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Chapter 1

I

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B REATHLESS waiting—for what? Blind terror—of what thing? The waiting interminably prolonged because the man did not know what was the thing he must expect; terror more hideous than mere fear because it was the unknown which menaced. In all of the universe there was now only this one thing which mattered; all else was forgotten. And what was it? To the man the desert in which he lay, helpless and hopeless, had ceased to exist. He no longer saw the hot sky, the molten sun, the limitless stretch of sand, cactus and blistering rock. He saw only the eyes which watched him.

They seemed staring at him terribly, two eyes which were steady, unwinking, immeasurable, inscrutable twin pools of ink. At one instant they became to his fevered fancy the fierce eyes of a savage, desert born and bred, observing his death with a curiosity at once unmoved and strangely childlike. Then he thought that he saw the eyes expand, dilate, grow enormous, the eyes of some misshapen monster thing, into whose lair he was the first man since the first dawn to penetrate. Northrup's reeling brain groped insanely for the visualization of the great body to which the eyes must belong, and which he could not see.

Then, with unconsciousness seeking to cast its black mantle over the man who struggled against it, the eyes

seemed suddenly to change again, to grow smaller, smaller, rounder, until they were the evil eyes of the desert's chief curse, *Sika-tcua*, the yellow rattlesnake. He found himself groping, wondering dully if there were truth in the old tale, if a snake might charm a man and draw him closer and ever closer to the quick forked tongue? He set his two hands out in front of his pain-twisted body, sinking them in the blistering sand, seeking to stop the impulse which had crept upon him.

He knew that the gray wolf at times came down from the ridges; that the panther followed the track of the mule-deer here; that the gaunt, mean-spirited coyote was not averse to sitting patiently and watching the slow death of one of his superior animals, waiting. His tortured thoughts of a coyote were no less terrible than the others now.

All day long the steep rays of the desert sun had smitten at him pitilessly; all day the red-black lava rocks among which he lay had burnt his body; all day the flying sand carried upon the hot blast of wind had seared and scorched his bloodshot eyeballs. It had been in the first, white dawn that he had fallen. Encompassed through the hesitant hours by the material threats of the desert, he had not once groaned. It was Northrup's way to suffer in silence.

But now the unknown had swept the last vestiges of reality aside; it had the seeming of creeping close about him from all quarters of a veritable mundane hell. Half-crazed with pain in the semi-consciousness which he was always fighting for, it was as if he had passed out of the old life already and into a fierce land of sorcery. Of only one thing

could he be certain now—the pair of steady black eyes watching him through a fissure in the rocks above.

Had it been an hour since he had called out? Or had many circling eons reeled drunkenly over him since his voice, disturbing the vast silence, had choked back into his throat? He did not know.

He knew that he had called out, thinking that these were the eyes of a man, a human being like himself, that he had begged for help. He knew that there had come no answer, that the eyes had watched him with the same steady curiosity. He knew that he had shouted and that long ago he had grown still.

Once he had painfully dragged from its holster the automatic which had not been shaken loose in his fall; when, with a blind anger upon him, he had lifted it a little the two eyes were gone. When it had fallen from his weak grasp the two eyes were back there, watching him with the same cursed steadiness.

In a moment of half delirium the quick suspicion had come to him that it was Strang, Strang who had deserted him in his helplessness, robbing him of the scant supply of water to drive on madly, seeking to gain the next water-hole. But no; Strang wouldn't be tarrying here, watching him die. Strang wouldn't even be so much as thinking of him. Strang was taking his own chance, his one chance, and pushing on desperately.

Northrup had lived through the day praying dumbly for the coming coolness of the night. Now the night was coming and he was afraid of it.

He twisted his head a little to look at the sun. He was less sure that the sun was setting than that this was the last time he would ever look upon it. In the west, a riot of color; the sun was sinking through a mist which seemed to rise from a sea of blood. Night was at hand. And with the sign of its coming the sense was strong upon him of the unknown, terror-infested, creeping closer about him.

"Strang might have waited," he thought.

His swollen lips and dry, aching throat were long ago past utterance. But he was not past saying within himself:

"I won't die until I know to what — thing those eyes belong!" There was much stubbornness in Sax Northrup.

IT WAS not meant that he should die yet. And so he did not die. It was meant that he should see Strang again, that he should stumble upon a century-long hidden secret of the desert. So he lived on where another man would have died.

The silver desert moon was two hours high in the purple sky when he realized that he had lost consciousness and found it again. Before he thought of that he thought of the eyes which had so long watched him; before he saw the moon he saw them. They were over him now, just over him, less than a yard away.

He stared upward through the night light curiously. There was sufficient light for him to see clearly, but his brain cleared slowly.

In seeking to guess the riddle of the two eyes, to conjure up the thing to which they belonged, he had never thought of a woman. And yet a woman it was bending over him, though his mind took long in clearing enough for him to be sure of that.

