

The Interlude

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cannot be picked because they die so soon, but they leave this poison behind,—that everything after is pale and shallow and dull.

"Why doesn't wreckage of soul kill like wreckage of body? For me then there was nothing but the yellow sky, the red hot rocks, and the girl in the dead dust, and my own horrified soul. How many things the desert had shown that poor lad that was I,—hate, love, and death! It was to show me one more, and then to cast me aside.

"The hot empty sky, the beautiful hot rocks, and her hair across my boots. But in a little while I thought that somewhere among the crags and world-old watercourses was the man who had fired that shot; and then there was nothing but that thought. Five minutes,—think of the pity of it!—I had been a careless, sun-soaked boy. Now I was this other thing. 'I know why the rocks are red and the sand in the waterways red,' I thought to myself, to that shattered thing that had been youth, 'It's to prevent my making a mess when I kill him.'

"You see, I had no doubt of what I should do. And that's queer, because all my life I had leaned upon others, taken my thoughts and opinions from others. I looked down at her once, moved her hair gently from my boots and shook the dust out of it; the Spanish touch had made it very silky. Then I went on up the path to find the man who had fired that shot.

"Bob had insisted that I should always take a gun with me, and it was there now, slung across my shoulders. I never took it in hand, not having been long enough away from law and butchers to acquire the instinct. I don't know whether you will believe, but I went bare-handed after the man who had killed her, my own death the last thing in my thoughts. I knew that I should not so quickly get rid of that aching pity and that dreadful rage, and I never doubted that I should find him.

"It's wonderful enough, too, that I did find him. I suppose his contempt for me was so great he did not try to hide. I saw him going down the side of a valley in the red rock where once a great river had run, his long old gun in his hand, and set after him. He was an Indian, young, light and sure-footed as an antelope, but I gained on him, and that's as wonderful as any of it. He stopped once and took a shot at me. It was a long one, and the bullet whined past my ear like a Chinese whistling toy, and died with a flick in the sand. I suppose something in the way I came showed him my mind, for he leapt up the long shelf in the cliff made by the old river, but still more quickly I followed. In a little we were high above the riverbed, and I was very close. He had his gun ready, and I saw the glint of his wild eyes beneath his headband of soft dyed skin and yellow stones. He was waiting to turn on one foot and give me another bullet. But I pulled a wedge-shaped splinter of hard rock from the crumbling red stuff—think of it! my city-bred arm and clerk's hand!—and flung it at him so quickly that on that narrow ledge he could not guard. It took him across the spine and he only cried once, falling from the shelf to the bottom of the old river, where the sand was red enough.

"I went down to see that he was quite dead, and then toiled back to where she lay. I was very weak by the time I got there, and there seemed to be a sort of mist over every-



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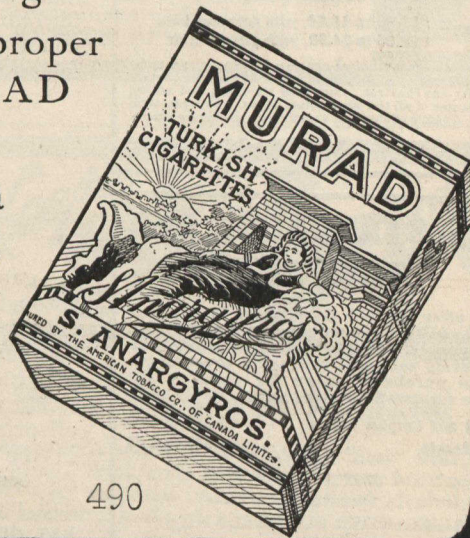
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