

Desert Men

by
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THE two men broke into a shambling run. One of them unhooked the canteen from his belt and forged a bit ahead of the other. At the brink of the small declivity he stopped; an agonized cry came through his parched lips.

“O God!” he groaned. “Jim, it’s dry!”

Jim came up beside him. He looked down at the waterless waterhole. The other man was exhibiting signs of panic. With a sidelong glance at him, Jim remarked—

“Kinda looks that way, don’t it?” The other hurled the now useless canteen to the ground and began to curse the Deity he had a moment before invoked. His action suggested the blind frenzy of despair. Jim looked at his partner steadily.

“Save yer breath, Bob.” He spoke in a low, even tone that checked the other’s mad outburst. “Better drop yer gun too; extra weight.”

He let his own cartridge belt and holster drop by way of example, but Bob did not follow suit. Instead, at the mention of the word “gun,” a wild look crept into his eyes. Jim saw and acted quickly.

“No, you don’t,” he said, yanking Bob’s weapon from its sheath and flinging it as far as he was able. “Bob, old man, ketch

hold on yerself. We’re livin’ yet, ain’t we? We still got some chance o’ gettin’ through. It’s a cinch we ain’t the only rats out’n this here desert; we’re liable to pick up with somebody who’s got water to spare, ‘n—”

“No chance,” muttered Bob, “we’re as good as dead already.”

“Aw, cut it! Then we gotta make Bedrock. We c’n do it by goin’ steady. C’mon; git goin’; we wasted too much time now.” Jim started off in the direction of the small town of Bedrock, their only hope. Bob shuffled after him.

With hat brims pulled down to shade their eyes and heads bent forward the two men walked in an inferno. Not a vestige of shade anywhere; the trackless waste afforded not an inch of shelter from the merciless sun that beat down upon them from a coppery sky; the heat devils danced and whirled around them. Yet they went on, because one was fired by the desire to live and possessed the strength of will to drive the other.

It was hell! Step, step, step, until walking became automatic. A burning thirst precluded other suffering, their parched throats and caked lips cried insistently for water. As if in punishment for Bob’s blasphemy the sun shone with a terrible

brilliance. And, by an irony of fate, Jim's canteen hung, unnoticed, at his side. Neither spoke; there was no need for conversation. When Bob faltered in his stride, Jim grasped him by the arm and urged him on. And still they went plodding on. How long, Jim asked himself, would the fight continue?

All the rest of that day they fought their way step by tortuous step across the blazing sand. To Jim the struggle for life became an obsession; in his semi delirium he fancied the sun a living enemy. He shook his fist at it, tried to swear at it, and dragged Bob with him to defeat its efforts to kill them.

WITH evening came a slight measure of relief. They flung their aching bodies to the cooling sand to rest. When they had lain there for some time Jim turned to rise. In the movement he felt the canteen at his side, snatched it eagerly and shook it. The hope that had started in his breast died when no gurgle came to his ear; in his feverish state he'd forgotten that the thing had been emptied. He dropped it beside his partner who lay outstretched with his eyes closed. Then, the nucleus of a wild idea germinating in his brain, he snatched it up again and returned it to the hook on his belt. It took a good deal of effort to kick Bob to his feet, but Jim succeeded after renewed attempts, and off they started again on their weary march.

Had any one ever accused Jim Coulter of being a psychologist he would have answered, "I don't sabe Greek. What's it in ord'nary lingo?" Yet the crazy scheme he turned over in his mind would have been worthy of a scientist. No student of "mind over matter" was Jim, however; so we'll say that Providence suggested the plan to him and let it go at that.

With the dawn of the next day Bob sank down without a word and stubbornly refused to move and Jim dropped to the sand beside him to gather what little strength he

had in reserve. After a short time he crawled to his feet and unhooked the canteen from his belt. Then he bent over the prostrate form of his partner and shook him. When Bob looked up at him he held the canteen up to his lips and pretended to drink from it. At this Bob's eyes grew wide.

He raised himself on one hand and held out the other; his jaw dropped in amazement when Jim, forcing a grin through the alkali dust on his face, shook his head and turned away. Bob tried to speak, but no sound issued from his throat. The word "water" formed on his lips. Jim had water; Jim had water; Jim had water!

The thought burned into his brain with insistence; he got drunkenly to his feet and staggered after him. The mad race had begun!

Jim turned and held the canteen to his lips again, tauntingly. A horrible scream forced its rasping way up from Bob's throat; he tried to run forward and fell. He got up again and lurched after Jim who had water, water; Jim had water and wouldn't give him any! Jim realized now that he had created a raving Frankenstein monster that threatened to destroy him. He hooked the canteen to his belt and did not turn again.

OVER the hill that hides the town of Bedrock from the expanse of the great desert two grizzled old prospectors urged their flea-bitten burros. As they stopped at the brow of the ascent to wipe their perspiring faces one of them dropped his bandanna.

"Jumpin' horseflies!" he yelled. "Look, Dusty!"

Dusty, following with his eyes the direction indicated by the other's outstretched arm, beheld the figure of a man crawling, followed at a distance of about twenty feet by another who staggered drunkenly. Both old men started down the other side of the hill at a dead run. They reached the pair just in time to prevent the second fellow, who had caught up with the other, from falling upon him.

Despite his apparent weakened condition, the man seemed endowed with the strength of a maniac and presented a tough problem which Dusty solved by tapping him on the head with the butt of his Colt. They then turned their attentions to the other who still showed signs of life. On his belt was a canteen which they found to be empty.

"Here, Samuel," said Dusty to the other, "you take the water bag an' 'tend to 'em while I beat it back to town fer help."

It took some time and careful nursing to bring Bob back to his health and normal mentality, but a doctor who had been imported from a more modern town than Bedrock accomplished this successfully. Once he had regained control of his reasoning, Bob was not long in coming to the realization of what his

partner had done for him. After their burros had strayed away from them during the sandstorm that had buried their water bags, Jim's canteen had been emptied first, and there remained only the obvious conclusion that Jim had literally taunted him into saving himself. When Jim, hearing that his friend was convalescent, came to see him Bob had tears in his eyes.

"Jim, old-timer," he said after they shook hands, "I'm gonna give you my share in the mine. You saved my worthless carcass an' that's the least I can do."

"Like —— you are! Listen, Bob," Jim added when he saw the protest forming on his lips, "how in blazes do you think I could 'a' got through if I didn't have you a-tearin' after me ready to chaw me up?"