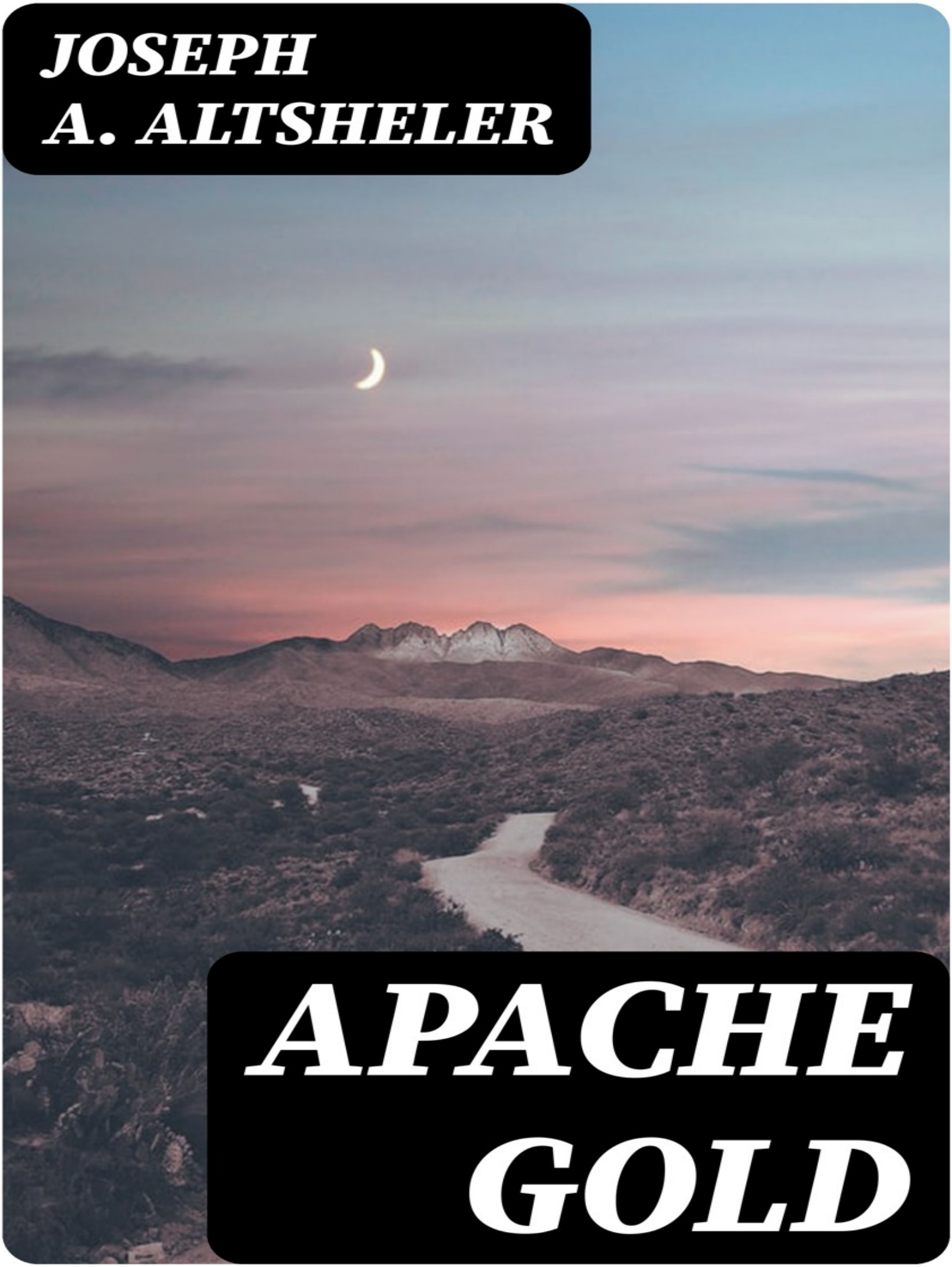
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CHAPTER I
THE STATION

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The young agent, a boy only, but large and strong beyond his years, sat at the door of the station, and he was alone in his world—he was nearly always alone. Two parallel lines of shining steel stretched away to the east, across the hot sand, and two other parallel lines stretched away to the west, also across the hot sand. On the crest of a low hill a giant and malformed cactus stood out against the burning blue sky, in the rude simile of a gallows. At times, especially in the twilight, when the resemblance increased, it seemed to offer the lad an invitation to come and make use of it.

Far in the northwest showed the dim, blue line of mountains, and Charles longed to be there among the forests on the slopes, rambling as he chose, but he took his gaze away from the temptation, and brought it back to his prison, the little railroad station, where he was agent and telegrapher, for the meager salary that he needed. Jefferson, although it had hopes, was not a large place, consisting of two buildings, the station of corrugated tin, with a glittering red roof, and the water tank. At normal periods it had a population of two, but Dick Anthony, the assistant, was off duty for a few hours—he had gone down the line on a visit to Madison, a magnificent metropolis of at least fifty people.

