flying over the sea and along the shore. Wildreth, reconnoitering swiftly, took note of them, and of the apparent absence of all other life. Far away to the southward, the rim of the desert was broken. A cliff was there; not a high cliff, and yet, perhaps, the beginning of something besides the desert. And perhaps, of course, the beginning of nothing except more desert.

He turned his gaze seaward again, watching idly the wheeling of the birds. Instantly he was alert. Among the birds there was an odd one—larger, strangely stiff—a bird that dropped in a swift, coasting fall——

“Van Ryder!” Wildreth caught at the other man's arm. “I was right! There's another—we aren't alone—there's another plane, as I'm alive!”

He pointed, wheeling Van Ryder around then by sheer force. Van Ryder seemed reluctant to look seaward, where already the following plane had come to earth—to water, rather; it was lodged on a shallow reef offshore.

“A monoplane, and out of gas worse than we were,” Wildreth said. “Come on—the poor devil may be glad of a little help.”

Van Ryder moved slowly after Wildreth. Wildreth turned impatiently to hurry him.

“Wait!” Van Ryder cried imperatively. “Wait!”

WILDRETH stood studying the man he had persuaded to take him as passenger on the flight which might well end nowhere. There was—there had been from the beginning—something about Van Ryder which did not ring true. What it was that added a suggestion of the hang-dog to his over-rugged face now, Wildreth could not guess. Obviously, the flyer who had come to grief out there was a competi-

tor for the prize which would be Van Ryder's—if he could get back alive to claim it. A rival for the glory, too—which might well mean more to Van Ryder than money. But, as obviously, both the prize and the glory were already Van Ryder's. Hadn't he reached the coast of Africa first—hadn't he landed on the mainland, before the other plane plunged down into the surf?

Van Ryder had determined on an explanation.

"I'd as leave let you in on this situation as have you figure it out for yourself," he began slowly, looking the other man in the eye. He was challenging opposition from the start, one would have said.

"It wouldn't be hard for you to figure out—nothing could be hidden or a secret kept long between three castaways looking into the face of a most precarious future. And yet, it's an unusual situation enough!"

Wildreth had to make a gesture of impatience before Van Ryder broke the silence into which he seemed to sink at this point. Easy to figure out, most unusual, and hard to tell, was the situation to which he held the key. And all the time, Wildreth could see a figure plunging about in the shallow water on the reef—struggling with what looked like wreckage about the plane. Van Ryder began again as abruptly as he had left off; in another moment, Wildreth would have left him and his story, and gone to the aid of that appealingly lonely stranger.

"Here's the point," said Van Ryder, quickly. "I hardly know where to begin, Wildreth; but to start my story in the middle—that isn't a man out there on the reef. No, it's a woman!" He made a sign that was half a command, half an entreaty.

"No, wait! I brought you as passenger—I'm the head of our expedition, you know. You owe something to me in the way of allegiance—I won't say obedience. I'm going to see that you pay it—beginning with hear-

ing me out, before you dash off to play the knight errant."

"There's something in what you say, if you don't push it too far." Never had Wildreth felt the depth of distrust of Van Ryder that he knew in this moment. "I'm listening. Please—go on."

"And please make it snappy!" Van Ryder interpreted his thoughts. "I'll try to. To proceed: that woman out there is my affianced—I should say my conditionally affianced—wife. And yet, I shouldn't say that either; I was right the first time. Her falling into the surf, after we had landed under our own power on the mainland, makes my first statement correct. Oh, I'm not trying to be mysterious; I told you, it's a hard thing to make clear. And I suppose you'll want to call me fancy names when it is clear.

"The woman whom we are about to help ashore was engaged to me, but engaged rather for material than for sentimental reasons. She wants money—badly. I have it. So far, so good.

"Then the question of this prize money came up. She undertook to win it, after a course of flying instructions so brief that her arriving as far as that line of white surf may be classed among the major miracles. If she won the prize money she wouldn't have to marry me—and she wouldn't. I, being from war times a flyer of some note—I hope I'm blushing?—undertook to see that she didn't win it. To tell you the truth, I hoped she'd give up the flight when she learned that I'd started before her; and I saw to it that she would know. Her monoplane had it on our heavier plane in weight, you see, and she must have thought it worth while to gamble on that—on overtaking and passing us. Then there was the glorious chance that we might end our journey on the floor of the ocean, and she be luckier—I'm sure she wouldn't have favored me with a tear.

"I suspected you were right about your phantom plane, all the time. She

was storm-swept from her course just as we were, no doubt, and she may have sighted us by chance and followed us purposely—raced us rather—taking our course to see fair play for herself—to see I didn't misrepresent my time of landing, and the like. She has no more trust in me than love for me, you may have guessed."

