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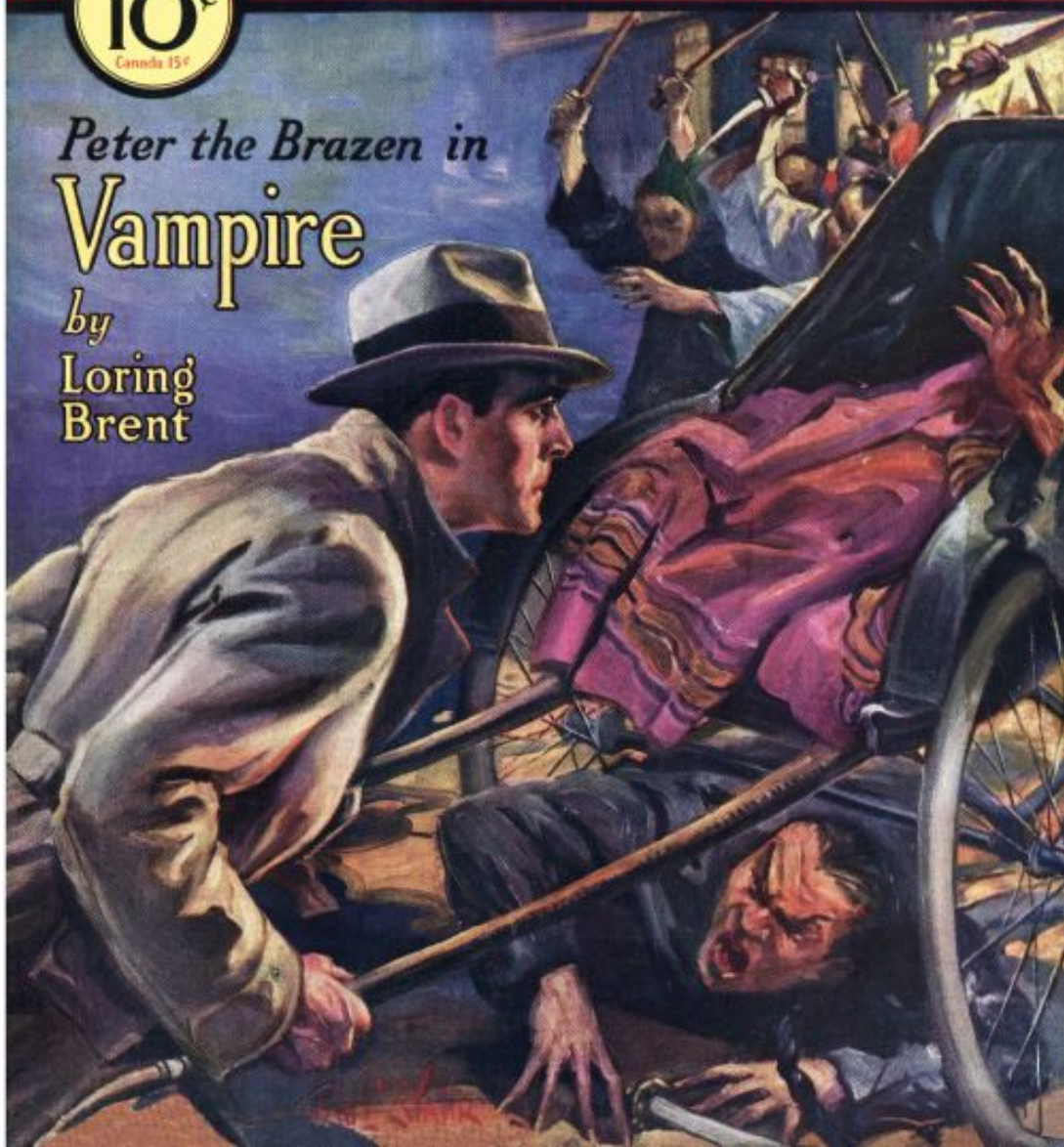
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Pay Dirt

A Whispering Tale

By

Erle Stanley Gardner

Author of "The Man with Pin-Point Eyes," "Sign of the Sun," etc.

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Death in the desert is a grimmer thing than elsewhere—but in all ways the desert is a grim school for men, as Pete and his partner knew only too well

CHAPTER I. A DYING MAN'S WISDOM.

I could tell that he was going to die, almost from the first minute I saw him. I've lived too long in the desert to be fooled on those things.

He was running, if you could call it that. And that was a bad sign. Then again he had most of his clothes torn off. And he was soft and he had been fat. Those things weigh against a man when the desert has her way with him.

It was along in the afternoon, and the sun was sending out long shadows. The man showed as a speck at first, wobbling in a crazy zigzag. His shadow was jet black, as is the way with desert shadows in the summer.

Old Pete knows the desert even better than I do.

"Get that second burro unpacked," he told me. "There's some canned tomatoes in that pack, and we'll need the canvas, and all the water. Take one of the blankets and soak it in water."



The youngster was having an uphill battle

We weren't over five miles from Owl Wells, so we had water and to spare. I started throwing off the pack ropes. Pete went out to meet the running man.

I caught a glimpse of Pete trying to flag the man down. He waved his arms, shouted, yelled. It wasn't any use. The guy was plumb loco. Pete finally had to catch him. Then the guy let out a whoop and started to struggle, as though Pete had been a cannibal. Then he went limp and Pete eased him down to the desert.

"Make it snappy!" he yelled at me.

I started the burro over that way, sopping water on the blankets as I came.

The fellow was an awful sight.

His skin was like a boiled lobster. His lips were cracked until they were taut, drawn back from the teeth. The tongue was black and swollen. Most of the clothes were gone. Pete took off the few rags that remained. We lay him on the wet blanket, put a little tomato juice in his mouth, sprinkled him with water, made a shade with the big bed canvas.