The boy was terribly lonely, and, as he sat in the doorway at an angle that protected him from the fiery sun, he looked around at his world, merely a circle in the desert, dotted at

the center with the station and the water tank. About these two structures empty tin cans flashed in the sunlight, but beyond this area the desert showed only dead grays and browns. It was absolutely silent, seeming to have been so for thousands of years, and ready to remain so for eternity. Charles looked at his watch. The 'Frisco express, that ray out of the live world, coming and going like a spark, was not due for three hours, and he wondered how he could ever pass the time. Far to the south two or three "dust devils" rose, and danced across the desert. He watched them eagerly, not because they were a novelty, nor because anything would come of them, but because they represented motion, and, when they sank away in the sands, he sighed. The diversion was over.

He looked up at the sky. Perhaps a bird would be flying across it somewhere, but the blue was unmarred by a single dot. He groaned, and let his hands fall helplessly to his side. "How long! Oh, how long!" he repeated. Thus he sat, an athletic lad, in shapeless clothes of dark brown canvas, and lamented, because he had reason for lamentation. He remained awhile, motionless, a yellow straw hat, with a wide brim drawn down over his eyes. At last he took a novel, with paper covers, from a shelf in the corner of the room and tried to read, but it failed to interest him, and he threw it abruptly on the floor.

Charles Wayne was often rebellious, as any other youth would have been thus cast away, but his mood was stronger than ever that afternoon, and when he walked about outside, in search of distraction, he found none better than to kick savagely at the empty tin cans. They only flashed

the sunlight back at him in the same brilliant, monotonous fashion.

He returned to the station, and presently the telegraph key began to chatter. It was merely the agent at Madison saying that the 'Frisco express was on time, and would take water at the Jefferson tank.

The sun was going down the slope, but the intense burning heat still hung over the earth. All things were parched and lifeless, there were no more "dust devils," but after a while, as the sun sank lower, gray shadows came out of the east, and a sudden coolness swept down from the north. Then the shining rails began to hum, and the red eye of the train looked over a bare hill.

When the express stopped and the connection was made with the water tank, Charles strolled along beside it, speaking with the engineer and brakemen, who were his messengers from the real world outside.

"Things lively in Jefferson?" asked the engineer.

"Fairly," replied Charles. "A cowboy from the Mexican border looked in about ten days ago."

"That so? You can't down Jefferson!"

The passengers, cramped by the long journey, alighted from the train, and walked up and down in the twilight, which was now full of chill. Among them was a large elderly man, with a heavy, red mustache, and a pompous arrogant manner, accompanied by a tall, slender boy about the age of the young agent.

The two walked side by side, and Charles noticed the lad particularly. He had fair hair and a fine face, but he saw that he was not used to wild life. His face and hands were

untouched by tan, but he wore a suit of the finest khaki, obviously cut by a high-priced tailor, and once he looked at a beautiful, jeweled gold watch that he drew from his belt.

"A mollycoddle! only a mollycoddle!" murmured Charles. He felt for the moment a bitter pang of resentment, because the lad was so obviously favored by fortune, while the same fickle dame had resolutely turned her back upon him.

He glanced again at the man, and he thought that he had never seen a face more repellent. The narrow, heavy-lidded eyes had the look of a vulture's, and the folds beneath them continued the simile. He spoke sharply to his companion, and the boy's fair face flushed. Charles dismissed his resentment in an instant. His nature was too high to cherish such thoughts, and his sympathy was with the lad who apparently had received an unjust rebuke about something. He heard the man call him Herbert, and once he would have laughed at the name. He had classed Herbert with Percy, and thought both effeminate, but now it made little impression upon him. His sympathies were still with the fair youth.

The two did not notice him, and they walked on, the man speaking contemptuously of Arizona to the boy. The conductor of the train appeared on the steps, and Charles, indicating the couple, asked him if he knew how far they were going.

"Only to Phoenix," was the reply; "but they've come through from New York. That's Mr. George Carleton, and the boy is a cousin of his, I think. I don't know who Mr. Carleton is, but whatever he is, he doesn't let you forget it."

Charles slipped away from the light and bustle of the train, which he had been awaiting so anxiously, and withdrew into the station. He was just as eager now for the train to go on, and leave him alone in his desert. The sight of the other lad had only made him unhappy. But a clamor arose, and there was the sound of a blow and protesting cries. He went out again—it was quite dark now—because something had happened; nothing had ever happened before in Jefferson, and this could not be missed.

