

Desert Dust

By Edwin L. Sabin

Author of "How Are You Feeling?" etc.

I had been desperately saving the ammunition, to eke out this hour of mine with her. Every note from the revolver summoned the end a little nearer. But we had our game to play; and after all, the end was certain. So under her prompting (she being partner, commander, everything), when the next painted ruffian—a burly fellow in drapery of flannel-fringed cotton shirt, with flaunting crimson tassels on his pony's mane—bore down, I guessed shrewdly, arose and let him have it.

She cried out, clapping her hands.

"Good! Good!"

The pony was sprawling and kicking; the rider had hurtled free and went jumping and dodging like a jack-rabbit.

"To the right! Watch!"

Again I needs must fire, driving the rascals aside with the report of the Colt's. That was five. Not sparing my wounded arm I hastily reloaded, for by custom of the country the hammer had rested over an empty chamber. I filled the cylinder.

"They're killing the mules," she said. "But we can't help it."

The two mules were snorting and plunging; their hoofs rang against the rocks. Sioux to rear had dismounted and were shooting carefully. There was exultant shout—one mule had broken loose. She galloped out, reddened, stirrups swinging, canteen bouncing, right into the waiting line; and down she lunged, abristle with feathered points launched into her by sheer spiteful joy.

The firing was resumed. We heard the other mule scream with note indescribable; we heard him flounder and kick; and again the savages yelled.

Now they all charged recklessly from the four sides; and I had to stand and fire, right, left, before, behind, emptying the gun once more ere they scattered and fled. I sensed her fingers twitching at my belt, extracting fresh cartridges. We sank, breathing hard. Her eyes were wide, and bluer than any deepest summer sea; her face aflame; her hair of purest gold—and upon her shoulder a challenging oriflame of scarlet, staining a rent in the faded calico.

"You're hurt!" I blurted, aghast.

"Not much. A scratch. Don't mind it. And you?"

"I'm not touched."

"Load, sir. But I think we'll have a little space. How many left? Nine." She had been counting. "Seven for them."

"Seven for them," I acknowledged. I tucked home the loads; the six-shooter was ready.

"Now let them come," she murmured.

"Let them come," I echoed. We looked one upon the other, and we smiled. It was not so bad, this place, our minds having been made up to it. In fact, there was something sweet. Our present was assured; we faced a future together, at least; we were in accord.

The Sioux had retired, mainly to sit dismounted in elcse circle, for a confab. Occasionally a young brave, a vidette, exuberantly galloped for us, dared us, shook hand weapon at us, no doubt spat at us, and gained nothing by his brag.

"What will they do next?" I asked.

"I don't know," said she. "We shall see, though."

So we lay, gazing, not speaking. The sun streamed down, flattening the desert with his fervent beams until the uplifts cringed low and in the horizons the mountain peaks floated languidly upon the waves of heat. And in all this dispassionate land, from horizon to horizon, there were only My Lady and I, and the beleaguering Sioux. It seemed unreal, a fantasy; but the rocks began to smell scorched, a sudden thirst nagged and my wounded arm pained with weariness as if to remind that I was here, in the body. Yes, and here she was, also, in the flesh, as much as I, for she stirred, glanced at me, and smiled. I heard her, saw her, felt her presence. I placed my hand over hers.

"What is it?" she queried.

"Nothing. I wanted to make sure."

"Of yourself?"

"Of you, me—of everything."

"There can be no doubt," she said. "I wish there might, for your sake."

"No," I thickly answered. "If you were only out of it—if we could find some way."

"I'd rather be in here, with you," said she.

"And I, with you, then," I replied honestly. The thought of water obsessed. She must have read, for she inquired:

"Aren't you thirsty?"

"Are you?"

"Yes. Why don't we drink?"

"Should we?"

"Why not? We might as well be as comfortable as we can."

