



Library podcast

Thrilling Tales: “The Water Hole” by Maxwell Struthers Burt

Hello, and welcome to Thrilling Tales: Seattle Public Library’s Storytime for Grownups – I’m your librarian reader, David Wright. This week we head out to the old West, for a story that first appeared in *Scribner’s Magazine* in 1915 - story of great bravery, and even greater regret, played out against the harsh backdrop of the unforgiving desert, where a man may die of thirst and, in a cruel irony, a thirsty man may die of slaking that thirst too quickly.

And now, *The Water Hole*, by Maxwell Struthers Burt.

Some men are like the twang of a bow-string. Hardy was like that—short, lithe, sunburned, vivid. Into the lives of Jarrick, Hill, and myself, old classmates of his, he came and went in the fashion of one of those queer winds that on a sultry day in summer blow unexpectedly up a city street out of nowhere. His comings excited us; his goings left us refreshed and a little vaguely discontented. So many people are gray. Hardy gave one a shock of color, as do the deserts and the mountains he inhabited. It was not particularly what he said—he didn’t talk much—it was his appearance, his direct, a trifle fierce, gestures, the sense of mysterious lands that pervaded him. One never knew when he was coming to New York and one never knew how long he was going to stay; he just appeared, was very busy with mining companies for a while, sat about clubs in the late afternoon, and then, one day, he was gone.

Sometimes he came twice in a year; oftener, not for two or three years at a stretch. When he did come we gave him a dinner—that is, Jarrick, Hill, and myself. And it was rather an occasion. We would procure a table in the gayest restaurant we could find, near, but not too near, the music—Hill it was who first suggested this as a dramatic bit of incongruity between Hardy and the frequenters of Broadway—and the most exotic food obtainable, for a good part of his time Hardy, we knew, lived upon camp fare. Then we would try to make him tell about his experiences. Usually he wouldn’t. Impersonally, he was entertaining about South Africa, about the Caucasus, about Alaska, Mexico, anywhere you care to think; but concretely he might have been an illustrated lecture for all he mentioned himself. He was passionately fond of abstract argument. “Y’ see,” he would explain, “I don’t get half as much of this sort of thing as I want. Of course, one does run across remarkable people—now, I met a cow-puncher once who knew Keats by heart—but as a rule I deal only with material things, mines and prospects and assays and that sort of thing.” Poor chap! I wonder if he thought that we, with our brokering and our writing and our lawyering, dealt much with ideas! I

remember one night when we sat up until three discussing the philosophy of prohibition over three bottles of port. I wonder how many other men have done the same thing!

But five years ago—no, it was six—Hardy really told us a real story about himself. Necessarily the occasion is memorable in our recollections. We had dined at Lamb's, and the place was practically empty, for it was long after the theatre hour—only a drowsy waiter here and there, and away over in one corner a young couple who, I suppose, imagined themselves in love. Fancy being in love at Lamb's! We had been discussing, of all things in the world, bravery and conscience and cowardice and original sin, and that sort of business, and there was no question about it that Hardy was enjoying himself hugely. He was leaning upon the table, a coffee-cup between his relaxed brown hands, listening with an eagerness highly complimentary to the banal remarks we had to make upon the subject. "This is talk!" he ejaculated once with a laugh.

Hill, against the combined attack of Jarrick and myself, was maintaining the argument. "There is no such thing as instinctive bravery," he affirmed, for the fifth time at least, "amongst intelligent men. Every one of us is naturally a coward. Of course we are. The more imagination we've got the more we can realize how pleasant life is, after all, and how rotten the adjuncts of sudden death. It's reason that does the trick—reason and tradition. Do you know of any one who is brave when he is alone—except, that is, when it is a case of self-preservation? No! Of course not. Did you ever hear of any one choosing to go along a dangerous road or to ford a dangerous river unless he had to—that is, any one of our class, any man of education or imagination? It's the greater fear of being thought afraid that makes us brave. Take a lawyer in a shipwreck—take myself! Don't you suppose he's frightened? Naturally he is, horribly frightened. It's his reason, his mind, that after a while gets the better of his poor pipe-stem legs and makes them keep pace with the sea-legs about them."