There was a ring of people on the sand, and a commotion at the center of it. Wayne pressed into the crowd, and saw on the ground a dark figure, shapeless and repellent. He was not sure what it was, but the other form, bending over it was certainly that of a man, Jim Grimes, a brakeman on the express.

"Now you clear out o' this!" said Grimes, kicking the bundle, which groaned, and resolved itself into the shape of a tramp.

Herbert Carleton saw the rough act and became indignant.

"Why do you do such a thing? It's a shame!" he exclaimed, his fair face flushing with anger—Charles liked him better than ever now.

"Excuse me, me bold young champion," replied Grimes, ironically raising his cap. "You wouldn't say that if you had to travel through these parts and learn the tribe to which this scamp belongs. They are murderers, when they're brave enough, an' sneak thieves when they ain't. I found him ridin' on the brake beam, an' he couldn't have stood it much

longer. I've saved him from sudden death, by pitchin' him off here in the sand."

Grimes grinned a little. A life of constant motion had not taken all his sense of humor. The man on the ground stirred and groaned again.

"Playin' 'possum," said the brakeman scornfully.

"All aboard!" shouted the conductor, and the train bell began to ring. Most of the passengers hurried up the steps, but Mr. Carleton, refusing to relax his dignity, would not hurry, austerely following his young relative.

Charles stood farther back in the shadow, and gazed at the lithe figure of the lad, as he stood at the car entrance, watching the tramp who still lay motionless in the sand. He plainly saw pity in his eyes, and his own sense of loneliness suddenly became overwhelming. "I, too, ought to be pitied!" was his angry thought. The engine whistled, and the train shot away into the dark. "Gone forever, like all the rest," murmured Charles, as he saw the rear light die in the desert. Again he was alone in the silence.

Charles Wayne had felt the spur of ambition already, and longed for a great place in the world, but as he had not a single relative who was able to help him, it seemed very far from the little station in the sand to any higher step on the ladder. Young as he was he had been fortunate to get even so small a position.

He returned to the station, and, lighting a train lantern, put it upon his telegraph desk. He was touching the depths of despair. The space between what he was and what he wanted to be was as wide as the world, and he felt it in its full measure. The apparition of the other boy, in his fine

clothes, passing gayly from one great city to another, deepened his loneliness and desolation fourfold.

"Jim Grimes was right," he said to himself, "this life in the desert is different, and it makes people act differently."

The thought took him back to the tramp. The fellow, whom he knew to be shamming, might prove dangerous. Courage was instinctive with the boy, but having no mind to run foolish risks, he took a loaded revolver from his desk, and went into the dark. He expected to be met by an able-bodied man with a request for food, and incidentally for drink, but the tramp was still lying in the sand. Wayne saw that his eyes were fitful and uncertain, and he was struck with pity.

"Poor devil!" he murmured. "This is no make-believe."

The face that looked up at him belonged to an old man. It was seamed and wasted by the winds and heat of the desert, by want and suffering. Gaunt and hollow, it was stamped deep with the marks of decay. He was not pretty to look upon, and the boy had a sense of repulsion, but his feeling of pity was stronger.

"Do you want something to eat?" he asked, bending down.

Fear leaped into the man's eyes, as he saw the face approaching his own, and he shrank away.

"He's been running a gantlet somewhere," thought Charles, who knew much of life in a wild region, but he said aloud:

"I'm a friend, and I want to help you."

The man looked at him in wonder, and then shook his head slowly, as if he could not understand. Charles,

perplexed, gazed down at his recumbent form. Here was one who was either sick or out of his head or both, and what was he to do with him? It was brutal of the railroad to throw him off there. The other boy was right.

The moon was rising slowly over the desolate plains. From the far mountains came a chill wind. Charles shivered. The stranger began to mumble something.

"What is that?" asked the boy.

The man raised his voice and said in a kind of chant:

"O'er the measureless range where rarely change
The swart gray plains so weird and strange!"

"Well, what of it?" asked the boy in anger, because the words struck upon his own mood. "They won't change for you, nor for me, nor for anybody else. We can't expect that."

But the man was not disturbed by the comment of his critic. He merely crooned on:

"O'er the measureless range where rarely change
The swart gray plains so weird and strange,
Treeless and streamless and wondrous still."

"Stop it!" cried Charles impatiently. "Tell me who you are, and how you came to be hanging under that train!"

He felt chilled and afraid, not of any real danger, but just of the world and the dark. Out on the plain the wind was moaning, and the night was growing more chill.

"Who am I, who am I?" replied the man in a high sing-song tone. "I'm nobody but Ananias Brown, nobody but just poor old Ananias Brown."

Charles was inclined to smile, but he did not do so; instead his feeling of pity deepened.

"Well, Mr. Ananias Brown," he said, "you may deserve your name or you may not, but one thing is certain, you need help."

