THE WELL IN THE DESERT

BY

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THE WELL IN THE DESERT

CHAPTER I

Blue Gulch was relaxing after the ardors of its working-day. From the direction of the Cheerful Heart Dance Hall issued sounds of mirth and festivity, and a weaving fantasy of shadows on its canvas walls proclaimed to those without that the cheerful hearts were in executive session.

A man coming furtively along Upper Broadway made a detour to avoid the bar of light that shone through the open door of the hall. He passed behind the building, and around the big fandango, where the trip of feet mingled with the tinkle of a guitar and the whirr and thump of a wheel of fortune.

“It can’t be anywhere along here,” he muttered, coming back to the road and pausing to survey the starlit scene.

Blue Gulch had but one street, the two sides of which lay at different levels, separated by the wide yawn of the gulch itself, thrusting into the mountain from the desert below. From where the man stood he commanded a very complete view of the place. In nearly every house was a light, and the shadows thrown upon the canvas walls gave a fair clue to the occupations of those within; so that during the early part of each evening at least neither half of the town need be in any doubt as to how the other half was living.

The life and gaiety of the community in relaxation seemed to gather upon the upper plane. Across the gulch Lower Broadway lay in comparative darkness.

The man drew back again as a couple of shadowy forms came wavering down the road. One of these carried a lantern, which hung low at his side, revealing the heavy miners' boots of the pair, and casting grotesque shadows up the mountain-side.

"Where's Westcott? Why ain't he along?" one asked, as they passed.

The skulking figure in the shadow strained his ears to listen, one hand pressed upon his mouth to keep back the cough that would have betrayed him.

"He's back at his office, digging," was the careless response. "Westcott ain't a very cheerful cuss."

The two laughed lightly, and disappeared within the dance-hall.

When they were out of sight the man came forth again, hurrying past the glowing windows of the Red Light Saloon, stopping beyond it to muffle with his shapeless hat the cough that took toll of his strength. He leaned panting against a boulder, waiting to regain his breath.

The way was more dimly lighted now. He was nearing the civic center of the place, the one bit of level ground in the gulch. Here, a faint light showing from one window, was the mining company's hospital. Beyond this the man passed a big, barn-like structure of wood, that announced itself, by a huge, white-lettered sign, showing faintly in the starlight, as an eating-house. Next it was the low adobe hotel of the place, and farther on, beyond a dark gap,

was a small building, boasting a door and two windows in its narrow front.

The visitor regarded this place consideringly. He thought it more than likely that it was what he sought. Light streamed from both windows and, stepping close, the prowler looked within.

What he saw was a man writing at a rough pine desk. The room was not large. One or two chairs, a couch, and some rude shelves, where a few law books leaned; a small earthen-ware stove, now glowing with heat, completed its furnishings. The watcher's eyes yearned to that stove. He was shivering in the chill autumn night, and he wore no coat. With a muttered curse he opened the door and stepped quickly into the room.

The man inside looked up from his writing, peering past the lamp the better to see his visitor. For a moment he stared, incredulous, then, as recognition was confirmed, he softly slid a hand toward one drawer of his desk. The new-comer noted the movement.

"You can stow that," he snarled, scornfully, "I haven't got any gun."

The other's fingers had already closed upon the handle of a revolver that lay in the drawer. With the weapon in his hand he crossed quickly, from one window to the other, and carefully pulled down the shades. The intruder had stepped into the full glare of the lamp, and now bent forward, his hands upon the desk.

As he stood thus, gaunt, haggard, panting, he seemed little calculated to awaken fear. The hands that clutched the table's edge were trembling and emaciated, and of a curious, waxy pallor. This same pallor was in his drawn, sunken face, and from out the death-

like mask of its whiteness the man's deep-set eyes gazed, heavy with despair.

"I haven't got any gun, Westcott," he repeated. "You needn't be afraid. You played a damned, dirty trick on me, three years ago, but that's all done with. I ain't here to throw it up against you; but I want you to do me a favor."