"It's condition," said Jarrick doggedly—"condition entirely. All has to do with your liver and digestion. I know; I fox-hunt, and when I was younger—yes, leave my waist alone!—I rode jumping races. When you're fit there isn't a horse alive that bothers you, or a fence, for that matter, or a bit of water."

"Ever try standing on a ship's deck, in the dark, knowing you're going to drown in about twenty minutes?" asked Hill.

Hardy leaned forward to strike a match for his cigarette. "I don't agree with you," he said.

"Well, but—" began Hill.

"Neither of you."

"Oh, of course, you're outside the argument. You lead an adventurous life. You keep in condition for danger. It isn't fair."

"No." Hardy lit his cigarette and inhaled a puff thoughtfully. "You don't understand. All you have to say does have some bearing upon things, but, when you get down to brass tacks, it's instinct—at the last

gasp, it's instinct. You can't get away from it. It's the fashion now to discount instinct, I know; well—but you can't get away from it. I've thought about the thing—a lot. Men are brave against their better reason, against their conscience. It's a mixed-up thing. It's confusing and—and sort of damnable," he concluded lamely.

"Sort of damnable!" cried Hill wonderingly.

"Yes, damnable."

I experienced inspiration. "You've got a concrete instance back of that," I ventured.

Hardy removed his gaze from the ceiling. "Er—" he stammered. "Why, yes—yes. That's true."

"You'd better tell it," suggested Hill; "otherwise your argument is not very conclusive."

Hardy fumbled with the spoon of his empty coffee-cup. It was a curious gesture on the part of a man whose franknesses were as clean-cut as his silences. "Well—" he began. "I don't know. Perhaps. I did know a man, though, who saved another man's life when he didn't want to, when there was every excuse for him not to, when he had it all reasoned out that it was wrong, the very wrongest possible thing to do; and he saved him because he couldn't help it, saved him at the risk of his own life, too."

"He did!" murmured Hill incredulously.

"Go on!" I urged. I was aware that we were on the edge of a revelation.

Hardy looked down at the spoon in his hand, then up and into my eyes.

"It's such a queer place to tell it"—he smiled deprecatingly—"here, in this restaurant. It ought to be about a camp-fire, or something like that. Here it seems out of place, like the smell of bacon or sweating mules. Do you know Los Pinos? Well, you wouldn't. It was just a few shacks and a Mexican gambling-house when I saw it. Maybe it isn't there any more, at all. You know—those places! People build them and then go away, and in a year there isn't a thing, just desert again and shifting sand and maybe the little original old ranch by the one spring." He swept the table-cloth with his hand, as if sweeping something into oblivion, and his eyes sought again the spoon. "It's queer, that business. Men and women go out to lonely places and build houses, and for a while everything goes on in miniature, just as it does here—daily bread and hating and laughing—and then something happens, the gold gives out or the fields won't pay, and in no time nature is back again. It's a big fight. You lose track of it in crowded places." He raised his head and settled his arms comfortably on the table.

"I wasn't there for any particular purpose. I was on a holiday. I'd been on a big job up in Colorado and was rather done up, and, as there were some prospects in New Mexico I wanted to see, I hit south, drifting through Santa Fé and Silver City, until I found myself way down on the southern edge of Arizona. It was still hot down there—hot as blazes—it was about the first of September—and the

rattlesnakes and the scorpions were still as active as crickets. I knew a chap that had a cattle outfit near the Mexican border, so I dropped in on him one day and stayed two weeks. You see, he was lonely. Had a passion for theatres and hadn't seen a play for five years. My second-hand gossip was rather a godsend. But finally I got tired of talking about all that, and decided to start north again. He bade me good-by on a little hill near his place. 'See here!' he said suddenly, looking toward the west. 'If you go a trifle out of your way you'll strike Los Pinos, and I wish you would. It's a little bit of a dump of the United Copper Company's, no good, I'm thinking, but the fellow in charge is a friend of mine. He's got his wife there. They're nice people—or used to be. I haven't seen them for ten years. They say he drinks a little—well, we all do. Maybe you could write me how she—I mean, how he is getting on?' And he turned red. I saw how the land lay, and as a favor to him I said I would.

