In 1888 an ambitious but insecure young woman crossed the plains with her family and settled in the arid regions of southeastern California. There, in the "naked space," she cast off conventional ways of thinking, inadequate in a "country [that] failed to explain itself," a country that left her "spellbound" with "wanting to know."[1] And she learned to reject the capitulations of what she called "young ladihood." She made the "revolutionary discovery" that her life was her own, to live fully and freely. Her desert wanderings, and her encounters with the various "outliers" she met there, nourished her independence and rebelliousness: the desert gave her "the courage to sheer off what is not worth while" while "its treeless spaces," she discovered, "uncramp the soul."[2]

Austin spent fifteen years in what she called the "Country of the Lost Borders," seeking "a lurking, evasive Something, wistful, cruel, ardent; something that rustled and ran, that hung half-remotely, insistent on being noticed, fled from pursuit, and when you turned from it, leaped suddenly and fastened on your vitals" (*Earth Horizon*, 187). Although she would live, as a successful writer, in artist communities in Carmel, Greenwich Village, and London, the desert had become a part of her. She returned to the southwest for her final years, 1924–1934, borrowing an image from the Zia Indians to express the desert's lingering fascination: throughout her life, she said, she had sought the "Earth Horizon . . . the incalculable blue ring of sky meeting earth which is the source of experience" (*Earth Horizon*, 33). To Austin, as to Georgia O'Keeffe, the desert simultaneously revealed the mysterious and the "bare core of things" (*The Land of Little*

Rain, 8), "exciting in the heart that subtle sense of relationship to the earth horizon which is the nurture of the spiritual life" (*Earth Horizon*, 33).

In the desert Austin found not only personal liberation but also a voice and a subject matter. In many works she described how Native American women artists, desert storytellers, and landscape shaped her art. Beginning with *The Land of Little Rain* in 1903, she published a series of books which explored her most cherished theme, the influence of the desert landscape on human character, culture, and art: *The Basket Woman* (1904), *Lost Borders* (1909), *The American Rhythm* (1923), *The Land of Journey's Ending* (1924), *Starry Adventure* (1931), and *Earth Horizon* (1932), among others. When she wrote that the desert is "a land that once visited must be come back to inevitably," she was describing both literal and imaginative journeys (*The Land of Little Rain*, 5).

Cactus Thorn is another of Austin's imaginative journeys into the desert. A story about the relationship between a male politician with "new" ideas, the kind of man Austin encountered during her years in New York, and a self-sufficient woman wanderer, it has many autobiographical undertones, and it certainly reveals the point of view that made her one of the foremost feminists of her time. Although it has never been published before, it ranks with Austin's best writing and treats recurring themes which illuminate her career, as discussed in the Afterword.

Apparently written in 1927 and rejected by Houghton Mifflin, the novella remained in manuscript in The Huntington Library's Austin collection until this publication. The manuscript is unedited and includes typographical mistakes, misspellings, and inconsistent punctuation. Our intention was to limit editorial work to repairing these problems, but along the way we found a few sentences that required minor rewording to clarify meaning. Because we could not ask the author's approval for such changes,

we modified the text only when absolutely necessary, making every attempt to preserve Austin's characteristic syntax.

We are grateful to The Huntington Library for permission to share this fine story with Austin's growing readership.

Notes

1. Mary Austin, *Earth Horizon* (New York: Literary Guild, 1932), pp. 194–95.

2. Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), pp. 78, 91.

« ONE »

GRANT Arliss had made two or three turns about the station platform before he saw her. So drugged was his gaze by the naked glare of a land whose very shadows looked rusted by the sun, he could scarcely take her in, lovely as she was, as a separate item of the landscape. She must have been sitting just there in the shelter of the alfalfa bales when the construction train had dropped him a quarter of an hour ago, taking him in with that same wide gaze, incurious as an animal's, which dropped without a spark as it crossed his own.

Arliss had been two days laying the raw silences of the desert to his soul. Not too long for him to be struck with the quality of her detachment, but long enough for him to put it to himself that the astonishing thing was, not that he had found a young and beautiful woman there, but that having found her, she did not disturb for him the somnolent desert charm. She was less of an item in it than the dwindling hoot of the train from whose caboose he had just descended, or the slinking rails over which, sometime that afternoon, the belated Flier would pick him up again.

He passed her the second time, to find that by some slight shift of her personality she had contrived, as some wild thing might, to remove herself even further from the scant field of his attention. But in the very moment of recognizing this removal he found himself yielding again to the pressure of vacuity which held him to the contemplation of the land's empty reach, its disordered horizons, its vast, sucking stillness.

