

Building the Big Dam

by

Theo White

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The whitewashed walls of the new
stack were gleaming and contrasted
under a desert moon. I leaned
against the board walls. Through
them came faintly the thin, metallic
noise of a cheap orchestra softened by
muffling feet. Ten yards of hard,
bright sand intervened between me
and the motor transports. Great
shadows crept under their bodies and
their broad tops were silhouetted
against the blue-green sky. The
sands supported the tops. The
sands made curious patterns on the
sand with the shadows of them and
the wire rails. It was contrast in black
and white. Gay women in cheap fin-
ery passed between me and the trans-
port trucks their shadows moving
quickly. Men, naked from the hips,
checked their swaggering gait to let
them pass and sauntered on to
the transports. They chuckled their
tongues in masculine derision. They
sat on the edges of the buses and
crossed rubber-booted legs. Occasion-
ally they called out coarse remarks to
other men in clean, white shirts with
the women. Sweating workmen, wait-
ing beside me, cursed. It was impos-
sible that they must work when there
was plenty to be had in town. They
spat and swore. The cheap women
always at transports
and spine. At a certain
swarmed up and over the two decks
of the transports. The hot exhaust
swirled white clouds of sand. Gay

men, probably drunk, in enormous
laughter and lust, they got under way.
The leader pulled out. The others
fell into a single file, a column of
lumpish, black shapes against the
summer sky. The sand settled, and
there was an acute quiet. Behind me
the thrilling music persisted in a too-
low sound.

It was Saturday night in Boulder
City. The graveyard shift had gone
down to the dam, leaving no more in-
fortunate mates to dancing and beer and
somewhat hazy fraternal society. It
was off to work, seven nights a week,
from eleven or seven, through the rise
and fall of a moon and the coming of
the dawn and a day. Western holi-
days could be had only by truancy.
Through the heat and noise and light
of the day they were with their sleep
and recreation. "You can't take
it," an old hand said to me, as we
dipped beer, and he told me of his early
years in construction camps.

He was bred at a time when they
were collecting pots of red dirt, with
no money, and the nation. They
were assembled in the large centers of
population. The cheap and indus-
trial centers wanted them. Cheap
labor bureaus hung out black signs in
the streets, as busy as the labor they
sought. Chained on the dingy boards
were appeals for men willing to work
in remote places. On the coast of Flor-
ida a bridge was under construction.
A railroad about to be built in Kansas.
There were no steam shovels of the ca-



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