"Any chance?" I asked, knowing that there wasn't, but just to be sociable.

Pete shook his head.

The man had been too fat. Thirst and heat had sizzled the lard off of him.

And when that happens there's some sort of an acid poison that gets into the system. It does with every one who gets out in the desert when it's hot. But a fat man gets it worse. That's why we always use tomatoes instead of water. It helps to cut that acid.

We worked until sunset with this party. Along about dusk he opened his eyes and was conscious.

We'd been feeding him tomatoes and keeping his skin sopped with water.

As soon as he came to, we gave him some more water. He gulped it down as though he had been a piece of dried blotting paper.

"More," he said.

Pete shook his head.

"Not yet. Try to sleep."

The man rolled his head from side to side.

"The judge," he said.

Pete frowned.

"What about the judge?"

The man tried to talk, but his tongue got in his way and he was awfully weak.

"The automobile—broken axle—tow car—judge—"

He closed his eyes.

Pete looked at me and frowned.

"Say, d'you s'pose there's another one of 'em out in the desert? They must have come in from the auto road. Tried a short cut, maybe."

He cocked his eye over toward the east. A full moon was tipping its rim over the hills.

"Say, Bob," he said, "d'you s'pose you could track this pilgrim by moonlight?"

"Maybe."

"If you can't, you can stay with him and I'll go."

I reached for my hat.

"I can track him if you could," I said, which wasn't exactly true. There's no man can hold his own with Pete Harder in the desert. But then, I wasn't going to let Pete get too puffed up.

I waited to see if he was going to make any come-back.

"The quicker you start the sooner you'll find out," he said. "This guy's got about one chance in a hundred. I'll know by morning. If he can move I'll make Owl Wells. What I'm afraid of is that there may be a woman—"

I didn't hear the rest. I was moving away in the desert.

You can track easier when the moon is angling up or down. It makes shadows back of the little ridges of disturbed sand. When it's straight overhead, it flattens things out too much.

I wanted to cover all the ground I could, so I pushed right along. After five miles I got a hunch my man had been walking in a circle. I cut across at right angles, and picked up his tracks again within half a mile. I backtracked those for a mile, then did the same thing, and made another short cut.

This time the steps were more evenly spaced and were in a straight line. Looked as though he'd been more certain of himself then, and a lot stronger. I pushed right along. The course he was traveling would have been a short cut over the Red Mountains to the automobile road,

and I knew a short cut that would take off a whole lot of miles from that. I acted on a hunch and took that short cut.

As soon as I came down out of the mountain pass on the old Indian trail I could see the machine. The moon was pretty much overhead now, but the shadows were black as ink, what there was of them. The road was an old short cut some of the old-timers used. There wouldn't be a machine over it in a month.

They'd taken out the rear axle all right. The car was right there and was going to be for some little time. I poked around in it. There were suitcases, a couple of bags of golf sticks, some overcoats, and a lot of junk. The baggage was expensive.

There wasn't any sign of a canteen. Either they didn't have any or they'd taken 'em with them. I was inclined to think they hadn't had any.

There was a little pile of charred embers by the side of the running board, an empty thermos bottle, and some grease-stained papers. I looked around and found some chicken bones and bread crusts.

Looked as though one of the men had gone for help, the other had stayed with the car—for awhile. He'd eaten the lunch. The embers weren't so awfully old. I looked at the radiator and found it was full of water, looked around the car and found the tracks of two men all milled up. Then one set of tracks headed out over the desert. Those were the tracks of the man we'd found. I poked around and found the other man's tracks. He'd started back down the road.

He'd started running almost at once. Maybe he'd got thirsty waiting, maybe he'd just got the lost-panic. People get that way when they're left alone in the universe with themselves. They want to start running. It's just a panic, fear feeding on fear.

I swung back down the road. Within two miles I found a coat and vest. There were papers in the pocket, a watch in the vest. It had run down. There was a big Masonic emblem on the chain, gold set with diamonds.

I kept on. The man had simply run himself to death. Maybe it had been the heat, maybe it had been his heart. I found him blotching the road in the moonlight less than five miles from the car.

His tongue wasn't swollen, his clothes were on and he hadn't shredded the flesh from his fingers, digging in the coarse sand with his hands at the last, so I knew he hadn't died from thirst.

That seemed to account for everybody. Just two men.

I buried him where I found him in a shallow grave that would keep the buzzards off, even if it didn't stop coyotes. I figured on coming back and finishing the job later.

I put the papers from his coat in my pocket.

He'd been a judge of a superior court some place, and his name was Charles McNaught. I had some canned tomatoes and cooked up a little bacon and warmed over some beans. I was tired. I'd been on the move all day and most of the night. The moon was getting pretty well in the west.

I figured on making Owl Wells because it was nearest and if Pete had been able to move the other man he'd be there.

If he couldn't move him by morning it'd mean there'd be two graves instead of just one.

The burro would have liked a long lay-off, but I gave him only two hours. Then we hit for the wells.

It was ten o'clock in the morning when we got there. Pete was there—alone.

“Cash in?” I asked.

He nodded. “Find the judge?”

“Yeah. If he’d waited at the car he’d have been O. K. If he’d thought of the radiator he’d have had enough water to have lasted him a week. But he ate a fried chicken lunch and then started to run. His pump stopped.”

Pete ran his fingers through the white stubble along his chin. There was a funny look in his eye.

“Listen to me, and listen careful,” he said. “My man got conscious along toward morning. He could talk. I knew he was going and he knew it, too. His name is Harrisson Bocker. He’s a millionaire. He’s got a son named Edward that’s in college some place or other. I’ve got the address written down.

