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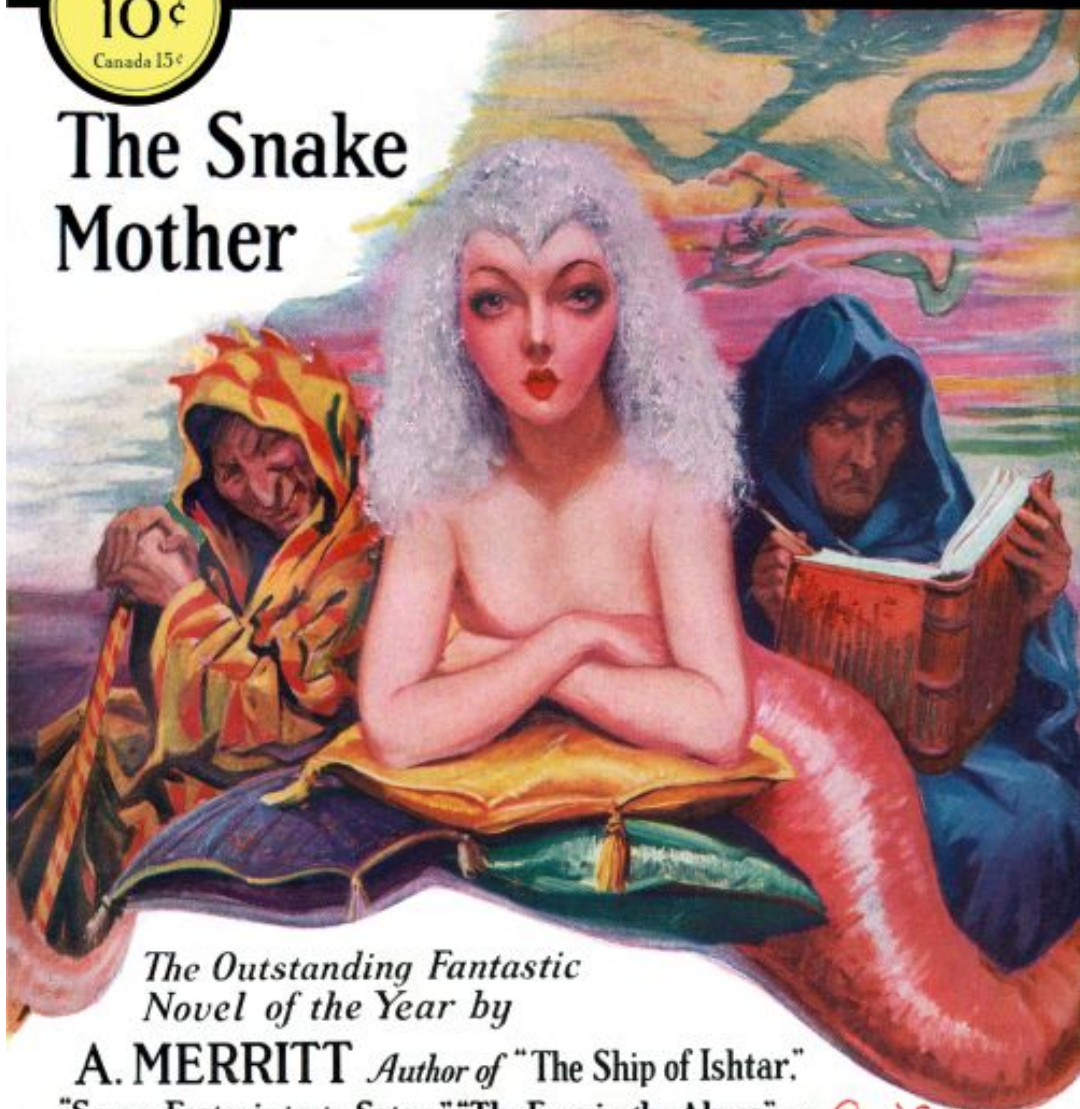
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*A head and shoulders rose out of the moonlit gully*

## Written in Sand

By  
ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

First published *Argosy*, October 25, 1930.

*Little by little a mystery unfolded itself to Bob Zane out on the desert, but for a solution he had to ask the murmuring sands themselves*

### *A Whispering Tale*

There are nights when a camp fire seems to profane the desert, and this was one of them. The moon hung low and round in the heavens, and the Colorado Basin was bathed in warm, mellow light like the amber of old wine.

But I wanted fried potatoes for breakfast, and I'd put off cooking them until the night got cooler. Boil potatoes for half an hour, then let them stand overnight, cut them into slices and fry them with onions, add a little bacon and wash down with coffee. That's a breakfast that'll stay by you. That's why my camp fire was crackling away under the desert moon, and the water was bubbling and steaming over the potatoes.

Off to the west, a mile or so, was Signal Butte. To the east, the lights of Calexico and Mexicali twinkled like brazen jewels. To the north, the Superstition Mountains basked in the light of the mellow moon.

The flames of the camp fire died down to a bed of glowing coals. A light breeze came up from out of the night, and the desert commenced to whisper.