He stooped down, lifted the man in his arms—he was very powerful for one so young, and the tramp was astonishingly light—and carried him into the station, where he put him on a bench.

"Now, Mr. Brown," he said, "we'll see if something can't be done for you. Unless I miss my guess, you've been rather short on food and water for more days than are good for anybody."

Quick and skillful, he hastened with his task. He gave him a stimulant from a flask, and then, lighting a little oil stove, he cooked eggs and strips of ham. A pleasant odor filled the room, and the stove threw out a grateful heat. Charles enjoyed the service that he was rendering; it was a break in the terrible monotony of his life, and he was helping a fellow creature.

"All ready in a minute," he said cheerfully. "I'm not such a bad cook, either, as you'll soon discover."

But his attention was called presently by the hard breathing of Mr. Brown, and his alarm increased when he looked at his face, which had assumed a grayish pallor. The wanderer was gasping and his eyes roved wildly. He muttered his western verse unceasingly, but now he never got farther than the first line:

"O'er the measureless range where rarely change—"

He began to move nervously on the bench, and threw up his hands, as if warding off a danger. Then Charles saw something that made his blood turn cold. Each palm was blackened and seared.

"I will not! I will not tell! You cannot make me!" he muttered, stubborn defiance thrilling through words of pain, while the hands moved fretfully like those of a sick man.

The boy walked to the window and looked out. The mighty desert, lying there under the darkness, had new aspects of awe and terror. Somewhere in its immensity a man had been put to the last test of cruelty.

He came back to the patient, who was growing more quiet, and offered him food, but Brown could take nothing. Charles felt his pulse and saw that it was weaker. He was assailed by a fear that the man was going to die, and he was now sorry that he had offered to do his assistant's work for a few extra hours. Dick Anthony should be there with him. He did not like to be alone in the presence of the dead. But his annoyance was driven away by the wave of pity which always returned at regular intervals.

And beneath this flood of sympathy there was an undertow of curiosity. What was Brown's story? What was it that had happened to him out there in the immensity of the desert? But he clearly saw that the man was sinking. In all likelihood he would die by daylight, and his secrets would die with him. Merely another insignificant human being lost in the vastness of the desert!

Charles went to the key, and telegraphed Madison that a man was dying in the station. Could they send a doctor

down on the freight due at 12:30? One would come, was the answer. Dick Anthony, too, would return on the same train.

He went back to the man, who had neither moved nor made any sound. His features were gray and sunken, and he seemed to be asleep. Charles sat beside him a full hour before he opened his eyes. His look then was weak, but it was that of one whose mind was clear, for the moment at least.

"Do you think you could take a little food now, Mr. Brown?" asked Charles.

The man laughed a husky laugh that ended in a gasp.

"No more bills of fare for me," he said, his words coming hard. "I don't need 'em. What's your name?"

"Charles Wayne."

"Well, Charles Wayne, I'm goin' out on the great trip. It's a wonder I lasted long enough to get here. There's none of my blood, an' I leave it all to you, because there's nobody else to leave it to. I guess I owe you somethin', anyway."

He laughed weakly, and again the laugh ended in a gasp. His manner was unreal and weird, and Charles was chilled.

"Brace up, old man," he said, "you've got many years yet before you."

"I know! I tell you I know!" said the man with some irritation. "You don't understand all that I've been through! I'm goin' out, I say, an' I leave it all to you! There will be enough for you, yes, for twenty, a hundred men!"

The wild light appeared in his eyes again, and his breath became shorter. The ashy gray of his face deepened. Charles knew that the doctor, due at 12:30, would be too late. The man's fingers were fluttering. He began to speak,

but in such low tones that Charles could not understand without bending down.

"Enough for a hundred! Enough for a hundred!" he murmured. "I leave it all to you! Beyond the base of Old Thundergust! In the ravine with the dwarfed pines! Up and down! Up and down!"

He paused, his breath exhausted and Charles wondered what tricks of fancy, what delusions were leading him on.

"Behind the veil! Behind the veil! All yours! I give it to you!" murmured the man. He did not speak again, but, in a minute or two, raised his head slightly, and when it sank back again, the assertion of Mr. Brown that he was about to take the great trip came true.

Charles, young and healthy, felt all a boy's awe of death, but he decently covered the poor, worn body with a cloth, and then sat in silence, wishing for the coming of the 12:30 freight as he had never wished before.

The desert was quiet. Around him was nothing but empty space and the darkness. He was alone with the dead on an island in the sand. "Behind the veil! Behind the veil?" he murmured to himself after a while. "I wonder what he meant by that? What could have been in his mind then? Do those about to die indeed see behind the veil?" He tried to turn his thoughts elsewhere, but his mind came back incessantly to the words of the dying man. Moreover, Brown had left to him all that he had, whatever it was, and wherever it might be. An inheritance of air castles that he was not likely ever to find or claim.