"It was eighty miles away, and I drifted in there one night on top of a tired cow-horse just at sundown. You know how purple—violet, really—those desert evenings are. There was violet stretching away as far as I could see, from the faint violet at my stirrups to the deep, almost black violet of the horizon. Way off to the north I could make out the shadow of some big hills that had been ahead of me all day. The town, what there was of it, lay in a little gully. Along its single street there were a few lights shining like small yellow flowers. I asked my way of a Mexican, and he showed me up to where the Whitneys—that name will do as well as any—lived, in a decent enough sort of bungalow, it would seem, above the gully. He left me there, and I went forward and rapped at the door. Light shone from between the cracks of a near-by shutter, and I could hear voices inside—a man's voice mostly, hoarse and high-pitched. Then a cook opened the door for me and I had a look inside, into a big living-room beyond. It was civilized all right enough, pleasantly so to a man stepping out of two days of desert and Mexican adobes. At a glance I saw the rugs on the polished floor, and the Navajo blankets about, and a big table in the center with a shaded lamp and magazines in rows; but the man in riding-clothes standing before the empty fire-place wasn't civilized at all, at least not at that moment. I couldn't see the woman, only the top of her head above the back of a big chair, but as I came in I heard her say, 'Hush!—Jim!—please!' and I noticed that what I could see of her hair was of that fine true gold you so seldom find. The man stopped in the middle of a sentence and swayed on his feet, then he looked over at me and came toward me with a sort of bulldog, inquiring look. He was a big, red-faced, blond chap, about forty, I should say, who might once have been handsome. He wasn't now, and it didn't add to his beauty that he was quite obviously fairly drunk. 'Well?' he said, and blocked my way.

"'I'm a friend of Henry Martin's,' I answered. 'I've got a letter for you.' I was beginning to get pretty angry.

"'Henry Martin?' He laughed unsteadily. 'You'd better give it to my wife over there. She's his friend. I hardly know him.' I don't know when I'd seen a man I disliked as much at first sight.

"There was a rustle from the other side of the room, and Mrs. Whitney came toward us. I avoided her unattractive husband and took her hand, and I understood at once whatever civilizing influences there were about the bungalow we were in. Did you ever do that—ever step out of nowhere, in a wild sort of country, and meet suddenly a man or a woman who might have come straight from a pleasant, well-

bred room filled with books and flowers and quiet, nice people? It's a sensation that never loses its freshness. Mrs. Whitney was like that. I wouldn't have called her beautiful; she was better; you knew she was good and clean-cut and a thoroughbred the minute you saw her. She was lovely, too; don't misunderstand me, but you had more important things to think about when you were talking to her. Just at the moment I was wondering how anyone who so evidently had been crying could all at once greet a stranger with so cordial a smile. But she was all that—all nerve; I don't think I ever met a woman quite like her—so fine, you understand."

Hardy paused. "Have any of you chaps got a cigarette?" he asked; and I noticed that his hand, usually the steadiest hand imaginable, trembled ever so slightly. "Well," he began again, "there you are! I had tumbled into about as rotten a little, pitiful a little tragedy as you can imagine, there in a God-forsaken desert of Arizona, with not a soul about but a Chinese cook, a couple of Scotch stationary engineers, an Irish foreman, two or three young mining men, and a score of Mexicans. Of course, my first impulse was to get out the next morning, to cut it—it was none of my business—although I determined to drop a line to Henry Martin; but I didn't go. I had a talk with Mrs. Whitney that night, after her attractive husband had taken himself off to bed, and somehow I couldn't leave just then. You know how it is, you drop into a place where nothing in the world seems likely to happen, and all of a sudden you realize that something *is* going to happen, and for the life of you, you can't go away. That situation up on top of the hill couldn't last forever, could it? So I stayed on. I hunted out the big Irish foreman and shared his cabin. The Whitneys asked me to visit them, but I didn't exactly feel like doing so. The Irishman was a fine specimen, ten years out from Dublin, and everywhere else since that time; generous, irascible, given to great fits of gayety and equally unexpected fits of gloom. He would sit in the evenings, a short pipe in his mouth, and stare up at the Whitney bungalow on the hill above.