“The guy could talk rationally about some things. Other things he was goofy on. Seemed he’d made some sort of what he called a ‘spendthrift trust’ for his boy. The judge was the trustee. Old Bocker figured the judge was maybe croaked. That’d invalidate the trust and mean the boy would take the money all in one gob. Bocker said he’d blow it in. He always was an easy mark, sort of a rich man’s kid.

“Well, the long and short of it was, he made me his trustee if old McNaught had cashed in, changed his will accordingly. I’m sole trustee. What I say goes. The kid don’t get any money until he’s forty unless I say he can have it. I can let him have all I want. If he gets married without my consent he loses everything. What do you think of that?”

I looked old Pete over.

“I think the guy was batty and you let him go ahead knowing he was crazy as a loon. He never even saw you before. What do you know about trusts?”

Pete chuckled.

“That’s what you think. Nobody can prove nothin’, and I’ve always wanted to have the handling of one of these rich men’s sons. Let us go get the coroner. I want this here official.”

CHAPTER II. A DESERT MAN'S WARD.

I was a witness at the inquest, and then I lost track of Pete for a few months. I heard generally what was happening. The kid didn't take kindly to Pete as a trustee. He got a lawyer and they fought for a while, but the codicil to the will was in his dad's own handwriting all right, and Pete gave some pretty strong testimony. The kid couldn't even get money to pay a lawyer unless Pete let him have it, after the first court sustained the trust. So the kid gave in and accepted Pete.

In summer vacation Pete stopped the kid's allowance and brought him up to Kernville.

Kernville's up in the mountains on the rim of the Mojave Desert. It's where the big mountains and the edge of the big desert meet, and it has something of both the desert and the mountains in its climate.

Looked at in one way, it's civilization, but it's pretty close to the jumping-off place. The desert sends streamers licking at the foot of the mountains like dry tongues. The cañons are filled with sand, prickly pear, Joshua trees, the weird desert cacti. The mountains are high, dry walls of crumbling rock with snow glistening on the ridges. Then, on the other side of the mountains, are roaring streams, pine timber, shaded slopes.

The Mojave Desert stretches to the east, runs into Death Valley, then sweeps along through the Pahrump Valley down through Nevada and Arizona, way on into New Mexico. It's all the domain of the desert, although the desert changes in every locality.

Men grow hard in Kernville. Big Bill Bruze lived in Kernville and he was hard. Nell Thurmond waited tables for Martha Stout, and Big Bill was sweet on Martha's help. And you couldn't blame him. Nell was pretty.

I was there when young Bocker arrived.

He gave his name as E. Reed Bocker. Pete asked him why he did that and the kid said Edward was common. He was like that.

Pete glared at him. "Your name's Ed Bocker up here," he said, "common or not." And E. Reed Bocker became Ed Bocker.

Pete put him to work in the mine.

Big Bill Bruze was foreman at the mine.

Ed Bocker was one of those handsome men. He had a profile like a movie picture actor, and his eyes were big and soulful. He was well muscled, not strong, just beautifully molded. His waist was slim, his shoulders broad and he drawled his a's when he talked.

I guess it was the first time that Pete had seen the kid at close range. He sure was enough to make a man go take a drink of rotgut.

He was so soft his skin would blister if he made three passes with a shovel. His hair had to be combed just so, and he had to have his suits pressed every couple of days. He brought along a bag of golf sticks "for exercise."

That was when Pete stopped his allowance and put him to work.

Within three days Ed Bocker was the most hated man in Kernville. He was everything he shouldn't be: a patronizing, educated, snobbish, weak-willed nincompoop, and three years at college hadn't helped him any.

Martha Stout was the only one who saw anything good in the kid.

Martha had trained animals in a circus before she got so fat she couldn't wear tights.

"It ain't the kid," she said. "It's his training."

And she sold Nell Thurmond on the idea, because Nell started returning the kid's smiles.

That started the fight.

The kid thought he was working in the mine. He actually wasn't earning his salt. Pete was paying the superintendent for the privilege of having the kid draw wages. And the kid was snobbing it around, telling everybody how everything should be done.

Then he and Nell fell for each other. She liked his soulful eyes, and she and Bill Bruze had had a spat over something anyhow.

The two went to the picture show, Ed and the girl. Big Bill was waiting outside.

Ed had confided to me that he'd taken boxing lessons in school, and had stood well at the head of his class. He seemed to think he could handle Dempsey with one hand.

But Big Bill called him.

The kid turned up his upper lip.

"I don't brawl," he said, and stuck out his arm for Nell to take.

Nell looked at him.

"Aren't you going to stick up for your rights?" she asked.

Big Bill Bruze stepped forward and slapped the kid across the mouth. He flushed, but kept his eyes straight ahead.

"I don't brawl," he repeated.

Nell's eyes blazed.

"Well, you're going to brawl if you go with me, big boy!" she said, and pushed him into Big Bill. At the same time Big Bill stuck out his left. It smeared the kid up a bit.

The kid adopted the correct boxing attitude.

"Very well," he said.

Big Bill swung a right. The kid made the correct college block. But Bill's fist ripped the blocking arm to one side and crashed the kid on the jaw.

Ed Bocker's features bore that look of dazed incredulity that a mathematician would have if he saw the multiplication table go haywire.

He made a ladylike left lead.

It was technically correct. It landed squarely on the point of Bill's jaw. But it might have been a mosquito buzzing for all the good it did. Bill walked right into it, planted himself and swung a right to the stomach.

The kid was out the minute that right crashed.