The long hours dragged on. Sometimes the telegraph key chattered a little, but it said nothing of importance, and

Charles stared vaguely at the figure of the dead man, shapeless in the dusk. "Behind the veil, and he left it all to me! Well, of all the queer bequests!" he repeated.

His mind was in a greater ferment than he knew. The impact of this tragic event upon the long days of loneliness and despair had caused a mighty stir. He was approaching the stage, at which one takes chances that, under favorable conditions, he would shun like death. He rose, and looked at his world, the bare little room with the circling rim of darkness and sand, and, once again, he was appalled by the loneliness and desolation. Then he reverted to Brown's last words—they had burned a place in his mind.

The crisis in life often comes without warning; there are no preliminary shadows and clouds, no prophetic voices, but Charles had looked upon two faces within a few hours, and each had stirred him deeply, one a boy's and the other a dead man's.

The long whistle of a train rose in the black night; it was the 12:30, and the freight was approaching. It was like a ship coming to his island in the sand, and, taking his lantern, he welcomed it. Dick Anthony, his assistant, a youth with irresponsible eyes and large teeth, sprang off, and the train doctor followed, with more deliberation and dignity.

"Is it a bad case?" he asked.

"Not now, Dr. Wharton," replied Charles gravely.

"Then it's a pretty quick recovery, and a wasted trip for me."

"The man died two hours ago."

"Ah!" exclaimed the doctor. "But it's as well that I came. I can make out the regular death return."

They went into the station, and Anthony, a voluble youth, with a head as light as a feather, was awed into silence by the sight of the still form on the bench. But the doctor uncovered the face, and looked at it long.

"The man died of exhaustion, caused by lack of food and general hardship," he said. "That is quite evident I have seldom seen a form more wasted. See the thinness of his hands."

He lifted one of the cold hands, and then he uttered a slight exclamation as he pointed to the seared and blackened palm.

"I noticed it," said Charles. "The other palm is the same way."

"The cause of it?" said Dr. Wharton.

"There is nothing to indicate," replied Charles with gravity.

The doctor shook his head.

"Nobody knows how these tramps drift out of the world," he said. "And, I presume, nobody misses them. I cannot see that there is anything to do but to bury him. You'd better put the body on a freight to-morrow, and send it down to Madison."

"If there is no objection, doctor, I should like to bury it here," said Charles. "I was with him when he died."

The doctor turned a swift, searching glance upon him.

"That is a bit of sentimentality, my boy," he said, "but it does you credit. Bury him here yourself. Of course there is no objection."

Dick Anthony did not fancy the proposition; he did not like to have the body there so long, and he said angrily to

himself that he was no grave-digger. But he stood in unusual awe of his superior, who was no older than himself, and he did not venture to remonstrate aloud.

The doctor departed in an hour or two on another freight train, and Charles sat up all night with the dead man. When he saw the sun come out of the sand, and gild the bare plains with a purple and rosy light he took a shovel and dug a grave near the station, under the branches of an Australian eucalyptus, brusquely declining Anthony's feeble offer to help. Then he made a coffin out of an old pine box, and buried Ananias Brown.

After he had filled in the grave again, he put a board at the head, and proceeded to cut upon it the proper inscription. But he hesitated at the name "Ananias." "That couldn't have been his real name," he thought. "Every man is named when he is a baby, and nobody would burden a baby with such a thing as that. I think I'd better call him John Henry."

So he cut upon the board "John Henry Brown, Departed This Life in the Desert," and then he gave the date.

After that he felt better. In fact, Charles Wayne was stirred by an unusual exhilaration, and it was all because he had made a resolve. He went back to the station and Dick Anthony, who had been leisurely watching him from the doorway, asked:

"All through now, Charlie?"

"Yes; except one thing. I've got to send a message to the division superintendent at Phoenix."

"Is the old man kicking?"

"Not at all. I merely want to give him my resignation."

Dick Anthony stared at his young chief.

"Now you know you're joking," he said. "You can't get another job."

"I don't want another, and I'm not joking. Here goes my message, and I'm only hoping that the superintendent will make you chief here in my place."

He sent the resignation, and in an hour the request came from the superintendent that he call, as soon as he could, at his office in Phoenix. Another man would be sent to Jefferson in the afternoon, and, confirming the request of Wayne, Dick Anthony would be made chief there.

"It's all right, Dick," he said. "You are to succeed me."

But Dick Anthony was not overjoyed. Perhaps the slight awe that he felt of Charles increased his attachment to him, and he did not like to be left with a new man.

"It's going to be lonesome without you, Charlie," he said.

"It has been lonesome with me," said Charles, looking out at the gray desert.

He packed his small baggage, putting his money carefully in the inside pocket of his waistcoat, and, after a good-by to Dick Anthony, took the train in the afternoon for Phoenix. The last thing that he saw in Jefferson was the new head board of the grave under the eucalyptus.

