

THE ADAM CHASER

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Treasures of the storied past, records of prehistoric settlements of the American Indian, lure a young archaeologist, Professor Abington, to the Sonora caves of Arizona where fate plays him a grim trick, and makes him arbiter of the destinies of living men.

CHAPTER I

A BAD HOMBRE

Halfway up a long cañon that cut a six-mile gash through rugged mountains thinly pock-marked with prospect holes, the radiator cap of John Abington's car blew off with a pop like amateur home-brew.

For a matter of a minute, perhaps, that particular brand of automobile developed a lively hot-water geyser. Followed a brief period of steaming, and after that it stalled definitely and set square in the trail which ran through deep sandy gravel and rock rubble—a hot car and a sulky one, if you know what I mean.

Abington harried the starter with vicious jabs of his heel, then crawled reluctantly out into the blistering wind which felt as if it were driving down the sunlight with sharp needle points of heat that stung and smarted the skin where they struck.

The canteens were buried deep under much camp paraphernalia, a circumstance which gave occasion for a few minutes of eloquent monologue. Curiously, the driver's vituperation was directed neither at the car nor the wind nor the heat, but at an absent individual whom he called "Shorty"—and at another named Pete.

Considerable luggage was shifted before the canteens were finally excavated from the floor of the tonneau; both canteens,

because the first one was so completely empty that it made no sound when Abington impatiently shook it.

He was standing beside the car, mechanically sloshing a pint or so of water in the second grimy, flat-bottomed canteen, when a dust-covered roadster came coasting down the four-per-cent grade of the cañon half a mile or so away. He glanced at the approaching car, set the canteen in the sand and helped himself to a cigarette from a silver-trimmed leather case. Abington was leaning against the rear fender in the narrow bit of shade when the roadster came down upon him, slowed with a squealing of dry brakes and stopped perforce. In the rocks and deep sand that bordered the road a caterpillar truck could scarcely have driven around the stalled car.

“In trouble?” A perspiring tanned face leaned out, squinting ahead into the sun through desert-wrinkled eyelids.

“None whatever,” Abington calmly replied, smiling to make the words cheerful. “I’m waiting here for the car to cool off a bit. I hope you’re not in a hurry?”

The driver of the roadster slanted a quick glance at his companion, who slumped sidewise in the seat with his hat pulled low over his eyes.

“Kinda. Got plenty of water?” This in a hopeful tone, which his next sentence explained. “I’m kinda short, myself, but I’ll hit Mina before long, so I ain’t worrying. How much you going to need? Half a canteen do you any good?”

The stalled driver walked forward with a loose, negligent stride which nevertheless covered the ground with amazing

ease. From under straight, black brows his eyes looked forth with apparent negligence, though they saw a great deal with a flicking glance or two.

“It might take me back to where I can fill my canteens, sheriff. I don’t suppose there’s a quart of water in the radiator, and everything’s empty. My fault. I discharged a couple of men I had with me, and I should have been on my guard against some such trick as this. As it was, I failed to stand over them while they unloaded their plunder from the car. At any rate, here I am for the present.”

“Tough luck. I’ll let you have what water I’ve got, but it ain’t much. She kept heating on me, climbing the summit. How far you going?”

“Back to Mina. I want to find those two fellows I let off there.” Abington’s questing black eyes rested on the roadster’s other occupant, shifted to the driver’s hard yet not unkindly face, and he waved the cigarette significantly.

“Better give this fellow a drink, before I empty the canteen.” He nodded toward the slack figure. “And if you’ll pardon the suggestion, sheriff, I’d turn him loose for a bit. Pretty rough riding, even when you’ve got all your hands and feet to hang on by.”

The other gave a short, apologetic laugh.

“Say, this feller’s plumb mean—that’s why I got him shackled that way. Car broke down, the other side of Tonopah, and I’m taking him through alone. He’s a slippery cuss. Had us chasin’ him off and on for two years. I can’t take any chances.”

“You’re not.” If the tone was ironic the eyes were friendly enough. “But the man looks sick. A drink of water and a smoke won’t make him any more dangerous, I imagine.”

“Yeah, I know he acts sick, and he looks sick. But it might be a stall, at that,” The officer turned and eyed his prisoner doubtfully. “I don’t want to be hard on anybody—and I don’t want to be bashed over the bean and throwed out on the desert to die, neither! She’s a lonely road—I’ll tell anybody.”

For all that, he got out, unlocked the tool box on the running board, took out a smaller box of screws, bolts, nuts and cotter pins, fumbled within it with thumb and finger and finally produced a small flat key.

