

So rustle something mighty sudden. Jake's beginnin' to make a bowl over to the store."

"I reckon I'll try Dellabar again. Mebbe there's somethin' there." Sue Pearson laid her hand gently on his arm.

"You're not going by the Playground road, Jim?" she asked apprehensively. "You can't cross that way now. We've only the one horse, remember. Please go by the old road, Jim."

Her husband nodded gravely, appreciating the force of her advice, for the blistering heat of June lay over Tunipier, and the Devil's playground was no longer safe for man or beast. He slipped his arm fondly about her.

"Sue," he said, and at his tone the woman's face glowed faintly. "I've tried hard for you. Things were agin us, back home, and I thought we'd do a sight better out here. It might be shut all right, tu, if Dellabar hadn't shut down, becuz I could her freighted steady then. I know it don't look yet as if our luck had come, but still I want you to know that I'm a-tryin'—always."

He left her abruptly, as if ashamed of what seemed an unmanly revelation. "I'll be leavin' about eleven," he said over his shoulder. "Mebbe I'll take Ettamary. The ride'll do her good."

Sue Pearson was still in her doorway, when Mr. Oliver Lee the dealer at the "Little Gem," spotless as to linen, and resplendent as to shoes, picked his way gingerly through the dust toward his breakfast at the Christensen's. "Handsome" Oliver Lee mentally compared Minna Christensen's stolid face and trustful "kornblumen" eyes, with this other man's wife. He raised his hat with an easy grace. He was sorry for Jim, and he admired his wife. But he quickly saw that the light in her face was not for him, and he went his way, just as had Billy Overton had done, and Tony La France, from Clover Valley, and all of Tunipier, in fact, from time to time.

When Etta Mary had surveyed the world from the front door, and found it much the same as yesterday, she thought herself of her playmate. He was sitting on a bench, on the sunny side of the house, pouring over something he held on his knees. She clambered up beside him, and peered over his shoulder. To her surprise he turned up on her with a dark frown.

Snapping the book shut he hid it in his shirt.

Etta Mary Pearson was only five, and Etta Mary probably could not read, but he must take no chances.

"The tenth of June," the book said. It must be nearly that by now. He wondered how he would know when the time came, and trembled lest it should pass him, and he not know it. Then he grew cunning.

"What day do you suppose this is?" the Wanderer whispered to the little girl. He would ascertain the date, without awakening her suspicion.

Etta Mary rolled her blue orbs reflectively.

"Today it's Wednesday," she announced. "Make thum boath, Thon. She pouted his knee, persuadingly.

"Aye, but we had Wednesday last week," he corrected, with convincing intensity. Etta Mary looked puzzled.

"But we have one too, thith week," she asserted, bravely escaping his mental snare.

A shrewd light twinkled in his eye. "But how do you know that this Wednesday isn't last Wednesday?" he asked, with a triumphant air. "They both have the same name."

Etta Mary began to feel perturbed. How indeed? It was a terrifying question.

"It thith, anyway!" she faltered helplessly. "I jutht know it thith!"

The Wanderer looked warily about him. He bent his gray head close to hers. "Does she know?" He nodded toward the tent.

Immediately the little girl slid down, and ran inside. She reappeared out of breath, but victorious. "Mamma thays, it it's the ninth of June, so it it's thith Wednesday, jutht ath I thaid," she remarked, with a complacent nodding of her sleek head. "Snake thum boath, Thon," she commanded.

The Desert Man gazed over her head, with blank, unseeing eyes. It had nearly passed him! Two days more and he would have had to wait another whole year. A year of weary waiting, of fasting and praying! A faint moan escaped his twisted lips. His relief was so great that it hurt him.

Hardly knowing what he did, he put the child away from him, and rising abruptly from the bench, stumbled

away to search for his little wagon. He found it by the door, where he had left it. Fastening the tongue hastily to his shoulder with a piece of rope, he turned his steps toward Jake Snyder's store, across the railroad tracks, leaving the child wondering over this sudden defection of her ornate gentle playmate.

She was still sitting thus when he reappeared, a little later, his blanket now covering several cans of something that made the little red wagon's wheels creak even more dismally than before.

"Come back to make my boath, Thon!" she asked, with a dazzling smile, and a seductive inclination of her yellow curls.

He shook his head gravely, but stopped for a moment. "No; no time now," the Wanderer muttered hoarsely, his eyes beginning to rove again.

"John of the Desert going away now?"

"Where you going?" demanded Etta Mary.

He smothered a smile in his hand. How crafty these women were! Aye, they had always been so, and once he had suffered, suffered. But he knew them now.

"Good-bye," he faltered, and slowly walked away. "Good-bye," he said over his shoulder. His grizzled face took on its wistful look again. Deceiver though she was, without a doubt, she had once been a genial friend.

"Good-bye, Thon!" said the little girl, gravely shaking a wobbly hand. Then, as he started to walk away, in the brush, toward the West, childlike she changed her mind, and ran tumultuously after him.

"Where you going?" she demanded panting, and immediately sat down in the shade of a large rabbit bush in order to discuss the matter comfortably. After much evident perturbation, the old man seated himself under a bush opposite. For some time he surveyed her doubtfully, debating something in his mind. Smoothing out the space between them, until it was level and clean, he took a stick, and drew a rude triangle in the sand. Along its lines he put small pebbles. At each corner he stuck a forked twig, pregnant with mystery. In the centre he placed a bright red stone, which he drew from his pocket. This done, he fixed his watery eyes upon the one opposite, and raised his voice in a tone of command.