But Bill Bruze was a bully and a killer. He was six feet of whipcorded strength, and he was jealous. What was more, he hadn't got the kid's looks, and he was sore at the kid because of that profile.

Bill measured the distance.

His right smashed the beautiful nose to powder. His left took out a couple of front teeth. His right put a permanent scar over the left eye. Then the kid hit the cement like a sack of meal. The bystanders prevented Bill kicking in his face, after he'd swung his foot for the second time.

Ed Bocker was four weeks healing, and then he looked like something the cat had dragged in.

He went to Bakersfield and a doctor told him a plastic surgeon could fix him up. Pete wouldn't let him have the money.

"You're gettin' over one handicap now," he said. "That damned beauty of yours. If you could only forget your education and the way you dawdle along on your a's when you talk, you might make a man."

The kid cried, he was so mad. Pete said things about a bawl baby and walked away.

Women are funny. Both Martha Stout and Nell Thurmond stuck up for the kid. Nell gave Big Bill Bruze the gate. She kept all her smiles for Ed Bocker. But the beating seemed to have turned Bocker plumb yellow. Bruze threatened to beat him up again if he even looked at Nell, and Bocker kept away.

The way I figured it, any man who would let fear of a beating keep him away from a girl he liked wasn't worth shooting.

Pete was worried about it. The summer was about over, and it looked like his whole plan was a fizzle. The kid was just a false alarm.

Pete asked me what I thought, and I told him.

"He ain't worth bothering with," I said. "Give him all his money and hope he drinks himself to death. Better yet, buy him the booze yourself. Or else pick a dark night and bump him with a club. Far as society's concerned he's a total loss."

Pete clawed at his white stubble.

"That's about the way I figure," he admitted, "but Martha Stout knows a lot about animals an' about men. She says he's got pay dirt. That it's his trainin' that's to blame. He's just one of those kids that was born with a gold spoon in his mouth. He tells me his dad wouldn't let him associate much with the kids at college, because they were common. It's his trainin'."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You an' me ain't got no education to live down," Pete went on. "We don't know nothin' about the handicap this kid's got."

I walked away. Pete's adopted kids were nothing to me.

CHAPTER III. YELLOW.

Pete went out in the desert on a prospecting trip. He left the kid there without any money. The kid had hardened his muscles a bit by working in the mine. But he was yellow all the way through. His spirit was just as soft as it had been the day he landed.

He avoided Nell Thurmond because Bruze told him to. Nell wouldn't notice Bill Bruze. And the kid's face had healed up into a crooked mask that was a distortion of his former beauty.

I was worried about the whole thing. Seemed like Pete should have left this kid to live the only sort of a life he knew.

Then Pete came staggering into town with some gold that was enough to make a stampede. It was coarse gold, like wheat grains, and Pete was loaded with it. His coat had gold in all the pockets.

But Pete was in a bad way. He sent for old Doc Smith.

Doc Smith is sort of a father confessor to the town. He's young in years, but old in knowledge. He came to the country that borders the desert because he thought he could do some good there. He writes philosophy, acts as judge, and patches up the sick.

Doc Smith treated Pete, and then he sent for me.

"Pete's cashing in," he said. "He's located a bonanza, but his heart gave out on him. He wants you to take his kid and go back there."

"His kid?"

"The adopted kid, Ed Bocker."

"That kid couldn't live in the desert."

Doc Smith shrugged his shoulders. He gave me a pencil scrawl. "Here's a map Pete made before he became unconscious. He gave it to Martha Stout, who's acting as nurse. She gave it to me. Pete was unconscious when I got there. He won't ever regain consciousness. You've got to start right now, before some one tries to trail you."

I looked at the map and whistled.

It was a bum map, but I could tell where the main range was. It was down in the worst section of desert I'd ever been in. Pete had scrawled on the bottom. "It's up one of these cañons marked with a circle. My heart went bad on me, and I walked for days without remembering where I was."

That was all. It was a heck of a map.

"I want to see Pete," I told Doc Smith.

"Walk on tiptoes," he said.

I followed him into the room. Martha Stout was there, fat and efficient. Pete was stretched in bed, his face like wax, his eyes rolled up, his lips blue. He was motionless. I touched his flesh. It was like ice.

"He'll die inside of two days at the latest. If he wakes up and finds you haven't started the shock will kill him right then," said Doc Smith.

"I'm startin'," I told him.

I groped around until I found Pete's limp, cold hand, shook it, and promised him. I thought the eyebrows might have moved a little. Then I groped for the door. My eyes were all

swimmy. Pete had been a pal of mine for years.

I got the kid rounded up.

That beating had done things to his soul, more than it had to his face. He was like a frightened quail, and he'd cringe every time he saw a man look at him real hard. That tickled the boys. There were lots to look at him real hard.

The things we needed I threw into a car. We'd outfit at Needles. We made Needles by daylight the next morning. The kid was helpless when it came to doing anything. He couldn't even drive the car.

We got our burros together and started out into the desert.

That's real desert, down south of Needles. There are stretches of it that don't see a human being once in five years. And there are stretches where the sand hills get up and walk around.

Down toward Yuma they couldn't build an automobile road across those hills for years, until some slick engineer figured out a way to hold the road. For years they had a long road of planks fastened together so the road could be lifted and shifted. When the sand hills would march over the road they'd pull the road up and around. It would have broken a snake's back to follow it. And it broke the motorists' hearts.

They've solved the road problem, but the sand hills still walk around.

That's the section of the desert where the whispers hang out. Every night the desert seeps with whispers. Of course they aren't really whispers, just the sand slithering against the sand on the wings of the wind. But it makes lots of whispering noises, and, just when you're dropping off to sleep, it sounds like whole words and sentences.

