

THE INTERLUDE

A Story of the Southern Desert

By MARJORIE L. C. PICKTHALL

As I went down the waterside,
None but my foe to be my guide,
None but my foe to be my guide,
On fair Kirkconnell Lea—



NO one would take Channing for a man with a story in his life. He is gray and thin, clad always in indefinite gray clothes that are too loose for him, and his dull gray eyes look wearily upon the world. Gray, level, uncompromising gray is the colour of his whole hard-working life, save for this one interlude

that glows therein like a ruby strung on cheap gray cotton thread.

I should never have learned of it, for he is very shy, only he fell ill and was away from the office for some weeks. He had no family, no friends, and being ill in a boarding house is not cheerful. I felt sorry for him, and went to see him and left him some books. Among them there happened to be Palgrave's "Golden Treasury."

I went to see him again as he grew better, and found him wrapped in blankets on a sofa, surrounded by my books. He was, for him, oddly talkative and excited. "This is the first long illness I've ever had," he told me, "and it has given me such a good chance for reading, the best chance I've ever had. I've always worked too hard to read much but magazines and papers. But now, thanks to you, I'm drunk on books; I've only been drunk once before in my life and then it was on sun."

He picked up the old "Golden Treasury," and I saw that it opened of itself at "Fair Helen,"—Helen of Kirkconnell. "This, now," he said, with a curious suppressed eagerness, "this book and the things in it are all fresh to me, most of 'em. And they're wonderful, lovely things. So terribly true, too. Look at this one." He began to mouth over the first lines of "Fair Helen" to himself, his pale gray eyes, larger than ever from his illness, fixed absorbedly upon the book.

"It's one of the saddest, most beautiful laments that ever was written," I said to recall him, and he looked up vacantly. "Yes," he muttered, "I suppose so. But it would have been certainly sadder, and perhaps more beautiful, if the love had all been on Helen's side. And in that case, don't you think that the man's rage against the nameless killer would have been proportionately greater, so great that it would have shaken his life from its level course, altered his axis, as it were, shown him new stars and spaces that were only names before? He would have been obliged to kill the killer, of course, or he could scarcely have gone on living under his debt."

Channing looked up at me, with those pale, over-strained gray eyes I was used to seeing bent upon his ledgers. All expression was gone from them but a sort of horror of memory. "The little snapping report among those gray hot rocks," he whispered, "and her hair over my boots. My God, if I die, shall I forget it, I wonder?"

One of the blankets he was wrapped in was an old Navajo, a glow of unfaded crimson. He turned down the top blanket of dark gray, and fingered the edge of the red as he told me.

"I was quite young," he said, in so low a voice that I sometimes failed to hear perfectly, "when I went out West for a holiday to join my brother Bob at the mines. It was somewhere hereabouts"—he picked at the blanket—"but I can't remember, because I was drunk with various things all the time I was there. I had spent—was spending—all my youth in offices, just as I'm spending my middle age. I rather hope I shall not have to spend my old age there. Maybe this weak lung will save me that. And heaven—why, those hard, golden, glowing streets—chrysolyte, beryl, topaz, and amethyst—why, they'll be homey, that's what they'll be. But I've never dared to go back West again."

He stared out of window at chill gray rain, fingering his blanket. "Can you imagine how it struck a poor little tidy soul fresh from an Eastern office? An endless railway journey, past the lands of trees and farms, past even the lands of cattle and sheep. And then two ponies waiting by a water-tank, and a man from Candelaria who said Bob had sent me a quiet one—"

He turned his eyes slowly from the gray square of the window. "Can you imagine what it was like? We rode slowly, and I had never ridden before; out into a great, dry, gorgeous desert, and I had never been ten miles away from bricks and mortar. We camped one night beside a little bitter pool and some sage brush; and I said my prayers like a frightened child, looking up at the violet-black sky and the fiery, palpitating stars.

"We reached the mines next day, and I was in a dream already, a dream of loneliness and colour and sun, sun, sun. Under the influence of the sun, something inside me seemed to be ready to bloom like a flower, a fiery flower. Bob and the man from Candelaria, every one was very good to me, because I was ill and ignorant and wildly humble, I suppose.

"The mines were insignificant scars, trivial buildings, among the scarred red hills. What made them wonderful was a square of emerald green growing stuff, real green, where they had struck more water-power than they needed. Bob used to point to the world-old river-beaches shelving out from the red and golden cliffs, and say, 'that's running still, under here,' and he'd strike the dust with his boot-heel. 'Think of it, Kid,' he'd say, 'just a line of artesian wells down the valley, and there's your rose blossoming.' I believe it's been done now, but Bob didn't do it. He died before, and the man from Candelaria took over the mines, and turned the valley into a blossoming rose, and then grew tired of it, and moved back into the desert again. And a man from the East made the valley pay in farms. . . . It's quite a long time ago.

"Bob said to me, 'You can ride east or west as far as those hills,'—but he called 'em something different—but don't drift north or south, Kiddie. And don't cross the hills.' The hills to east and west looked quite close, and to north and south they seemed to join, too; but Bob said they didn't, it was only the illusion of distance. So that we seemed to be surrounded by a golden-red, purple-shadowed barrier, within which was the sun; the stars, the sand, and the red rocks Bob was mining into, sticking up like an islet out of a sea of sand; just these, and the mirage. Generally it put snow-peaks on the hills and cedar forests in front of them, or else a lake and acres of reeds. Until I grew almost confused as to which was the reality and which the dream—confused, yes; and careless too. Nothing was real but the vibrating flood of sun and colour in which I moved absorbent, soaking them up sponge fashion.