Desert whispers are funny things, and they vary just as the desert varies. Up around Death Valley the desert whispers will be hard and hissing, filled with an ominous menace. Down here by the border, they'll be languid, romantic, dreamy.

But the Colorado Basin's a funny desert, anyway. Down by the Superstition Mountains, where the whole valley is under sea level, and the soil is composed mostly of silt that's been washed down by the big river, the whole desert's entirely different from what it is a hundred miles north. Deserts are like that. At times you'll have high stretches covered with giant cacti and greasewood. Then you'll have barren places where even a stray sage can't get nourishment. But always you will hear whispers. They're the heritage of the desert.

Of course, those whispers aren't really voices. I know as well as you do that they're the noises made by the sand scurrying along on the wings of the desert winds and rustling against the cacti and the sage. And then, when the wind gets stronger, you can hear the sound of sand rustling against sand, the strangest whisper of all.

But here's something to think about: Those sand whispers somehow or other color the whole desert country. Meet a man who's lived a long time in the desert, and there'll be a husky hiss in his voice, a dry whispering note that brands every word he utters. And the desert teems with other whispers, whispers of lost mines, of fabulous fortunes buried by the Spaniards when the Indians turned hostile.

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I was thinking about those whispers when the desert began to whisper to me. The ashes glowed in the breath of the wind. The sand scurried by and made little whispering noises, tantalizing sounds that were almost words. I strained my ears to listen—and while I was listening I heard the other sounds that weren't whispers.

There was the sound of feet in the dry wash, feet that weren't accustomed to walking on sand. They shuffled, stumbled, stamped a couple of times as the man lurched forward, then shuffled again. They came nearer. A head and shoulders showed in the moonlight as a man came up out of the wash.

"Howdy," he said, while he was still thirty yards off, and his voice was anxious.

"Howdy," I said.

He came toward me then, and the moonlight sent a short black shadow splotching the white floor of the desert until it looked like a moving blot of ink.

"You're Bob Zane?" he asked.

"Yes," I told him, and waited.

He sat down by the camp fire and held out his hands to the coals as though it had been cold. But it was a warm night.

"They told me I'd find you out near Signal Butte. I had a hard time trying to locate you. Then I saw your fire."

I waited until he looked up from the coals. Then I said, "Yes."

He looked back into the fire right away.

"My name's Lucas," he said, "Pete Lucas. They tell me you know the desert from A to Z."

"Nobody really knows the desert, Lucas," I said.

He shuffled his weight around as though the sand was uncomfortable. He rubbed his hands, and then held them toward the coals some more. What he wanted to say didn't come easy. I didn't give him any encouragement. Talk that's hard to say out on the desert ain't the sort of talk that's easy to listen to.

The red embers caught the front of his face. The moon silvered the silhouette. All in all, I got a good look at him. He was about forty years old, and he had something to conceal.

His head moved in swift jerks on a nervous neck. His mouth was weak and the chin was pointed. The nose spread out into wide nostrils. The eyes were weak and watery. The big

sombrero that he'd tilted back was obviously new.

"You could help me," he said.

I didn't say anything. Any man that had any proposition to make to me could make it unaided.

"I need somebody that knows the desert."

I kept silent.

He looked up at me, his watery eyes blinking in the red light of the glowing embers.

"If a gent had been out in the desert to some sort of a secret place, could you track him to that place? If you got started within, say, twelve hours?"

I shook my head.

"I might, and again I mightn't. Winds come up awful fast in the desert countries."

He sighed and let his eyes blink out over the desert.

"But suppose you got started a little sooner?"

"Well, how much sooner?"

"Three or four hours."

"That sounds more like it."

"What sort of a proposition could I make you—in money?"

"I don't know. What could you?"

"I could offer you a thousand dollars for the job. But you'd want to be awfully certain you could do it. If you fell down it would lose me a lot of money."

I ventured an innocent comment:

"We could track him some other time."

"No," he said, shaking his head, "he wouldn't make any more tracks."

I said nothing for a while, but listened to the sand whispers of the desert. The moon looked like a great pumpkin just over my head. The mountains were purple shadows against the golden glow of the night sky, and the sagebrush cast black shadows.

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My visitor was looking at me now, staring straight and steady, but that was because I was looking out into the desert. As soon as I turned my eyes back to his face, he started looking at the coals again. The sand whispered little snatches of sound that were almost words but weren't.

"Maybe we'd be crowding too close on this fellow, and he'd get wise," I suggested.

"No. When we start there won't be nothing to be afraid of along that line. It'll be just a question of finding out where he went. There'll be two sets of tracks, one going out, one coming back."

I added to his words, sort of casual-like:

"And the man that made 'em will be dead?"

He jumped back from the fire and got to his feet.

"I didn't say that!"

"No; so you didn't! It must have been that the desert whispered it to me."

He stood, teetering back and forth on his feet.

"Pshaw!" he said after a bit, and turned and strode away into the desert just like he'd come, his feet shuffling, the black shadow bobbing along over the silvery sand.

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I drained the water off of the potatoes and spread my blankets.

