

A Stranger Appears

by Jim Tully

There were five of us. And we were a ragged crew. We had been waiting fourteen hours for a freight train to crawl over the desert.

We had walked nearly fifty miles to a decrepit water tank, at which, it was said, a train stopped now and then. And there we had lingered, worn out, but unable to rest, with swollen feet, and sand-whipped eyes, with cracked lips, and dried throats, and aching bodies upon which the rags hung loosely.

The State of Arizona had declared war on hoboes. Yegg men, the aristocrats of our world, had robbed several safes within its border, and in doing so they had been thoughtless enough to kill a village marshal.

As weakness has ever been punished for the crimes of strength, we, the mongrels of the breed, had been hunted and driven across yellow leagues of sand.

It was three days after my seventeenth birthday, and I, being Irish, was in a sentimental mood.

I thought of all the women who had fed me during the last four months in which I had tramped nearly ten thousand miles.

I looked at the many monikers of Long-traveled hoboes on the posts that supported the water tank. Some of the monikers had arrows carved beneath them which pointed in the direction the rovers had been bound.

The hours dragged by until the middle of the night hung heavy on my brain. I fell into a stupor.

The other derelicts awoke men when they emerged from a long gap of silence.

I looked skyward and saw a yellow slice of the moon pushing its way downward among the Pleiades. Lacking the fierce glare of day, the night was still lustrous white.

A jack-rabbit bounded over the desert a short distance to the south. It looked as large as a kangaroo. Two animals appeared and looked after the flying rabbit, but made no more to pursue. All five of us looked in the direction of the objects outlined clearly under the moon.

A toothless tramp, his feet tied in rags, his cheeks sagging in like tents which the main support had been taken, said with a cracked voice, "You can't fool them coyotes. They know a greyhound can't ketch a jack-rabbit, so they don't try. Funny, aint it? One o' them coyotes 'll sit right still near a bush 'cause he knows you can't see him. An' I seen a dog kill a black-snake, but you can't make him touch a rattler. I wonder if someone figgers it all out like a God."

"Yep," sneered Frisco Slim, whose crooked jaw still sagged from a blow that once had broken it, "it's all figgered out — by God."

Another tramp pulled a battered cheap watch from his pocket. Being nearsighted, he held it at the edge of his left eye, which was streaked red, under yellow, and faded.

"Holy cock-eyed Moses," he grunted, "it's one o'clock and no rattler yit"

"Well, the Santa Fe Limited 'll be along soon. You kin grab her here. She only runs 'bout eight an hour," grinned the toothless vagrant

The tramps again entered a gap of broad silence. Soon a figure appeared on the rim of the desert. It would move

slowly, then swiftly, and then stop suddenly. As it drew nearer, we heard it shouting at the moon and stars. Now and then it would pick up a stone and throw it at a cactus plant screaming, "I got you that time. You'll quit crowin' at me every midnight"

Then the figure approached us, walking sideways. We forgot trains and the agony of vagabond life in the wild appearance he made. He was in the middle thirties — a thin collection of angular bones. His yellow, hairy shin showed through the torn places in his trousers, which were held to his sleeveless shirt with a large safety-pin. On his left foot was a button shoe without buttons. On his other foot was a lace shoe held with a white cord. His beard was fiery red, and at least a foot long. His hair was nondescript black and gray, and straggled.

"Hello, Brothers," he said, "nice winter night. Think it'll snow? He came closer and shouted, "Don't hit me, boys. I aint crazy." He shuddered away and moaned piteously. "Don't hit me, please, I aint crazy. I'm all right" Then his voice became softer, and he spoke slowly and distinctly, "I've been walking a long. Long way."

"Why, you poor bum, we won't hit you," mopped Frisco Slim. The derelict ran into the desert for some distance and then returned to us. His bare arms were covered with the marks of morphine needles. His left hand bled from the pricks of a cactus.