There was a moment of intense silence after Van Ryder's long speech. Even the sea seemed to listen, in an interim of falling breakers. The slight, lonely figure still toiled desperately on the reef, but the distance was sufficient to prevent sound from carrying between the mainland and the reef.

Wildreth could offer no comment on Van Ryder's explanation. Not much use in saying "cad"—Van Ryder knew that he was thinking it. The idea of a man and a woman risking life or death for the woman's continued freedom or self-sale did not appeal to Wildreth's sense of the heroic, or even the picturesque. It seemed rather to pollute the clean air of sea and desert. Sordid—both the combatants in this trial at arms were sordid, and Van Ryder was a brute.

It was in silence that the two men finally started for the reef and the monoplane.

ALTHOUGH several hours had passed since he helped her ashore, Wildreth had not seen the face of the vanquished amazon of the air. She had on aviator togs, of course. She hadn't even taken off her mask. Not much wonder, that—she had had a harrowing experience, and was half dazed with the fall that had broken her plane beyond hope of repair. Add to that that all three of them were little better off than they would have been adrift in mid-ocean, and it was little wonder that she had hardly spoken to or looked at Van Ryder or Wildreth.

Wildreth went on a scouting expedition of one, as soon as they had

gotten the woman and some of her portable paraphernalia to their "camp." They called the neighborhood of Van Ryder's plane that, although it bore little resemblance to any camp Wildreth had ever seen, having neither tent, fire, nor water. By some intuition of the sort uncannily attributive to her sex, the new arrival had come well stocked with water. Wildreth and Van Ryder were infinitely the better off in that respect at least, since her coming. Among them, they had an assortment of concentrated foods, as well. They could live for a while—if only there were the slightest hope of getting away. So far as Wildreth could predict they would, however, continue to inhabit the coastal region of a nameless desert until, and for countless centuries after, the end of their lives.

After a gruelling trek toward the low cliffs, he came back to camp in the late afternoon. The airplane east a shadow eastward which might have proceeded from a monumental structure. The dunes were no longer pale gold, but flushed with a dull orange and shadowed with bluish violet. The sky had become a million miles or so deeper than it had been with the sun blazing in its zenith.

From a distance, Wildreth could see the figure of Van Ryder's adventurous promised wife. From somewhere she had dug up a dress of some light color; it was rumpled, but it gave an alluringly distinctive grace to her slight figure that had not been apparent in man's clothing. Her head was bare, and of the color that Wildreth had always been convinced was the only color for a woman's hair—a soft, not too decided brown.

"If only she won't get hysterical over the fix we're in!" he hoped, desperately.

He was conscious of her, now, as a personality; conscious of a warm flood of sympathy for her. She wasn't the sort of woman he could admire, or could have wanted to know. *His* type

of woman—well, there had been only one woman in the world for him. She had been like this one, physically: slight and graceful, with a dainty head of nut-brown hair. But she had been all girl, all woman—a woman who held herself high, who wouldn't barter herself to save life itself; a girl who was gentle, who wouldn't intrude herself into the hard world of men's striving.

Van Ryder was fussing with the plane, as Wildreth arrived. He looked up in time to see the meeting of the other two, ready with a formal introduction which, under the circumstances, held more than a suggestion of the grotesque. The introduction was never finished; Van Ryder stopped with his mouth open. Obviously, Wildreth and the woman at whom he stared were already acquainted.

"Helen."

The pronouncing of her name was not a cry of surprize, and it was hardly a greeting. Wildreth said it softly, quietly, as one who pronounces aloud a word of incantation long silently rehearsed. At the sound of it, Van Ryder's smile returned.

"So you know Helen Courtenay! Know her well, allow me to guess. Don't tell me you might have been a predecessor of mine—an undesired husband-to-be more easily gotten rid of than I hope to prove myself! But you *must* have been in love with her—you made her name sound as though it still appertained to the original owner of it—the owner of the face that launched a thousand ships. Well, at least this Helen has wrecked one!"

Van Ryder glanced carelessly toward the reef on which reposed the abandoned monoplane. The tide was rising; the monoplane would be washed out to sea during the dark hours of the night—not that it mattered. Van Ryder's real interest, Wildreth knew, was not in the plane—not even, at this moment, in

their chances of escape, but in the probing of Wildreth's display of feeling. Van Ryder himself had uncanny intuitions, Wildreth had observed; he gave a demonstration of the working of his sixth sense in his next chance shot:

"Maybe this Helen has at least *two* wrecks to her credit—of sorts. You, Wildreth, are more or less a drifter, I've understood. It's easily seen, too, that you never would have done for Helen—not possessing a requisite amount of the root of all evil which is one of my few claims to attractiveness. Now, there's a new idea! You've been in love with Helen—has Helen perhaps returned the compliment? Oh, please—let's not make fools of ourselves!"

