The Woman at Eighteen−Mile

Mary Austin

Table of Contents

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I HAD long wished to write a story of Death Valley that should be its final word. It was to be so chosen from the limited sort of incidents that could occur there, so charged with the still ferocity of its moods, that I should at length be quit of its obsession, free to concern myself about other affairs. And from the moment of hearing of the finding of Lang's body at Dead Man's Spring I knew I had struck upon the trail of that story.

It was a teamster who told it, stopping over the night at McGee's, a big slow man, face and features all of a bluntness as if he had been dropped before the clay was set. He had a big blunt voice through which his words rolled, dulled along the edges. The same accident that had flattened the outlines of his nose and chin must have happened to his mind, for he was never able to deliver more than the middle of an idea, without any definiteness as to where it began or ended and what it stood next to. He called the dead man Long, and failed to remember who was supposed to have killed him and what about.

We had fallen a−talking round the fire of Convict Lake, and the teamster had handed up the incident of Dead Man's Spring as the only thing in his experience that matched with the rooted horror of its name. He had been of the party that recovered the body, and what had stayed with him was the sheer torment of the journey across Death Valley, the aching heat, the steady, sickening glare, the uncertainty as to whether there was a body in the obliterated grave, whether it was Lang's body, and whether they would be able to prove it; and then the exhuming of the dead, like the one real incident in a fever dream. He was very sure of the body, done up in an Indian blanket, striped red and black, with a rope around it like a handle, convenient for carrying. But he had forgotten what set the incident in motion or what became of Lang after that, if it really were Lang in the blanket.

Then I heard of the story again between Red Rock and Coyote Holes, about moonset when the stage labored up the long gorge, waking to hear the voices of the passengers run on steadily with the girding of the sand and the rattle of harness chains, run on and break and eddy around Dead Man's Spring, and back up the turgid pools of comment and speculation, falling in shallows of miner's talk, lost at last in a waste of ledges and contracts and forgotten strikes. Waking and falling asleep again, the story shaped itself of the largeness of the night; and then the two men got down at Coyote Holes an hour before the dawn, and I knew no more of them, neither face nor name. But what I had heard of the story confirmed it exactly the story I had so long sought.

Those who have not lived in a mining country cannot understand how it is possible for whole communities to be so disrupted by the failure of a lode or a fall in the price of silver, that I could live seven years within a day's journey of Dead Man's Spring and not come upon anybody who could give me the whole of that story. I went about asking for it and got sticks and straws. There was a man who had kept bar in Tio Juan at the time, and had been the first to notice Whitmark's dealing with the Shoshone who was supposed to have stolen the body after it was dug up. There was a Mexican who had been the last to see Lang alive and might have told somewhat, but death got him before I did. Once at a great dinner in San Francisco, a large positive man with a square forehead and a face below it that somehow implied he had shaped it so butting his way through life, across the table two places down, caught at some word of mine, leaning forward above the bank of carnations that divided the cloth.

"Queer thing happened up in that country to a friend of mine, Whitmark " but the toast−master cut him off. All this time the story glimmered like a summer island in a mist, through every man's talk about it, grew and allured,

caressing the soul. It had warmth and amplitude like a thing palpable to be stroked. There was a mine in it, a murder and a mystery, great sacrifice, Shoshones, dark and incredibly discreet, and the magnetic will of a man making manifest through all these; there were lonely water−holes, deserted camps where coyotes hunted in the streets, fatigues and dreams and voices of the night. And at the last it appeared there was a woman in it.

Curiously, long before I learned of her connection with the story, I had known and liked her for a certain effect she had of being warmed and nourished from within. There was about her a spark, a nuance that men mistook never more than once, as the stage driver told me confidently a vitality that had nothing, absolutely nothing but the blank occasionless life of the desert to sustain it. She was one of the very few people I had known able to keep a soul alive and glowing in the Wilderness, and I was to find out that she kept it so against the heart of my story. Mine! I called it so by that time, but hers was the right, though she had no more pertinence to the plot than most women have to desert affairs.

She was the woman of the Eighteen−Mile House. She had the desert mark upon her lean figure, wasted bosom, the sharp upright furrow between the eyes, the burned tawny skin, with the pallid streak of the dropped eyelids, and, of course, I suppose, she knew her husband from among the lean, sidling, vacuous−looking Borderers, but I couldn't have identified him, so like he was to the other feckless men whom the desert sucks dry and keeps dangling like gourds on a string. Twenty−five years they had drifted from up Bodie way, around Panamint, toward Mojave, worse housed and fed than they might have been in the ploughed lands, and without having hit upon the fortune which is primarily the object of every desert adventure. And when people have been as long as that in the Lost Borders there is not the slightest possibility of their coming to anything else. And still the woman's soul was palpitant and enkindled. At the last, Mayer that was the husband's name had settled at the Eighteen−Mile House to care for the stage relays, and I had met the Woman, halting there with the stage, or camping nights on some slower passage.

