

Wilderness Station

Elia Wilkinson Peattie

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I.

THERE was a yucca in sight, and a bunch of stunted pinon, and there were cacti by the thousand, and a settlement of prairie dogs; which last made the place look almost sociable at times.

On a siding stood a box car, and in the box car were two things—a man and a telegraph instrument. The man was put there to operate the instrument, and the instrument was put there—fifty miles from anywhere—to make the desert less incommunicable.

The instrument was a good one, and calculated to perform all that was required of it, but the man—well, the man was something of a curiosity. When he offered himself to the Santa Fe company, he was asked for credentials, and got them, without delay, from another road.

"Why have you set your heart on going out to the desert?" asked the superintendent. "We usually reserve such places for—for men who need to live in the dry, warm climate. To tell the truth, few others are willing to go. If I had anything else to offer you, I would."

"It suits me," said the man.

So the superintendent sent him out fifty miles beyond anywhere.

"It beats me," said the superintendent to the engineer, the day Paul rode out to his place. "He's young, and healthy, and seems bright enough—and a man likely to make his way, if he had any inclination for getting on. He's lucky if he doesn't end in the mad-house. I would, I know, if I once got out of sight of land." By land he meant the populous group of adobes, the large depot and eating station, and the comfortable reservoirs of the company, where the precious water of the waste was hoarded.

The new telegrapher must have been naturally sociable, for sometimes he couldn't keep from talking. Dave Matthews, who operated the wire at Billow's Bluff, got a message from him one day when there was nothing official doing. It ran thus:

"Any one in sight?"

"Yes," answered Dave, uncertain as to his meaning. "Why?"

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"Man or woman?"

"Man."

"Got two legs?"

"Yes."

"How many arms?"

"What are you driving at?"

"I'm refreshing my memory. Will be pleased to tell you anything you wish to know about jack rabbits."

From that day they were friendly, and once in a while they exchanged confidences.

"Grub low. Don't forget tomatoes. Fine day rainbows around everything. Very curious; wish you could see it. Everything looks iridescent, but isn't. I'm not. Send a book with the grub."

One day Dave grew inquisitive. He wired:

"I say, are you a bachelor?"

The answer was evasive.

"Are you?"

Dave didn't mind the evasion, because the inquiry propounded was what he desired.

"Yes, to-day. But I'm going to fix all that to-morrow. Wish you could come down to my wedding, old man."

For the first time the man at Wilderness Station grew profane. He rapped back swiftly: "Damn your wedding!"

"Well," said Dave, aghast, "so he's a married man after all. Now, what the dickens?"

But he could get no light on the subject. Not but that there was light enough for almost any purpose out there. It was a wonderful light, sometimes white, sometimes gold, sometimes rosy, sometimes silver. Night seemed reluctant to visit it, but fell velvet-black when it did come so silent, so vast, that the man in the box car, peering out of his door, drew back appalled. He hid himself away from mere darkness; he took refuge in his whistling against the appalling silence; he cowered in his cot away from space.

II.

PAUL had been out there about four months when David Matthews got this message the first thing one morning when he opened his wire.

"I'm sick. Can you send " the instrument responded to some meaningless fumbling, and was still.

"What's the matter?" sent back Dave.

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There was no answer. Dave wired a message to his superior and explained the situation.

"Give me a sub," he begged, "and let me go out to Kittredge."

He went out on the Overland, which dropped him at the box car. There was nothing in sight except some red lava rock, shaped like a grotesque castle—a sort of ogre's stronghold.

"Great God!" said Dave, not irreverently. He went into the box car. There, on his cot, lay Paul—lank, sun-dried, saddle-hued, his eyes of terrible brightness, his hands twitching and convulsive. It was pretty much as Dave expected. He had brought some fever remedies, and he got some fresh water from the spring and doused the sick man with it till his temperature went down. It is a treatment in which men in the sun-stricken countries grow expert. Finally sleep came. It lasted for ten hours. Then Paul awoke, and gave a stifled cry when he saw Dave.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"The fool from Billow's Bluff."

"Why, you old sweep!" cried Paul with affection, and stared with watering eyes.

Dave stayed there for a week, and tried to persuade Paul to give up Wilderness Station.

"It's a good place for a man far gone with consumption or something like that," he said; "but you're a fellow who could get a move on you if you would."

"I've stopped moving," said Paul significantly.

It was at the fall of darkness, which in the desert is most singular and impressive. The two sat together on their camp-stools and watched the curtain drop over their yellow world.

"You see," said Paul, "I'm better off here than anywhere. I don't wish to see any one who ever knew me."

"What did you do?" asked Dave sympathetically. "Kill a man?"