"That Jim Whitney's a devil' he confided to me once. 'One of these days I'll hit him over th' head with a pick and be hung for murder. Now, what in hell d'ye suppose a nice girl like that sticks by him for? If it weren't for her I'd 'a' reported him long ago. The scut!' And I remember that he spat gloomily. "But I got to know the answer to that question sooner than I had expected. You see, I went up to the Whitneys' often, in the afternoon, or for dinner, or in the evening, and I talked to Mrs. Whitney a great deal; although sometimes I just sat and smoked and listened to her play the piano. She played beautifully. It was a treat to a man who hadn't heard music for two years. There was a little thing of Grieg's—a spring song, or something of the sort—and you've no idea how quaint and sad and appealing it was, and incongruous, with all its freshness and murmuring about water-falls and pine-trees, there, in those hot, breathless Arizona nights. Mrs. Whitney didn't talk much; she wasn't what you'd call a particularly communicative woman, but bit by bit I pieced together something continuous. It seems that she had run away with Whitney ten years before—Oh, yes! Henry Martin! That had been a schoolgirl affair. Nothing serious, you understand. But the Whitney matter had been different. She was greatly in love with him. And the family had disapproved. Some rich, stuffy Boston people, I gathered. But she had made up her mind and taken matters in her own hands. That was her way—a clean-cut sort of person—like a gold-and-white arrow; and now she was going to stick by her choice no matter what happened; owed it to Whitney. There was the quirk in her brain; we all have a quirk somewhere, and that was hers. She felt that she had ruined his career; he had been a brilliant young

engineer, but her family had kicked up the devil of a row, and, as they were powerful enough, and nasty enough, had more or less hounded him out of the East. Of course, personally, I never thought he showed any of the essentials of brilliancy, but that's neither here nor there; she did, and she was satisfied that she owed him all she had. I suppose, too, there was some trace of a Puritan conscience back of it, some inherent feeling about divorce; and there was pride as well, a desire not to let that disgusting family of hers know into what ways her idol had fallen. Anyway, she was adamant—oh, yes, I made no bones about it, I up and asked her one night why she didn't get rid of the hound. So there she was, that white-and-gold woman, with her love of music, and her love of books, and her love of fine things, and her gentleness, and that sort of fiery, suppressed Northern blood, shut up on top of an Arizona dump with a beast that got drunk every night and twice a day on Sunday. It was worse even than that. One night—we were sitting out on the veranda—her scarf slipped, and I saw a scar on her arm, near her shoulder." Hardy stopped abruptly and began to roll a little pellet of bread between his thumb and his forefinger; then his tense expression faded and he sat back in his chair.

"Let me have another cigarette," he said to Jarrick. "No. Wait a minute! I'll order some."

He called a waiter and gave his instructions. "You see," he continued, "when you run across as few nice women as I do that sort of thing is more than ordinarily disturbing. And then I suppose it was the setting, and her loneliness, and everything. Anyway, I stayed on, I got to be a little bit ashamed of myself. I was afraid that Mrs. Whitney would think me prompted by mere curiosity or a desire to meddle, so after a while I gave out that I was prospecting that part of Arizona, and in the mornings I would take a horse and ride out into the desert. I loved it, too; it was so big and spacious and silent and hot. One day I met Whitney on the edge of town. He was sober, as he always was when he had to be; he was a masterful brute, in his way. He stopped me and asked if I had found anything, and when I laughed he didn't laugh back. 'There's gold here,' he said. 'Lots of gold. Did you ever hear the story of the Ten Strike Mine? Well, it's over there.' He swept with his arm the line of distant hills to the north. 'The crazy Dutchman that found it staggered into Almuda, ten miles down the valley, just before he died; and his pockets were bulging with samples—pure gold, almost. Yes, by thunder! And that's the last they ever heard of it. Lots of men have tried—lots of men. Someday I'll go myself, surer than shooting.' And he let his hands drop to his sides and stared silently toward the north, a queer, dreamy anger in his eyes. I've seen lots of mining men, lots of prospectors, in my time, and it didn't take me long to size up that look of his. 'Aha, my friend!' I said to myself. 'So you've got another vice, have you! It isn't only rum that's got a hold on you!' And I turned my horse into the town.