"By Aldebaran, and that Greater Star!" he said, crossing himself rapidly. "Aldebrum and the Great Tar," repeated Etta Mary, vaguely, following his motions with an uncertain hand.

"By the three Kings, and my hope of Death—"

"Kings—hope—death," murmured the little girl automatically.

"I swear never to reveal—"

"Veal!" Her eyes brightened. Amid it all, this at least she knew.

"The Great Secret!"

"Secret!" gasped the Deceiver, with relief. The Desert man's intensity had been a little oppressive. Besides, she was glad that there really was a secret after all.

Replacing the red stone in his pocket, notwithstanding her plainly evident desire to handle it, he piled the twigs together, and lighted them with a match. While they burned he kept silence, by his finger pressed against his lips.

He produced his book, and read its passages to her, line by line.

"For thon shalt tread upon the Aps and the Cathlik!"

"What's an 'aps'?" demanded Etta Mary, instantly. For answer he drew his finger along the ground, making a sinuous line.

"A thnake!" hazarded the child, with a quiver of repulsion. He nodded. "The reptile of history."

"And the Cathlik?"

This time his explanation was not so lucid. He screwed his face into a terrifying scowl, and glared at her, with blazing eyes. Etta Mary drew back a little, but when his features relaxed, and he smiled crookedly, she saw without an investigation, which she did not care to pursue, that the Cathlik was something that took pleasure in frightening little girls to death.

"On the other side of the habitation of Satan," he murmured, and paused a moment to consider.

Etta Mary grew restive. It was a secret and yet she could not understand. It was most disappointing.

"Which side?" asked Etta Mary, petulantly.

The Wanderer looked up in surprise. "Why—the other side," he responded,

with easy assurance. "This side is here; the other side, of course, is over—over—there." His voice trailed away, with the last words. He began to stare at Etta Mary. "The other side," he repeated, frowning. Then, as if to convince himself of its truth, by saying it out loud, "The other side—is not here, therefore, it is over there." He brightened perceptibly. This solution was easy. Still, he observed her narrowly, to see if she concurred.

"But, thuppothe you are on the other thide," objected the Deceiver, with merciless common sense.

The old man's face became a blank.

Etta Mary chuckled with glee, and clapped her hands.

"Thon dothn't know? Thon dothn't know!" she screamed, triumphantly.

With a shrewd realisation of her power to force further disclosures of the Great Secret, she drove his ignorance home, and clinched it tight.

"Thon dothn't know the other thide! Poor old Thon! Etta Mary Pearson knowth! Poor old Thon!"

He felt that here was a crucial point. All too late, a fatal omission was being uncovered, something that should have been discovered years ago. He realised, with torturing shame, that he did not know which was the "Other Side" of which the book told. He surveyed her doubtfully. Was it possible that the yellow curls dancing before him, as she constantly repeated the agonising chant, covered a knowledge of the right, in fact the only direction in which he might proceed?

"Poor old Thon!" chanted Etta Mary, for the twentieth time. The Wanderer made up his mind. Adjusting the rope of the little red wagon to his shoulder, he rose to his feet, taking pains to keep his face turned away. He busied himself with some mysterious preparations. Immediately she became curious. Scrambling precipitately over the back of the wagon, she sat down among the blankets and tin cans. "Take we widin," Thon! said Etta Mary. The Desert Man turned away, to hide a crafty smile.

On the approach to the Devil's Playground the sage brush gradually faded away, growing sparsely where the glistening sand begins to creep with long white fingers into the darker soil of the mesa land, finally becoming only an isolated dot here and there. It is here that an intimation comes of the great heat in the centre of the basin and the vastness of that trackless, waterless waste. For twenty miles it stretches to

the north from Tunipier; and twenty to the west, a hideous blaring sear upon the face of God's green earth. Here the little red wagon came to a halt. On either side of him juttled out, as if into a lake, great barren headlands, capped with a row of black, lava rock, cracked into uncouth snarps, jagged and sinister. In undulating mounds and swells, the Desert spread itself before him, white, soft, deathly silent. As he looked, a forgetful rabbit hopped lazily out on its surface and sat, blinking in the light.

Then, although it did not see him, it scurried hastily back to its shady covert, with more speed than grace. He wored a little to one side, and coming into another current of air, a blast struck him full in the face. It was hot as the breath of a furnace. The sand on a nearby hillock slid down and spread itself abroad; he thought he could hear the grains rattling one on another, in the ghastly silence; then, whisked together by a gust of wind, resolved into a whirling dancing pillar, that threw itself around him like a shroud, blinding his eyes, and stinging his flesh, with pricking, irritating particles. The twist in his lips became unconsciously exaggerated. He stood for a moment, nervously considering the prospect. A nebulous forecast of the task before him seemed floating through his mind, trying to wage warfare with a comprehension that shifted, evaded, and constantly refused the battle, prophesying bitter moments to even such as he.

And yet far beyond, faintly wavering through the eddying waves of heat, their snow-tipped peaks shimmering and sparkling in the bright sunshine, lay the dim, blue mountains of the promised land.

He turned back to the wagon, wherein the child lay curled up a corner of the blanket drawn over her face, for the hot sun had made her drowsy. It seemed a long journey for a woman. If she had not seemed so sure that she knew, perhaps, perhaps—

The child opened her eyes. "Where you going?" murmured Etta Mary sleepily. "Thon, dwice on!"

He picked up the tongue, and took a step forward. The wagon's wheels sank softly into the yielding sand. "And three Archangels will accompany thee," he muttered.

He threw back his head with a quiver of joy that extended to the extremities of his limbs. He cried his fore word again. "And then thou shalt be happy!"

It was nearly eleven when Jim Pearson



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