A slow fury was mounting in Wildreth's brain.

"You'd like to challenge me to mortal combat, or something of the sort. Is there any use? We'll all be dried-up mummies soon enough. After all, I'm the only one who's in the dark. I know that, should we get back, Helen would be obliged for some reason, known only to herself, to marry me—for my money. I love Helen, and I know she doesn't love me—she's risked her life, *lost* her life, to get enough money to meet her needs without having to take me with it. That's rather hard on me, but I'm striking as hard a bargain as I can, if I live to strike it. Yes, I'm holding her to it!"

"As for you and Helen, I can see that you're in love with her, or have been—all the same with your sort, I think—and I more than half suspect you're not an object of indifference to Helen. Let it go at that; if I'm content, you should be. As I've said, none of it will matter too long. My plane is empty—dead empty. Helen's plane is empty and smashed. And probably there isn't a human being within more miles than will ever matter to us again—and if there is, it's a band of them, and they like white

meat for dinner. Don't be frightened, Helen; it all means, you know, that you won't have to marry me."

There was so much bitter truth in Van Ryder's words that Wildreth heard them out in silence, and went on thinking about them in silence. But after a barely perceptible hesitation, Helen spoke to Van Ryder.

"You say my plane is smashed and empty, Arthur. But—supposing you were wrong?"

Van Ryder wheeled suddenly; he had been staring out over the palming sands.

"Wrong? What do you mean?" he urged, the veins standing out suddenly on his forehead. "If I were wrong, somebody might get out of this alive—but you know I'm not wrong. We saw you forced down—not gas enough to make the mainland. We saw the plane."

"I wasn't forced down for lack of gas," Helen said, calmly. "I came down—my engine was bad. You take too many things for granted, Arthur. You failed to notice that my plane is well stocked with gas. I think it still carries enough to take this one of yours somewhere, very lightly loaded—not across the ocean, of course, but up the coast, far enough to reach civilization perhaps——"

"Then we've got to be getting it off!" Van Ryder cried urgently. "The tide, you know—it will float your plane sooner or later. Nice time to mention that it's floating three lives away with it."

Helen Courtenay's face whitened.

"Wait!" she commanded. "That's my gas, Arthur. I didn't realize, about the tide. I was waiting—to strike a bargain. You know, if anyone is to get anywhere on a very little gas, one person must go alone, because every pound of weight may count. There's food and water to keep two people alive here for a while. Let me go then—my gas in your plane, and send or come for you and Mr.

Wildreth. You couldn't get away without my gas—not in a hundred years. But if I save you and your ship, I'm entitled to salvage. Arthur, you don't need prize money, and you already have plenty of glory. You are one of the first flyers in the world, today. If I had the money—the prize—it would mean——"

"It would mean that you'd never marry me. No, Helen. I'm not inclined to be chivalrous. Out of date; senseless. I get what I want, if I can—and in this case I can. I'll share the prize money with my wife——"

"Share it—as salvage!" Helen interrupted desperately. "If I save you, using my gas—I don't ask for half, Arthur. A little would be enough."

"Your gas—my plane!" Van Ryder could show a touch of fury, too. "That will be enough, Helen. How far could you get with that battered thing out there on the reef? We're wasting time. First, get the gas. I'll take off in the morning. No use flying in the dark—I'm looking for signs of civilization. So long as we get the stuff off before she floats, time hasn't been wasted after all. Might as well have this settled at the start—well, now it is settled."

"I'm head of this ship—the victor ship, and the only ship in sailing condition. To back up my headship, I carry a Colt. My passenger doesn't; neither, probably, do you. I'll start at sunrise."

NO UNNECESSARY words passed between the men during a hard hour's work. Only when the precious fluid was safely transferred to the other plane did Wildreth make his attempt at influencing Van Ryder's determination.

"It's wrong, Van Ryder," he ventured, when the two were alone. "You're standing on your rights, I suppose—or on your interpretation of your rights. Just the same,

that gas makes the difference between life and death. And there is such a thing as chivalry, you know. Also there's an elemental law—a justice of the primitive—a thing that makes itself felt in lonely places. Plenty of women marry men they don't love because they must have money, or think they must have it, in cities. It seems to me especially horrible, out here. Perhaps because here might does make right, elemental justice is the more imperative. A fair division—some salvage—is due Helen Courtenay; it would make her free—free to do as she pleases; and yet, because your plane is sound and was not completely empty, and because you will command it yourself and head the relief expedition which—we hope—will return for us, I'm not sure that she can force it from you. If it weren't for her own sake, so far as I am concerned, I'd be ready to advise her to refuse the gas—to throw it out on the sand; *unless you came to terms.*"

"Well, I listened!" Van Ryder showed the signs of his effort at self-control. "I listened—and that will be about all. I take off in the morning, after the sun is up. One thing I meant to ask you, Wildreth"—the hard and rather shallow eyes searched the dusk to the southward—"those cliffs—how near did you get to them, and how did they look? Coming down in the plane, I seemed to see nothing but desert—but it was all so quick, after the fog broke, and we were flying low."