I thought there was something else that moved out there in the desert. Coyote, maybe, but I wasn't sure. Twice I got a glimpse of motion, and then there wasn't anything except the moonlight, the warm night, the sighing wind and the sand whippers.

I got under a light blanket, saw that my burro was all jake, and pillowed my head on the saddle.

I started drifting off to sleep the way a man does in the open desert. And the sand whispered a lullaby. My muscles relaxed, and isolated thoughts flitted through my brain. The sand whispers became words and strung out into a whole sentence.

There was something startling in that sentence, something I should know. It snapped me wide awake, it was so important. I felt the sense of the whisper slipping as I woke up, and I tried to hang on to what it was. But it was no use. I snapped wide awake to the moon that was shining down in my face, and the whispers were nothing but sand rustling against sand.

I didn't go back to sleep again right away. There was something I was trying to get, like reaching for a lost dream. Sometimes I almost knew what it was, but never well enough to get it fixed, just a hazy impression.

The wind went down as suddenly as it had come up. The moon shone steady and brilliant, and I went to sleep.

Daylight found me slicing the potatoes with onions. The bacon sizzled in the frying pan, and then I dumped in the onions and potatoes. When they were browned to a turn I washed them down with coffee.

But all the time, I was thinking of the man with the broad nose and the watery eyes, whose hands had seemed cold so he had to toast 'em over the embers of the desert fire. I remembered the flicker of motion I'd seen out in the moonlight. Somehow or other, the desert whispers seemed concerned with that flicker of motion.

The sun came up over the Chocolate Mountains, and the long shadows settled over the desert. Right away it commenced to get hot.

I got my camp stuff staked out in the shade of a mesquite clump and saddled my burro. Then I went out to where I'd seen that flicker of motion. The tracks in the desert told the story.

The man with the watery eyes, who had given the name of Pete Lucas, had come floundering over the desert with shuffling feet. Some distance behind him had been a dainty-footed girl, walking as lightly as a young doe. While Lucas had been talking with me, the girl had been lying down on the slope of a sand dune where she could watch him. I didn't think it was close enough to enable her to hear what had been said.

When Lucas left, she left, too, following him.

I back-tracked the girl for a ways, trying to get a good imprint of her foot. It was dainty and small, but she handled her feet as though she knew what she was doing with 'em.

I got a track in a patch of silt soil that was a good one. It showed that the left heel had a little chip gouged out of it, probably by a rock. For the rest there wasn't anything except tracks of a woman's shoes.

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I rode the burro into Mexicali. I like it south of the border, like to watch the types that come and go; besides, it's all a desert country and the desert has got into my blood. When you first see the desert and get out in it, you'll either like it or you'll hate it. Most of the time, if you hate it, it'll be because you're afraid of it. Then, after a while, when the desert gets into your blood, you'll find it motherly.

But it's a jealous mother, and it only takes care of its own. Those that know the desert and respect its power get along in it. Those that get flippant are likely to be found some place with circling buzzards, swollen tongue, and fingers that have had the flesh ribboned from the bone through delirious digging for water.

The desert's got me. I have to be out in it. It's in my blood. I don't stay long around the border ports. It's an interesting sight to see—once in a while. After that you want to forget it.

But I did want to see if I could find a girl with the heel of her left shoe chipped.

I found the guy with the watery eyes, and I kept him from seeing me. The gambling tables were just opening up, and the big horseshoe bar in the old Owl, that's now the A. B. W. Club, was swinging into action.

This chap, Lucas, was looking for somebody. After an hour or so he found him; I could tell by the expression in his eyes. The vague, watery look vanished, and the eyes snapped to hazel hardness. The flat nose expanded until the nostrils were two black, round holes, and Lucas wet his lips with his tongue.

I followed his eyes to the man he'd spotted. He was a big man, with a great dome of a forehead and eyes that were puckered in thought. He wasn't accustomed to the desert places, and the sun hadn't been kind to his skin. The eyes were red-rimmed from drink and sun, and he seemed a little bit shaky. He took a couple of cocktails, and then went to the gaming tables. He gambled until noon, and then he had some lunch. He played roulette and he was about a thousand dollars ahead. After lunch, he ran into a streak of bad luck. His pile melted, and as it melted he began to plunge, which is the wrong way to gamble. Any old gambler will tell you to crowd your luck when it's coming your way, but to hold 'em close to your chest when you're cold.

And Lucas kept watching the big chap with the dome forehead, keeping in the background, watching, watching, watching.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, when the big chap was down to his last stack, luck turned. He rode it hard. He bet the limit straight up and won time and again. The chips were scattered all out in a big pile. They changed croupiers half a dozen times. He just kept on winning and winning and winning.

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Then when he must have had five thousand dollars in front of him, the chap with the watery eyes walked up and tapped him on the forehead.

The big man had just won a bet. His face was flushed with liquor and success. He turned impatient eyes as he scooped in the chips, and then froze into startled inactivity. His jaw sagged until I could see his pink gullet. The eyes bulged until the red rim seemed an inch wide.

"Pete Lucas!" he said, and his voice held nothing of welcome.

Lucas laughed, and the laugh was harsh.