CHAPTER II
THE START

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Phoenix is a city literally created out of the desert by the hand of man, who has known how to draw the life-giving waters, and spread them where he would, and, like any other oasis, it shines and attracts by contrast with the sands. The burning sunlight of the afternoon had just begun to soften when Charles Wayne approached, and the sight of green grass, fresh foliage, and trees hanging with fruit was like a vision of delight to him. The effect of everything was heightened. How very green the green was! The water in the irrigation ditches actually seemed to him to sparkle in silver, and such oranges as those on the trees never grew before. He sighed in deep content. Phoenix was coming into fame, and to Charles it was all that it had promised.

He went at once to the office of Mr. Gray, the Division Superintendent. Mr. Gray was sorry to lose so capable a lad, and asked him to reconsider; he thought that they could give him a better office in a few months, and while promotion was slow, yet, in a case like his, it was sure. Charles shook his head.

"I thank you, Mr. Gray," he said; "but I've decided to try something else."

Mr. Gray's curiosity was aroused, but he would not ask any questions.

"This, you understand, is the middle of the month?" he said.

"I know," replied Charles, "and I should leave at the end of the month; I don't ask any salary for the two weeks."

"I think we will pay you for the full month," said the Superintendent. "It is not usual in the case of a sudden resignation, but we shall make an exception with you. I hope that the money won't trouble you."

The boy was moved by this liberality, and he replied frankly that it would be welcome.

"Do you go east or west?" asked Mr. Gray.

"I think I shall stay in Phoenix a little while."

"Then come in and see me again, and, if you should change your mind, and wish to return to our service, don't hesitate to say so."

When Charles left the office the sun was just sinking in the plain. The great splash of rainbow lights that marked its going lingered for a few moments, and then came the dark. The electric lights flamed out, and the vivid night life of the little city began. The awful feeling of loneliness and desolation swept over Charles again, because he knew no one there, or at least no one to whom he wished to speak just then.

He strolled a little in the streets, keeping as well as he could in the shadow, and he came at last to a hotel with a wide piazza, where people from the east, travelers of wealth and leisure, sat in the evening and talked of wonders, some of those that they were seeing in the west, and others of those that they were leaving in the east.

The group upon the piazza was larger than usual this evening, the last limited having brought many who wished to stop in Phoenix.

Charles saw Herbert Carleton and the elderly cousin among them. Both were in evening dress—the boy wearing a dinner jacket—as were other eastern people. Charles felt again the pang of envy that he sought so quickly to stifle. Everything for the other boy, nothing for him! But he did not succeed in crushing the feeling, and then he felt a little pity, too. This other boy was not in good hands. Charles had lived a rough life long enough to read the human countenance, and he knew that George Carleton was a bad man.

He stood in the grounds awhile and then turned away to seek the obscure little hotel at which he was staying, and to sleep, but when he had gone a hundred yards a small man, with a large head, wonderful white teeth, and a pair of beautiful gold glasses astride his nose, put his hand upon his shoulder.

"Pardon me," said the stranger in a well-modulated voice, "but can you direct me to the Pacific Hotel?"

"It's but a short distance," replied Charles, with the ready comradeship of the border, "but I will not give you any directions. As that is my own destination we can go together."

The little man, without a word, turned and beckoned violently. A figure of great height, crowned by a small round head, the chief feature of which was a nose of alarming length and thinness, emerged from the dusk, and stood waiting.

"My follower, assistant and friend, Mr. Jedediah Simpson of Lexin'ton, K—y," said the little man. "Do not say Lexington, Kentucky, but Lexin'ton, K—y, which he thinks is always sufficient."

The tall fellow grinned good-naturedly, and, when he grinned, his face was cleft from side to side.

"You are very kind," said the little man trotting by Wayne's side, while Jedediah Simpson of Lexin'ton, K-y, followed on behind, "but I find most people in the southwest obliging, when you don't try to mind their business."

Charles glanced at him again. He wore a hideous pith helmet, like those of the English in India. From one pocket of his gray Norfolk jacket protruded the head of a little hammer.

"You look at me inquiringly, and I suppose you can guess my occupation from this hammer," said the little man merrily.

He took it from his pocket and twirled it deftly as a drum major does his baton. Then he laughed again.

"I use this, not for cracking heads, but for cracking rock," he said, and Wayne almost fancied that he could see his eyes twinkling behind the big glasses. "I am a scientist, a geologist, an archæologist, and several other things. I am Professor Erasmus Darwin Longworth, at your service. I am from the University of—Sh! but I won't tell you what university it is; that must remain a secret."

"Why?" asked Charles, amused at the stranger's air of importance and intense earnestness.