"I was madly in love with it all, and madly frightened at times. There was no fear of my disobeying Bob. 'Thus far,' he said, 'and no farther,' and I obeyed him to the letter. He used to spend a good deal of time watching me through a telescope when I went off on my timid, enchanted expeditions among those glowing cliffs and voiceless dead splendours, never quite easy when I was out of sight. He was very good to me, was Bob.

"Sometimes those desolations would yield up a little speck of humanity; supplies coming to our little mine on mule back, or an Indian drifted down from some more fertile fastness with dried meat or turquoises for sale. Very rarely, as I grew more bold or more spell-bound and thrust further into the red barrier, I would meet one of these silent, stoic, glooming creatures, and they generally passed me indifferently, though I was fascinated by them. Bob said, 'They're gentle and jealous, untrustable and faithful, patient and fierce.' And when I said I didn't understand, he laughed. 'If you understood them,' he said, 'you'd understand the desert—perhaps. And who does that?'

"So I went on with my charmed, sun-drunk wanderings among the blood-coloured ranges. A day out, camp, and a day back was Bob's rule for me. If I was longer he came to fetch me. At other times he used to climb to the heights of his island-rocks and watch for me with the telescope.

"Sometimes it used to show me to him, a fly crawling upon the blank sands. Sometimes he would see the fly crawl into the green soft shades of the cedar mirage, or swallowed up by the long waves of a lake, or lost among reeds and beds of water-grasses where the wild-fowl bred; to come out, a dark pin-prick on a towering red cliff, where no life was, where rain never came, torn into foot-

holds with the fury of old-time flood.

"I wonder if it showed him my meetings with the girl? No, I don't think so.

"I never knew her name. I saw her first, a silent, unfaltering figure on the rough path. As she came nearer, I saw that some touch, perhaps of Spanish blood, had made her glow through her stoic surface of expressionless quiet. She seemed to me the desert personified. I stared at her as she passed, and ventured on a Spanish greeting I had learned from Bob. I've forgotten it now. She did not answer, but her dark eyes flamed at me, and when she had gone by, I knew she stopped and calmly watched me out of sight.

"After that I often met her, moving through my dream sure-footed, with the desert's glow behind the desert's mystery. She never spoke to me, and I never knew her name nor why she was there. But she always met me with a curious lightening of the expressionless face, a splendid flame in the Spanish-Indian eyes, suddenly shown and suddenly hidden. And she always stood and watched me out of sight.

"I was moving in my dream of space and sun and colour, and cared to notice her only as she seemed one with these. I was saturated with them, drunk upon them. I never even mentioned her to Bob, because—God help me!—she did not seem to be of sufficient importance!

"I was quite young and very ignorant, besides being drunk. Once as I passed her on a narrow path, I had an idea that she stooped forward with a snake's quickness and touched my hand. But when I looked again, startled, she was passing me, still and erect, her face indifferent and the glow shut out of her Spanish eyes.

"I am telling this in the language of twenty years' thought. She was not then of importance enough for me to speak of her to Bob; and never a day from then till now that she has not been present to me, that I have not thought of her. She is so greatly revenged or repaid, whichever you like best.

"Her arm—. I can see it still, smooth and steady, the glow of red showing through the delicate coppery skin like fire through thin gold; there were bracelets upon it, heavy affairs of soft gold, and turquoises linked together with silver chains. I thought she would pass me as usual, the lightening of the face in answer to my half-understood Spanish greeting. But she stopped and barred my way with her outstretched arm, and her long eyes glowed upon me.

"I checked stupidly, with a casual admiration, a careless surprise. I cannot now realise the quickness of it all. It seems as if it must have taken longer to happen, that my life's axis could not have been so changed in a moment, that events so strange must have moved more slowly. But actually it was done faster than I can tell it to you. She barred my way with this young splendid arm, and I hung upon one indifferent foot, wondering. And then suddenly she looked back and moved so that she was between me and the ascending path. The gay, vibrating hot silence was split by a little snap, and shut together again. But the girl laughed and slid forwards on to my shoulder, and I knew she was dying.

I knew she was dying, and I knew what the glow in her eyes had been. This knowledge tore my life in two like the wind rips a lowered blind, showing the storm outside. She lay heavily upon my arm, and laughed again, saying something in her own language; then she turned her smooth coppery face up to me, and I saw the sun-glow was dying from behind the clear skin. I kissed her once, and the eyes brightened again. Then she slipped from my hold and fell, and there was nothing but the empty yellowish sky, the palpitating hot red rocks; and she, her black hair rolled across my dusty boots, the fire gone forever from the thin dead gold.

"I don't know how long I stood, looking down at the girl to whom I had been indifferent, who had loved me so that she had died for me. Such a thing comes no more than once in a life, and to me it had come unsought. Now that I look back, it seems like the very blossoming of the desert, a fiery, crimson, flower, beautiful beyond understanding, upon an unsightly gray vegetable. And those flowers

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