"You're not having to go out in the desert to-night, eh, Sam Slade?"

"Out in the desert—how—what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

Slade scooped his chips toward the croupier.

"Quitting," he said.

"Afraid you might lose some of 'em back?" the croupier sneered.

Slade's eyes snapped cold and hard.

"You heard me," he said.

I didn't like the expression of his eyes. I've seen killers before, from outlaw horses to rattlesnakes. He had the look of a killer. The croupier saw it too, and he didn't say anything. He rang a bell, and the money came in.

Then, when he had the money all laid out, Slade did a funny thing. He divided it into two equal piles, and Pete Lucas took one of the piles. Somehow or other, though, it was just what I'd been expecting.

Then they walked into a restaurant, the San Diego Bar and Café.

That suited me. I wanted eats, and they make 'em good at the San Diego. Chinese cooks and waiters, anything you want: venison, quail, doves, lobster, oysters. I sat down where I could see them when they went out. No use to try and see 'em while they ate. The booths had curtains up the side, and were built for privacy.

I had some broiled baby lobster, some quail on toast and a bottle of Tipo wine that dated back ten years—you can get it if you know the ropes.

Low voices came from the booth where the two men ate. Once I heard a sharp exclamation, and a chair scraped back. Then a voice talked low and fast, and I heard the chair being pulled back to the table. After that there was more talking.

Then the Chinese waiter disappeared, and a pair of jet black eyes bored into mine over the top of a serving tray.

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“Want some dessert?”

It was a girl. I'd place her at around twenty-three or four. She knew her way about, and she'd lived. There was a snap to the jaw that was all business. Her eyes were like a couple of ripe olives. The complexion was clear and dark. The hair was a piled mass of midnight clouds that framed her face.

“Well?” she wanted to know.

I shook my head. “Nothing more.”

She dropped the curtain and went toward the other booth. I looked at her as she bent over, picking dishes off the table. As she reached for a dish across the table, there was the flash of a silk-stockinged leg as she kicked it out behind her to keep her balance, and I caught a glimpse of the heel.

It had a chip gouged out.

There it was, a little drama of life taking place right before my eyes, and yet I couldn't get it pieced together.

I paid my check and sipped my wine until the glass was empty. Then I went out into the streets of the desert town. There was the usual crowd of tourists, and there was something else—low-hung black clouds, that scraped the tops of the mountains and sent black streamers trailing toward the ground.

Rain in the desert. It happens, but mighty infrequently.

The rain started within fifteen minutes, and the silt soil turned to a slick mud on top of a hard foundation that was like grease smeared on cement. People tried to walk across the street and their feet flew out from under. Automobiles skidded and slid into a devil's dance that swept 'em against curbs with crushed wheels, or crashed 'em into each other.

The rain came down in swift torrents for half an hour, and then there was a rift in the clouds, a patch of blue sky, and the sun was shining.

People who knew the desert stood on the sidewalks to see the cloud effects. The tourists lapped up the booze and plunged into the gambling games. The desert showed clear and



sparkling, the clouds melted as by magic, and the sun's rays beat down.

Then, right in the middle of my speculation as to what I was going to do next, there was the scream of a woman. It was a knife-like scream, thin and drawn with terror; and then the sound of a shot crashed out.

A Chinaman shrilled a staccato sentence in Cantonese, and scuttled out of the San Diego bar like a frightened quail scurrying for cover. Another Chinese followed on his heels. A tipsy American bellowed for the police. A bartender in a white apron came out and looked up and down the street. A khaki-clad little brown man with a heavy revolver swinging from his hip sprinted for the door, slipped on the wet mud that had been tracked to the pavement, skidded into the arms of the bartender. The bartender took him in.

I managed to be well in the lead of the crowd of gawkers that pushed in.

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The girl with the black eyes was on the floor. There was a little pearl-handled gun near her right hand. And there was a red streak along her forehead. The eyes were turned way up into her head, and were fluttering nervously.

She looked as though she'd been creased by a bullet, and then slammed to the floor with a good punch. I made for the booth where Lucas and Slade had been eating.

It was empty. There was a litter of dishes and some wine bottles, and a couple of glasses still half filled with whisky. The two men had gone.

The Chinese began to filter back from shelter. They were furtive-eyed, utterly dazed. They shook their heads with lots of "no savvy's" until an interpreter came up.

Then there was a lot of jabbering in Cantonese, and the interpreter told the story. It was painfully simple. The Chinese waiter had been approached by the girl, who asked him to take five dollars and let her wait on the tables for half an hour. He had done so. There had been a scream, a blow and a shot, and there was the girl. That was all he knew. He hadn't seen any one who had been eating. The girl was waiting on them.

That's the way with the Chinese. When they want to disguise the truth they always hang together and get a yarn that's got just enough of truth in it to make a good foundation for whatever falsehoods they want to add.

The Mexican police took charge, the girl was taken out on a stretcher and things went on the same as ever.

I poked around the gambling halls trying to find a trace of the two men. Nothing doing. I made inquiries about the girl. They'd taken her across the line over into El Centro. She was seriously hurt with a concussion and possible fracture. She was unconscious. The doctor's orders were against any visitors when she recovered consciousness.