"But our conversation seemed to have stirred to the surface something in Whitney's brain that had been at work there a long time, for after that he would never let me alone about his Ten Strike Mine and the mountains that hid it. 'Over there!' he would say, and point to the north. From the porch of his bungalow the sleeping hills were plainly visible above the shimmering desert. He would chew on the end of a cigar and consider. 'It isn't very far, you know. Two days—maybe three. All we need's water. No water there—at least, none found. All those fellows who've prospected are fools. I'm an expert; so are you. I tell you, Hardy, let's do it! A couple of little old pack-mules! Eh? How about it? Next week? I can get off. God, I'd like money!' And he would subside into a sullen silence. At first I laughed at him; but I can tell you that sort of thing gets on your nerves sooner or later and either makes you bolt it or

else go. At the end of two weeks I actually found myself considering the fool thing seriously. Of course, I didn't want to discover a lost gold-mine, that is, unless I just happened to stumble over it; I wanted to keep away from such things; they're bad; they get into a man's blood like drugs; but I've always had a hankering for a new country, and those hills, shining in the heat, were compelling—very compelling. Besides, I reflected, a trip like that might help to straighten Whitney up a little. I hadn't much hope, to be sure, but drowning men clutch at straws. It's curious what sophistry you use to convince yourself, isn't it? And then—something happened that for two weeks occupied all my mind.”

Hardy paused, considered for a moment the glowing end of his cigarette, and finally looked up gravely; there was a slight hesitation, almost an embarrassment, in his manner. “I don't exactly know how to put it,” he began. “I don't want you chaps to imagine anything wrong; it was all very nebulous and indefinite, you understand—Mrs. Whitney was a wonderful woman. I wouldn't mention the matter at all if it wasn't necessary for the point of my story; in fact, it is the point of my story. But there was a man there—one of the young engineers—and quite suddenly I discovered that he was in love with Mrs. Whitney, and I think—I never could be quite sure, but I think she was in love with him. It must have been one of those sudden things, a storm out of a clear sky, deluging two people before they were aware. I imagine it was brought to the surface by the chap's illness. He had been out riding on the desert and had got off to look at something, and a rattlesnake had struck him—a big, dust-dirty thing—on the wrist, and, very faint, he had galloped back to the Whitneys.’ And what do you suppose she had done—Mrs. Whitney, that is? Flung herself down on him and sucked the wound! Yes, without a moment's hesitation, her gold hair all about his hand and her white dress in the dirt. Of course, it was a foolish thing to do, and not in the least the right way to treat a wound, but she had risked her life to do it; a slight cut on her lip—you understand; a tiny, ragged place. Afterward, she had cut the wound crosswise, so, and had put on a ligature, and then had got the man into the house some way and nursed him until he was quite himself again. I dare say he had been in love with her a long while without knowing it, but that clinched matters. Those things come overpoweringly and take a man, down in places like that—semitropical and lonely and lawless, with long, empty days and moonlit nights. Perhaps he told Mrs. Whitney; he never got very far, I am sure. She was a wonderful woman—but she loved him, I think. You can tell those things, you know; a gesture, an unavoidable look, a silence.

“Anyway, I saw what had happened and I was sorry, and for a fortnight I hung around, loath to go, but hating myself all the while for not doing so. And every day Whitney would come at me with his insane scheme. ‘Over there! It isn't very far. Two days—maybe three. How about it? Eh?’ and then that tense sweep of the arm to the north. I don't know what it was, weariness, disgust, irritation of the whole sorry plan of things, but finally, and to my own astonishment, I found myself consenting, and within two days Whitney had his crazy pack outfit ready, and on the morning of the third day we set out. Mrs. Whitney had said nothing when we unfolded our intentions to her, nor did she say anything when we departed, but stood on the porch of the bungalow, her hand up to her throat, and watched us out of sight. I wondered what she was thinking about. The Voodooos—that was the name of the mountains we were heading for—had killed a good many men in their time.”