That's the true desert. People who have lived in it for a long time get the same way the desert is, hard and gray, and with a whispering note in their speech.

Ed Bocker and I headed into that desert with three pack burros and two saddle burros.

Misfortune dogged us from the start.

One of the saddle burros was gone the second night. The third night the other saddle burro followed suit. I'd hobbled him, but he gnawed through the hobbles.

It was funny. I'd never had anything quite like that before. I wouldn't have believed a burro could have gnawed those hobbles, but I found 'em in the desert in his tracks.

Seemed like the first burro had followed him up and enticed him away. I found the tracks.

After that Ed and I had to walk.

His feet blistered and his face peeled. He sobbed and wanted to go back. I threatened him with a beating if he even looked back over his shoulder, and he stumbled on.

It was Pete's dying request, and I was going to see it through, but it sure was a trial. That kid was a thorn in the flesh, and I don't mean maybe.

We had to limit our water. Virtually none for washing, just enough for drinking to keep us going. It was awfully hard at first, particularly on Ed. After a while we toughened to it. I naturally got used to it first.

The work in the mine had toughened him up some, but his trouble was lack of grit. The desert toughened him more, walking every day through soft and shifting sand, scrambling over hard ridges of rock outcropping, working along valleys of rough float.

I kept wondering how those saddle burros had got loose. Then one night I heard a rifle shot. I rolled out of my blankets and got away from the light of the camp fire, jerked my Winchester from its scabbard and waited.

There was nothing more.

In the morning one of our pack burros was dead, shot through the heart. I worked for an hour before I picked up the tracks of the man who had fired that shot. He had been two hundred yards from the burro, with only moonlight to see with. It had been real shooting.

I tried to follow the tracks, but the man was too wise to leave a trail. He hit a rocky ledge and followed it.

I went back to the kid. I was worried now.

The desert is nothing to fool with. We were way out of the beaten track, in a wilderness of sand that was almost unexplored. Maps weren't much good because the sand would get up and walk around overnight. Big mountain ranges were the only things that stayed fixed in that country.

The kid was whimpering. He was frightened. It was too strong for him.

I figured we could carry the lighter packs on the two remaining burros. But how about getting back? And who was following us?

It looked as though some one had been wise to that map and was using us to lead him to the place where the gold was.

Finally we reached the shoulder of the ridge of mountains that Pete had marked with a circle. And I ran on man tracks in the soft sand, tracks that were fresh.

He was a man and he was a big man, and he had two burros with him. I figured he'd be the one who had shot our other burro, and I got the rifle ready as I swung in along his trail.

There was enough of a moon to follow it after the sun set. By midnight I came on his camp. I didn't let the kid know. The camp was just over the ridge. With the first gray of dawn I kicked the kid out.

"Buckle on your six-gun," I told him, "and come along."

"Game?" he asked.

"Game," I said.

He followed me over the ridge. We caught our man just as he was making his breakfast fire.

I thought there was something familiar in his motions the way he reached for his gun when he heard us coming.

"Little late, ain't you?" I asked him, looking down the sights of the Winchester.

He looked up so I could see his face, all twisted with hatred.

It was Big Bill Bruze.

"Gone into the hold-up business?" he asked.

I kept the rifle ready.

"You're not dealing with any college kids now," I told him. "You've called for chips in a man's game and you want to be prepared to play your hand."

He squirmed a bit, looked at the kid.

"Got a chaperon to fight his battles now, eh?"

"Maybe. What are you doing here?"

"Prospectin'. It's government land."

I jerked my head toward my camp.

"They weren't government burros you shot and ran off," I told him.

I could see his face twist with surprise and thought at the time he was doing some good acting. And that made me mad, madder than if he'd denied it with a wink or a grin.

“Never mind opening your trap,” I said. “You might bite off a soft-nosed bullet. Just open your ears and do some listening. You’ve followed us down here, thinking we’d lead the way to a mine you could steal. Well, we’re not playing *Santa Claus* with any mines, but I’ve got lots of ammunition. If we have any more trouble there’s likely to be some careless shooting and you might get hurt. I’ve forgotten more about this desert than you ever knew.”

And I stopped to let the words soak in.

He was a great big bulk of a man, hairy-chested, big-jawed, broad-shouldered. His shirt was open at the neck and the big muscles of his neck and chest stood out in cords of strength.

“Put down your gun and come ahead,” he invited.

I laughed at him.

“My gun’s my advantage,” I told him. “It’s my ace in the hole, and I ain’t aiming to lay it down. There’s nothing about your face that looks good to me, and the only way I can even bear to look at it is over the sights of a gun.”

“Huh!” he retorted. “Speakin’ of faces, what’s that you’ve got with you? His face looks like it had been through a sausage grinder. What happened to it?”

“A coward kicked it,” I said.

He flushed at that.

“If there’s any more trouble I’m going to take your guns away,” I promised him, and then I motioned to the kid and we went back over the ridge to our camp.

I kept an eye out for ambushes.

CHAPTER IV. A VISITOR.

That afternoon there was a droning noise from the sky. I looked up and made out a plane swinging in wide circles. It's a funny sensation, being out in the desert and seeing a plane snarling through the blue sky like some great bird. That plane had left Needles maybe less than three hours. We'd been toilsome days in coming.

The plane spotted us. The circles got more and more narrow. I looked up at it. Something dark was coming out of the middle of the thing. That something dark hung poised for a minute, and then separated from the plane. I turned sick.

A man was being thrown overboard. Even as I looked, he broke loose and came down, a hurtling black speck, arms and legs spread out, spinning, turning, twisting.

