

***H. BEDFORD-
JONES***



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Arizona Argonauts

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CHAPTER I

TWO PALMS

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Piute Tompkins, sole owner and proprietor of what used to be the Oasis Saloon but was now the Two Palms House, let the front feet of his chair fall with a bang to the porch floor and deftly shot a stream of tobacco juice at an unfortunate lizard basking in the sunny sand of Main Street.

"That there Chinee," he observed, with added profanity, "sure has got this here town flabbergasted!"

"Even so," agreed Deadoak Stevens, who was wont to agree with everyone. Deadoak was breaking the monotony of an aimless existence by roosting on the hotel veranda. "I wisht," he added wistfully, "I wisht that I could control myself as good as you, Piute! The way you pick off them lizards is a caution."

Piute waved the grateful topic aside. "That there Chinee, now," he reverted, stroking his grizzled mustache, "is a mystery. Ain't he? He is. Him, and that girl, and what in time they're a-doing here."

"Even so," echoed Deadoak, as he rolled a listless cigarette. "Who ever heard of a chink ownin' a automobile? Not me. Who ever heard of a chink havin' a purty daughter? Not me. Who ever heard of a chink goin' off into the sandy wastes like any other prospector? Not me. I'm plumb beat, Piute!"

"Uh-huh," grunted Piute Tompkins. "Pretty near time for him to be shovin' out as per usual, too. He was askin' about the way to Morongo Valley at breakfast, so I reckon him an' the gork is headin' north this mornin'."

The two gentlemen fell silent, gazing hopefully at the listless waste of Main Street as though waiting for some miracle to cause that desert to blossom as the rose. At either side of the porch, rattled and crackled in the morning breeze the brownish and unhappy-looking palms which had given the city its present name. They were nearly ten feet in height, those palms, and men came from miles around to gaze upon them. It was those two palms that had started Piute Tomkins in the orchard business, which now promised to waken the adjacent countryside to blooming prosperity.

At present, however, Two Palms was undeniably paralyzed by the odd happenings going on within its borders. Contributory to this state of petrification was the location and environment of the desert metropolis itself. Lying twenty miles off the railroad spur that ended at Meteorite, and well up into the big bend of the Colorado, in earlier days Two Palms had been a flourishing mining community. It was now out of the world, surrounded by red sand and marble cañons and gravel desert and painted buttes; Arizona had gone dry, and except for Piute Tomkins and his orchard business, the future of Two Palms would have been an arid prospect.

Piute Tomkins was the mayor of Two Palms and her most prominent citizen, by virtue of owning the hotel and general store, also by virtue of owning no mines. Everyone else in Two Palms owned mines—chiefly prospect holes. All around the town for scores of miles lay long abandoned mining country; the region had been thoroughly prospected and worked over, but was still given a tryout by occasional newcomers. The Gold Hill boom in particular had sent revivifying tremors up through the district, several unfortunate pilgrims having wandered in this direction for a space.

Inspired by the rustling quivers of the brownish palms outside his hostelry, Piute Tomkins had passed on the inspiration to other prominent citizens. They had clubbed together, and managed to get some wells bored out in the desert—installing mail-order pumping machinery to the indignation of Haywire Smithers, proprietor of the hardware emporium across the street. They then set out pear and almond trees, and sat down to get rich. Piute Tomkins had been sitting thusly for five years, and after another five years he expected to have money in the bank.

"I was wonderin' about them pears, when they come to bearin'," he reflected to Deadoak. "What we goin' to do with 'em when we get 'em? It's twenty miles south to Meteorite, and thirty mile west to Eldorado on the river, an' fifty mile north to Rioville. How we goin' to get them pears to market?"

"They come in an' buy 'em on the trees," said Deadoak encouragingly. It paid Deadoak to be heartening in his advice. He was the only man thereabouts who understood the workings of cement, and during the orchard boom he had put in a hectic six months making irrigation pipe. He also owned several mines up north.

"Speakin' o' that chink, now," he said, sitting up suddenly, "you say he's headin' for Morongo Valley to-day? I bet he's heard about that there mine o' mine—the one that stove in on Hassayamp Perkins an' broke his neck. Sure he didn't mention it?"

"He ain't talked mines a mite," said Piute, casting about for a lizard. "Nope, not a mite. Haywire was tryin' to interest him in them two holes west o' the Dead Mountains, but he plumb wouldn't interest in nothin'. It's my opinion, private, that he's aimin' to raise garden truck. Most like, he's heard of the irrigation projects around here—they was wrote up in

the Meteorite paper last year—and he's come down to find the right place for garden truck. Chinks are hell on raisin' lettuce an' stuff."

"What in hallelujah would he do with it when he got it?" demanded Deadoak witheringly. "Eat it? Not him. Now, the way I take it——"

He hushed suddenly. The hotel door had opened to give egress to a large man—a tall, widely built man, clad in khaki—and a girl, also clad in khaki. The man moved out into the white sunlight, looking neither to right nor left, and vanished around the side of the building. His features, one realized, were those of a Chinaman.

The girl, who flashed a bright "Good morning!" to the two men and then followed, was slender and lithe, and carried over her shoulder a black case and tripod slung in a strap.

"Camera again," observed Deadoak, as she too disappeared. "Why in time do they go out workin' with that picture machine? It don't look sensible to me. Didn't you ask him?"