"There is nothing but desert," Wildreth told him. "It isn't so far to the cliffs—a few hours only. I could see beyond, in one place, and the desert continues on the other side. I thought I saw caves in the cliffs—caves of animals, perhaps. I turned back, because I saw no use in going on."

"All right. I may explore in that direction before morning myself,"

said Van Ryder. "You think I'm cold-blooded and hard-boiled, but my nerves are on edge. I feel as though I'd never sleep—and sometimes I wish I could sleep forever."

He slumped down suddenly upon a sandy hummock, and sat there—still staring moodily southward into the dusk.

Wildreth, now, took to putting around Van Ryder's plane. He had a project of his own, for propping against it one of the parachutes it carried to improvise a shelter for Helen's use. He saw Van Ryder's eyes upon him, after a while, and half expected that he would object for the sake of making himself disagreeable; but he only acknowledged Wildreth's finished achievement with a brief gleam of white teeth that looked like a snarl in the deepening gloom, and after a moment rose and strolled lazily away.

There would have been silence then, but for the beating of the surf. Even that sound was muted by the desert stillness, as the ocean was checked and its slow-retreating rollers blotted out upon the sandy shore. Late twilight turned to night, and stars hung in the sky like lamps—larger and more brilliant over the desert, softer and more liquidly tremulous toward the rim of the sea. Then, after an hour or so, a false dawn seemed growing in the east, and presently the eastward-turning world swung slowly into view a red-tinged golden shield, and the desert waked again to life.

HELEN came to Wildreth then, at last. They stood side by side for a while without speaking.

"We've watched the moon rise before, together—you and I!" Wildreth spoke suddenly, and something in his voice was like a cry of pain.

"And if Arthur succeeds in getting to where people live, tomorrow, and if he comes back at once—this time is the last."

"But we thought it might be the last time when I went to war; and after I had your letter—the one that ended things—I thought it had been the last time."

Against all reason, there was triumph in Wildreth's last words. Helen Courtenay caught it, and answered it like a challenge: "Do last times matter? Isn't tonight—more than the rest of life?"

The moon, rising clear in the depths of the desert sky, showed them each the truth in the eyes of the other. And, for a little while, nothing else was real.

Wildreth, at last, faced other realities.

"You love me—you have always loved me!" he said, wonderingly. "But you wrote me that letter, telling me it was all over. And all the years between, you never wrote to say it wasn't true. We meet, after—why, it must be ten years!—and, unless a few more days are all there is to life, you will go back and marry Van Ryder for his money. At least and at last—*why*, Helen? *Why*?"

There, with the shadow of Van Ryder's plane pitching westward into the dark water, and Van Ryder's little figure lost to sight in the swimming distances of silver and black, Wildreth heard the things that Helen's letter of ten years ago had not contained.

"I thought it would be wrecking your life, dear, to have it any other way," she pleaded. "I had a burden to carry, all at once, that was too much to saddle you with, with your way in the world to make. I thought, however much it hurt, that it would be better—that it was the only way—for *you*."

"It made me a drifter," Wildreth said quietly. "I came back from the war with you gone out of my life—with everything gone. I never tried to do the things I had meant to do—the things I would have done."

Helen's voice was blurred with unshed tears.

"I thought," she resumed quietly, "I thought that if I gave you my explanation, you would make it harder for me. I never dreamed how it would break you not to know—only to think that I had changed. Well, at least I can give you the explanation now. Do you remember Cynthia—my roommate of the old days?"

Wildreth nodded.

"There's nothing very new or original about *my story*," Helen said, "except that my story is Cynthia's story, instead of being the story of a girl with a sick mother or a crippled father or a little sister to bring up. Cynthia and I were more than sisters to each other, you remember, Harry. Well, you took with you to the war my promise to marry you when you came back. Right after that, Cynthia *did* marry—a man named Alan Trevor. He didn't go to war; he was in business—speculative business of some kind. He wasn't a good sort; I was sure of it from the beginning. And I think he hurried Cynthia into marrying him, to avoid the draft."

Wildreth was studying Helen, as she talked. Ten years! They hadn't done much to her, after all. Not changed her love, her spirit; he knew that already, without needing to hear the rest. Her hair was short, now, as became the hair of a woman who was ready to risk her life to win a prize that would mean—

He shivered, struck by the sudden realization of what her failure to win that prize would mean to both of them; then fell again to studying her face. It was browner, and a little thinner, but as exquisitely shaped and molded as of old. In her eyes—the clear gray eyes that had always seemed to see to the end of the world and beyond it, and into the deepest depths of his heart—the old, indomitable sparkle of gay courage was as ever in conflict with a haunting, wist-

ful tenderness. Helen! She was the same, and this one hour was theirs.