It was to secure for himself just this long, uninterrupted wait at the ramshackle station, from whose high platform ores had

once been shipped to forgotten smelters, that he had used his name, not unknown even so far from New York, to have himself dropped there to await the belated Flier from the East.

What he found in the untenanted valley, rising far on either side into nameless, broken ranges, was so exactly the reflection of his inward state that he was able, in his pacing rounds, to forget the presence of the girl until the high wheeling sun drove him automatically to shelter. The stir she made, making room for him in the only possible seat among the miscellaneous crates and bales, brought to him afresh not only the singularity of her being there, in a situation which could not be supposed to be improved by the presence of an unknown man, but the greater singularity of his failure to respond to any suggestion that might lie in her beauty and their aloneness, beauty of the same sleepy smoothness as the land itself, isolation subject only to the interruption of the Flier three or four hours hence.

And yet, for all effect she had upon him, she might, like the horned lizard starting from under his foot, have assembled herself from the tawny earth and the hot sand, or at a word resolve herself into the local element.

So absolute was this sense of her being a part of the place and the day that it was with the effect of going on with a suspended conversation that she presently addressed him.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," she suggested quietly, "not unless you are used to it." Forgetting why he had sat down, Arliss had made a restless movement to resume his pacing. To hide the start she gave him, he squinted upward toward the hot, shallow heaven.

"Isn't it safe?" he wished to know.

"Over in Pahwahnit," she said, with vague pointing movements of her throat and chin, "days like this, men drop dead with water in their canteens." Arliss remembered hearing of this.

"I didn't know Pahwahnit was so near." He looked with interest toward the low, mottled ranges which the girl had indicated.

"Oh, *near!*" she smiled. "It would be a good horse would take you to Pahwahnit in three days, from here. And your friends might be a month finding you."

"Ah," he became whimsical in turn, "that would suit me!" She gave him a moment of grave appreciation.

"It sure is a good country to lose yourself in."

Arliss reflected that this might well be a preliminary to finding yourself, which was what he had come West to do.

"The point being, of course," he said, "that there should be people interested in looking for you."

She considered this literally. "There's a ranch at Bennet Wells," she enumerated, "and two men doing assessment at the Bonnie Bell. Then there's always likely to be *vaqueros*. And the Indians. Only the Indians wouldn't know you were lost unless you told them. They would think you were simply taking a *paseo*."

"Ah, then," Arliss insisted, "there *are* people who manage to live here."

"Oh, live! If you can call it that!" she flashed at him. "People don't really live here: they just happen along and stay." She seemed to keep pace silently with his thought, which made a backward cast toward ancient uses of the desert. "Of course," she began again, "if you've got something to think out—" and then at his quick recognition of the personal touch, by the same subtle means which he had sensed earlier, she momentarily withdrew herself. Arliss felt himself remanded to the traveler's impersonal claim for information.

"I mean, would it be possible to get food and housing for a few months, while you *are* thinking it out?"

She nodded. "There's a sort of a town between those two ranges that look so close together; and ranches scattered about. It's a question really of water. When you have water you can have anything you want. *Any*thing!" She appeared to measure him a moment before selecting the confirming incident. "There was a man had an Italian villa here once: Over there, at Hawainda."

Arliss could just make it out, a scar on the furthest range where the crude reds and ochers of the plain altered subtly to pearl and amethyst, and the rusty shadows began to creep from under the heavy glare, and to fill the passes with blue drift.

"They say the very stones were brought from Italy, and marble seats and fountains for the terraced gardens, packed in by mule back—that was the story."

"There would be a story," Arliss agreed, "*and* a woman." It was the first note of sophistication he had ventured, and her low, amused laugh was the measure of her response.

"Three of them," she agreed. "His wife and two daughters. *They* had had about all they could stand of the desert when Beasley struck it rich; and he built the villa after they had been a year in Italy. He couldn't imagine what else it was they wanted. There's been no one there for years now, except Indians. They wouldn't live in the house, of course; they're superstitious. But they keep up the water pipes and the reservoir, I've heard, so they can play with the fountains."

"Oh, not really! Everybody *told* me I should find romance in the West, but I hadn't expected anything so good as this."

"Is that what you call romantic?" The girl frowned slightly to herself. "The Beasley women hated it, I've heard. They didn't lose any time getting out of it when the old man died. I suppose," she considered, "a thing can't seem romantic when it's the only thing that ever happened to you . . . there must be plenty of empty houses in New York that aren't in the least romantic."

"Ah," cried Arliss, caught, "how did you know I am from New York?" and immediately perceived that he had touched too nearly on that instinct by which, like some delicate insect, she took a sudden color of aloofness from the soil.