“Never pays to be in a hurry to git a pair of handcuffs open,” he muttered to Abington. “This way’s safe as I can make it. He’s a bad hombre.”

Abington nodded understanding and stood back while the deputy sheriff walked around the car and freed his passenger from the handcuffs which were fastened behind his back.

For an appreciable space the fellow drooped indifferently where he was, not even taking the trouble to rub his chafed wrists, though they must have pained him considerably, swollen and discolored as they were with the snug steel bands and the awkward position forced upon him.

“Have a drink of water,” Abington suggested, not too kindly. More as if he were speaking to a man who was free to go where he pleased.

The fellow looked up at him, nodded and lifted a hand shaking from cramp. Abington unscrewed the cap and steadied the canteen to the man's mouth. He drank thirstily, pushed the canteen away with the back of his hand, lifted his hat and drew a palm across his flushed forehead where the veins stood out like heavy cords drawn just under the skin.

"Thanks!" He gave Abington another glance, a gleam in his eyes as of throttled speech.

"Have a smoke. Here, keep the case while we're getting the car started." Abington glanced at the officer. "You've no objection, I suppose?"

"Hell, no! What do you take me for? Just because I use some precautions against being brained while I'm busy driving don't mean I'm hard boiled." He sent a measuring glance toward either side of the straight-walled cañon. Within half a mile there was no cover for a man, and the cliffs rose sheer. "You can get out if you want to, Bill," he said to the prisoner. "Guess you won't go far with them leg irons."

"Thanks." The prisoner's voice was perfunctory, and he seemed in no great hurry to avail himself of the privilege. While the others walked to the stalled car—the deputy watching over his shoulder—the prisoner sat where he was, smoking a cigarette from Abington's leather-and-silver case.

The stalled car refused to start. That mechanical condition, which is called freezing, held the cylinders locked fast until such time as the expansion subsided, and in the fierce heat of that cañon the motor cooled very slowly. Abington suggested

coasting backward to the first place where a turnout had been provided.

“There’s a turnout, back here a couple of hundred yards or such a matter. If you can give me a push over this little hump, I think the car will roll down the road easily enough,” he explained. “I’ll have to keep it in the road, sheriff, or I could manage alone.”

The deputy rather liked being called sheriff, and he was anxious to reach Carson City that evening with his prisoner. Until Abington’s car moved out of the way, he himself was stalled, since he could not move forward more than the hundred feet which separated the two cars. There was no other road down that cañon.

“If Bill Jonathan wasn’t feeling so tough, I’d take off the hobbles and make him get out and help,” he grumbled, looking back at the roadster. “But I guess he’s sick, all right. He ain’t left the car yet. Well, you get in and hold ’er in the ruts, Mister”

“My name is Abington. I’m an archaeologist—”

“That right? My name’s Park. I’m sure glad to meet you, Doctor Abington. Heard a lot about you and them petrified animals and things you’ve been digging up. Got the brake off? All right—”

But the best he could do, just at first, was to rock the car a few inches each way. Between shoves he looked over his shoulder. The prisoner apparently preferred the shade of the car to the heat of the sun, and Park soon ceased to worry about him. Midway between Tonopah and Mina would be a poor spot to

choose for a walk away, even if the man were free to walk, he reflected.

However desperate he might be, Bill Jonathan was no fool. He knew well enough that Park would shoot at the first hint of trouble. The deputy grunted and turned his attention to the work at hand.

Abington got out and helped claw the hot loose sand away from behind the rear wheels, got in again and steered while Park braced himself and heaved against the front fender. The car moved backward nearly a foot, and the two grinned triumphantly at one another.

“Next time—I’ll get her—Doctor Abington!” the deputy puffed, glancing over his shoulder as he mopped trickles of sweat from face and neck. A thin wreath of cigarette smoke waved out from the prisoner’s side of the roadster, and Park grinned at Abington behind the wheel.

“Hope you’re well fixed for cigarettes!” He chuckled good-humoredly. “Bill’s trying to smoke enough to last till he gets outa the pen, looks like.”

“He’s welcome,” Abington returned, a smile hidden under his pointed black beard. “I’ve plenty more.”

“Just as you say. All right, let’s give her another shove. Gosh, it’s hot!”

Grunting and straining, Park moved the car three feet backward to where a nest of small stones halted it again. Encouraged by the small progress, the two knelt again behind

the rear wheels and began to paw a clear path in the gravel. The "hump," one of those small ridges which characterized desert roads, would be passed within the next six feet.

At the precise moment when Park was kneeling with his back half turned from his own car, he heard his starter whir with an instant roar of the motor just under a full feed of gas.