The two men had disappeared as utterly as though they had been wiped out.

The desert settled back to its whispers, to the monotony of cloudless skies and sun-swept days. The last I heard of the girl she was conscious, expected to recover, but not saying anything as to how it all happened.

And there was another funny development. The night of the shooting a Mexican had sold a team of horses and a light cart to two men. They had driven off. Three days later the team had been discovered northeast of Holtville. The horses had been running. There was blood on the dashboard.

Apparently the horses had been wandering on their own for nearly two days. They'd struck some alfalfa and were feeding when discovered. But they were encrusted with dried sweat and had been traveling without water.

Gold was reported in the Panamints; a new strike, placer. I always liked placer. It's a one-man proposition, no great outlay for mill and refinery, no blocking out of ore and looking for capital, no delving underground. And again, I always liked new strikes.

So I flung on the packs, saddled the riding burro and started the trek north. Sometimes I thought of the girl and the two men, and sometimes at night the desert would whisper strange sounds, sentences that seemed to indicate I was to have more of them, was to write a closing chapter to the incident. But I could never make anything more out of it than whispers.

If I was awake enough to listen, I was too awake to understand. If I could make sense out of the sand whispers, it was because my consciousness was dulled with sleep, and I wouldn't wake up until morning, trying to remember the sand whispers like I would a dream.

The placer proved to be a bunch of hoey, put across by some get-rich-quick mining company that was unloading stock in Los Angeles; but I had to cover half of the Panamints and a shoulder of the Funeral Range before I discovered it was a plant. By that time I was thinking of the border again, and I turned the burros back there.

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On the map, if it's large scale enough, you'll find a little place that's listed as Andrade. It's on the Colorado, just west of Yuma, where the California boundary takes a jog down the river. And that twenty-odd mile jog of boundary takes in some of the toughest border country in the States, bar none.

It's a saying in the customs at Tijuana that the farther east you go the tougher it gets. They have reference to Mexicali. Go to Mexicali and you'll hear the same thing. The farther east, the tougher the border. They have reference to this jog in the boundary.

Anyway, the place is listed on the map as Andrade. Go there and you'll find it's Cantu on one side of the line, and Los Algodones on the other. You won't find anything that looks like Andrade.

And there's lots of action at Los Algodones. They say there's never been a border crew there for six months that didn't have white hair. The theory is that six months on that post will give any of 'em white hair.

Anyhow, I went to Los Algodones, across the drifting sand hills that never stay put, but march like great white ghosts across the face of the desert. My burros were staked and watered, and I had an evening on my hands. I tried roulette and won, and got tired of it.

The evening begins at Los Algodones at around three o'clock in the afternoon. It's over by six. Ask any of the wise ones why they don't keep that section of the border open until nine o'clock, the way they do at Tijuana and Mexicali, and see what he says. If he's a wise one he'll say it with a smile. If he uses words, it's an odds-on shot he won't be one of the wise ones—or else he'll be figuring on leaving the border.

I went into the Log Cabin and rubbered around for a while, and then I went to one of the places where the girls hustle drinks for a commission. It's all done right out in front. A square of dance floor, a greasy-skinned orchestra, a long bar, girls who can flick eyes over a face and classify the character at a glance, and the tourists, suckers, hangers-on and rubbernecks. The girls could play the game straight—or not. Mostly, at Los Algodones there aren't many tourists.

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There I saw her. The same black eyes, just like two moist ripe olives, the same full lips, the same swing to her walk, the same independent poise of her head.

A blowzy kid with staring eyes gave me a level glance of appraisal, then turned away. A cute trick came mincing up to me, talked a few words of baby talk and made a half-hearted attempt to smile winsomely. Then she went away.

The black-eyed kid came over.

“Hello, pard.”

“Hello.”

“Looking around?”

“Looking around.”

“Listen, big boy, I’m on the up and up. I’m hustling drinks. If you want to dance give me a chance. I can use the ticket. If you want to drink and want somebody to can the mush and drink alongside of you, I need the coin. If you’re just rubbering don’t waste my time and I won’t waste yours. You look like a guy that knows the ropes and knows what he wants. I’m the kid that hands it to ’em straight.”

I nodded. “We’ll sit at a booth and have a couple of drinks and a talk.”

She jerked her head toward the bartender and walked to a table.

“Here’s mud in your eye,” she said.

I looked her over. “Last time I saw you was when you were being taken to a hospital.”

She straightened a bit.

“Yes?”

“Yes. How did you happen to get into this racket?”

She smiled cheerfully. “None of your damned business!” she answered.

I nodded and drank my beer. She watched me with speculative eyes. “You Bob Zane?”

“Yes; why?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Wondering about the night you lay back of a sand hill and watched a man talking to me?”

“Say, you’re a wise guy, ain’t you?”

“You might be surprised.”

“Not me! ’Nother drink?”

“One more.”

She waved a hand toward the bartender.

He started toward the booth, and the outer door opened. A sloppy man with hard eyes set in a flabby face pushed his stomach through the entrance.