She was old, unthinkably old, unbelievably ugly. She might have been the barren deity of a barren land. She might have been a skeleton, with the skin upon the fleshless skull tanned by sun and wind through hundreds of years until it was leather. Squatting motionless over him she did not seem to be a living, breathing being until he saw the eyes, the same steady, unwinking black pools of ink with the glint of the moon in them.

The moment was uncanny. The moonlight dragged weird figures from the desert floor, charging them with ghostly unreality. The thing squatting above him might have been a sister thing to the fantastic shapes the moon made everywhere about her.

Northrup shivered. His reason, making its way back through the darkness of his stupor, had not fully reinstated itself. He knew that here in this strange land of aridity there could be no such thing as decomposition. When death came it struck its blow cleanly, unattended by decay. Air, sun, wind, when they had their way undisputed, made of the dead such a thing as that which bent over him. If no prowling beast came to rend apart, then the body would last throughout generations, perhaps centuries.

Fear comes in many guises but never with so cold a clutch as when whispering of the supernatural. At the shock from the pictures whipped up before him by his own imaginings, Northrup again lost consciousness.

Later—he did not know how much later—it seemed quite natural for him to feel that some one was moving about him. He realized dimly that it couldn't be Strang, for Strang had gone on. He knew that it must be the thousand-year-old

woman who had come out of the nowhere, riding on a moon-ray, perhaps; who, when she was done pottering around him, would go back the way she had come. He didn't try to turn his head to watch her because he knew that he hadn't the strength left in him.

She had slipped something soft under his shoulders, had even managed to turn his great body a little, making it lie a fraction less painfully. And she had brought him water. That was a joke on Strang! He had gone on furiously, lugging three or four warm cupfuls in his canteen, thinking that there was no other drop to be had until one had crossed many miles of desert.

There came intervals during which Northrup was oblivious to everything about him, brief spaces of time when he awoke to both realization and curiosity. But for the most part he existed in a condition which was a sort of dim border-line between consciousness and stupor. He accepted the present as matter of fact, forgot the past and did not seek to speculate upon the future.

For days he lay upon the talus, upon the first of whose ragged boulders he had fallen from the cliffs of porphyry above. The old woman, moving with the feebleness and the slowness of a Winter sunbeam, forced her shaking hands to construct a shelter over the spot where he lay.

A ragged, home-made cotton blanket stretched above him from rock to rock, a robe of rabbit-skins made at once cover and bed. She brought him water in a rude *olla* of sun-baked clay, administered gruelly messes made from corn-meal, attending him after the first with a faithfulness like a

shepherd dog's. Where she went for the water, what was the source of her food supply, he did not know.

The silence was seldom broken. For hours at a time she would squat near him, her blanket drawn about her shoulders, over her head, her hands lost in its folds, her ancient face turned upon him in an expressionless stare. When there arose absolute need for speech there was no difficulty in understanding each other.

Northrup, through many years of going up and down among people of her breed, had come to understand the tongue of the Indians of Walpi, Oraibe, Taos. When he had called her "*So Wuhti*," which is the Hopi for Old Woman or Grandmother, she had understood. She had named him "*Bahana*," White Man, and the ceremony of introduction was complete.

For a long time Northrup, lying grim and quiet, thought that by struggling to keep on living he was but postponing the hour of his death a few hours. Among his lesser injuries he thought that he could count the fracture of his left arm. He could only speculate upon the extent of injury done internally.

Had he been in a hospital with capable physician and nurses attending him there might be a chance. But here, with the half-cooked food a wild woman brought, with the nauseating decoctions which she extracted from he knew not what plants or roots, with a bed of lava rock, his chance seemed little enough. He watched her making his medicines, heating the sticky liquid over a greasewood fire, then setting it aside that she might sing over it and so make it "good medicine," and imagined that the mixture would be

about as efficacious as her singing. The latter was horrible enough. But he got well.

And they grew to be companions of a sort, as perhaps nearly any two of God's creatures would if set alone in the world. The fact that the old hag was living here and absolutely alone, that she seemed contented to be here and looked for no other company than her own until Northrup had come, aroused curiosity after a little.

He soon found many questions to ask. And during the five months which passed before he was a strong man again—and one must be certain of his full strength before he seeks to walk out into the desert with the little water he can carry and the knowledge that he must travel forty miles to the first water-hole—he learned much from So Wuhti.

Chapter 2

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II

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HAD not So Wuhti led him at last to her abode, Northrup would never have found it. It was slow climbing for them both, the woman weighted down by close to a century of years, the man still so weak that a little exertion set him trembling throughout his wasted body.

The chosen chamber of So Wuhti was close up to the cliff-tops, a roughly gouged-out room in the rocks, to be approached only by a steep trail from below. It was constructed cunningly in a great fissure so that while from it the old woman might look out over the desert, it would be a keen eye down there to discover her.