The roadster shot backward up the trail, guided evidently by guess and a helpful divinity, since Bill Jonathan's head never once appeared outside the car to watch the trail behind him. Park jumped up, pulled his old-fashioned range-model Colt and fixed six shots in rapid succession, evidently realizing that he must get them all in before the car was out of range. With the sixth shot the glass was seen to fly from a headlight, then the hammer clicked futilely against an empty shell.

Park swore as he started running up the trail after the car, the driver's head now plainly in sight as he leaned out and watched the road. A good fifteen miles an hour he was making in reverse; and unless a car came down the cañon and stopped him as Park had been halted, for the simple reason that he could not turn out, Bill Jonathan seemed in a fair way of making his escape.

"The damn fool! He can't get far with them leg irons on!" Park grunted, coming to a stop where the roadster had stood. "That's what I get for being so damn soft hearted! I *told* you he was a bad hombre, Doctor Abington!"

CHAPTER II

SYMBOLS OF MYSTERY

Abington walked forward a few steps, stooped and picked up his cigarette case from the hot sand of the trail.

“Spencer founded his whole philosophy on the premise that there is a soul of goodness even in things evil,” he observed with the little hidden smile tucked into the corners of his black-bearded lips. “Your man has made off with your car, but he very thoughtfully returned my cigarette case—not altogether empty, either. Not knowing I have a full carton in the car, he has left us a cigarette apiece; which proves the soul of goodness within the evil. Will you have a smoke, sheriff?”

“Might as well, I guess,” Park grumbled, his eyes on the departing car. “This is a hell of a note! Doctor Abington, what we’ve got to do is make it in to Mina and get word out to the different towns before Bill can make Tonopah or Goldfield.

“Thunder! Who’d ever think he’d try to pull off a stunt like that? I was going to take the irons off his legs, but I kinda had a hunch not to. Never dreamed he’d pull out with the car while his legs was shackled; did you?”

“I’m afraid my mind was quite taken up with my own problem.” Abington confessed in a slightly apologetic tone. “I’m not accustomed to chasing live men, you know. It’s the dead ones I’m interested in, and the longer they’ve been dead the better.

“Nevertheless, sheriff, I realize your predicament. If there’s a long-distance telephone in Mina you can intercept the fellow at Tonopah, I should think.” He was thoughtfully turning the cigarette case over in his fingers as if his habit was to admire its glossy brown leather and the silver filigree. Now he slipped it into his pocket and turned to retrace his steps.

“I suppose we ought to get the old boat headed down the trail, sheriff. Your prisoner went off with your canteen, you know, so we’ll have to pet my motor along as best we can. But she’ll roll down the cañon in neutral, and then we’ll drive it as far as we can—which may not be far.

“At the turnout, down the road here, I’ll get the car headed in the other direction, and it wouldn’t surprise me if we beat your man in, after all. Will he have gas enough to take him to Tonopah?”

“Lord, yes! I filled the tank plumb full, and it’s one of them old thirty-gallon tanks. But somebody’ll maybe run across him trying to fill the radiator or something, and see the leg irons and take him in. Tires ain’t none too good—maybe he’ll have tire trouble. I sure hope so,” he added unnecessarily.

Abington, leaning to push at the side of the car while he kept one hand on the steering wheel, did not answer. Park added his weight at the front fender, straining until his gloomy countenance went purple. The car rolled over the hump, and Abington hopped nimbly to the running board, watched his chance and straddled in behind the wheel.

Some time was lost in negotiating the turn. After that, coasting down the road with a dead engine cooled the cylinders considerably. By skillful management Abington was able to start the motor and use what power was needed to drive the car up over certain small knolls near the foot of the cañon.

At the edge of the long valley, a hill gave them momentum sufficient to carry them well down toward a white, leprous expanse, called Soda Lake, with a tiny settlement a few miles beyond. Here, in the chuck holes of the soda-incrusted lake bed, the car refused to go any farther without power, and power in that grilling heat required a full radiator.

Even so, the two made fair time walking, and at the settlement Abington was able to hire a man to haul water out to the car. Also, Park was successful in getting wires through to the sheriff's office at Tonopah, and also at Goldfield, the only points he believed Bill Jonathan would attempt to reach.

"If you like, sheriff, we can follow up your man at once," Abington suggested when Park came out of the telegraph office looking less worried. "I'm willing to postpone the pleasure of chastising Shorty and Pete, and drive you straight through to Tonopah. Water is the only thing I needed for the trip, and the man is waiting out here with a full supply, ready to drive us back to my car. At the most we will be only three hours behind the fugitive and, as you say, he can't do much with leg irons on.

