

THE WESTWARD EDEN

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IT was spring on the desert, but here was no soft greening of the grassy earth, no wide unfolding of leaf and shade; only the giant saguaro crowned itself with a narrow circle of waxen blossom, the thin, drooping needles of the palo verde hid in a faint veil of powdery yellow, and the slender rapier-like blades of the Spanish daggers were stained with little blood-red flowers.

We left behind us the canal that divided sharply the desert from the sown; on one side the fertile earth with its dark gloss of orange groves; on the other, the naked sands broken only by sharp, hostile, desert growth. We turned into a road leading through the hills, and after a little while drove out into a wide and level plain, that was called, for no evident reason, Paradise Valley, and here we went on among the creosote and ironwood and the white still spikes of desert lilies. It seemed that no one stirred in all the world beside us and a single jack-rabbit that started suddenly like a spurt of silver and disappeared over the pallid, silvery soil. On all sides, rocky, rose-red heights, visionary and impalpable as the mountains of a dream, enclosed this pale earth, which had been once, so I was told, the bed of ocean, and I wondered to see the tremulous, shining mirage of waters, receding always before us, as if the desert sand still bore upon its breast the ghostly weight of vanished seas.

The plain was full of vague, wandering tracks that might be used, or mistaken, for roads, and along one of these we turned, at a place where a single tin mail-box stood on a post by the roadside, painted in black letters with the name, Adam Johnson. I knew not who this Adam might be, but it seemed he lived in splendid isolation, like his namesake before even the creation of Eve; when man from being one became dual, upon which calamitous experiment disaster naturally followed.

I listened to the talk of the two men in the front seat of the car, for they were speaking about him. He was an old man, they said, and had come out to the desert seeking relief from asthma, and had lived in this place for a long time. Last year he had been bitten by a rattlesnake, and had lain alone in his cabin for two days, until the postman suspected something wrong and found him almost at the point of death. He had survived, miraculously, but had become very feeble and querulous, yet still he would not leave here.

We drove as far as we could, and then got out of the car and left it standing by a low group of ironwood trees, whose sparse, grey foliage gave a meagre shade. We climbed up the rising ground and came to a wooden shack, built like a tower of the winds with windows on all sides looking to the four ways of heaven. It had little sign of habitation, but when we knocked at the door, it was opened by Adam himself, who asked us to come in. The place was wretchedly furnished; a bed without linen, spread only with a coarse blanket and a patchwork coverlet, a plain table, and one or two uncertain chairs. It was airless and intensely hot. On the table was a gaudy pile of wild-west magazines, and a much worn Bible which lay open at the second chapter of *Genesis*.

Adam, it appeared, had a certain variety of taste, and I wondered a little how the Bible and the school of western fiction supported one another; perhaps not so badly as one would think, there being enough of blood and thunder in both of them.

Adam indeed was a failing man, with quavering, tremulous voice, weak with the self-pity of age, and hands that shook and fluttered when he held one out to show me, at the base of the middle finger, the little blue mark of the serpent's envenomed tooth. He pulled me by the arm, urging us all anxiously to come out to the woodshed and see the very spot where the snake lay hid, and to humour him we went. At the back of the house was a low shed still half filled with wood. "It was there," he said, pointing, "there in the corner under the wood, and when I reached in with my hand to get a stick, it fastened itself right on to my finger. I dragged it all across the shed before I could shake it off. 'I'm done for,' I said, 'but before I've gone, I'm going to kill that wicked thing.' So I went and got my gun and came back to the shed, and I was real glad when I blew that snake all to nothing. I was pretty far gone by that time, and my head was swimming, and I could hardly see, but I got back to the cabin somehow and lay down on the bed, and I don't know how long it was till I found Postman standing by me. It seemed to be a long time, and a lot to be happening all around me, and I saw strange things in the cabin."

His voice broke with sobs, and tears trickled from his tired blue eyes and slipped down his thin white beard.

"They took me to the hospital and after a while they told me I'd pull through, though it was a wonder, and when I was well enough to leave, I went to stay with my sister in Chicago, who said she'd look after me for a bit, but I couldn't breathe

there, and I knew I must come back to the desert. It just seems as if the Lord had meant this place for me, and had brought me to live here."

At one side of the cabin was a deep well with a wooden cover, and he drew up some water from it and made tea for us in spite of our protests. As we sat in the little hot cabin and drank our tea out of tin mugs, I could see a passage on the opened page of the Bible underlined in pencil: "And the Lord planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there he put the man whom he had formed."

Looking out on all sides through the small windows, I felt the beauty of this westward Eden, rose-red and silver pale, so little touched by man, but it was a cruel Eden for all that, waterless and shadeless and lonely beyond words, where the beasts of the field would not come, but only creeping, venomous things. But Adam had made his dwelling here, and had found here the serpent and done battle with it, and destroyed it, as its poison was now destroying him slowly and inevitably, though his life had been spared a little while.

At last the men left some tobacco for him and we came away, back again to where we had left the car. They sat down together, talking of some scheme for bringing water down into the valley and pointing to the long, scarcely perceptible line of the prehistoric canals dug by the Aztecs or some other Indian people who lived here long ago.