"Him?" Scorn sat in Piute's tone. "Tom Lee? He don't never talk. Don't know when I've seen a man that talked less than him. That is, in company. Up in his own room I've heard him jabber away by the hour. Him and the girl always speaks English——"

"Say!" exclaimed Deadoak, excited. "I bet I got you now! You remember that guy come out three years ago an' boarded over to Stiff Enger's place by Skull Mountain? Lunker, he was, and his folks sent money for his carcass when he cashed in. Stiff said that he'd stalk around by the hour talkin' queer talk to himself and wavin' his hands at the scenery."

"He was an actor, wasn't he?"

"Certain. Well, that's what this chink is—that's why he's learnin' his parts up in his room! Then he goes out in the desert somewheres with the girl, and she puts him through his paces and takes pictures of him! Piute, I bet a dollar he's a movin' picture actor and they're makin' pictures of him—that's why they always go some different place!"

"Might be some sense to that notion," ruminated Piute Tomkins. "Still, it don't look——"

From behind the hotel burst forth the roar of a flivver. The car careened into sight, the big yellow man sitting in the rear, the girl at the wheel. It skidded into the dusty street, righted, and darted away. At the next corner—the only corner—it turned up past Stiff Enger's blacksmith shop and disappeared.

"Uh-huh," commented Piute. "They're headin' for Morongo Valley, all right, if they don't stop somewheres first. They're plumb liable to stop, too. That ain't but a track these days; no travel atall that way. I told the chink it was a bum road, but he just grinned and allowed the car could make it."

"Well, there's scenery a-plenty up Morongo way," averred Deadoak. "That's all there is, scenery an' rattlers. Wisht they'd take a notion to dig into that mine o' mine, they might dig up ol' Hassayamp. He had a bag o' dust on him when she caved in, but I reckon he's all o' twenty feet inside the hill."

Why Tom Lee had come to Two Palms, no one knew. A most amazing Chinaman who spoke very good English, who put up at the hotel and seemed to have plenty of money, and whose business like himself was a mystery. He would go for one day, or two or three into the desert, and invariably come back empty-handed, so far as anyone could tell.

What was even more astonishing, his daughter always drove him. At least, Tom Lee said she was his daughter, and

she seemed quite satisfied. Everyone in Two Palms fairly gasped at the bare thought, however; for she was actually a pretty girl and looked as white as anyone. More so than most, perhaps, for life in Two Palms was not conducive to lily complexions, yet the desert sun had barely given her features a healthy sun-glow.

A pilgrim, during some prospecting toward Eldorado, had come upon the girl sitting in the car, one day, and had been struck dumb by sight of her. Later, he had wandered morosely into the Two Palms, begging a drink in charity, and murmuring something about having proposed mattermony before the ol' man showed up and he had realized the dread secret of her birth. Still murmuring, the pilgrim had wandered off toward Meteorite and had been no more seen of men.

"Still an' all," observed Deadoak, whose mind had reverted to this incident, "I dunno but what a man *might* do worse. She's durn pretty, I will say, and always has a right sweet word for folks. I dunno but what she might be glad to take up——"

"Now, Deadoak, you look here!" Piute turned in his chair and transfixed the other with a steely gaze. "I'm mayor o' this here town, an' deputy sheriff, and it's my duty to uphold morality and—and such things. Don't you go to shootin' off your mouth that-a-way, I warn you, legal! Don't you take too much for granted. We need irrigation pipe, and we're liable to need more, but that don't give you no license to presume. You go to outragin' the moral feelin's of this here community and somethin' will happen quick!"

"I was just thinkin'," Deadoak weakly defended himself. "And Mis' Smithers allows that she's a right smart girl, considerin' what's behind her——"

"Don't you think too hard," said Piute, getting up and shoving back his chair, "or you'll have a accident! Mind me, now."

He stamped inside the hotel, calling to Mrs. Tomkins in the kitchen that the guests had departed and she could tidy up the rooms a bit.

CHAPTER II

SHIPWRECKED MEN

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Sandy Mackintavers was slowly piloting his big Twin-Duplex along a rough and rugged road. It crested the bleak mesa uplands like a red-bellied snake. A twining, orderly road of brickish red, now and again broken into by flat outcrops of yellow sand or white limestone cut into its tires most pitifully.

One who knew Arizona would have recognized that road, although Sandy himself might have gone unrecognized. He was coated with the dust of several bathless days, and underneath the dust, his heavy features were drawn and knotted. Sandy had a general idea that he was in Arizona, but did not care particularly where he was, so long as the car kept going and he drifted westward, unknown of men.

Six weeks previous to this momentous day, Mackintavers had been a power in the world of mesa, ranch, and mine that centered about Albuquerque and Socorro; the world that he had now left far behind him to the eastward, forever.

His wealth had been large. His unscrupulous fingers had been clutched deep in a score of pies, sometimes leaving very dirty marks about the edge. Mining was his specialty, although he was interested in trading stores and other enterprises on the side. Any bank in the Southwest would have O.K.'d the signature of Alexander Mackintavers for almost any amount.

Yet Sandy had few friends or none. His enemies, mainly those whom he had cheated or bluffed or robbed, feared him deeply. He gave no love to any man or woman. He was