"No," said Paul slowly. "I have not killed anybody. It is only that—that I am killed!"

"Oh, a woman!" cried Dave, relieved.

"Yes. My wife."

"I'll be drilled!" murmured Dave, profoundly sympathetic, and thinking of his Anna.

"I grew up with her in the same house. She was my adopted sister. At least, that is how others thought of her; but from the first time I saw her, when I was only a little boy of ten, I loved her. You wouldn't hardly believe that, would you?"

"Yes, I would," said Dave under his breath.

"Well, when she was nineteen I made her my wife. It came about as a matter of course. I saw she wasn't over interested, but I thought it was only her modest way. The company heard of my marriage, and did the handsome thing by me. I was sent up to the city. She was pleased at that. She went in for everything—the theater, wheeling, singing, making friends, everything. It seemed as if she'd been penned up so long in that stupid little town that she

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wanted to scoop up life in her hands as fast as she could."

"I see," said Dave.

"She met other people other men and she was pretty and had a wonderful way with her. One day I went into a florist's to take her home some violets for her birthday, and and she was in there with a man. They stood at the end of one of the greenhouses, looking straight at each other. She was looking at him as she never looked at me." He stopped, and there was a curious dry click in his throat.

"Dum it all!" cried Dave, as if in pain.

"I went home," continued Paul after a time, "and waited for her. Then I told her what I had seen I made her understand me and herself. I turned over my savings to her, all we had, and I told her I would never bother her again."

"What did she say?" asked Dave.

"She hung on to my arm and said: 'Poor old Paul! Poor Paul!'"

"What did she mean by that?"

"I don't know," said Paul.

The two sat talking till almost dawn. At last Paul arose.

"I've come out here and buried myself in this sandy grave," he said.

"Well," said Dave, quivering with sympathy, "I'll shoo the vultures away that's all I can do."

Dave went back to his Anna and his station the next day, and Paul took up the round of life once more. He had thought himself reconciled to his pain; but after that night the old torment of longing and jealousy returned to him. Visions of the home which he had once called his own haunted him in his sleep. Sometimes he dreamed that Nan's soft cheek was laid against his own; again, in that horrible stillness, he heard her unforgettable laugh, which had in it a cadence peculiar to itself. There had been an uncertain trick of her lips, too, which had always provoked a desire in him to kiss her. Ah!

III.

HAVE you ever heard the cry of the coyote? Do you know how the sage-brush smells? Do you know how tantalizingly the long yellow road winds away among the cacti, luring one out of a hell of solitude? Perhaps you do not and may you never know!

Paul arose one morning after a night of disturbing dreams, almost spent.

"I think I'll wire them to send a sub," he soliloquized. "I'll go back and kill that man. I may as well."

He stood on the sands watching for the west bound limited. It came a speck in the waste, a dull roar, a hurricane of sound! But nearing Wilderness Station it slackened, and the express agent leaned out of his doorway with a message. When the great train got under way again, Paul looked up, watching, with an ache of longing, the human faces peering out at him.

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Then, in one incomprehensibly swift, electric moment he saw what was for him the face of faces—Nan's! They looked straight at each other, gave full recognition in that startled glance, and the train lashed down the yellow waste like an angry serpent.

Some invisible Afrit of the desert seemed to come up and put iron fingers about Paul's throat. He felt these terrible hands pressing him down upon the sand. And after that there seemed only dust—the meaningless grin of the desert, the senseless passage of the hours. He forgot to prepare his meals that day, and went to bed almost as soon as the darkness fell. He lay there, not sleeping, the old terrible thirst of his sickness once more torturing him.

In the middle of the night he heard the east-bound Overland speeding along noisily, and felt comforted a little by the mere thought of the proximity of human beings.

There was, quite unaccountably, a slackening of speed. Paul heard the brakes squeal, and got up and dashed into his clothes. He lit his lantern and leaped out of his shelter, but, to his amazement, the train was already under way. Lifting his lantern to pierce the soft gloom, he saw a human being moving towards him out of the darkness.

The sense of the newcomer's identity came upon him in one swift rush.

"Nan!" he cried out sharply. "Nan!"

"Paul," said the woman, "I've been looking for you ever since you left me!"

"Why, in God's name?"

"Because for one silly hour I did not deserve to lose my happiness! I suppose you never did anything wrong, Paul"

"Oh!" groaned the man in sudden self-abasement.

"But I'm not so good as you, Paul. I—I had a disloyal hour. But you saw the worst of it—the very worst, I tell you. And I won't give up my husband for that! I won't be wretched all my life. You've got to forgive me."

"Forgive you!" gasped Paul.

He had often lain on "the floor of the world" prone and weeping, but now his head was cushioned, and his tears were dried.

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