I looked, my mouth warm with a rush of saliva, my stomach weak with horror. Then there was a puff of white. Almost at once a great mushroom of glittering white came out against the blue-black of the sky. It was a parachute.

The plane sailed off.

The black speck dangled and swung against the big mushroom of white. Slowly it drifted to the earth. I could see it was coming down almost on top of us.

It slid down back of a ridge some two hundred yards away. We walked over there, the kid's face white and drawn, my own rifle ready.

I could see it was a girl, untangling herself from the harness of the parachute. She came toward us.

"Nell Thurmond!" I yelled.

She smiled. Her face was a bit pale, and her knees were a little wobbly. It takes nerve for a girl to make her first parachute jump.

"I came to warn you," she said.

Ed Bocker's face was getting red and white by turns.

The girl didn't seem to even notice him.

"Martha Stout went crooked," she said. "She made a copy of the map, and she sold it to Bill Bruze. Bill's here, and he's got three other men who are camped up separate cañons so you can't surprise them all at once. They're planning to let you find the mine and then see that you don't leave the desert. Martha had to copy the map from memory, and they figure that yours is the best map. They think you'll be more likely to find it than they will."

I knew my eyes were bulging. I couldn't figure Martha Stout as a crook, no matter how I went about it.

"Pete?" I asked.

"He died the day after you left. He never regained consciousness."

I looked her over.

"You came to warn us. How about getting back out?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I'll take my fortune with yours . . . Hello, Ed."

He twisted his broken nose as he grinned.

"Hello, Nell."

I looked at the burros. We never would get out now. We had one more mouth to feed, one more person to divide drinking water with.

“Bet you were frightened when you climbed overboard from that plane,” I said.

She didn’t even hear me. She was looking at Ed Bocker.

I sighed and got the burros together. We were getting to where we could make a permanent camp, though we had little to make it with. Pete’s map had showed the location of a spring of water up at the head of one of the cañons, and I figured that cañon was the second over. If there were hostile people in the country the first thing was to get to drinking water.

We marched over the ridges. About dusk we came to the cañon that had the spring.

Two people were camped there. What was more they had monuments on the ground and a location notice.

“Howdy, folks,” I said when we came up.

They weren’t cordial about it.

“You can’t camp here,” one of them said. “This here is a located mineral claim.”

I tried to keep smiling. “I can get water here, anyway.”

He shook his head. “Nope. We can’t afford to take no chances on having the claim jumped.”

I started getting the canteens off the burros.

“Well,” I told him, “we’re not jumping any claims, but we’re almost out of water, and we’re filling up. What’s more, we’re goin’ to come back from time to time and fill up some more.”

He came toward me.

“I gotta stop you.”

“You and who else?”

“My partner.”

He was just a little uncertain, but his right hand was getting pretty close to the holstered gun that swung at his belt.

Living in the desert doesn’t give you much weight, but it gives you a lot of strength per pound and it makes a man plenty active. I got within reaching distance before the right hand could connect with the butt of the gun. My left cracked him on the jaw, staggered him back. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the other man reaching for a gun. Then I saw Ed Bocker get into action. After that my hands were full.

I finally got my man where I could take his gun away from him, and looked around to see what luck Ed was having. He wasn’t having much. His footwork was all the college professor on boxing could have asked for, but it wasn’t getting by in the soft sand with a clump of sagebrush to tangle his feet every once in a while. His broken nose had stopped another punch and it hadn’t done the general effect any good.

But he was swapping punches, and his blows had a little steam to them.

I rolled myself a cigarette.

“Now then, son,” I told him, “are you going to knock that gent out, or are you going to be a sissy all your life?”

He turned to look at me when I spoke, and the reception committee that had taken him on, slammed home a terrific wallop to the chin.

Ed was punch-groggy, but there was something that gleamed out from the back of his eyes I hadn't seen before. He was forgetting some of his complexes and getting down to raw human nature.

He went in, and, for a second or two, he showed speed and strength. His boxing helped him time his punches, and something that had been dormant in him made him put snap in them.

The left measured the distance, the right crossed over, and a sprawling figure staggered backward, poised for a second and then went down with a thud that jarred the earth.

Ed Bocker stood over him, staring with a species of dazed incredulity.

"I knocked him out! I knocked him out! I knocked him out!" he kept repeating.

I didn't pay any attention to him in particular. I left that for the girl. I was busy going through the camp and confiscating firearms. I got two six-guns and a rifle, and I took all the shells I could find.

The one that Bocker had knocked out stayed out. My man was sitting up, nursing a black eye and a bloody nose and gazing at me moodily. My lips were split, and one of my front teeth was wobbly. The sand was all dug up with man tracks. We were a great-looking outfit.

"Any guy that tries to corner water in the desert is a so-and-so," I said. "And, what's more, you guys ain't to be trusted with firearms. You might get hurt."

He didn't say anything.

I filled the canteens, loaded on the captured arsenal, and led the way over the ridge, down a cañon, over another ridge and camped at the head of a little draw where the ridges would break the wind.

We were getting into the region of drifting sands.

No one said very much that night. Twice I caught Ed Bocker looking at his skinned knuckles with sort of a wide-eyed incredulity.

"I knocked him out," he said once.

"Sure you did," I told him. "That's what your fists are for. You box for points in college, but when you get out in the world you fight for knock-outs. It ain't a sociable pastime."

Nell Thurmond didn't say anything. Her eyes were starry.

I made a little camp fire because I wanted some tea, and we had to cook some rice.

But I kept every one but myself away from the circle of firelight, and when they made up their beds I had them bed down far from the fire.

Some one was watching us, it seemed to me. It was an uncomfortable feeling.

I'd just got the rice ready and the tea water boiling when the rifle started to talk.