“That’s my call,” said the girl. “Sorry, Bob Zane, but you’re ditched. I wanted to talk to you, but I’ve got a date.”

And she did what blamed few dance hall girls do to a guy who is spending—she got up and left me, cold. The bartender grinned and walked away. I turned my head so I could get a better look at the man who had entered.

Right away I saw that she had been lying. She didn’t have any date with him. As far as I could see, he’d never set eyes on her before.

But she was out to make him. She tried all the wiles of the dance hall girl. And, in the end, he motioned to the cute trick with the winsome smile and the mincing walk.

The kid with the olive eyes got a chance and whispered to the cute trick. The cutie let her eyes widen, nodded her head. After a little while she pleaded some excuse, shunted the fat one to the girl with the olive eyes, and beat it.

The paunchy man and the girl who been drinking with me talked and drank. Mostly they talked. At first it was the regular line of conversation. Then it got lower and more confidential.

When I left the place the fat man was pulling himself across the slimy surface of the moist table by his elbows, so that his voice would carry to the girl without his having to speak loud.

What they were talking about I couldn't tell, but they didn't have eyes or ears for anything or any one else.

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I filed that fact away, went over to the Casino, where I tried a system at roulette. The system didn't work, but it came near enough to it so my original five dollars lasted me pretty well through the afternoon.

The border was about to close when I got back to the dance hall. It's a period of frantic haste. Perspiring bartenders fling drinks at the crowd that's determined to get in its last lick. Couples stop dancing, hurry to the bar and start scurrying for the border a good ten minutes too early—afraid of getting left.

I looked around for the girl with the olive eyes and the fat man, and didn't get a trace of either. Then a subtle whisper rippled the crowd; glasses clanged to the bar, and the exodus commenced. Ten seconds, and the bar was deserted. Another ten seconds and the doors were closed, locked, and the street became a parade toward the border.

Tired-eyed inspectors surveyed the seething mass with skilled eye. Occasionally their hands darted out, and some man or woman stepped aside. They weeded the sheep from the goats with a flicker of steely glance that penetrated the mask of indifference the smuggler tries to wear. It's possible to smuggle a bottle across the border—but the percentages are against it.

I got to my burro, said good night to the inspectors, and swung toward my camp. It was dark when I got there. I started the fire, spoke to the animals, went to the packs to get out a fresh can of coffee; and heard a scream.

It was a thin scream, sounding as though I'd heard it before. It was the scream of a woman locked in a struggle with some adversary, losing her strength, but fighting with sheer nerve.

I kicked out the fire. No use to be outlined against flame, a perfect target. Then I went toward that scream, on the run.

I saw them when I was within forty or fifty yards; the bulk of two figures against the grayish white of the sand, the slender form of the girl swaying and swinging, the bulky figure of the man.

As I came up, he got his hands to her throat.

Then I saw it was no mere struggle between man and woman, but that he was trying to murder her. He heard my steps, and his hand relaxed from her throat as he stiffened. His hand streaked for a gun, but I was on him before his fingers touched metal.

He was like a huge bear. The strength of his arms was enormous, but he was a flabby bear. Soft living had made the tremendous muscles soft. And the desert does one thing for a man. It whips his strength into tireless endurance.

When those hands grasped me I knew his strength was too great for an immediate victory. But I pried loose, sank a punch into the heavy stomach and began a dancing chase, flicking blows home when I had the opportunity. Then when he was panting and puffing, I walked in, let him grasp me, and showed him that bulk never makes for a long struggle.

I was reaching for his throat, not that I actually intended to throttle him, but just to give him a taste of what he had given the girl, when he went limp in my arms. The great weight jerked me forward, broke my grip and sent me stumbling over it. The flabby man rolled to all fours, got to his feet and ran into the darkness.

I turned to the limp bundle of femininity.

An automobile roared into speed. Lights sent twin shafts gleaming into the darkness, then swung in a half arc; a red taillight winked mockingly, then was swallowed in dust, and the sound of the motor became fainter.

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The girl stirred in my arms.

“Get him!” she said.

It was the girl of the olive eyes.

I took her back to the camp fire. She sipped the tea I gave her, her face bitter, her lips clamped together.

“You’ll have to ride a burro to get where you want to go,” I said.

She shook her head. “I don’t want to go anywhere.”

I said nothing. The desert stretched about us, a great waste of tumbled rock hills, sage and sand. Off to the east the river lapped at the dry soil.

“I hate it!” she spat, and as she spoke the golden rim of a moon, just past the full, swung over the red mountain rim. “God, how I hate the desert! Of all the grim, remorseless, unjust places on earth, the desert is it.”

Never have I heard a woman speak with such hatred.

“The desert,” I told her, “is misunderstood. You must know its ways, which are as the ways of a woman. When you know it, it is a wise mother. It does justice after a fashion of its own, but it is always justice.”

I put some more sage on the fire. It flamed up into a warm circle of ruddy light.

“Bah!” she flung at me.

I said nothing. A desert wind came up with the moon, and the sand began its interminable whispers.