Upon the floor lay So Wuhti's bed, a tumbled pile of cotton blankets of native weave and a rabbit-skin robe. In a smoke-blackened corner were a few charred sticks and bits of brush; here and there were sun-baked clay utensils, for the most part black and cracked. A few strings of dried meat, a heap of shelled corn, a pot of water, a prayer-stick against the wall by the bed completed the equipment of the room.

From So Wuhti's boudoir—Northrup always called it that and So Wuhti seemed greatly pleased with the name—it was no trick to come to the top of the cliffs by means of the short ladder. And here one came upon that wonder of the

desert of which a thousand tongues have told since first the old Spanish conquistadores dipped into it, which countless artists have sought to catch upon their brushes.

For a hundred miles in all directions the eye passed over gray floor, sweeping up into loma and mesa, the magic desert colorings over it all, deep blues and glittering bronzes, the snow white of drifted sands, the gray-green of cactus and brush, the brick reds of rocky precipices. Through the clear, dry air the eye sped instantly over waterless distances where a man might find slow death in crossing.

Here, just at the cliff's edge, Northrup found again the half-expected, the tumbled ruins of an ancient watch-tower. His mind toyed with the pictures which his fancies suggested.

The vision arose of a gaunt, cat-quick sentinel, hawk-eyed, skin beaten into glistening copper from the sun, keeping guard here while his brothers slept in a younger century; starting up as, many miles away across the rolling floor of desert sand and scrubby growth he caught a quick glimpse of an invading enemy; cupping his hands to his mouth to send outward and downward his warning shout; kindling the ever-ready pile of greasewood fagots to send out over the land other messages of warning, voiceless, lightning-winged. And, as if the old time were not yet dead though the watch-tower of stone was crumbling, he saw a pile of dry greasewood and a black smudge of smoke against the side of the one upstanding slab of stone.

He went back, down to So Wuhti, wondering.

As, little by little, strength came back into his emaciated body, he grew impatient for the time when he might dare to take up the trail again. But a month passed and he knew that it would be as mad a thing to try to move on as to climb to the cliff-tops and leap downward.

There was water here; So Wuhti brought it laboriously from a hidden spring far back and deep down in the great fissure in the rock wall. If he turned back, he knew there was no more water within thirty miles; if he went on it was a gamble if he would find water at the end of forty miles. So he waited for his strength to come back to him.

Slowly, so slowly that perhaps she was never aware of it, So Wuhti's silence slipped from her. She came, in her loneliness, to feel a strange affection for the big-bodied Bahana with his white skin, his yellow hair and blue eyes.

She had never seen a man like him. At first she seemed a little in awe of him, a little afraid of him. In those first weeks she would sit and watch him suspiciously, her lips locked, her eyes bright with speculation.

But, as the Hopi legends have it, woman is the daughter of Yahpa, the Mockingbird, and so, since her father is so great a talker, may not long remain silent. The legends of her forefathers were scripture to So Wuhti.

So it turned out that as they sat together in the old woman's boudoir or upon the cliff-tops, the slow hours passed to the throaty monotone of So Wuhti's talk while Northrup smoked her tobacco in his pipe and listened. It took him no great time to recognize the fact that the old woman was half crazed—a brooding, solitary life and a mind filled with superstitions having worked their way with her.

In the main her conversation was an ingenious fabric of lies told with rare semblance of truth. As if she were recounting some minor happening of the day, she told of a visit she had had from Haruing Wuhti, chief deity of the Hopi polytheism. The goddess, coming up out of the sea, had come across the desert, running swifter than an antelope. So beautiful was she that she had hurt So Wuhti's eyes with her beauty. *Aliksai!* Listen, Bahana! She is like a soft white maiden, Haruing Wuhti, her hair yellow like the squash blossom, yellower than yours. Her eyes are like turquoises, her mouth as red as a sunset through the sandstorm. She came swiftly at So Wuhti's call. Through the night the goddess sat there, So Wuhti here, and they talked.

So Wuhti shook her head, mumbled, grew silent. The Bahana was not to hear the things of which Haruing Wuhti and So Wuhti spoke in the night.

She explained her presence alone here. She told him of it twice, once in answer to his question, once volunteering the information. Had she gone into the matter a third time Northrup had no doubt that he would then have had three instead of merely two distinct explanations to choose from.

In the first account Northrup found many traces of ancient Indian religions. So Wuhti spoke familiarly of the beginnings of the world which, while she admitted that it was Haruing Wuhti and the Sun who had done the actual work, she herself witnessed.

She called Northrup's attention to the fact that the spot in which he and she were was the top of the world. Hence it became clear that it was very distantly remote from the abiding-place of the chief goddess. Being so far away the