"Bang!" it went.

I heard the crack of the bullet rushing through the air toward me, and I heard the "*thunk*" as it struck.

I grabbed a rifle and rolled over to one side. I caught the flash of the second shot and answered with a snap shot that must have given the hombre something to think about.

There were no more shots.

I remembered that second bullet had a tin-panny sound when it struck, but I couldn't be bothered just then. I was streaking up the ridge, keeping just below the skyline, watching the skyline of the second ridge over. If I saw anything move against the stars I was going to throw lead. This had quit being a joke.

But I didn't see a thing. Somehow or other, I got the idea I was up against some one who knew as much about the desert as I did, maybe a lot more—only I wouldn't have missed those first two shots.

I went back to camp. They'd had sense enough to kick the fire out, but I could see the glow of an isolated ember here and there.

"Get those embers covered," I said, and began kicking sand over all I could find.

"He hit the canteens," said Nell.

"What?"

"Yes. A hole through each one."

I whistled. "Any water left?"

"Yes," said Ed Bocker, "I knew I couldn't do any good with a gun, so I beat it out to some of the mesquite and whittled plugs. They help, but the water seeps out around them, no matter how tightly I push them in."

I didn't say anything. The water would leak out. With bullet holes in those two big canteens we could never make the long march back out of the desert. It would mean one of us would have to try it, and leave the other two. And I didn't like the idea of leaving the girl with only Ed Bocker to protect her. That stretch of desert was getting mean.

I salvaged as much of the rice as I could, and we had weak tea, not too hot, and rice. We ate in the dark.

I rolled the two into their blankets, pretended to crawl into mine. But I crawled out on the other side and started playing Indian.

The shots had come from a rifle. The two citizens at the spring might have had a rifle cached, but there was Big Bill Bruze to be reckoned with. Maybe he'd done the rifle shooting.

I crawled up along the sandy ridges, sniffing for wood smoke. Finally I located a camp. It was Big Bill, all right. I started to wake him up and have a show-down, then I figured on a better lesson. I still-hunted into his camp, picked out the biggest of his canteens, carried it out into the desert and buried it where I'd find it again. Then I went back to my blankets.

That night the desert began to whisper. The sand hissed over the sand on the wings of the desert night wind, and the whole darkness literally crawled with whispers. I could tell the others were awake, listening.

The desert is a fearsome thing out at night in the land of the marching sand hills when the wind brings the sand to life and the desert begins to whisper. Listening to those whispers will do things to a man's soul. They bite deep. I didn't sleep much.

CHAPTER V. SHOW-DOWN.

Morning, and I organized things. We needed access to that spring and I intended to have it. "I'm going over to the spring," I told Ed Bocker. "You stay here with the girl. Use your head. If anything happens to me you've got to get her out of here."

He didn't argue, just nodded. The desert was doing things to him. I could see that. But I had other things to think about. I went over to the spring. The two looked at me, surly-like.

I kept my eye on them and went through the camp, looking for a rifle. I couldn't find anything that even looked like a rifle. I told the two a few choice sentiments and went back to camp.

There I made the two a little talk.

"We came into this country to find a mine. We're going to find it," I said. "What's more, we're going to have trouble. A little trouble all the time. A devil of a lot of trouble if we locate the pay dirt. Let's go."

We started out. I had the map and did more exploring than the rest. I left Bocker to do most of the guard duty. The girl did the cooking. I covered cañon after cañon; and always I had the feeling of being watched.

Day after day, the program was about the same. It was hard work, looking for gold and watching back trail. It did things to my disposition. It also did things to Bocker. He got thinner, more whipcorded. His eyes were steadier, and his lips took on a firmer line.

Then one day I stumbled onto it. It was up a winding cañon, and I could see there had been some old camp made at the mouth. A little ways on up I found a can with a piece of paper in it. The paper had some of Pete's writing in lead pencil:

IT'S UP AT THE END OF THIS CAÑON

That was a funny message, but I figured it was because Pete's heart had started to go bad on him when he was coming out and he'd left this paper to guide him when he came back.

I stood staring at the piece of paper when a rifle cracked. The report sounded thin and stringy on the hot desert air, but the bullet came cracking through the heat and whipped up the sand within two feet of me. I ducked for cover and got my own rifle into play.

I spotted him up on a ridge, just over the crest, four hundred yards away. He'd been following me, looking at me through binoculars. When he saw me pick up the can with the paper in it, he figured it was a location notice and had gone into action.

I decided to try a trick I'd seen once south of Tucson.

I started walking straight toward the ridge, firing often enough to keep him under cover, making him take little snap shots that went wild at the distance. Fifty yards, and I came to a protecting ridge that ran up and headed the ridge he was on.

I didn't come over the top of that ridge the way he figured I would, but I started running for all that was in me, working up toward where the ridge joined the main formation.

I got up there, eased over the top, waited until I got my breath enough to hold the gun steady, and then began to slip down, on the same side of the ridge where my friend was.

Two hundred yards, and I got where I could see him. He was stretched out just back of the crest, his rifle at his shoulder, waiting for me to show myself against the skyline as I came across.

I could see he was getting a little nervous, from the way he was stretching his head.
But it never dawned on him to look up his own ridge.
I got my rifle at ready and cat-footed down to him.

When I was within twenty yards he heard me. He flung around and started to throw up the rifle. There wasn't any time to waste in chatter. I slammed a bullet in the general direction of his gun arm and worked the repeating lever as I jerked in a fresh shell. That one was due to rip his heart to ribbons if he didn't take the hint of the first one.

But the first shell hit the rifle on the lock and slammed it out of his numbed and nerveless fingers.