"Because another man has come to the southwest for the purpose of anticipating me in the discoveries that I hope to make," replied Professor Longworth venomously, "and I do not wish it to be known yet that my university is represented here."

Jedediah Simpson of Lexin'ton, K-y, nodded his head violently as if he fully shared the Professor's feelings.

"Do you mind telling the name of the other man?" asked Charles, still amused. "It may enable me some time or other to give you warning of his coming."

"He is Professor Nicholas Humboldt Cruikshank. We are rivals. Mr.—Mr.——"

"Wayne—Charles Wayne."

"Mr. Wayne. No, Charles, I'll call you; you're too young to be Mr. Never believe a word that man says! He is no geologist! He is a fraud! I've never heard of his boasted books nor of his honorary degrees! He is certainly a beginner, and he is merely following me now for the sake of profiting by the discoveries that I am going to make!"

"I am sure of it, Professor," said Charles soothingly. "Such conduct is low and base to the last degree."

"I expect to prove," continued Professor Longworth, "that Northern Arizona is now the oldest land above water. It is generally thought that the Laurentian Mountains in Canada have that honor, but I assure you, my dear boy, it is a mistake, a terrible mistake. I will prove it by means of geological specimens, but, as surely as I do so, that scoundrel Cruikshank will step in and claim that he, too, has the proof, and that he got it first."

Jedediah Simpson again nodded his head violently.

"I think not, Professor, I think not," replied Charles.

These complimentary remarks soothed Professor Longworth, and he gave way to no more outbursts until they reached the hotel. But there, when they entered the lobby,

his face turned purple, and he struggled with an inarticulate cry of rage.

Leaning against the clerk's desk was a tall, thin man, clad just like Professor Longworth; the same enormous pith helmet, the same heavy glasses, and the same Norfolk jacket. Also from the pocket of the Norfolk jacket protruded a little hammer.

"Cruikshank! Cruikshank!" Professor Longworth at last ejaculated.

Walking up to the long man he shook his fist in his face and exclaimed:

"Cruikshank, you have followed me here to profit by my discoveries! I have said to others that you are a fraud, and now I say it to you!"

"Longworth, I should strike you if we did not both wear glasses," said the thin man. "And your accusation, sir, is as false as your reputation for learning. It is you who have followed me. Keep away, sir! I want no trouble with a man of your caliber, or, rather, lack of it."

Professor Longworth grew purple again and Jedediah Simpson drew near the threatened conflict, but Charles interfered between the rival scientists.

"Come, come, Professor!" he said to his new friend, "it's too late to quarrel. Let's talk."

Professor Longworth allowed himself to be persuaded, and went with Wayne to the lobby, followed as always by Jedediah Simpson, while Professor Cruikshank remained, leaning scornfully against the desk. They did not stop in the lobby, but passed to a little piazza, where the three sat down, Jedediah Simpson keeping a little in the rear.

"I shall ask your pardon, my lad, for showing passion before you," said the Professor with much dignity; "but we scientists and students of old things are sometimes stirred deeply by matters which seem trifles to other people, but which, nevertheless, are important to us. It is not alone the rivalry which this man Cruikshank offers, but I have never been able to place him. I thought I knew, by reputation, all the very learned men in America, but he is new to me, and the fact annoys me."

"Jest say the word, Purfessor, an' I'll go in an' thrash him," spoke up Jedediah Simpson.

"Good gracious, no, Jedediah!" said the little Professor hastily. "We don't do things that way in the world of learning. You'll overlook Jedediah's violent and primitive ways, Charles. It's true he was born in Lexin'ton, K—y, but his parents were mountaineers, and he has inherited their instincts."

"But I was shore born in Lexin'ton, K—y," said Jedediah Simpson with unction, "an' nothin' can take that honor from me. An' as fur violence, Purfessor, you didn't mind it that time in the South Seas when I h'isted right overboard the chief who wanted to whack you on the head with his club."

"No, Jedediah, I didn't. You saved my life, and I'm grateful. You've saved it more than once, and you're likely to save it again. Although Jedediah has his faults, Charles, he also has his virtues, and he is a wonderfully handy man. He has a delusion, however. He thinks he was born to be a great musician, and that chance or fate has defrauded him."

"Wouldn't you like to hear me sing 'Poor Nelly Gray' and play it on the accordion?" asked Jedediah Simpson proudly.

"Not now, Jedediah! Not now!" said the Professor in great haste. "Spare our young friend."

"All right," replied Jed, calmly. "Mebbe he ain't used to music, an' it has to be broke to him gradual. But when I get rich I'm goin' to have in my house every kind o' musical instrument thar is. Mebbe I won't play 'em all, but they'll be thar, an' I'll know they'll be thar, even while I'm asleep."

"But it isn't so easy to get rich," said Charles.