She reached for the canteen lying in a fast dwindling strip of rock shade. We drank sparingly. She let me dribble a few drops upon her shoulder. Thenceforth by silent agreement we moistened our tongues, scrupulously turn about, wringing the most from each brief sip as if testing the bouquet of exquisite wine. Came a time when we regretted this frugality; but just now there persisted within us, I suppose, that germ of hope which seems to be nourished by the soul.

The Sioux had counceled and decided. They faced us, in manner determined. We waited, tense and watchful. Without even a premonitory shout a pony bolted for us, from their huddle. He bore two riders, naked to the sun, save for breech clouts. They charged straight in, and at her mystified, alarmed mien I was holding on them best I could, finger crooked against trigger, coaxing it, praying for luck, when the rear rider dropped to dived headlong worming into the ground, bounded briefly and a little hollow of the sand.

He lay half concealed; the pony had wheeled to a shrill, jubilant chorus; his remaining rider lashed him in retreat, leaving the first digging lustily with hand and knife.

That was the system, then: an approach by rushes.

"We mustn't permit it," she breathed. "We must rout him out—we must keep them all out or they'll get where they can pick you off. Can you reach him?"

"I'll try," said I.

The tawny figure, prone upon the tawny sand, was just visible, lean and snakish, slightly oscillating as it worked. And I took careful aim, and fired, and saw the spurt from the bullet.

"A little lower—oh, just a little lower," she pleaded.

The same courier was in leash, posted to bring another fellow; all the Sioux were gazing, statuesque, to analyze my marksmanship. And I fired again—"Too low," she muttered—and quickly, with a curse, again.

She cried out joyfully. The snake had flopped from its hollow, plunged at full length aside; had started to crawl, writhing, dragging its hinder parts. But with a swoop the pony arrived before we were noting; the recruit pumped into the hollow; and bending over in his swift circle the courier snatched the snake from the ground; sped back with him.

The Sioux seized upon the moment of stress. They cavorted, scouring hither and thither, yelling, shooting, and once more our battered haven seethed with the hum and hiss and rebound of lead and shaft. That, and my eagerness, told. The fellow in the foreground burrowed cleverly; he submerged farther and farther, by rapid inches. I fired had inconvenienced him.

My Lady clutched my revolver arm.

"No! Wait!" The tone rang dismayed.

Trembling, blinded with heat and powder smoke, and heart sick, I paused, to fumble and to reload the almost emptied cylinder.

"I can't reach him," said I. "He's too far in."

Her voice answered gently.

"No matter, dear. You're firing too hastily. Don't forget. Please rest a minute, and drink. You can bathe your eyes. It's hard, shooting across the hot sand. They'll bring others. We've no need to save water, you know."

"I know," I admitted. "We niggardly drank. I dabbled my burning eyes, clearing my sight. Of the fellow in the rifle pit there was no living

token. The Sioux had ceased their gambols. They sat steadfast, again anticipative. A stillness, menacing and brooding, weighted the landscape.

She sighed.

"Well?"

The pregnant truce oppressed. What was hatching out, now? I cautiously shifted posture, to stretch and scan; instinctively groped for the canteen, to wet my lips again; a puff of smoke burst from the hollow, the canteen clinked, flew from my hand and went clattering among the rocks.

"Oh!" she cried, aghast. "But you're not hurt?" Then—"I saw him. He'll come up again, in a moment. Be ready."

The Sioux in the background were shrieking. They had accounted for our mules; by chance shot they had nipped our water. Yet neither event affected us as they seemed to think it should.

Mules, water—these were inconsequential in the long-run that was due to be shot, at most. We husbanded other relief in our keeping.

Suddenly, as I craned, the fellow fired again; he was a good shot, had discovered a niche in our rampart, for the ball fanned my cheek with the wings of a vicious wasp. On the instant I replied, snapping quick answer.

"I don't think you hit him," she said. "Let me try. You're tired. I'll hold on the spot—he'll come up in the same place, head and shoulders. You'll have to tempt him. Are you afraid, sir?" She smiled upon me as she took the revolver.