"Sh-shh-shh," he placed his bleeding hand to his mouth. "Be quiet! Do you know who I am? My name is Peter. I betrayed Him. I denied Him. I'm afraid He'll get me, so I stay out in the desert. When I hear roosters crowing, it makes me think of Him. I killed a thousand of them with rocks back there. I did Him a dirty trick. And they tell you I was the first Pope. That's a lie. The first Pope was a Jew. His name was Paul and he ran a hock shop in Rome. But keep still for if they knew I told you, they'd kill me."

He ran claw-like hands through his tangled hair. Then he pointed above. "See those stars up there? God and I fixed them where they arc. It was some job. I knew God when He was a kid. We went to school together. I worked with Him eleven hundred years. He was a good fellow until He got hold of the world. Then He got the swelled head. Well, we raised the world on big derricks.

"We used two oceans of glue fixing those scars. We had an airplane longer than a railroad, and we shot the stars out of a cannon eighty miles long. God would certainly whiz that airship around. We often made a thousand miles a minute. We stuck eighty million stars up there in eleven years. One time we got in a little quarrel because I dropped a star, and God said, 'Why God damn you, Peter,' and I spoke up heatedly and said, 'Don't you God damn me, God.' Then we smiled and made up.

"We had a fine time when we were not working, though. We knew a great many girls — angels, I guess — and they would visit us on their own clouds, and we would sail away off with them. We lived and entertained in a wonderful house. It had red lilies and purple grass all around it. And girl angels were thicker than the Irish in Dublin.

"I shall never forget one incident that happened at the end of a busy day! I can see God's expression yet as he watched, while the wind blew through his hundred -mile-long whiskers. His eyes were bigger than saucers, and the pupils were larger than the eggs of geese.

"I had been getting ready to place a tiny star in the gun when I heard a slight commotion beneath us. God said, "This is a delightful storm, Peter, and I love to watch such things, though it takes more than an unusual storm to arouse my interest. But then, they are necessary, and so I allow them to happen. You see — after one is a few billion years old he grows weary of storms. Life merely consists, Peter, in the getting of a little wisdom and dying.

"The smartest of the races yet produced down there was the pagan. They lived riotously and crawled away singing lewd songs to lewder women. There is a little space below at the present time and it is inhabited by some millions of people who are called Christians. I think their name was taken from a red-headed fellow who had bad luck in trying to give up all and follow his neighbor. They crucified him, if I remember correctly. There was much said about the poor fellow having been my son, but you can imagine that I have had many sons to remember since the first billion years of my infancy.

"This man's name was Jesus, but there were over thirty other prophets called Jesus at that time, and they were all my sons. But I did have a fondness for this poor fellow. You see. Peter, sincerity is so rare, even to me, that I admire it. But I must admit that the saddest fool is the sincere fool. As I remember it, Christ was not a strong man physically. If he had had a son, a woman he once helped would have been a wonderful mother for that son. Her name was Magdalen—and she was as lovely as a budding willow on the plains of Lombardy.

"It really is a sad job, Peter, that being a God. I hear the whim-pers of the poor broken devils roll up to me at night in trillions of words. Hardly one among them is brave enough to walk through his own maze of darkness alone. They call on me, when I am busy with other things. But then, enough of my troubles. Peter, look down below."

"I looked and saw countless numbers of girls as naked as slender trees in winter dancing on a vast level and yellow stretch of sand, near a blue-green ocean, under the light of three moons.

"Red, white, green, and blue angels flew above them scattering flowers. Their bodies were as slender as those of the girls who danced in rhythm to the waves of the sea.

"Horns of sand formed that reached in three directions to the three moons. They circled around and around, being blown by the wind. The millions of varied and brightly colored birds and butterflies appeared as if from nowhere. Each bird and butterfly picked a flower from where the sand had once been. And each flower picked was of a different color from the bird or butterfly that picked it. The angels flew after the birds and butterflies. Then the millions of girls mounted into the air with wingless bodies, and vari-colored streaming hair, singing the while a weird song, low, musical, and vibrant.