Hardy took a long and thoughtful sip from the glass in front of him before he began again. "I've knocked about a good deal in my life," he said; "I've been lost—once in the jungle; I've starved; I've reached the point where I've imagined horrors, heard voices, you understand, and seen great, bearded men mouthing at me—a man's pretty far gone when that happens to him—but that trip across the desert was the worst I've ever taken. By day it was all right, just swaying in your saddle, half asleep a good part of the time, the smell of warm dust in your nose, the three pack-mules plodding along behind; but the nights!—I tell you - It isn't good for two people to be alone in a place like that and for one to hate the other as I hated him. God knows why I didn't kill him; I'd have to get up and leave the fire and go out into the night, and, mind you, I'd be shuddering like a man with the ague under that warm, soft air. And he never for a minute suspected it. His mind was scarred with drink as if a worm had bored its slow way in and out of it. I can see him now, cross-legged, beyond the flames, big, unshaven, heavy-jowled, dirty, what he thought dripping from his mouth like the bacon drippings he was too lazy to wipe away. I won't tell you what he talked about; you know, the old thing; but not the way even the most wrong-minded of ordinary men talks; there was a sodden, triumphant devilry in him that was appalling. He cursed the country for its lack of opportunity of a certain kind; he was like a hound held in leash, gloating over what he would do when he got back to the kennels of civilization again. And all the while, at the back of my mind, was a picture of that white-and-gold woman of his, way back toward the south, waiting his return because she owed him her life for the brilliant career she had ruined. It made you sometimes almost want to laugh—insanely. I used to lie awake at night and pray whatever there was to kill him, and do it quickly. I would have turned back, but I felt that every day I could keep him away from Los Pinos was a day gained for Mrs. Whitney. He was a dangerous maniac, too. The first day he behaved himself fairly well, but the second, after supper, when we had cleaned up, he began to fumble through the packs, and finally produced a bottle of brandy.

"Fine camping stuff!" he announced. 'Lots of results for very little weight. Have some?'

"Are you going to drink that?" I asked.

"Oh, go to the devil!" he snapped. 'I've been out as much as you have.' I didn't argue with him further; I hoped if he drank enough the sun would get him. But the third night he upset the water-kegs, two of them. He had been carrying on some sort of weird celebration by himself, and finally staggered out into the desert, singing at the top of his lungs, and the first thing I knew he was down among the kegs, rolling over and over, and kicking right and left. The one that was open was gone; another he kicked the plug out of, but I managed to save about a quarter of its contents. The next morning I spoke to him about it. He blinked his red eyes and chuckled.

"Poor sort of stuff, anyway," he said.

"Yes," I agreed; 'but without it you would blow out like a candle in a dust storm.' After that we didn't speak to each other except when it was necessary.

“We were in the foot-hills of the Voodoos by now, and the next day we got into the mountains themselves—great, bare ragged peaks, black and red and dirty yellow, like the cooled-off slake of a furnace. Every now and then a dry gully came down from nowhere; and the only human thing one could see was occasionally, on the sides of one of these, a shivering, miserable, half-dead piñon—nothing but that, and the steel-blue sky overhead, and the desert behind us, shimmering like a lake of salt. It was hot—good Lord! The horn of your saddle burned your hand. That night we camped in a canyon, and the next day went still higher up, following the course of a rutted stream that probably ran water once in a year. Whitney wanted to turn east, and it was all a toss-up to me; the place looked unlikely enough, anyway, although you never can tell. I had settled into the monotony of the trip by now and didn’t much care how long we stayed out. One day was like another—hot little swirls of dust, sweat of mules, and great black cliffs; and the nights came and went like the passing of a sponge over a fevered face. On the sixth day the tragedy happened. It was toward dusk, and one of the mules, the one that carried the water, fell over a cliff.

“He wasn’t hurt; just lay on his back and smiled crossly; but the kegs and the bags were smashed to bits. I like mules, but I wanted to kill that one. It was quiet down there in the canyon—quiet and hot. I looked at Whitney and he looked at me, and I had the sudden, unpleasant realization that he was a coward, added to his other qualifications. Yes, a coward! I saw it in his blurred eyes and the quivering of his bloated lips—stark dumb fear. That was bad. I’m afraid I lost my nerve, too; I make no excuses; fear is infectious. At all events, we tore down out of that place as if death was after us, the mules clattering and flapping in the rear. After a time I rode more slowly, but in the morning we were nearly down at the desert again; and there it lay before us, shimmering like a lake of salt—three days back to water.