“How I hate it all! I hate the dry heat, the glittering sand! I hate the wind that makes everything whisper. Those whispers! They always seem to be promising something, and they lie! Sand lies, that’s what they are.”

“No,” I said gently; “the whispers don’t lie. Perhaps your ears lie.”

And then she began to talk, the words pouring from her mouth so fast they trod on each other’s heels.

“Listen. There were two men. Either of them could have given me the information that I wanted more than life itself. Either could have saved my husband from a living hell. Those two men disappeared into the desert in an old buggy. I was unconscious. By the time I came around enough to insist upon trackers following them, the damned desert had drifted sand and silt into the tracks until they couldn’t be followed.

“Then I heard that you could follow a track, sometimes when it was months old, and I tried to get you. You had gone, slipped through my fingers. I saw you again this afternoon, and was going to tell you my story when the one man for whom I have been waiting came in. I tried to get the information I wanted from him. He spotted me, somehow. I came to your camp to wait for you. The border men told me where it was. He followed me. You know the rest.

“That’s the justice of the desert you prate so much about! My husband was intrusted with a big shipment of gold. We had only been married three months. Three men took it from him, but under such circumstances that he was held responsible. Those three men came to the border and buried the gold. One sneaked out and changed the hiding place and rushed to Mexicali. The others followed him, found him, demanded an accounting. They went to the

hiding place, but I couldn't follow because they had spotted me—I was unconscious, knocked down with a blow, nearly killed with a bullet.

“Those men disappeared. Then the third started to follow the cold trail. He traced them to Mexicali. Then he traced them in this direction. He has some information I haven't got. And he didn't want me to see you.

“Now they have all slipped through my hands. I'll never be able to establish John's innocence. I've given everything, thrown all I had into the gamble, trying to save my husband from prison. He got a jolt of fifteen years! Think of it! Fifteen years!”

I looked at her eyes, rimmed with moisture, blazing with hatred. My mind went back to that night in Mexicali when the team had gone out into the night at a gallop, carrying the two men.

“It had been raining,” I muttered.

“What? When?”

“The night they took the buggy and went into the desert.”

“Yes!” she snapped. “It had been raining, but it cleared up and the wind came up, and the ground dried almost immediately, and drifted over the tracks. A week later the best tracker in the border country couldn't follow the tracks.”

I looked at the moon, then I thought for a moment, not daring to raise her hopes too high.

“We'll go to Yuma. We can get a car there. It'll be an hour's ride on the burro,” I said.

“Why should I go to Yuma?”

“Because the desert is getting ready to show you its justice,” I told her.

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She rode to Yuma with me. The trip was mostly in silence. At Yuma I got a man to drive us to the place where the team had been found, northeast of Holtville. I knew a man that had a ranch near there. I got saddle stock from him. By midnight we were out on horseback, the moon blazing down with a light that turned midnight to day.

I searched for two hours before I found what I wanted. It was in a silty patch where the wind had stretched its legs and swept the ground down to bare crust.

There were two long lines of earth stretching out into the moonlight, some four or five inches high. In between these lines of raised earth were little mushrooms of baked dirt, flat on top, sticking up like flattened door knobs thrust into the ground.

“What are they?” she asked.

I stopped my horse. “You've seen 'dobe houses, made of brick that's nothing but sun-dried mud pressed into shape?”

“Yes.”

“You know how well they endure?”

“Yes. They're pretty substantial. Why?”

“Two or three months ago it rained in the desert. Two men started out with a buggy because an automobile couldn't travel over the slippery ground. The wheels of the buggy, the feet of the horses, sank down into the silty mud, pushed it into ruts.”

“Well?”

“Then the sun came out. The ground dried almost instantly and the sand and silt started to drift, and covered up the tracks so they couldn't be followed.”

Her voice was impatient as she spat another question at me.

“Well, what's the answer?”

“But the pressure of the wheels and the feet of the horses pushed the silt into a hard mud. The sun baked it into ’dobe. Then the winds blew for several weeks, and in places all the light stuff was blown away. The tracks that had become invisible became visible again, not as ruts sunk into the ground, but as ridges, high above the loose stuff that had blown away.”

I could see her eyes glitter with black interest under the silvery moonlight.

“These are the tracks of the buggy?”

“These are the tracks of *a* buggy driven about that time, when the ground was wet, and with two horses.”

She sighed, a peculiar, tremulous sigh.

“Let’s go,” she said.

We rode on, following the tracks as best we could. We could only pick them up in the silty spots where the wind had blown. But the buggy was going straight when those tracks were made, evidently piloted toward some star or natural landmark which had showed in the moonlight.

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It was nearly daylight when we came to the place where the buggy had stopped. Here were crisscross ridges of earth, miscellaneous mushrooms of ’dobe.

“The rig stopped here for a long time,” I told her. “Then, when it went away it took an aimless course as though there was no driver.”

She nodded.

I poked around in a sand drift. A bit of bone caught my eye. I scooped away the sand. The body, what was left of it, was that of Sam Slade. The girl wasted no time in exclamations or hysterics. She joined me in getting the sand away, and in making another search. We found Pete Lucas just as the sun went up.