The stars rolled swiftly from the east, traveling faster than light. It skimmed over the blue-green ocean and dried it up as a hot flame does a drop of rain. Then fishes, sea animals, and grotesque reptiles died slimy deaths in the muck of the ocean bed. Ninety-thousand-ton whales splashed mud for thousands of feet in their snorting death agony. Then a gigantic wind followed the sun and swept the ocean bed clear of all that had once been life. I counted a million dead whales sailing through the air.

"Everything moved with exact precision. The stars and sun and whales and even the tiniest butterflies carrying flowers were in no more danger of striking each other than the planets which swung aloft in the now empty sky. A girl flew out of the welter of confusion toward me. She was ravishingly beautiful. I reached out for her, and God's hand grasped my shoulder.

"Listen, Peter," he commanded, 'don't bother her. Why do fishermen wish women at such ungodly times?' God asked me in an irritated tone."

The derelict rubbed his forehead with his right hand. An engine whittle echoed with far away haunting music. A coyote wailed at the like of moon in the sky. I looked at the ragged placer-of-stars with boyish wonder.

There came to his face an expression I have since seen in the eyes of a dying fanatic.

There was a colossal wonder to me about this life-lashed vagrant under the desert moon. His eyes burned and he shouted, "Kid, get off the road."

Then his voice became soft again and he went on with his story.

"Everything went lovely for several hundred years, though we did have some trouble in putting the sun in its proper place. We kept it for a long time in cakes of ice larger than Texas.

"We quarreled and I quit God with a desire to get even. I started to build a bowl out of lumber inside of the sky. It was my object to shut the light from the earth. I told God of my intention after I had the lumber in a pile bigger than Russia. He laughed out loud at me. I could see his teeth shining white when he leaned his head back. They were larger than tombstones over meat-packers' graves. Then he said:

"Why, Peter, I've seen a million worlds go to hell in my time. "I paid no attention to his talk, but kept busy for a million years, and I had him worried. Everywhere you looked there were boards through which the sun tried to shine. I could see the world getting darker and darker down below.

"The people shrieked for light, and I heard God laughing at them. They sent great airships after me. And big battleships sailed through the air as if they were on water. I watched them all freeze and turn white and go shooting down like snowflakes."

The derelict's mind seemed to wander. He clutched his hair.

"I know a lot of things, I do," he went on. "Solomon wasn't wise. He had a thousand wives. You know Job wailed? Saul cheated him with loaded dice. Judas told Job what Saul did. Judas was a pretty square shooter until he got mixed up with a girl who knew an editor.

"Why, I saw Adam and Eve driven out of the garden. Eve was in pain. That was a green apple she picked. Some Sunday-school teacher swiped her fig leaf and I made a date with her; Eve, I mean.

"Well, anyhow, I had the sky about all nailed up when God came sailing over to see me on a green cloud trimmed in red.

"God laughed out loud again and a million eagles started to fly and screech all around us.

"But I kept on working and it was all dark below and I only had one more board to put up. Then the red snake thing spurted at me again, and I rapped my hand with the hammer.

"God laughed as I started to fall. I told you so,' he shouted.

"It took me a thousand years to land. I lit on the desert back there

and started to walk. I'll go after more lumber and nail the sky up yet"

We looked at the strange figure as a light glimmered in the distance and a whistle sent a wild melody over the desert.

"It's the Limited," murmured the toothless tramp. "She sure is ramblin' tonight."

The great engine's light swept far ahead of it as the train crashed along the rails like an immense black monster with a golden fire in its bead.

As it came within a few hundred yards of us, the man who called himself Peter threw his bead back and yelled, "Aha, my fiery chariot. I shall run ahead of it for lumber."

He jumped on the track and ran ahead of the rushing train, The engine bore down upon him, its whistle shrieking like a thousand panthers.

An object was hurtled high into the air, and then rolled over and over.

The man who had known God was stretched out like a tired child upon a yellow blanket.

"Poor devil, he knows God now" said the toothless vagrant.