"He'll need to have a remarkable run of luck if he reaches there ahead of us. For instance, your motor had been heating, and you had only half a canteen of water. As I remember the road, there's a long, hard climb for several miles beyond that cañon.

He'll be compelled to fill up with water at that spring just over the summit; one stop, at least, where he will have enough awkward walking to hold him there twice as long as a man with his legs free. So—"

"Say, Doctor Abington, you sure can figure things out!" Park grinned while he bit the end off a forlorn-looking cigar he had just bought at the little store. "You ought to be a detective."

"I am. I've been trying to detect the origin of the human race, for years now," Abington smiled. "It's the same kind of figuring brought down to modern conditions. If you're ready, sheriff, we'll get underway."

So back they went, roaring up the long rough trail to the cañon and on to Tonopah. They did not meet a soul on the way, nor did they overtake Bill Jonathan and the roadster. Neither did they glimpse anywhere a sign of his turning aside from the main highway, though Park's eyes watered from watching intently the trail.

Abington proved to be a scientifically reckless driver and a silent one withal. Within an incredibly short time he landed a grateful deputy at the sheriff's office in Tonopah, bade him an unperturbed adieu, drove his car into a garage and established himself comfortably in the best hotel the town afforded—all with the brisk, purposeful air of one who is clearing away small matters so that he may take up the business which really engrosses his mind.

In his room at the hotel John Abington dragged the most comfortable chair directly under the two-globe chandelier,

lighted a cigarette from the pasteboard box which he took from his pocket, and pulled out the leather cigarette case as if this was what he had been all along preparing to do.

“Got a tack from the upholstery, no doubt, for a stylus,” he mused. “Old car—binding probably loose on the door pocket—that’s where it gives first. H’m! That’s what he waited for. Knew he meant to escape, of course—saw it in his eyes. H’m! Let’s see, now.”

Abington blew a cloud of smoke and thoughtfully examined the case as he turned it over slowly in his hand, just as he had done when he picked it up in the cañon road.

As he studied it his lips moved in that silent musing speech which was his habit—the black beard offering perfect concealment for his soundless whisperings.

“H’m! Clever of him—hieroglyphics adapted to code work. Let’s see. The old Babylonian ‘chain of evil’—three links, meaning ‘not so bad.’ Following that, a man. Humph! That’s Bill himself, no doubt.

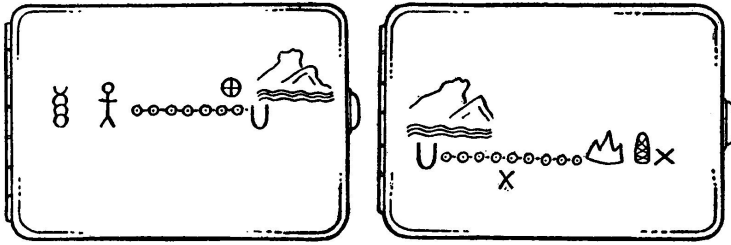
“Nest—h’m!—that’s Egyptian; the old Egyptian symbol denoting the number of days in a journey, but with the Babylonian and Manchurian moon month at the end. Probably meant a month’s journey, and didn’t know the sign for it. Bill, my lad, you show intelligence above the average layman, at least.

“Now, what’s all this? Water sign, mountains, stopping place—Bill descended to picture writing there, I see! That’s the mountain across from my camp where I took Bill in and fed










him—gave him my best hiking boots, too, by Jove! My camp by the river— Bill, you are ingenious!

“Without a doubt you wish me to understand that within a month you will be at my old camp by the river—counting on more food and more boots, perhaps! H’m! I don’t just know about that.

Bill’s message, written in hieroglyphics such as are found among the rock carvings of Nevada.



Key

- | | | | |
|--|--|---|-------------------------------------|
|  | {Chain of evil (old Babylonian).
{Something bad or unlucky. |  | =Water—a river. |
|  | =Man. |  | =mountains, premodified Manchurian. |
|  | {=Suns.
{=Days' journeys. |  | =mummy—a burial. |
|  | =Babylonian moon phases. |  | =plural. |
|  | =Stopping place. | | |

“Don’t see how you are going to make it. Handicap too heavy. Doubt whether I myself could overcome the obstacles—leg irons, officers on the watch, posses on the trail, three hundred miles to go— Bill, old fellow, if you make it you’ll prove yourself a man worth helping! You won’t get half the distance—but if you do, you may have my next-best boots and welcome!”

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