"There ain't no tellin'," said Jed with cheerful philosophy. "They say the mountains up in these parts are chuck-full o' gold, and mebbe me an' the Purfessor will strike a mine when we are lookin' fur funny rocks."

"As I said," remarked the Professor, "Jedediah has his virtues, and one of them is an unfailing optimism—a great, a most precious quality."

They talked a while longer, and Charles felt a strong liking for both. Eccentric they certainly were, but they seemed to him interesting and sincere.

"You'll beat Mr. Cruikshank, Professor, you'll beat him. I have no fear of the result," said Charles at last. "And now I'll tell you and Mr. Simpson good night."

He passed through the lobby on his way to his room, and he noticed Professor Cruikshank still there, his attitude unchanged. Evidently he was watching his rival. Charles smiled, despite himself. "It ought to be a pretty fight between them," he thought.

He had checked his valise on his arrival, and now it was taken up to his room by the Mexican servant. The apartment was small and bare, a fact that did not trouble him, as he was used to the border, and was thoroughly tired.

"Where put him, boss?" asked the Mexican who brought the valise.

"Oh, anywhere," replied Charles; "and that will do. I don't want anything more."

The Mexican put the valise down near the door, and went out, Charles put himself in bed and went to sleep. Then he had a succession of dreams flitting after one another; one was of a lad whom he had envied, sitting on a piazza in the dusk of a semitropical evening, another was of himself lost among high mountains, and a third was of a swarthy man like a Mexican, who entered his room and made a minute search through his clothing and valise.

The last dream was so vivid that Charles awoke and sat up. He seemed to hear the sound of a faint footfall and of something closing softly, and, after that, the intense silence of a house asleep.

He took his revolver from the pillow under his head, stepped out of bed, and lighted the lamp. There was no one in the room, and the door, which in his haste for sleep he had left unlocked, was closed. But when his eyes fell upon his valise he started. The valise was open.

The boy quickly examined the contents. Nothing was missing, although all the articles seemed to have been moved about. Then he looked at his clothing, and he was confident that not all the garments were lying where he had left them before going to bed. But everything was there, even to the gold watch and loose chain in the waistcoat.

Charles was puzzled. He was sure that someone had been in the room, but nothing was taken, although there was enough to tempt any sneak thief. "Who was he, and

what could he have wanted?" was his unspoken query. But he now locked the door with care, and, being too young and healthy to be bothered long by mysteries, was soon asleep again.

He rose early and ate breakfast, but when he came from the dining-room the thin, long figure of Professor Nicholas Humboldt Cruikshank presented itself in his path.

"Young Mr. Wayne, I believe?" said the Professor in nasal tones.

"Correct," replied Charles. "I am happy to meet you, Professor Cruikshank."

"Pardon me for intruding or interfering at all in what is your business, but I wish to give you a warning, a warning that you will do well to heed. I saw you in close converse last night with that arrant humbug, Longworth. Have nothing further to do with him, sir. The man is a pretense and a mockery, a gross fraud. He has not really earned a single one of his degrees. He is always stealing from me. He has, in fact, stolen enough from me to make a reputation for himself."

"But, Professor," said Charles, "I am sure that, even after those unfair losses, you have sufficient left to make a great reputation for yourself."

"You are a clever lad," said Professor Cruikshank, obviously pleased. "Do you do anything in geology yourself? I am going forth presently on an expedition to prove that the oldest ground now above water is not the Laurentian Chain in Canada, as is generally supposed, but Northern Arizona."

"Now here, indeed, is a pretty fight," thought Charles, for the second time, but he said aloud:

"It is an arduous quest that you are undertaking, Professor. Arizona is large, and there are deserts and mountains in plenty."

"I am glad of it," said Professor Cruikshank triumphantly. "They do not daunt me, but they will keep back that rascal, Longworth. If you are not employed, may I suggest that you go with me? I can pay well, you are young, but you seem very strong, and you can be of valuable assistance, in a material way, while I attend to those finer, I may say, almost spiritual, things pertaining to science."

"I thank you very much, Professor," replied Charles hastily, "but I cannot do it, as I am thinking of going to 'Frisco in two or three days."

The professor expressed his regret, and Charles, with a word of adieu, left him. He did not like Professor Cruikshank, while he had liked Professor Longworth. In neither case could he give the precise reason why.

He spent the day in preparation for a long journey, and made his purchases with the greatest care—a horse and a pack mule, warranted strong and faithful, a collapsible tent, two breech-loading rifles of the finest make, a large supply of cartridges to fit the rifles, another revolver to match the one that he already had, a compass and blanket, some mining tools and canned and dried food that would give the largest possible amount of nutriment in the smallest possible space.

The boy had many errands, but, as he was swift and skillful, it did not take him long to do them, and, by the middle of the afternoon, he was back at his hotel with his goods around him. Here he read some important items of