At the time I learned of her connection with the Whitmark affair, the story still wanted some items of motive and understanding, a knowledge of the man himself, some account of his three months' pasear into the hills beyond Mesquite, which certainly had to do with the affair of the mine, but of which he would never be persuaded to speak. And I made perfectly sure of getting the rest of it from the Woman at the Eighteen−Mile.

It was full nine o'clock before the Woman's household was all settled and she had come out upon the stoop of the Eighteen−Mile House to talk, the moon coming up out of Shoshone land, all the hollow of the desert falling away before us, filled with the glitter of that surpassing wonder, the moon−mirage. Never mind what went before to draw her to the point of talking; it could have come about as simply as my saying, "I mean to print this story as I find it," and she would have had to talk to save it. Consider how still it was. Off to the right the figures of my men under their blankets stretched along the ground. Not a leaf to rustle, not a bough to creak. No grass to whisper in the wind, only stiff, scant shrubs and the sandy hills like shoals at the bottom of a lake of light. I could see the Woman's profile, thin and fine against the moon, and when she put up her hand to drag down the thick careless coil of her hair, I guessed we were close upon the heart of the story. And for her the heart of the story was the man, Whitmark.

She had been, at the time he came into the country seventeen years before, that which the world knows so little what to do with that it mostly throws away a good woman with great power and possibilities of passion. Whitmark stood for the best she had known; I should have said, from all I learned, just a clean−minded, acute, tolerably cultivated American business man with an obsession for accomplishing results.

He had been sent out to look after a mine to which the title was not clear and there were counter machinations to take it away from him. This much may be told without breach, for, as it turned out, I was not to write that story, after all, at least not in the lifetime of the Woman at the Eighteen−Mile. And the crux of the story to her was one little, so little, moment that, owing to Whitmark's having been taken with pneumonia within a week afterward was rendered fixed beyond change or tarnish of time.

When all this was going forward the Mayers kept a miners' boarding−house at Tio Juan, where Whitmark was in and out, and the Woman, who from the first had been attracted by the certain stamp of competency and power, began to help him with warnings, intimations of character and local prejudice, afterward with information which got him the reputation of almost supernatural penetration.

There were reasons why, during his darkest time, Whitmark could find nobody but the Indians and the Woman to trust. Well, he had been wise enough to trust her, and it was plain to see from her account of it that this was the one occasion in life when her soul had stretched itself, observed, judged, wrought, and felt to the full of its power.

She loved him, yes, perhaps I do not know if you call love that soul service of a good woman to a man she may not touch. Whitmark had children back East and a wife whom he had married for all the traditions of niceness and denial and abnegation which men demand of the women they expect to marry, and find savorless so often when they are married to it. He had never known what it meant to have a woman concerned in his work, running neck and neck with it, divining his need, supplementing it not with the merely feminine trick of making him more complacent with himself, but with vital remedies and aids. And once he had struck the note of the West, he kindled to the event and enlarged his spirit. The two must have had great moments at the heart of that tremendous coil of circumstance. All this the Woman conveyed to me by the simplest telling of the story as it happened: "I said . . . and he did . . . the Indian went. . . ."

I sat within the shallow shadow of the eaves experiencing the full−throated satisfaction of old prospectors over the feel of pay dirt, rubbing it between the thumb and palm, swearing over it softly below the breath. It was as good as that. And I was now to have it! For one thing the Woman made plain to me in the telling was the guilt of Whitmark. Though there was no evidence by which the court could hold him, though she did not believe it, though the fulness of her conviction intrigued me into believing that it did not matter so much what he was, the only way to write that story successfully was to fix forever against Whitmark's name its damning circumstance. The affair had been a good deal noised about at the time, and through whatever illusion of altered name and detail, was bound to be recognized and made much of in the newspapers. The Woman of the Eighteen−Mile saw that. Suddenly she broke off the telling to show me her poor heart, shrivelling as I knew hearts to warp and shrink in the aching wilderness, this one occasion rendering it serviceable like a hearth−fire in an empty room.