"Alan Trevor wasn't a good speculator either, for when other firms were making fortunes his firm failed. He blew his brains out, just about the time that Cynthia's baby was born. And Cynthia—her mind went—dark."

The climax had come suddenly. With its coming, everything was clear.

"So you, Helen, have taken care of Cynthia and her baby, and can't go on doing it, unless you marry Van Ryder and his money. Is that it?"

"Yes, Harry, now you understand. I had luck, for a long time. I got a berth as companion to a woman who traveled with her husband, all over the world. Globe-trotting with them developed my adventurous ideas, I suppose. The woman died six months ago, and I had very little to fall back on. They had paid me a salary out of all proportion to the kind of position I held, because I was willing to go with them into strange places where few women would go; I couldn't get another place that would pay as well—that would pay enough.

"I could have learned stenography, and gone into business, but that wouldn't have done it either. I've managed to keep Cynthia in a good sanatorium, a sanatorium where she has special care. They've never given up hope for her. If I should lie down on my job now, I'd feel as though I might be losing her her chance to be herself again. The baby—I called her Cynthia—I've had taken care of all the time, of course. Abandoning her would be like abandoning a child of my own; I always loved children, you know—you can understand how I've come to feel about this one."

Wildreth felt as though he had suddenly come face to face against a stone wall.

"If I hadn't given up—if I'd done the things you hoped I would go on and do without you," he cried pas-

sionately, "it wouldn't be too late yet. As it is—I have nothing. I needn't tell you, you've guessed that."

The waves were crashing more heavily, their lines of white showing in the moonlight like teeth. They reminded Wildreth of Van Ryder's smile. They seemed to be mocking his futility.

"I don't know much about the laws of salvage," he ventured. "It seems to me, though, that you were within your rights this afternoon, in demanding a substantial sum for turning over your gas to Van Ryder. If you would take it into the courts, of course I am your witness. I'd urge you to take his plane now and go—he threatened us with his Colt a while ago. But you'd be technically guilty of the theft of his plane, if you did. You can't salvage without consent, as he quite well knew when he left us alone here with his ship."

Helen's face seemed suddenly drained of blood.

"I'd rather have forgotten all that, tonight—it makes what is to come after more definite and real," she said pitifully. "I've thought it over since then, and I'm afraid there's no hope. Van Ryder is better equipped to fight it in the courts than we are. If I claim salvage for the use of my gas, he can perhaps claim more salvage for the use of his plane. The best I could do then, would be to hope to break even. And then, perhaps our bargain—his and mine—would be off. And you see, since I didn't win the prize money, I—don't want it off. I don't see any other way, except to marry Van Ryder."

Wildreth remembered that Helen couldn't bear to have anybody see her cry.

"Perhaps you're tired, and would like to turn in," he said quickly. "I've done the best I could in the way of a tent, you see."

She thanked him with a look and disappeared behind the flapping canvas.

A night wind had sprung up which carried with it little, stinging grains of sand. The night was no longer magical, but menacing and unkind. Wildreth rolled his coat into a ball, and turned his shirt collar up around his neck. Then he burrowed into the sand with his elbow raised between his face and the unpleasant wind. And because every muscle of his body ached with exhaustion, after a while he slept.

YESTERDAY had been a day of sea breeze, and the heat of the desert had been not unpleasant. The desert wind of the night held over until morning, and Wildreth waked tired and cramped, at the impact of the sun's first lances on his head. Today would be a day of blistering heat. He thought uncomfortably of the few water bottles that comprised their pooled supply of drinking water; three people safe from the agony of water starvation might have used it all in half a day baking here.

Helen's shelter had not been blown down as he feared it might be during the night. With the going of Van Ryder's plane there would, however, be no shelter for anyone.

In a moment, Wildreth was on his feet. Van Ryder should be taking off, even now; if there was to be the shadow of a hope for Helen and Wildreth there was no time to waste. Van Ryder had disappeared into the desert before Helen and Wildreth separated for the night. In the hours of Wildreth's exhausted, heavy slumber, he evidently had not returned. It would only serve him right if Helen were to take his plane now and go without the formality of his consent, since his delay imperiled the lives of his companions. But Wildreth knew that Helen would do no such thing, and for Helen's sake it would do no good to antagonize Van Ryder, cir-

cumstances being as they were. It might be, besides, that Van Ryder had met with an accident; that all of the precious time and energy of the other two, before lack of water reduced them to things beyond the power of thought or action, would have to be spent in an expedition to those distant cliffs to find out what had happened to him. Wildreth's brain was spinning with half-formed plans for meeting this emergency. And then he sighted a figure moving in the shadow of a dune.