"But if he kills me—?" I faltered.

"What of that?"

"You."

"If?" Her face filled. "I should not be long."

She adjusted the revolver to a crevice a little removed from me—"They will be hunting you, not me," she said—and crouched behind it, peering earnestly out, intent upon the hollow. And I edged farther, and farther, as if seeking for a mark, but with all my flesh a-prickle and my breath fast, like any man, I asserted, who forces himself to invite the striking capabilities of a rattle-snake.

Abruptly it came—the strike, so venomous that it stung my face and scalded my eyes with the spatter of sandstone and hot lead; at the moment her Colt's bellowed into my ears, thunderous because even unexpected. I could not see; I only heard an utterance that was cheer and sob in one.

"I got him! Are you hurt? Are you hurt?"

"No. Hurrah!"

"Hurrah, dear."

The air rocked with the shouts of the Sioux; shouts never before so welcome in their tidings, for they were shouts of rage and disappointment. They flooded my eyes with vigor, wiped away the daze of the bullet impact; the hollow leaped to the fore—upon its low parapet a dull shade where no shade should naturally be, and garnished with crimson.

He had doubled forward, reflexing to the blow. He was dead, stone dead; his crafty spirit issued upon the red trail of ball through his brain.

"Thank God," I rejoiced.

She had sunk back wearily.

"That is the last."

"Won't they try again, you think?"

"The last spare shot. I mean. We have only our two left. We must save those." She gravely surveyed me.

"Yes, we must save those," I assented. The realization broke unbelievable across a momentary hiatus; brought me down from the false heights, to face it with her.

A dizzy space had opened before me. I knew that she moved aside. She exclaimed.

"Look!"

It was the canteen, drained dry by a jagged gash from the sharpshooter's lead.

"No matter, dear," she said.

"No matter," said I.

The subject was not worth pursuing.

"We have discouraged their game, again. And in case they rush us—"

This from her.

"In case they rush us—" I repeated. "We can wait a little, and see."

(To be Continued.)

MAY. Flattered with promises of escape From every fearful blast, Spring takes, O sprightly May! thy shape. Her loveliest and her last. —Wordsworth.

Now the bright morning star, day's harbinger, Comes dancing from the east, and leads with her The flowery May, who from her green

lap throws The yellow cowslip and the pale primrose. Hail bounteous May! —Milton.

Hebe's here, May is here! The air is fresh and sunny; And the miser bees are busy Hoarding golden honey. —T. B. Aldrich.

Then comes May, pleasure and play, Holiday-dance and roundelay. —Armine Thomas Kent.

With blossoms fair the fields appear, With balmy air sweet May is here. —From the German of O'er.

May, thou month of rosy beauty, Month when pleasure is a duty; Month of maids that milk the kine, Bosom rich and health divine; Month of bees and month of flowers, Month of blossom-laden bowers; Month of little hands with daisies, Month of love and poet's praises, Month of love and poet's praises. —Leigh Hunt.

When young May unbinds Her dewy hair, and with sweet sympathy Makes crisp leaves dance with glee. —Martha Gilbert Dickenson Blanchi.

You scarce would start If from a beech's heart A blue-eyed Dryad, stepping forth, "Behold me! I am May." —Henry Timrod.

But May—warm May—has crept across the year, And e'er I was aware I felt her breath. —Gene Gaunter.

And a vague, uncertain murmur seems adrift upon the air, For the maid May has awakened with violets in her hair. And from her hands' unclasping drop the daisies o'er the lea— And from her lips, half parted, falls a sigh of ecstasy. —Lida Lewis Watson.

In May the lark air is sweet With odor from the hawthorn spray, And birds each other blithely greet. —In May. —Norreys Jephson O'Connor.

O fragrance of earth and flower, And voices of night in May! —Amelle Reeves.

There's no such lovely month in Rome As May. —Robert Browning.

In dreams my heart and May are one In vagrant ecstasies; In dreams my heart is straying with May across the seas. —Albert Pike.