"It was a night like this he went away," said the Woman, stirring to point the solemn moonlight poured over all the world.

That was after twenty−two months of struggle had left Whitmark in possession of the property. He was on his way then to visit his family, whom he had seen but once in that time, and was to come again to put in operation the mine he had so hardly won. It was, it should have been, an hour ripe with satisfaction.

"He was to take the stage which passed through Bitter Wells at ten that night," said she, "and I rode out with him he had asked me from Tio Juan to bring back the horses. We started at sunset and reached the Wells a quarter of an hour before the time.

"The moon was half high when the sun went down and I was very happy because it had all come out so well, and he was to come again in two months. We talked as we rode. I told you he was a cheerful man. All the time when it looked as if he might be tried for his life, the worse it looked the more his spirits rose. He would have laughed if he had heard he was to be hung. But that night there was a trouble upon him. It grew as we rode. His face drew, his breath came sighing. He seemed always on the point of speaking and did not. It was as if he had something to say that must be said and at the moment of opening his lips it escaped him. In the moonlight I saw his mouth working and nothing came from it. If I spoke, the trouble went out of his face and when I left off it came again, puzzled wonder and pain. I know now," said the Woman, shaking forward her thick hair, "that it was a warning, a presentiment. I have heard such things, and it seems as if I should have felt it too, hovering in the air like that. But I was glad because it had all come out so well and I had had a hand in it. Besides it was not for me." She turned

toward me then for the first time, her hair falling forward to encompass all her face but the eyes, wistful with the desire to have me understand how fine this man was in every worldly point, how far above her, and how honored she was to have been the witness of the intimation of his destiny. I said quickly the thing that was expected of me, which was not the thing I thought, and gave her courage for going on.

"Yet," she said, "I was not entirely out of it, because . . . because the thing he said at the last, when he said it, did not seem the least strange to me, though afterward, of course, when I thought of it, it was the strangest good−by I had ever heard.

"We had got down and stood between the horses, and the stage was coming in. We heard the sand fret under it and the moonlight was a cold weight laid upon the world. He took my hand and held it against his breast so and said. . . . Oh, I am perfectly sure of the words; he said, 'I have missed you so.' Just that, not good−by, and not shall miss you, but, 'I have missed you so.'

"Like that," she said, her hands still clasped above her wasted bosom, the quick spirit glowing through it like wine in a turgid glass "like that," she said. But no, whatever the phrase implied of the failure of the utterly safe and respectable life to satisfy the inmost hunger of the man, it could never have had in it the pain of her impassioned, lonely years. If it had been the one essential word the desert strives to say it would have been pronounced like that.

"And it was not until the next day," she went on, "it occurred to me that was a strange thing to say to a woman he had seen two or three times a week for nearly two years. But somehow it seemed to me clearer when I heard a week later that he was dead. He had taken cold on the way home, and died after three days. His wife wrote me; it was a very nice letter; she said he told her I had been kind to him. Kind!" She broke off, and far out under the moon rose the thin howl of coyotes running together in the pack. "And that," said the Woman, "is why I made you promise at the beginning that if I told you all I knew about Whitmark and Lang you would not use it."

I jumped. She had done that, and I had promised light−heartedly. People nearly always exact that sort of an assurance in the beginning of confidences; like a woman wanting to be told she is of nobler courage at the moment of committing an indiscretion, a concession to the sacredness of personal experience which always seems so much less once it is delivered, they can be persuaded to forego the promise of inviolateness. I always promise and afterward persuade. But not the Woman of the Eighteen−Mile. If Whitmark had lived he would have come back and proved his worth, cleared himself by his life and works. As it stood, by the facts against him he was most utterly given over to ill repute. The singularity of the incident, the impossibility of its occurring in any place but Death Valley, conspired to fix the ineffaceable stain upon his wife and his children, for, by the story as I should write it he ought to have been hung. No use to say modestly that the scratchings of my pen would never reach them. If it were not the biggest story of the desert ever written I had no wish to write it. And there was the Woman. The story was all she had, absolutely all of heart−stretching, of enlargement and sustenance. What she thought about it was that that last elusive moment when she touched the forecast shadow of his destiny, was to bind her to save his credit for his children's sake. One must needs be faithful to one's experiences when there are so few of them.

She said something like that, gathering up her hair in both hands, standing before me in the wan revealing light. The mark of the desert was on her. Heart of desolation! but I knew what pinchings of the spirit went to make that mark!

"It was a promise," she said.

"It is a promise."

But I caught myself in the reservation that it should not mean beyond the term of her life.