Immediately Wildreth leaped into action.

The water, and the other supplies, must be divided into threes. Van Ryder might be forced down—only too probably would be—in some other forgotten spot of the earth's surface as hard to live in and as easy to die in as this place. His was the quickest chance for safety, but he was entitled to his fair share of what they had. As for the portions of the other two, Wildreth would try a little cheating between himself and Helen. Helen must in some way be made to have the advantage, since no woman could long hold death from hunger and thirst at bay. Wildreth was trying not to think of Helen's lonely anguish, should she survive him. He could try, above all things, to give her her chance at life, and pray that, should he die before help came, her fate might be different.

He called her, a little later, and she came out rubbing her eyes like a sleepy child.

"I've slept!" she cried cheerfully. "I wouldn't have expected it, but I did—and I believe you did too. When is breakfast—or is there any? I won't need to eat for hours, though I'd like just a mouthful of water. It's hot already, isn't it?"

"It is!" Wildreth answered grimly. "Our friend Van Ryder is letting us get a taste of the heat even before he starts. I called you out, so that I could get the parachute out of

the way. Van Ryder has been exploring all night, and is just getting back—he'll not take off till two hours after sunrise. Those two hours may be important, before this is over."

Wildreth had not glanced again in the direction of Van Ryder's approach, since he first sighted him. Helen was looking southward now, watching him as he drew near. Suddenly she gave an exclamation of surprise:

"What is the matter with him—with Arthur? He walks as though—as though he were faint, or ill. How terrible——"

Looking now, Wildreth was struck by Van Ryder's change of carriage, of manner, even of face, for the approaching man was near enough to show a deathly pallor to the two who stood waiting. Wildreth's first thought was even now of Helen. Van Ryder had no right to exhaust himself by an all-night trek through the heavy sand, since his exhaustion still further imperiled Helen. But before Wildreth could put his resentment into words, Van Ryder reached them and slumped heavily down on the sand at their feet. And for a few minutes he sat so, wordless, motionless, a glassy stare in his bold eyes. Finally, at Wildreth's urging, he seemed to make an attempt to draw himself together.

"Those mountains—cliffs, rather, yet shifting mountains of sand—they are the mountains of the dead. Accursed! I—a fool—I must talk, and I can't be coherent. If you had been through hell—if you had *seen the dead*—not only the recent dead, but the dead who have been dead for many centuries! If the dead had all—*all*—accused *you*——"

Wildreth and Helen exchanged looks of the most unspeakable consternation. Van Ryder would, doubtless, be as unyielding as ever. He still carried the only gun in the party. He would insist on flying his plane, and he would wreck it, and with it their

hope of rescue. For—Van Ryder was mad!

He seemed, nevertheless, to have retained his uncanny faculty for reading their minds.

"I'm not—I'm not as you think!" he screamed at them, with a sudden return of yesterday's anger against them. "I'm not mad. It happened as I say, I tell you, at the dark pool beyond those cliffs."

Yet, again, Wildreth and Helen stared at each other. Dark pool? Water? Life? At least they could search for it, as soon as Van Ryder had taken off. Wildreth laid his hand on Van Ryder's shoulder.

"The pool—is it close on the other side of the cliffs?" he questioned eagerly. Van Ryder's well-known sneer rested evilly upon his haggard countenance.

"The pool won't be of any use—even to a pair of lovers!" he said. "You won't be able to drink of it, or wash in it, or look at your precious reflections in it. The pool—it's one of those mirage things, you know. I saw that plain enough afterward. Only it was real in the dark hours, the hours when the dead are supposed to show themselves. Paugh! I feel as though I'd been digging in an old, old cemetery!"

Again Wildreth urged him gently.

"A good place to get away from, then, Van Ryder," he argued. "If you're unnerved, better let Miss Courtenay fly. If you still insist on flying your plane, better start quickly!"

"Better *not* start quickly!" Van Ryder mocked, his hand moving to touch the revolver with a threat. "You're thinking of your skins—I tell you I've been through a thing bigger than either of your precious lives. A thing I've got to think through, got to talk about. *I'm going to tell you*—yes, I am, and there'll be time to talk about this rescue flight afterward. While I live, no one but

myself flies my plane! And I fly when I get ready."

HELEN had seated herself quietly upon the sand. The sun beat mercilessly down on all of them. But Wildreth sat down too, facing Van Ryder. He must think, he must try to reason with Van Ryder, or to force an issue if necessary. But there was that gun! It wasn't courage to argue with that, unless he could surprize Van Ryder—it was idioey. Besides, if Van Ryder were humored for a while, later he might see reason. Already Van Ryder was going on.

