

He refilled and relighted his pipe before continuing.

"You noticed this evening the level stretch of plain to the eastward. The soil is loose, light sand, and the terrific winds which occasionally sweep down over the mountains play mad pranks with it. Great hills and hollows are piled up and scooped out, familiar landmarks are obliterated, and new ones uncovered to-day, and tomorrow the inconstant wind will undo its work leaving the plain as level as a floor. In the bank of clouds I saw the promise of one of those periodical storms and, like an inspiration to my muddled brain, came the idea of fashioning myself a grave, in which I could lie down, allowing the wind to wrap me deeply in a winding-sheet of sand. To think was to act. With a nervous energy, born of my madness, I seized a spade and hastened out into the plain."

The old man got up and went to the door. The full moon had climbed well up to the heavens, shedding a soft, weird glory over the plain.

"It wasn't far, just out yonder, at the foot of a giant sage-bush that I chose the spot for my grave."

I had arisen and stood beside him, looking out across the sand, dotted with numberless sage-bushes. I had no idea which particular shrub he meant, but the awesome story, and his motionless, intent attitude, which recalled his frequent halting and backward glances, as I had watched him coming across the plain in the evening, kept me dumb. He stood thus for some time, and then, with a deep sigh, resumed his seat; but I dropped down upon the doorstep; the moonlight was pleasanter than the ghostly shadows of the cabin.

"I worked rapidly, pausing for an occasional reassuring glance at the bank of clouds. I had scooped out the sand to a depth of perhaps three feet, when the point of my spade unexpectedly came in contact with a hard surface."

"The bed rock?" I ventured, as the old man stopped short, as though overcome by the memories he had evoked.

"No—and this was what surprised, almost terrified me. I knew that the sand was from ten to twenty feet deep, and that it was impossible that I could have reached bed rock so close to the surface. Carefully pushing the point of my spade about, I found that the obstruction was apparently circular, and perhaps three feet in diameter. A few moments' work cleared away the intervening sand, disclosing a flat, round rock. Using my spade as a pry, I lifted the rock slowly from its resting place, and perhaps you can imagine my surprise when I uncovered the dark mouth of a well. I am not naturally a physical coward, but my nerves were so unstrung by all that had gone before, that it was several minutes before I could bring myself to investigate this unexpected development of my grave. At last, however, I secured a pitch stick from the cabin for a torch, and returned to follow this new 'lead' to its conclusion. Thrusting the lighted stick into the opening, I found that the well was about four feet deep and that the sides were walled with rough stones fitted together without mortar. At the bottom, on one side, was a small opening. Lowering myself into the well, I thrust the torch ahead and cautiously crawled through this opening to find myself in a small chamber high enough to admit of my standing upright. The walls of the chamber were of the same rude masonry as the well, while the ceiling was composed of stout poles, laid closely together and resting upon the stone walls.

"Scattered about the floor were rude implements of stone, specimens of primitive pottery—small jars, covered and uncovered—bows and arrows of gayly painted wood, arrow heads and spear points. I knew, at once, that I was standing in an ancient Indian grave, and was, therefore, partly prepared for the ghastly picture which was revealed when the light of the torch put the host of lurking shadows to flight. Sitting bolt upright against the farther wall, grotesquely hideous with feathers and other savage adornments, and wrapped about with gaudy robes, falling away from the skeleton forms in decaying

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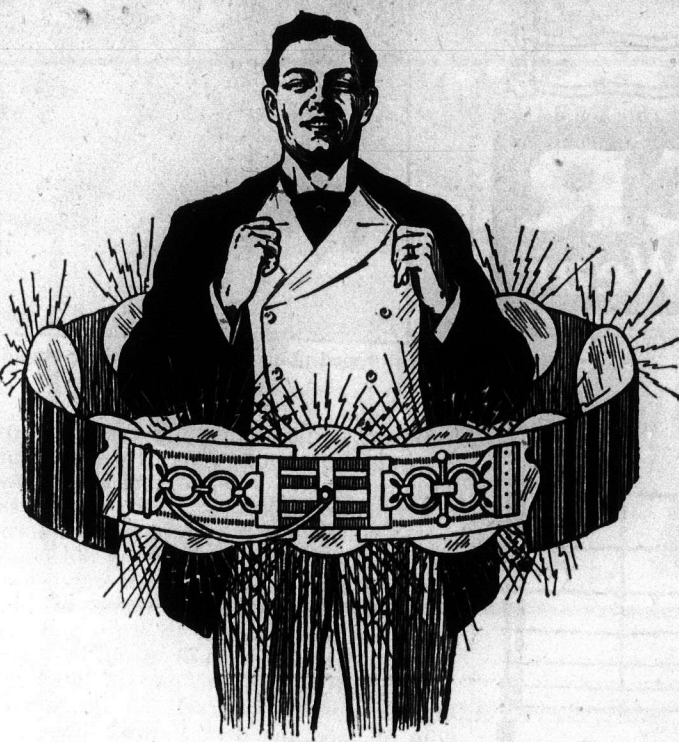
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