The lawyer had turned the key in the lock and stood near the door, watching him intently, noting the close-cropped head, the thin, pallid face, the nondescript garments of the wayfarer.

"You managed to escape," he finally said, slowly.

"Yes, I did." The man coughed, clutching the table for support.

"I got away last week," he explained, panting. "Yes—and I stole the clothes," with a glance at the sleeves of his rough gray shirt. "I'm a thief, now, just like you, Westcott."

The other made an inarticulate sound in his throat.

"We'll let all that pass," the intruder said, with a toss of one gaunt hand. "I'm up to no harm, but I've got to have help. I've got out of that hell you left me in at Phoenix; but it won't do me any good. I'm dying!"

Another fit of coughing shook him, until he reeled. Westcott pushed a chair toward him and he sank into it, still gripping the table.

"I'm dying," he said again, when the cough had spent itself, "and I want to get back and die in God's country."

Westcott sat down opposite him, still watching him, intently.

“I can’t walk back,” the man went on, “and I ain’t fit to beat it back. You’re welcome to the fifteen hundred you got off me; but can’t you—for the love of God, *won’t* you—give me the price of a ticket back to Iowa?”

His dull, sunken eyes were akindle, and he leaned forward, an agony of eagerness in his eyes. The prison-born look of age fell from him for the moment and it became apparent that he was not only a young man, but must once have been a comely one, with a powerful frame.

“I heard you were attorney for the Company here,” he went on, as Westcott still kept silent. “You ought to be able to do that for me. You had fifteen hundred of mine.”

The attorney flinched, ever so slightly, then he rose, dropping the revolver into his coat-pocket, and took a turn about the room.

“I—I wasn’t such a beast as it looks,” he finally said, speaking with difficulty. “I’ve been ashamed of myself: I meant to stay and try to clear you. I don’t know how I came to do it; but Jim Texas swore’t was you; and I lost the money playing faro at Randy Melone’s.”

The brief glow in the sunken eyes had burned itself out. The man surveyed Westcott, apparently without interest.

“Jim Texas lied,” he said, apathetically, “and now *you’re* lying. You paid some of that money to Raoul Marty for a horse; and you got away with most of the rest of it in your clothes. You can hear things, even in jail.” This was said with a weary laugh, in which was no mirth.

“You don’t always hear ’em straight,” the attorney replied, with studied gentleness.

“I *was* ashamed, Barker,” he went on, quickly. “I’ve been sorry ever since.”

“Then you’ll give me the price of a ticket?” Hope gleamed again, in the dull eyes. Westcott considered.

“I haven’t got the money here,” he mused; “but I think I can raise some by to-morrow. How would you get down to the railroad?”

“I’ll take care o’ that—” another siege of that racking cough. Barker leaned back in his chair, faint and gasping. Westcott drew a flask and poured some of its contents into a tin cup. The other drained it, eagerly.

“That’ll help,” he murmured, handing back the cup. “I ain’t always so weak as this; but I’ve been hitting the trail for a week, without much grub.”

“Did anyone see you come in?” Westcott asked, with apparent irrelevance.

“No. I kept out of sight.”

“Good!” The other nodded. “That’s what you’ll have to keep doing.”

“I’ve got to go out and see what I can do about that money,” he continued; “and you’ve got to have something to eat. I guess I’ll have to lock you in here while I’m gone, in case anyone should come along. You needn’t be afraid but that I’ll come back,” he added, as the other looked up, in quick suspicion. “It’s safer so, and I want you to have something to eat.”

“I sure need it,” was the reply. “Mighty bad.”

“I know you do; I’ll bring it soon’s I can.” Westcott moved toward the door. “You lay low till I get back.”

“You’re not going back on me?” Barker still studied him.

“Going back on you?” Westcott laughed, shortly.