"The dark pool opened up before me, right at my feet, you know. Just beyond the cliffs. And I leaned down, to drink, but a face was staring up at me. A white face, very white, very dead; I could see that. And so I straightened up, and when I leaned over again to look, I could see the other faces—dozens of them—crowding behind each other, all seeming to stare up at me, *all faces I recognized!* And all forming a pattern, somehow, a pattern I couldn't describe now, and yet a definite pattern as though they were woven together, part of a plan. Lights seemed to play across the surface of the pool, so that sometimes one part of the pattern would stand out bright against the rest as a background, sometimes another. And there was a kind of orderly progression about it. For instance, the faces of you two showed always—but some of the time the faces belonged to a period long, long gone by, and some of the time to other times. Some of the time you were—but I'll tell you the first."

His listeners were silent now, when he paused. They were listening not only to humor him; they were listening, absorbed, for Van Ryder's low, husky tones cast a spell over them. He seemed seeing again the horrors of which he spoke.

"First, I saw the three of us as we were long centuries ago. God! How

dead, how steeped in death, our three faces looked!

"I was one of a conquering horde. Before us fell the walls of a city, a city we had borne down by our might, yet whose culture we could not own because we could not understand it.

"You, Wildreth, I slew, and you were Helen's lover. She would have preferred death to my arms—death, and reunion with you. She paused, though, before the leap out of an upper window she was about to take, because a little child cried out to her in terror. She turned to save it, to conceal it—a little stranger child, you know, not her own. In that moment, I made her mine."

The husky voice stopped. The last words had been all but inaudible. Van Ryder seemed to sway beneath the blazing sun. Helen's arm was up, a fragile shield. Yet now neither Helen nor Wildreth could have interrupted; neither could have gone away.

"No need making a long story of it," Van Ryder said with a last attempt at his old manner. Then, "God! I can't tell you the horror—the horror of it. But few words are best, since I must tell it.

"I won't even go over all of it. You, Wildreth, and Helen, and I, we were together more than once as the centuries of death were told. Once in a spot like this, and we were desert-dwellers, the three of us, and dusky with the life-long kiss of daily suns. That was perhaps the most horrid and the most vivid; for it took place in a spot not unlike this part of the desert, and it was among cliffs like those awful cliffs yonder, and by a pool that was real enough, then—could a pool have been once, and have disappeared?—an oasis sand-quenched centuries ago? Well, it was by such a pool, and not in battle but in cold-hearted murder, that I slew you both, choking the breath from *her* throat with my bare hands, because she loved you!"

A terror seemed growing in the broad, clear light of day. It was a relief to hear Van Ryder's next words:

"That was the worst—the worst of all."

He kicked restlessly with his toe in the sand.

"You know there's this to be said for me—I've just taken what I wanted when I could get it, at any price, in this life and—before. But what was your wheeze, last night, Wildreth, about an elemental justice—an elemental law? Seeing how things die never, never lose themselves utterly, crowd back on you—it makes me feel you may be right. It makes me feel I've been judged somewhere, sentenced somewhere. And after those mute witnesses rose up against me last night, I'm half expecting sentence.

"There was another crime—another recurrent crime, woven through the plan of past and present. Wildreth, you remember I laughed, telling you how the shadows of my plane have often followed me through the cloud-blotted sky? Perhaps they were all real, and never shadows—as real as Helen's plane was yesterday—as real, though they were piloted by dead hands. One more thing I have to tell—then I am through.

"There was another progression of faces, always the same yet always different, that followed me down the ages. The faces of men I have slain. In the Great War, you know, I had won honors for the men I killed in the air—shot down, rammed. Well, I saw the faces of a few of them, and those faces too were in that pool of death, leering at me. But I didn't fear them—not those faces. I felt my soul absolved, for it was war. There was a face, though—the face of a comrade.

"When we took the gates of the city I told you of, this comrade came upon me as I was concealing about me a jeweled bracelet. We were to divide the spoils, but one of the gems in this was worth a king's ransom. Just how it was safest hidden, I

seemed uncertain. In my uncertainty he came upon me, and I stabbed him, as I had stabbed so many of the foemen.

"In the Great War, the war we all know of, this man was a brother ace. Each of us had brought down planes—exactly the same number, by a malicious chance! It rankled in my heart, day and night. On any expedition I might die not *first* but *second*. If Wentworth would only make his fatal last flight the first, leaving me with no rival, first in glory!

"We came down together in a desolate lonely field in No Man's Land. Wentworth had run out of gas; his was a forced landing. I followed him down. At first I think I meant to help him. But he got out of his plane, and stood looking up at me. Something—took control of me—an idea—horrible—irresistible! What would they have done to me, instead of decorating me, if they had seen what happened then? Risking my own plane, I flew toward his plane and *him*. I missed the plane by a hair's breadth, but—at the last instant, did I try to hit him, or miss him? Who can solve the mysteries of the soul? I *grazed* him—he fell dead, the top of his scalp beneath his helmet red—his skull *nicked* as neatly as you might nick off the top of an egg.