“The next two days were rather a blur, as if a man were walking on a red-hot mirror that tipped up and down and tried to take his legs from under him. There was a water-hole a little to the east of the way we had come, and toward that I tried to head. One of the mules gave out, and staggered and groaned, and tried to get up again. I remember hearing him squeal, once; it was horrible. He lay there, a little black speck on the desert. Whitney and I didn’t speak to each other at all, but I thought of those two kegs of water he had upset. Have you ever been thirsty—mortally thirsty, until you feel your tongue black in your mouth? It’s queer what it does to you. Do you remember that little place—Zorn’s—at college? We used to sit there sometimes on spring afternoons. It was cool and cavern-like, and through the open door one could see the breeze in the maple-trees. Well, I thought about that all the time; it grew to be an obsession, a mirage. I could smell the moss-like smell of bock beer; I even remembered conversations we had had. You fellows were as real to me as you are real to-night. It’s strange, and then, when you come to, uncanny; you feel the sweat on you turn cold.

“We had ridden on in that way I don’t know how long, snatching a couple of feverish hours of sleep in the night, Whitney groaning and mumbling horribly, when suddenly my horse gave a little snicker—low, the way they do when you give them grain—and I felt his tired body straighten up ever so little. ‘Maybe,’ I thought, and I looked up. But I didn’t much care; I just wanted to crawl into some cool place and forget all about it and die. It was late in the afternoon. My shadow was lengthening. Too late, really, for much mirage; but I no longer put great stock in green vegetation and matters of that kind; I

had seen too much of it in the last two days fade away into nothing—nothing but blistering, damned sand. And so I wouldn't believe the cool reeds and the sparkling water until I had dipped down through a little swale and was actually fighting my horse back from the brink. I knew enough to do that, mind you, and to fight back the two mules so that they drank just a little at a time—a little at a time; and all the while I had to wait, with my tongue like sand in my mouth. Over the edge of my horse's neck I could see the water just below; it looked as cool as rain. I was always a little proud of that—that holding back; it made up, in a way, for the fear of two nights earlier. When the mules and my horse were through I dismounted and, lying flat, bathed my hands, and then, a tiny sip at a time, began to drink. That was hard. When I stood up the heat seemed to have gone, and the breeze was moist and sweet with the smell of evening. I think I sang a little and waved my hands above my head, and, at all events, I remember I lay on my back and rolled a cigarette; and quite suddenly and without the slightest reason there were tears in my eyes. Then I began to wonder what had become of Whitney; I hadn't thought of him before. I got to my feet, and just as I did so I saw him come over the little rise of sand, swaying in his saddle, and trying, the fool, to make his horse run. He looked like a great scarecrow blown out from some Indian maize-field into the desert. His clothes were torn and his mask of a face was seamed and black from dust and sweat; he saw the water and let out one queer, hoarse screech and kicked at his horse with wobbling legs.

“Look out!” I cried, and stepped in his way. I had seen this sort of thing before and knew what to expect; but he rode me down as if I hadn't been there. His horse tried to avoid me, and the next moment the sack of grain on its back was on the sands, creeping like a great, monstrous, four-legged thing toward the water. ‘Stay where you are,’ I said, ‘and I'll bring you some.’ But he only crawled the faster. I grabbed his shoulder. ‘You fool!’ I said. ‘You'll kill yourself!’

“Damn you!” he blubbered. ‘Damn you!’ And before I knew it, and with all the strength, I imagine, left in him, he was on his feet and I was looking down the barrel of his gun. It looked very round and big and black, too. Beyond it his eyes were regarding me; they were quite mad, there was no doubt about that, but, just the way a dying man achieves some of his old desire to will, there was definite purpose in them. ‘You get out of my way,’ he said, and began very slowly to circle me. You could hardly hear his words, his lips were so blistered and swollen.