“Lord!” he exclaimed, “Do you think I didn’t have enough of that?”

He threw some lumps of coal into the little stove. “I’ll have to douse the glim,” he explained, “since I’ll be out around town, and someone might wonder who’s here. You can lie down there.”

He waved a hand toward the couch and Barker nodded.

“I’m pegged out,” he said, wearily. “I’ll just sit here by the fire. Lord! How long is it since I’ve been warm?”

He drew his chair nearer and bent to the glow. Westcott lowered the light and blew out the flame.

“I’ll lock the door on the outside,” he said, “And don’t you worry, Barker: I’ll take care of you. Just trust me.”

“I guess I’ve got to trust you,” was the helpless reply, “I can’t do anything else.” And Westcott stepped out into the night, locking the door behind him.

Once outside he walked along the plaza to the head of the gulch and stood looking down upon the town. The varied sounds of a mining settlement at night came plainly to his ears. A new dancer from over the border was making her first appearance at

Garvanza's that evening, and the Mexicans were gathered in force. There was a crowd of miners in the Red Light Saloon. He could hear their voices.

"How I hate it all," he muttered. "I wish I was out of it!"

The post-office was on Lower Broadway in the Company's store, where a single light burned, dimly. Farther down was the school-house, where the school-teacher labored by day, with the half-dozen white children of the town, and twice as many young Papegoes. Behind the gulch, climbing heavenward, verdureless, copper-ribbed, austere, lay the mountain, where the mines were.

Westcott had been in Blue Gulch for more than a year. He had drifted out of Phoenix after the Barker affair, glad to get away, where he was sure no one knew of the matter.

There had been no question about Barker's guilt. Jim Texas swore to having seen him knife Lundy. He couldn't have saved him if he had stayed, Westcott told himself. He had never understood why they had not hung the fellow, instead of sentencing him for life.

"Better have done it outright than to kill him by inches in their hell of a jail," he thought.

But now what was to be done with the man? Westcott stood scowling at a house down the gulch. There was a light inside that threw upon the canvas side-wall the gigantic figure of a woman, coughing. It reminded him unpleasantly of Barker.

"Damn the fellow," he muttered. "Wha'd he come up here for, anyway? He'll never live to get back east." He walked on, turning up the collar of his coat. "It's coming winter. The cold'll kill him."

Again he stood pondering, while one by one the lights down the gulch went out. Then he bethought himself of his errand and went stumbling down Lower Broadway in the dark.

The storekeeper was just closing up, but the young fellow turned back to wait upon him.

“I won’t keep you more’n a minute, Farthing,” he said, and proceeded to buy bread and cheese, a tin of meat and a couple of bottles of beer. A little package of tea was an after-thought.

“Going prospecting, Mr. Westcott?” the clerk asked, as he made up the packages.

“Maybe,” was the reply.

Westcott was at the door as he spoke. Young Farthing was putting out the light.

“Oh, Johnnie,” the attorney said, with the air of just remembering, “I want to telephone ... ‘long distance.’ I’m afraid it’ll take some time.” He half hesitated.

The boy looked disappointed; he had planned to get over to the fandango in time to see the new dancer. He spoke cheerfully however.

“That’s all right, Mr. Westcott,” he said, and turned up the lamp again.

“Why can’t I lock up, Johnnie?” Westcott asked; “I’ll bring the key up to the hotel when I come.”

“If you wouldn’t mind—” Farthing looked relieved, “Everything’s all right but just turning out the light,” he added.

“All right.” Westcott gave him a little push; “You go on,” he said, cordially; “I can lock the door as hard as you!”

“I guess that’s true, Mr. Westcott,” the boy laughed, and with a relieved “good-night,” he departed, as Westcott was turning toward the telephone-booth.

Half an hour later the attorney was in his own office, boiling water in a tin pail, on top of the little stove, while Barker, warmed and cheered, made great inroads upon the bread and cheese and the tinned meat. Presently Westcott made tea in the pail.