"There's a lot of Easterners out here every year," she let fall from behind the veil; "we get so we can pretty generally tell where they come from."

The check, if it amounted to that, was one that Arliss refused to admit, all the more because of the implied fatuousness of his momentary hope that she might have recognized him. It wasn't unlikely; he had many followers in the West and his picture was one of the stock cuts of contemporary news. But he was not so fatuous as not to feel, in the moment of perceiving himself still unknown, a measure of the freedom he had come so far to find. He returned, as far as possible, to the note of detachment in his next question. "And just where *have* we come? Where am I now, in respect to places one hears of—Los Angeles, for instance? And how would I go to that place—where the villa is?"

"Hah-wah-eenda," she pronounced with the soft southern roll. "It's an Indian word for 'Place of the Doves.' There was always water there, and they built their nests—You'd have to go by train from Los-Ahng-lace," again she gave him the soft, informing drawl, "to Barstow, I guess; and from there to Minnietta, it's two days by pack train, and then north across the long arm of Mesquite . . ." But already Arliss's interest had dropped. By the very vastness which her use of names and distances implied, he was beguiled again into that vacuity of mind which in his present situation of spiritual exhaustion appeared to him as the happiest state.

After a perfunctory question or two he found himself, this time unwarned, resuming his aimless round, and by a vague impulse of propriety, extending it down the track and around the point of an ancient lava flow, temporarily out of sight and sound of his fellow islander. Here, for an hour he so successfully maintained his wished-for detachment that until he came in sight of her again he was hardly aware that he had turned his steps back toward the station shed. She had risen and was moving about with a familiar definiteness which, by the aid of a white napkin spread upon a bale of hay, and the inward prompting which had turned him back upon his path, he recognized as meal getting.

Arliss had made no provision for himself during the long hours which must elapse before he could reach the dining car of the Flier, and the way in which she had taken this for granted in laying places for two at her improvised table struck him as one more item in the complete identification of the young woman with the place and the day. In a country in which the whole machinery of impulse and foresight is sucked out of a man, it is natural that food should simply appear.

She had produced, doubtless from some place where they were stored for just such emergencies, the simplest of equipments for making tea, and only waited for him to fetch water for it from the nearby tank, to include him in her arrangements.

"Your train may be late, you know," she had opposed to his conventional hesitancy over her proffered hospitality. It aroused him for the first time, by the implication of its not being her train also, to a question; since it was not to take the only possible train, what in the name of desolation was she there for? Not venturing to ask, he filled the extemporized kettle and placed it over the fire she had kindled amid the aimless wheel tracks at the back of the station.

It was a little past noon of the clock, that magical moment when the shadows begin to stir and crouch for their evening assault upon the plain, and the burnt reds and the thick yellows and pale ash of the desert clear and flash into translucent flame. In such moments one perceives the lure of the desert to be the secret lure of fire, to which in rare moments men have given themselves as to a goddess. While it lasted it seemed to Arliss that the whole land leaped alive from the kindling of their wayfaring hearth. It leaped subtly almost to the surfaces of this pale brown girl, as if she were, like the land, but the outward sheath of incredible hot forces that licked him with elusive tips before they dropped to the crackle of twigs under the kettle on the bare sand. Turning to gather a handful of fuel, he found the thin

flame-colored film of a cactus flower almost under his fingers. Before the girl's sharp, deterring exclamation reached him, he drew back his inexperienced hand, wounded with the cactus thorn.

"There's only one way to admire a cactus," she commiserated, and while he fumbled for his handkerchief to swathe his pricked fingers, she held up the delicate blossom on the point of a dagger that she had produced unobtrusively from somewhere about her person.

"I didn't know that the thorns simply jumped at you like that," Arliss apologized, taking the proffered dagger, not so much to admire the sun-rayed flower as to wonder at the implement on which it was impaled. It was slender like a thorn and had a carved ivory handle which had been broken and mended deftly with bone. He wondered where she carried it and what provocation would have brought it leaping against himself.

"I suppose," he said gravely, handing it back to her, "that this is a typical desert experience; to admire and be stung."

The girl laughed, laying the flower back in the shade of its parent leaf and half consciously heaping a little sand over the severed end of the stem. "The desert's got a worse name than it deserves," she defended; "there's ways it has to be lived with—I suppose you'd be just as likely to be killed crossing Fifth Avenue if you didn't know the rules."

"Well," he admitted, "New York can sting you to death, too. But one reads—all sorts of things about how the desert lays hold on a man and never lets go."