There was a paper in the sand near where Slade’s hand had been. It was scrawled, blotched with red stains, but it told the story:

Lucas, Carl Flint and me held up John Lorne of a big gold shipment. I sneaked the gold from the other two and buried it here. Peter Lucas found me. I offered to split fifty fifty. He agreed. Lorne’s wife had us spotted and made a gun play. We beat it out here in a rig. Lucas found where the gold was and ambushed me, but I managed to get him even after he shot me in the back. I tried to get into the rig, but the horses got frightened and ran away. The desert is killing me. God, it’s hot! Lorne is innocent. The gold is . . .

The scrawl became unintelligible.

I looked from the note to the sand hills, red in the rays of the newly risen sun. It took me a few minutes to spot the handle of a shovel. I dug it out of the drifting sand. After that it was easy. The gold was there. I had it uncovered and before her within half an hour.

Tears streamed down her face. The sun had turned from a red ball to a white-hot disk. The heat rays were shimmering over the desert.

“I’m sorry, I—”

There came the sound of something ripping through the air, the plunk of a high-power bullet striking a sand bank. Powdery sand scattered over us both. The bullet had gone directly between us, a space of inches. A second later there came the sound of a thin, spiteful crack. The sort of noise smokeless powder makes in the heat of the desert. I flung her down against

the sand. Another bullet zipped past my arm. A third threw sand in my face. I dug a trench, after a fashion, and got out my old shiny forty-five from its shoulder holster. Not much good against a rifle.

He came on then, charging, the windshield of his automobile down, his rifle clattering a volley. Breastworks or trenches were no good now. He was going forty miles an hour toward our flank. I ran to one side so he'd concentrate his fire on me, and give the girl a chance. My old forty-five bellowed an answer.

The automobile gave him the advantage of quick motion. But it's hard to shoot from a moving car, harder to shoot a rifle than a revolver. And the old forty-five has accounted for many a rabbit on the run.

I saw dust flick from the shoulder of his coat, saw the hand drop, the arm straighten. The gun slid down, hit the windshield support. He grabbed for it with his other hand, and the wheels went into a skid. The rifle struck the ground and went end over end. He slammed on the brakes, but I was running forward.

He took in the situation with a swift glance, and did the only thing available. He stepped on the throttle. I fired twice to stop him, trying to find a rear tire, but he rounded a sand hill and got away.

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The girl came to me. We picked up the rifle.

"He must have either followed us, or else had some tip we didn't know anything about."

She nodded. "But we have the gold, and Slade's confession!" Her voice showed how she felt.

I rigged a pack on my saddle and walked, leading the horse, carrying the rifle. The girl rode the other horse. The olive eyes gleamed with a deep light.

"To think that those marks would come to light after weeks!"

I couldn't resist the opportunity for a crack.

"Desert justice," I said.

And she nodded, looked out at the shimmering waste of sand, out where the horizons danced in the heat, and the mirages chased each other in a game of ripple-tag.

We got to Holtville, made a report, and organized a posse to track down Carl Flint, the flabby man with the cold eyes. It was two days before they found him. One of my bullets had punctured his gasoline tank. He'd abandoned the automobile and tried to make it for Yuma. His way lay across drifting sand hills. He hadn't made it.

The girl was to leave that night, to join her husband. The Governor had issued a pardon. The gold had been restored to its owners. There was a matter of a reward, almost five thousand dollars.

"It's yours, Bob Zane."

I shook my head. "You stayed with it, did the work. It's yours."

"No. We'll split it."

I shook my head again. "The desert keeps me supplied. You and your husband will need it."

We sat around my camp fire. Fifteen minutes and she would go toward town to take her train. The reward was all that remained, and I wouldn't change my attitude on that.

The wind came up and the sand rustled softly against the sage. She listened to it.

"The desert!" she breathed, and her voice was soft with emotion.



I thought of the three men who had robbed and cheated, and gone to the desert, of the girl who had followed, of the desert justice of the tracks that stuck in the air, the three bodies buried in the sand hills. It was the drifting sand, the whispering sand, the shifting desert that had lured them to their doom, betrayed them at the last, covered their bodies.

It was a pleasant reverie. Was the sand telling the sage about it? Had it whispered its judgment in the ears of the dying men before they had succumbed to the sentence of doom which had been pronounced?

And then, abruptly, two arms were around my neck. My startled lips felt the clinging caress of warm, moist lips.

There was moisture on my cheek where a tear-stained cheek pressed against it—and she was gone.

I listened to her feet as they crunched into the soft sand as she walked away, toward civilization, toward the train that would take her to her waiting husband—and I knew then that John Lorne was a lucky man.

The sound of the steps died away. The wind freshened, and the desert whispered soothingly to my tired ears, little sand whispers that didn't make sense, but vaguely stirred and soothed. And then the swirling sand, eddying against a dead sage, seemed to hiss the words "Desert jussssstice," and I nodded affirmation.

The desert is a wise mother when you know her ways.

THE END.

[The end of *Written in Sand* by Erle Stanley Gardner]