“Seems like old prospecting days, don’t it?” he said with ostentatious cheerfulness, as he filled the tin cup. “I dare say you’ve had your share of them?”

“Some.... A-a-h!” Barker drank, blissfully, of the strong, scalding brew.

“I located a good claim once,” he said, setting down the cup. “But it was jumped. All I ever got was—”

He paused, in some embarrassment, and changed the subject. “Great stuff, that tea,” he said, and Westcott refilled the tin cup.

“I’ve done better for you than I hoped to,” he volunteered presently. “I couldn’t raise the money in the town—too near pay-day; but I got a pal of mine on the ’phone. He can let me have the cash, and I’ll get it to-morrow. Don’t you worry, Barker.” He answered the question, in the other’s eyes, “I’m looking out for you all right. You don’t need to worry.”

“I’m a pretty sick man,” Barker answered, his white face flushing. “I know I’m done for; but I want to die in the open.”

“Don’t you talk about dying.” Westcott went about the place making it secure for the night. “You’ll be snug as can be here,” he added, “By seven o’clock to-morrow morning this town’ll be practically empty. All the men’ll be at the mine. Sime’s going down to the plain to meet the stage, and the school-teacher’ll be busy. We’ll get you off in good shape.”

He took some papers from the desk and put them in his pocket.

“I wouldn’t show myself, though,” he said. “Keep the curtains down, and lay low. Lock the door after me, and take out the key.”

At the last words the man’s look of anxiety vanished.

“All right,” he replied. “I’ll sure lay low. I haven’t slept much in a week. I’ll be glad enough to take the chance.”

“So long, then,” Westcott said, slipping out.

“So long,” and the key turned in the lock.

CHAPTER II

Having secured the door, Barker took the key from the lock and hung his hat upon the knob.

"Don't want anyone peeking in," he murmured, as he resumed his seat by the fire. He was no longer cold, but there was companionship in its glow.

The meager little office was a palace compared with the cell from which he had escaped, he thought as he looked about him in the dim light from the open door of the stove.

"If he plays me any more tricks—" His mind reverted to Westcott, and the cold sweat stood upon his forehead at the idea of possible treachery.

"Pshaw!" he muttered. "There's nothing more he can do. He's done it all. God! To think I swore to kill him at sight, and here I am begging favors of him."

The angry snarl in his voice changed to a cough, and ended in a whimper.

"I couldn't do anything else," he pleaded, as though arguing with someone. "I want to get back east. I want to die in the open. Hell! I was going mad in that hole."

He rested his head between his fists, torturing himself with memories of the days before he crossed the Divide, the youngest chain-man in the surveyors' gang of a projected new railroad. He

had come from Iowa, and boy-like he sang the praises of his native state all across the alkali plains, until, in derision, his fellows dubbed him “the Iowa barker.”

The name stuck. In Nevada he was plain “Barker.” The others seemed to have forgotten his real name, and as Barker, when he left the outfit, he drifted down into Arizona. He blessed the easy transition when the trouble came that fixed the killing of big Dan Lundy on him. He had kept his real name secret through all that came after.

What had it all been about? What was he doing here to-night? Why hadn’t he killed Westcott, instead of sitting here by his fire?

He passed a wavering hand before his eyes. Oh, yes. Now he remembered. Westcott was going to send him east—to God’s country. Meanwhile, he was dead for sleep. He caught himself, as he lurched in his chair, and rising heavily, he threw himself upon the couch.

It was past noon when he woke. The sun lighted the yellow curtains; the door stood open, and Westcott bent over him, shaking him by the shoulder.

“Barker! Barker!” the attorney called.

“Barker! Wake up! Time to get out of this. I’ve got a chance to send you down to the railroad.”

By degrees he struggled to consciousness, and sat up. Westcott had brought him a big cup of steaming coffee.

“Drink this,” he said, not unkindly.