"And he was there in that awful pool, with the top of his head like a broken egg. And he alone seemed to frame with his lips a word—one word: '*Revenge!*'"

"Oh, Arthur, please—no more!"

To Wildreth, it seemed the smell of death was in the air. He, too, had his memories of the war; his career had been honorable but inglorious. He had gone with the others, stood by the others, neither fallen behind nor succeeded in doing anything wonderful. Certainly there was no stain of misconduct of even the slightest on his soul; and yet the suggestion of detail Van Ryder had given was hard

listening to. In the trenches, he had seen more blood and mud and broken heads than Van Ryder. And Van Ryder's story—was it to be regarded as a sane confession? He could not have touched him now. But seeing Helen's trembling, he was moved with a sudden imperative need to prevail upon Van Ryder to hasten at last, that there might be an end of this daylight horror.

"For God's sake, Van Ryder, will you fly?" he cried impetuously.

"No one but me shall fly my plane; and I—I'd as leave fly it into the ocean and leave it there. There might be peace. Yes, I will fly."

He got unsteadily to his feet. Even seeing him sway blindly, Wildreth could not have touched him. He seemed a man accursed, a man apart. And even though his doing anything in the way of rescuing the victims of his selfishness was doubtful, it would be a relief to have him gone, since any attempt to take over the control of that plane would be met with a bullet. Yes, it would be a relief to have him gone, even though death came soon after. Death would be more possible without Van Ryder's presence, without the horrible aroma of death that seemed to cling to him. Wildreth raised Helen to her feet, that together they might watch his going.

Slowly Van Ryder staggered across the blazing sand toward the plane. They were to the east of the plane, and its shadow lay on the opposite side. Aside from Van Ryder's own short shadow moving before him, there was nothing anywhere but glare and heat. Then—

"What was that?" Wildreth cried sharply. And Helen answered in a high tone of rapture:

"Rescue! A plane flew over!"

Truly something had blotted out the glare of the sand, something swift-moving, a solid shadow flying swifter than any cloud before a hurricane, yet something small and solid-edged—

like the shadow of a plane upon the desert. It had passed directly over Van Ryder.

Wildreth turned eager eyes into the blazing sky. Nothing! But perhaps against that glare he could not see. A strange thing, though—a moment ago he had *heard* nothing, and now he heard nothing.

Only for the briefest of seconds had his gaze been withdrawn from Van Ryder. It sought him now hastily, in the natural conjecture as to whether or not his attention had been arrested. Van Ryder stood swaying! not so had he swayed a brief moment ago—not so helplessly. Then, before Wildreth could take one forward step toward the man, he collapsed—toppled, a strengthless, lifeless heap upon the sand.

No airplane is noiseless. So there had been no plane. It was of no use, then, to look for its return. Wildreth and Helen, of the same mind without words, dismissed their momentary thrill of hope as a hallucination, and hurried to Van Ryder. He must have fainted.

But no faint ever covered the top of a man's head with blood, or nicked off the top of his skull neatly, as the top of an egg-shell may be nicked off, spilling blood and brains. . . .

It was Helen who fainted.

BETWEEN burying Van Ryder and restoring Helen sufficiently so that she might dare to take the air in Van Ryder's plane, Wildreth had not much time immediately for conjecture. But in after years there was much time. The prize money which came to Helen was all put into a trust for her friend and her friend's child. Together, Wildreth and Helen could make their own way in the world, once that burden was lifted from Helen's shoulders. But even together, they could arrive at no certainty as to the manner of Van Ryder's death,

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The Elemental Law

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any more than they could entirely stop thinking of it.

“An enormous bird, almost like the fabled roc, might have done it,” Wildreth would say, trying to think so. “Swooping down for a victim, but a little afraid of the three of us and the big plane, and so only striking with beak or talons, and rising——”

“But the shadow, the shadow of a plane—the clear, square outline——”

Helen would say as much as that, and fall silent. Into the stillness would obtrude unpleasant memories of Van Ryder's hoarse voice, telling his horrible story in the sunlight; unpleasant memories of the visions his voice had made real before them, of dead faces in a dark pool of death, and dead figures re-enacting crime-tragedies of days that were dead, and centuries that were dead, and among them the slaying of a comrade in the manner of Van Ryder's own going.

Thin as a cloud that may be scattered by a ray of sunshine is the veil that lies between the things which are seen and the things which are unseen; and no man may say what those things so mercifully hidden are, or what is the manner of their working upon those souls to which dark passions give them access.