

# A STRANGER.

By AMBROSE BIERCE.

ALAN stepped out of the darkness into the little illuminated circle about our fading campfire, and seated himself upon a rock.

"You are not the first to explore this spot," he said gravely.

Nobody contradicted his statement; he was himself proof of its truth, for he was not of our party and must have been somewhere near when we camped. Moreover, he must have companions not far away; it was not a place where one would be living or traveling alone. For more than a week we had seen, beside ourselves and our animals, only such living things as rattlesnakes and horned lizards. In an Arizona desert one does not long expect wild only such creatures as those; one must have pack animals, supplies, arms—a "unit." And all these imply courtesies. It was perhaps a doubt as to what manner of men this unconventional stranger's courtesies might be, something with something in its words interpreted as a challenge, that drove every man of our half-breed "brigade" to rise to a sitting posture and lay his hand upon a weapon—in our case, in that time and place, a policy of expediency. The stranger gave the matter no attention, and began again to speak in the same desiccated, uninflected monotone in which he had delivered his first sentence.

"Thirty years ago," began a salesman, William Shaw, George W. Kent, and Berry Davis, all of whom crossed the Santa Catalina Mountains and travelled the route as nearly as the configuration of the country permitted. We were prospecting, and it was our intention, if we found nothing to push through to the top at some point near the Big Bend, where we understood there was a settlement. We had a good outfit, but no guide—just Ramon Gallegos, William Shaw, George W. Kent, and Berry Davis.

The next repeated the names slowly and distinctly, as if to fix them in the memories of his audience, every member of which was now attentively observing him, but with a slackened ap-

prehension regarding his possible companions somewhere in the darkness that seemed to enclose us like a black wall. In the manner of this volunteer historian was no suggestion of an unfriendly purpose. His act was rather that of a harmless fanatic than an enemy. We were not so near to the country as not to know what the solitary life of many a plainsman had a tendency to develop eccentricities of conduct and character not always easily distinguishable from mental aberration. A man is like a tree—in a forest of his fellows he will grow as straight as his general and individual nature permits; alone in the open he yields to the deforming stresses and tortures that environ him. Some such thoughts were in my mind as I watched the man from the shadow of my hat, pulled low to shut out the firelight. A useless fellow, no doubt, but what could he be doing there in the heart of a desert?

Having undertaken to tell this story, I wish that I could describe the man's appearance; that would be a natural thing to do. Unfortunately, and somewhat strangely, I find myself unable to do so with any degree of confidence. For afterward no two of us agreed as to what he wore and how he looked; and when I try to set down my own impressions they chafe me. Anyone can tell some kind of story—narration is one of the elemental powers of the race. But the talent for description is a gift.

Nobody having spoken, silence the visitor went on to say: "This country is not then what it is now. There was not a ranch between the river and the hills. There was a little game here and there in the mountains, and near the infrequent water-holes grass enough to keep our animals from starvation. If we should be so fortunate as to encounter no Indians, we might get through. But within a week the purpose of the expedition had altered from discovery of wealth to preservation of life. We had gone too far to go back, for what was ahead could be no worse than what was behind; so we pushed on, raking by night to avoid Indians and the intolerable heat, and something ear-

selves by day as best we could. Sometimes, having exhausted our supply of wild meat and emptied our canteens, we were days without food or drink; then a water-hole, or a shallow pool in the bottom of an arroyo, so restored our strength and sanity that we were able

"Scarcely, I know not well of the good God and what please him. I have lived without religion, and I am not acquainted with that of you. Pardon, senores, if I shock you, but for me the time is come to beat the game of the Apache."



"And you," he shouted, "You dared to escape?"

to shoot some of the wild animals that sought it also. Sometimes it was a bear, sometimes an antelope, a coyote, a cougar—that was as they pleased; all were good.

The morning as we skirted a mountain range, seeking a practicable pass, we were attacked by a band of Apaches who had followed our trail up a gulch—it is not far from here. Knowing that they outnumbered us ten to one, they took none of their usual cowardly precautions, but dashed upon us as a gallop, firing and yelling. Fighting was out of the question; we urged our feeble animals up the gulch as far as there was footing for a horse, then threw ourselves out of our saddles and took to the chaparral on one of the slopes, abandoning our entire outfit to the enemy. But we retained our rifles, every man—Ramon Gallegos, William Shaw, George W. Kent, and Berry Davis.

"Some old crowd," said the humorist of our party. He was an Eastern man, unfamiliar with the desert observances of social intercourse. A gesture of disapproval from our leader silenced him, and the stranger proceeded with his tale:

"The savages dismounted also, and some of them ran up the gulch beyond the point at which we had left it, cutting off farther retreat in that direction and forcing us on to the side. Unfortunately the chaparral extended only a short distance up the slope, and as we came into the open ground above we took the fire of a dozen rifles; but Apaches shoot badly when in a hurry, and that so killed it that none of us fell. Twenty yards up the slope, beyond the edge of the bush, were vertical cliffs, in which, directly in front of us, was a narrow opening. Into that we ran, fitting ourselves in a cavern about as large as an ordinary room in a house. Here, for a time, we were safe; a single man with a repeating rifle could defend the entrance against all the Apaches in the land. But against houses and trees we had no defence, because we still had, our hope was a memory.

"Not one of these Indians did we discerned, but by the smoke and glare of their fires in the gulch we knew that he lay and by scent they watched our side; in the edge of the bush—know that if we made a sortie not a man of us would live to take one step into the open. For three days, waiting in there, we held out before our suffering became insupportable. Then out came the morning of the fourth day—Ramon Gal-

legos, and pressed his pistol against his temple. "Madro de Dios," he said, "comes now the soul of Ramon Gallegos."

"And so he left us—William Shaw, George W. Kent, and Berry Davis.

"I was the leader; it was for me to speak. 'He was a brave man,' I said; 'he knew when to die, and how. It is foolish to go mad from thirst, and fall by Apache bullets, or be skinned alive—it is in bad taste. Let us join Ramon.'"

"That is right," said William Shaw.

"That is right," said George W. Kent.

"I straightened the limbs of Ramon Gallegos, and put a handkerchief over his face. Then William Shaw said: 'I should like to look like that—a little while.' And George W. Kent said that he felt that way, too.

"It shall be so," I said; "the red devils will wait a week. William Shaw and George W. Kent, draw and kneel."

"They did so and I knelt before them. 'Amidly God, our Father,' I said. William Shaw and George W. Kent.

"Amidly God, our Father."

"Forgive us our sins," said I.

"And receive our souls."

"And receive our souls."

"Amen!"

"I had them beside Ramon Gallegos and covered their faces."

There was a quick commotion on the opposite side of the camp-fire; one of our party had sprung to his feet, pistol in hand.

"And you," he shouted: "You dared to escape? You dare to be alive! You cowardly bound, I'll send you to join them if I hang for it!"

But with the leap of a panther the captain was upon him, grasping his wrist. "Hold it in, Sam Yountsey, said it!"

We were now all upon our feet, except the stranger, who sat motionless and apparently unresponsive. Some one seized Yountsey's other arm.

"Captain," I said: "There is something wrong here. The fellow is either a fanatic or merely a liar; just a plain everyday day about Yountsey but no call to kill. If this man was of that party it had for members, one of whom—probably himself—he has not named."

"Yes," said the captain, releasing the insurgent, who set down: "There is something national. Years ago four dead bodies of white men, scalped and horribly mutilated, were found about the



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