"Oh, yes, it gets them. It seems to *want* people." She considered the wide, untenanted spaces, the rich promise of the soil. "It wants them too much," she concluded. "It is like a woman, you know—that has only one man or child: she loves it to death."

"That," said Arliss, "is positively the most alarming thing I have heard about it." She seriously agreed.

"There's accidents, of course, like missing the trail or getting

out of water. But they are likely to happen to you anywhere. The desert sort of sucks you empty and throws you away. That is, unless you are willing to take what it gives you in place of what you had."

"Then it does give you something?"

"Everything!" she averred. "Only . . . you can't pick and choose." She turned back to an earlier phase of their conversation. "If you had come here to think something out, you know. Well, you won't."

"Won't think?"

"It will be done for you. Like a piece of knitting that you've got all wrong. It's taken out of your hands and unraveled; all you have to do is watch it being set right."

"Then I have come to exactly the right place!" He tried for the note of lightness to cover a certain dismay. For the one thing he knew he hadn't come for was to have things taken any more completely out of his hands. It was, he himself would have said, to get his thinking thoroughly in hand again, to restore his lost sense of ascendancy over a situation which, for the moment, impressed him as having points in common with the trackless land whose horizons were lost in illimitable disordered ranges.

He was sitting on the bare sand beside his companion who, for the purpose of tending their kettle, had dropped there with a lithe unconsciousness of habit. The homely occupation gave him a more direct sense of her personality than he had yet received. More a woman than a girl, he decided—twenty-three or -four, perhaps—but of her experience nothing could be judged. There was nothing Western about her as he had learned to recognize Westernness in current fiction. Her dress, the hat and the jacket of which she had laid aside, was such as the more competent of city stenographers might have worn.

But even while he speculated, she had turned from him in one of those lovely poses the secret of which was known only to the

early Greeks, and poked at a greyish spot of earth with a stick. It looked a little firmer, perhaps, than the surrounding sand. Then to his amazement, the spot gathered itself together and scurried off toward the shelter of the cactus thorns. For a moment the spiked, squat head was held alert, the broad body pulsating with startled life, quieting slowly as the little creature dropped back upon its belly and, with a slight burrowing motion, became again a part of the sun and shade-mottled sand.

"I guess they have the right of it," the girl commented with one of those occasional odd lapses into colloquialism which Arliss had already speculated over. "They never start any knitting of their own. They take it all out in making themselves a part of the big pattern." She dropped the stick, and with a beautiful half turn toward the open country, took the measure of its vastness in her speech. "That's the best thing you get out of the desert. It teaches you never to make anything up. Like . . ." this time she searched the wide earth for comparison, "like marriage is with us."

This was the sort of thing that, said in the circle to which Arliss was accustomed, would have cleared instantly for the speaker an advanced position on the Freudian premise. It should have led, by way of "complexes" and a discussion of the Russian realists, to precisely the breath-shortening crisis from which it was supposed to tear the veil.

Said as a preliminary to the announcement that the kettle had boiled, it had the effect of one of those inadvertent gestures by which, in the middle of the game, the board is suddenly cleared. It left the other member of the engagement with hand extended and no piece to play.

Without waiting for an answer, apparently without expecting any, she took up the kettle and, leading the way back to their improvised table, gave herself to the administration of hospitality and the simple enjoyment of the meal. On her feet and moving

she was even more beautiful than Arliss had at first conceded, and less provocative, an effect that was heightened by the girl's failure to make of the primitive ritual of fire and food, man and woman in the wilderness, the note of sex appeal. Evidently she found nothing in their situation to inhibit this casual introduction of a topic they were both young enough to approach with trepidation. He had to admit to himself, however, if any such trepidation existed on her part, it was admirably concealed. He found himself under the necessity of reviving the topic himself, if he was to discover what, if anything, she had meant by it.

"So you think," he suggested, "that marriage is made up."

"On one side or the other," she agreed. "I have seen the wild creatures mating, and I've never seen them unhappy in it. But I've seldom seen humans where one or both of them wasn't suffering, because they had already made up their minds beforehand that marriage ought to be something it hadn't turned out to be with them. That's what I mean about the effect that the desert has on men. If you come into it with your mind made up as to what you want to get from it, you may not get anything."

"But," Arliss expostulated, "when we go after anything we have to begin where we are."

"No," she shook her head thoughtfully. "You have to begin where *It* is. Like I said with marriage. You have to begin with what loving is, and cut your marriage accordingly. It's like a match and a piece of wood. After they come together you can't treat them any more as wood and match, but as fire, and deal with them according to the nature of fire."