THE GOD OF TRUTH His truth is a shield.—Ps. 91:4. Humanity in its lower forms, unenlightened by the Divine Spirit, does not necessarily recognize the beauty and glory of truth.

Among barbarous races lying is not only a general habit, it is frequently regarded as a virtue; and even among civilized and cultivated races you will find people who can see no disgrace in it except that of being found out.

Many religions have been invented and believed—or at least men have believed that they believed them—in which falsehood plays a prominent part in the characters and actions of the gods.

Remember, for instance, the masquerades of the gods in Greek and Roman mythology, and especially the fabulous performances of Hermes, who may be called the tutelary divinity of liars.

The Bible, on the contrary, represents the first sin as coming out of a belief that God would not really keep His word.

"Ye shall not surely die," said the evil spirit, and Adam believed him. And as the first sin came out of the assumption that God might lie, so the second consisted in the fact that man did lie.

"The woman tempted me and I did eat."

That was the first falsehood of the great harvest that was afterward to spring from the idea that God could possibly be untrue.

Stanzas For Music. There's not a joy the world can give Like that it takes away. When the glow of early thought declines in feeling's dull decay; 'Tis not on youth's smooth cheek the blush alone, which fades so fast, But the tender bloom of heart is gone, ere youth itself be past.

Then the few whose spirits float above the wreck of happiness Are driven o'er the shoals of guilt or ocean of excess; The magnet of their course is gone, or only points in vain. Their sails, when their shivered sail shall never stretch again.

Then the mortal coldness of the soul like death itself comes down; It can not feel for others' woes, it dare not dream its own; That heavy chill has frozen o'er the fountain of our tears, And though the eye may sparkle still 'tis where the ice appears.

Though wit may flash from fluent lips, and mirth distract the breast, Through midnight hours that yield no more their former hope of rest; 'Tis but as ivy leaves around the ruined turret wreath, All green and wildy fresh without, but worn and gray beneath.

Oh, could I feel as I have felt—or be what I have been, Or weep as I could once have wept o'er many a vanished scene; As springs in deserts found seem sweet, all brackish though they be, So, midst the withered waste of life, those tears would flow to me. —George Gordon Byron, in the Indianapolis News.

APRIL Oh, April is a changing lass, I don't know where to find her; She flings out hands to welcome me Then puts them straight behind her.

She weeps, and I would comfort her, But she laughs into my eyes; A changing lass is April, Full of wonder and surprise.

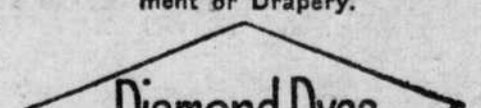
But I heed not her flirting ways, My Phillis dearest maid! 'Tis only when you follow them My heart is sore afraid.

And I would pipe a warning note White feet so lightly tread; 'No lad doth choose a changing, For the lass that he would wed!' —Anna Dunning Gray, in the Kansas City Star.

Pleasant Surprise. From the New York Sun. She—After we are married can I handle the money? He—Sure; but I really didn't know you had any.

WOMEN! DYE FADED THINGS NEW AGAIN

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Disappointingly Human Small Boy (at dock)—Papa, those are not real sailors, are they? Papa—Indeed they are. Why do you think they are not? "Why, I've been watching them for 'most an hour, an' I haven't seen one of them hitch his trousers an' stand on one leg an' say, 'Yo-ho, my hearties!' once."—Pearson's Weekly, London.

Investigating Kelp Gradually scientists are gaining information on the life history of kelp, a plant which grows in the sea and provides a source of potash for agricultural purposes.

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Life Sentence "Talk is cheap." "Not always." "How do you know?" "Two words cost me my freedom for life." "What were they?" "Be mine."

Who's Looney Now? "I suppose we think we are smarter than the Chinese." "Aren't we?" "The Chinese are not saying a word. They are getting wheat and pork in exchange for mah-jongg sets."—Louisville Courier-Journal.

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