I took the rug from the car and spread it out under the ironwood trees with some care, for on the desert even the life of plants is at enmity with man, and one must be on one's guard against the poisoned thorns and vicious, spiny growths that thrust from its harsh soil. I lay down in the scant shade to rest and read, and as I rested I brushed curiously with my hand at the light top-sand and found beneath it the black sand that is everywhere the sign of gold, gold in minute quantity, not great enough to tempt man's greed but only to make rich the fancy of a dreamer lying idly by the ironwoods. At a little distance I could see the blanched skeleton of a Gila monster, about a foot long, lying half-hidden in the sand. These are sluggish-looking, bloated, pink and black beasts, rarely found, and ugly though not alarming in appearance, but they are credited, by the natives at least, with a venom more deadly than the rattlesnake's. I would have got up to look at it more closely, but the heat was heavy on the earth and weighed down upon me with its indolent pressure.

I was reading a book of Gifford Lectures, *Man on his Nature*, and I found both equally depressing. We were, the writer thought, to be congratulated on having escaped at last from the monstrous superstitions of the Middle Ages; which may be right, but I did not think that the world he offered us through his microscope was much of an improvement.

Medieval man did perhaps suffer unduly from demons, chiefly those in the shape of attractive females, but I daresay such trials were not without mitigation. And in spite of them, contemplating the world and his own being, he evolved the idea of life governed by divine law, a conception not altogether to his discredit. To exchange this for life as revealed by the microscope, that of the life-cycle of the liver-fluke and the malaria germ, is to pass from a world of recognizable purpose to one devised by lunatic fiends. There is little consolation to be derived from the enticements of the liver-fluke. A man could die of it then, as he may still, but he died in the belief that such was God's will, a thing inscrutable yet somehow to be trusted. He was spared the knowledge that he was merely the destined fighting-ground and final prey of a myriad of inferior organisms. These are facts and as such to be accepted, but I do not see much reason to rejoice at the change, unless it be for the melancholy satisfaction of knowing the worst. It is an awakening from a pleasing if delusive vision of the spirit to a nightmare reality. Yet one can, I suppose, to a certain extent, deal with the liver-fluke, whereas there was nothing whatever to be done about God.

Sometimes in thinking of these things I find myself impelled to believe in the Fall of Man, yet not of man only, but of all matter; some remote and universal guilt, the sin that caused the world to be, from which we must somehow effect our release. Or is this very life of the senses itself an illusion, a mistake we have made in our own minds, a false appearance of the thing that is not, with the incomprehensible curtain of space spread out like the Veil of Maya to hold but seemingly an unreal world? I felt it would surprise me very little if the whole thing suddenly vanished, if the solid earth beneath my feet wavered and was gone, and I found myself, with hardly a consciousness of change, in some unimaginable and quite other mode of being.

But the pain of life is real enough, however illusory its substance.

Whilst I pondered on this I fell asleep, and I thought that I had climbed the hill again to the old man's house, and that I

was struggling to lift up the heavy wooden cover of the well. And finally it came away quite easily in my hand, and the waters rose up from beneath it like a living fountain and flowed down on all sides and spread out over the valley. Only it wasn't water any more, but sky; a blue luminous mist that gushed forth from the opened earth, and all the stars swam round in it like little silver fish. Its coolness and sweetness lay deep about me, and all the valley was refreshed with it as with some lovely joy. But, all at once, all the stars lifted their heads up out of the water, and cried out in a shrill chorus, "Cover the well, cover the well." And I turned quickly but it was too late, for already the squat, evil head of the serpent had appeared over the side, and he slid forth like a narrow flame, with darting, wicked glance, and forked, flickering tongue. And all the stars fled away in terror, and the blue mist of the water was troubled, and grew shadowy and seemed to lose its light. But I heard a voice proclaim, "The power of the serpent is gone, and the power of the beast draws near." And I saw a deeper shadow darkening on the water, and the serpent shrivelled and was gone. And, looking round, I saw a great ugly creature that came forth from the well, a huge bloated sluggish thing like a giant Gila monster, and it looked too stupid and foolish to fear, yet as it came it lapped up all the blue mist of heaven and left behind it only the arid waste of sand. And I knew I must destroy it or be lost. And I found I had in my hand the thorny, slender stem of a Spanish dagger and with that I fought as well as I could, and in the end the creature died with a silly, squeaky groan, and it was gone like the serpent, and I stood with the dagger in my hand that dripped with blood, the poisonous, vaporous blood of the ancient dragon, that would have destroyed with its least drop a weapon of steel, but had no power against this living blade.

And all the stars came back again and swayed quietly to rest in their places in the sky beneath my feet, that was once more at peace and fair without a stain.

And there was suddenly a line of angels standing with silver feet on all the rose-red mountains, holding their swords of flame upright in their hands, streaming up into the sky like banners. And they sang together with shining lips, "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Then I saw a pathway of gold unrolled like a scroll, leading down from the mountains, and one came forth from the serried line of the angels, like a shepherd,

in a long saffron cloak, and he had a crooked staff in his hand, and on his head a crown of wax-white flowers.

He walked on the golden path as on a royal cloth spread down before his feet, and he drew near me and his eyes were terrible with light, the relentless, unvarying light of the naked desert. I knelt down as he passed by me, and I was full of wonder so great that it was almost peace.

And I woke to find the thin shadow of the ironwood had moved by a hand's breadth upon the page of my book, and the men were still talking of bringing the water down into the valley. But I wished they would not, for it is good there should be still some waste places upon earth, that one may lie down there and dream. For I was afraid, and said in my heart like Jacob, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not." And, like him, I raised a little cairn of stones upon the black sand before we went away.