"Had another gun hid, I see," I told him.

He was the same hombre I'd had the fight with at the spring. He'd evidently had one rifle buried in the sand, and they'd kept it cached.

I made him take his shoes off and pass them over. Then I took my rifle and started back down the ridge. He wouldn't do much mischief in the hot sands of the desert in his stocking feet.

"You take my advice and head for camp," I told him as I left. "Your feet won't stand over a mile of this, and you'll need all the mud you can puddle out of that spring."

Sure it was cruel, but he had it coming.

Then I heard firing from the direction of my camp. The shots sounded thin and weak, but plenty rapid. I started down the ridge just as fast as I dared to take it in the sun.

I topped a ridge and looked down on camp from four hundred yards. A black speck was perched on a ridge, making talk with a rifle. Another black speck was wading out to meet him, shooting as he walked, shooting calmly, unhurriedly.

Another black speck was behind the blanket rolls, peppering away with a six-gun. It wouldn't do any good at the distance except keep the guy with the gun occupied.

I knew Nell Thurmond was fully aware of that fact. She was just joining in. I elevated my sights for four hundred yards.

And then I held my fire. The black speck on the ridge had tossed away his rifle and was running down the slope. It was Big Bill Bruze. I could tell from his awkward, sidelong gallop.

Ed Bocker held his gun for a moment, at his shoulder. Then he tossed it away and started running up the slope, toward Big Bill.

I uncocked my rifle and shortened the distance as fast as my legs would cover the ground, and I could see some one else running toward the two enemies, a long-legged cuss who had sprung up from nowhere out of the desert. He must have been buried in the sand. I hadn't seen him.

Big Bill Bruze and Ed Bocker met on a little level space. The sand was soft. There was no chance for college footwork. It was primitive man against primitive man.

I got there just as it finished. I'd seen some of the action while I was running, not as much as I'd liked, and I had to keep an eye on the long-legged stranger with the rifle who was quartering down the other slope.

Big Bill went down for the count as I came up.

I got a look at his face. His nose was ground to powder. His eyes looked like pieces of hamburger steak. His lips were ribbons.

Ed Bocker had some marks, but, on the whole, he seemed fairly beautiful compared with the other guy. I flung my rifle in the general direction of the long-legged customer.

“Now then, you get your gun stretched out in the sand and your hands up, and—”

My jaw sagged. The long-legged cuss was old Pete himself. He started to laugh. And the girl was laughing. Ed Bocker was as speechless as I was.

Pete did the talking. “I never had but one school, the old desert. I knew there was pay dirt in this kid, but he’d had things too soft. Civilization wasn’t bringing it out. So I framed it with old Doc Smith to give me some sort of a powder and paint my lips blue. Then I planted some gold and pretended to have a mine out in the worst section of the desert goin’.

“I didn’t intend nothin’ else, not me. But Martha Stout embellished the idea. She said Ed would never get no self-respect until he’d mastered Big Bill over the girl. So she let Big Bill Bruze bribe her for a rough copy of the map and started him out here. Then they shipped the girl in by plane.

“Big Bill got a couple of his buddies to locate on the spring, figuring they’d keep you from water and make you surrender the map for water. He just didn’t figure you right.

“I wanted Old Mother Desert to take this lad in hand and bring out the pay dirt in him. I was the one that followed you and run off the burros and punctured the canteens. I been watchin’ all the time. And I been waitin’ for Big Bill to find out the girl was here and come after her.

“The old desert took things in hand and ripped off some of the softness from my boy and done brought out the pay dirt.”

I let the information soak in.

“One of those guys might have killed me,” I said.

Pete snorted.

“If’n you can’t take care of yourself in the desert you’d oughta cash in your chips.”

“And there wasn’t any gold at all?”

He shook his head. “Only what I bought from a placer mine and stuffed into my pockets.”

I could feel myself getting madder and madder.

“And all this time I thought I was carrying out your dying wishes I was just playing schoolma’am for a kid that couldn’t absorb nothing from college?”

Pete’s eyes got sort of gray, like the desert sand. His voice had that whisper to it that comes to those who have lived long where they can hear the sand whispering to the sand, a dry huskiness.

“The desert did the teachin’,” he said. “She’s the crudest and the kindest mother a man ever had. Now I can give this kid his money an’ let him get married and know that the money won’t ruin him. We’ve brought out the pay dirt, you an’ me. You’re mad now, but you’ll be glad for what you’ve done ’fore you get back out.”

I turned my back and walked away.

That night though, when the sand commenced to whisper, I could see things in a little different light.

I lay and listened to the sand. Then the wind died down, and I could hear Ed Bocker and Nell Thurmond talking in low tones over the embers of the fire.

And I could hear something soft and hissing that I thought was sand whispering; but the wind had lulled. I propped myself up on an elbow to hear what it was.

It wasn't sand. It was old Pete, the damned old galoot, chuckling to himself, and his throat had got so dry from years in the desert that it sounded like a sand whisper.

Then I knew how much I liked the old cuss, and I got over being mad and commenced to chuckle, too.

Nature had played a funny stunt when she'd delivered Harrison Bocker and Judge McNaught into the desert. If the old judge had been trustee for Ed Bocker he'd have trained him up to be a pampered son of luxury, never worth a damn.

But the desert had taken a hand. Seemed sort of like she'd known what she was doing when she slipped Pete in as guardian and trustee of young E. Reed Bocker.

And then the wind, which had lulled, sprang up again, and the sand began to stir and rustle, and it sounded just like Pete's chuckle. I got to wondering if the desert was chuckling, too, and was still wondering when I dropped off to sleep.

THE END.

[The end of *Pay Dirt* by Erle Stanley Gardner]