“And now this is the point of what I am telling you.” Hardy fumbled again for a match and relit his cigarette. “There we were, we two, in that desert light, about ten feet from the water, he with his gun pointing directly at my heart—and his hand wasn't trembling as much as you would imagine, either—and he was circling me step by step, and I was standing still. I suppose the whole affair took two minutes, maybe three, but in that time—and my brain was still blurred to other impressions—I saw the thing as clearly as I see it now, as clearly as I saw that great, swollen beast of a face. Here was the chance I had longed for, the hope I had lain awake at night and prayed for; between the man and death I alone stood; and I had every reason, every instinct of decency and common sense, to make me step aside. The man was a devil; he was killing the finest woman I had ever met; his presence poisoned the air he walked in; he was an active agent of evil, there was no doubt of that. I hated him as I had never hated anything else in my life, and at the moment I was sure that God wanted him to die. I knew then that to save him would be criminal; I think so still. And I saw other considerations as

well; saw them as clearly as I see you sitting here. I saw the man who loved Mrs. Whitney, and I saw Mrs. Whitney herself, and in my keeping, I knew, was all her chance for happiness, the one hope that the future would make up to her for some of the horror of the past. It would have been an easy thing to do; the most ordinary caution was on my side. Whitney was far larger than I, and, even in his weakened condition—I was weak myself—stronger, and he had a gun that in a flash of light could blow me into eternity. And what would happen then? Why, when he got back to Los Pinos they would hang him; they would be only too glad of the chance; and his wife?—she would die; I knew it—just go out like a flame from the unbearableness of it all. And there wasn't one chance in a thousand that he wouldn't kill me if I made a single step toward him. I had only to let him go and in a few minutes he would be dead—as dead as his poor brute of a horse would be within the hour. I felt already the cool relief that would be mine when the black shadow of him was gone. I would ride into town and think no more of it than if I had watched a tarantula die. You see, I had it all reasoned out as clearly as could be; there was morality and common sense, the welfare of other people, the man's own good, really, and yet—well, I didn't do it."

"Didn't?" It was Jarrick who put the question a little breathlessly.


"No. I stepped toward him—so! One step, then another, very slowly, hardly a foot at a time, and all the while I watched the infernal circle of that gun, expecting it every minute to spit fire. I didn't want to go; I went against my will. I was scared, too, mortally scared; my legs were like lead—I had to think every time I lifted a foot—and in a queer, crazy way I seemed to feel two people, a man and a woman, holding me back, plucking at my sleeves. But I went. All the time I kept saying, very steady and quiet: 'Don't shoot, Whitney! D'you hear! Don't shoot or I'll kill you!' Wasn't it silly? Kill him! Why, he had me dead ten times before I got to him. But I suppose some trace of sanity was knocking at his drink-sodden brain, for he didn't shoot—just watched me, his red eyes blinking. So! One step at a time—nearer and nearer—I could feel the sweat on my forehead—and then I jumped. I had him by the legs, and we went down in a heap. He shot then; they always do! But I had him tied up with the rags of his own shirt in a trice. Then I brought him water in my hat and let him drink it, drop by drop. After a while he came to altogether. But he never thanked me; he wasn't that kind of a brute. I got him into town the morning of the second day and turned him over to his wife. So you see"—Hardy hesitated and looked at the circle of our faces with an odd, appealing look—"it *is* queer, isn't it? All mixed up. One doesn't know." He sank back in his chair and began to scratch, absent-mindedly, at a holder with a match.

The after-theatre crowd was beginning to come in; the sound of laughter and talk grew steadily higher; far off an orchestra wailed inarticulately.

"What became of them?" I asked.

Hardy looked up as if startled. "The Whitneys? Oh—she died—Martin wrote me. Down there, within a year. One would know it would happen. Like a flame, I suppose—suddenly."

"And the man—the fellow who was in love with her?"



Hardy stirred wearily. “I haven’t heard,” he said. “I suppose he is still alive.”

He leaned over to complete the striking of his match, and for an instant his arm touched a glass; it trembled and hung in the balance, and he shot out a sinewy hand to stop it, and as he did so the sleeve of his dinner jacket caught. On the brown flesh of his forearm I saw a queer, ragged white cross—the scar a snake bite leaves when it is cicatrized. I meant to avoid his eyes, but somehow I caught them instead. They were veiled and hurt.

The End. Join us next time for another Thrilling Tale.