"And if the fire goes out?" Arliss had that instinctive fear of the irrecoverable nature of marriage which manifests as a covert curiosity.

He was still far from admitting that his fear was the obverse side of an incapacity so far to make the wholehearted approach, but he had begun to wonder whether the mystery of his waning

appetite for leadership, his reluctance to accept the opportunity held out to him, for fear his interest in its exercise might not hold out, were not of the same nature as the evanescent flame of passion. With that uncanny prescience for the trend of his secret thought which he had already noted in this singular young woman, his companion pointed her contempt with a glance at the burnt ends of sticks from which the flame of their own fire had already receded.

"There's ways of handling fire," she said. "You can spend all your time keeping it going, or you can build it up fresh when you need it from the coals. That's what I meant by being made up, when it ought to be something that exists that is there all the time, like a well, or," she reverted to the earlier figure, "like a fire in the depths of the earth, or fire in the sun. You oughtn't to have to keep poking at it to make it burn."

"Ah," he said, "I thought it was the business of women in particular to keep the fire burning . . . priestesses of the flame."

She took him in again with that incurious animal-like gaze. "You would," she said, with an impersonal finality that made Arliss aware that, thought he had never so stated it to himself, that was exactly what he had long wished to think. He knew that he had been thinking of marriage for himself as a possible way out of his present state of spiritual insufficiency. If only he could find a woman who could be counted on to kindle a flame and keep it going, he might, at that glow, warm the slowly chilling reaches of his intellect and his ambition. He had a momentary panic that this strange young woman, in placing him so accurately on one point, had also penetrated to the place of the chill and discovered what he had left New York to hide. Before he could, however, frame any sort of an answer to this pointed judgment of himself, his companion had flicked the personal element from it with the shaking out of the crumbs of their meal, and was going on with her own thought. "I suppose," she half mused,

"that's one of the ways in which women got sidetracked. They didn't *have* to keep making up the fire all the time, the way men do. They *lived* in the flame until men got to think of them as being makers of the flame. . . ." She dropped off with such complete disregard of her companion that for a moment he failed to follow her into simple comment on the country, the climate, the trails that went white and blind across the baked land.

Arliss was conscious of a vague irritation with this singular young person who "talked sex"—that was the way it was phrased in Arliss's own circle—and dropped it in that calm way just as the man was beginning to get interested. He would have liked to keep on with the subject, to point his protest against her reading of the function of woman as priestess of the flame, by his own need to feel the flame, any flame, for just the kindling touch which he was beginning to imagine she might have given, and so negligently refused. Here were all the materials of a fire—the romantic setting, the woman with her satisfying contours, the shadows of her hair like rusted gold, the fruity brownness of her skin. He had been astonished that she did not move him more at the beginning of their acquaintance and now he found himself vexed in the discovery that her mind was not even on the business of whether she moved him or not. His annoyance, however, was not deep enough to be proof against the simple charm of her talk, friendly and impersonal as a boy's, charged with all a boy's interest in and information about the region in which they found themselves marooned. Gradually his mind loosened its tension and ran out happily on the track which her talk provided.

At the end of an hour he was startled by the wild hooting of his approaching train in the narrow cañon to their right. The girl stood up, beginning to assemble her belongings with instinctive feminine movements of setting herself to rights. Arliss rose also, and for want of anything else to say, expressed the conventional hope that they were continuing their journey together.

"Oh, no!" she told him; she was expecting friends who would come for her—she threw a casual glance back toward the encircling hills and took the position of the sun—in another hour. And as she stood serene in her utter lack of any need of him, that happened which by every calculation of social incidence should have happened in the beginning. As at the striking of a match Arliss felt himself swept suddenly by the need of her, the need of a man for a woman, as natural as the need of water and as necessary as bread. She stood buttoning the ready-made jacket that fitted her lovely curves as it might have fitted the bronze Diana pointing her perpetual arrow within view of Arliss's New York office. Her brown eyes, pale brown like the shadows under the sage, smiled at him with the first glint of natural coquetry.

"I've been very happy to meet you, Mr. Arliss," she said.

"Ah," he cried, "I didn't tell you that!"

"Well, couldn't I just have seen your picture in the papers? It's there often enough."

There was so little to say to this that for the moment that was left to them amid the approaching thunder Arliss let his glance roam over her hungrily, until in passage it crossed her own for an instant in which she took the measure of his desire and disallowed it, as the cool surface of a statue might for a moment reflect, without being warmed by it, a passing torch. She clasped the hand which he formally held out to her, and shook it gravely. "Good-bye," she said, and again, "I'm very glad to have met you!"