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Cactus and Rattlers



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CHAPTER I

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A T least twice a year, when he came in to Stovepipe Springs to get his mail and flour, Sagebrush answered to the cognomen of George Beam. This was one of the occasions. To his acute consternation, he had discovered that "The Springs" was crowded with life and gayety, for there was a strange female stopping at the hotel, and another pilgrim was coming in by stage this same afternoon.

Sagebrush presented a general vista of whiskers, red nose and nondescript garments, bleached by sun and white with alkali dust; yet it was his proud boast that he was the only man between Death Valley and the big bend of the Colorado who kept abreast of the times. Subscribing to several weekly magazines, he came in once every six months to get the accumulated copies. Then he sat down and answered the advertisements, requesting circulars. Thus he had a burro-load of magazines to read for six months, then a burro-load of circulars wherewith to while away the next six months—an involved and vicious circle in which Sagebrush was always trying to catch up with himself. He kept the post office on the map, however.

"Now, dog-gone it," he observed to his three patient burros, as he tied on his grub and magazines and a bundle of postal cards, "you and me got to hike out again in order to git our correspondence goin' in peace! Dad blame this dad-blamed town! What in hell is folks crowding in this country for, anyhow?"

Haywire Johnson, assistant postmaster and general utility man about the hotel, showed up in time to answer this query.

"Hi, Sagebrush! Aint you stoppin' over in town? Things is pickin' up right fast. We got a settler yesterday, and we got a tourist comin' today."

"That's jest it," growled Sagebrush. "A feller can't have no peace no more. That makes three women in town now, not countin' them females over to José Garcia's shack."

"Well, listen!" Haywire laid his hand on the desert rat's arm. "Where'd you get that dust you weighed in over to the store, eh? Let's you and me go in and talk, Sagebrush. If you aint got no objections to wettin' down them whiskers with a mite o' licker, s'pose we go inside and arbitrate."

Sagebrush grunted, hitched his three burros to the rail, and vanished in the hotel.

NCE Stovepipe Springs had been a boom mining town, but now it was dead and dried out. To west and north lay desert, to the south lay more desert and the Colorado. To the east was the Chuckwalla Range—in it and beyond it rich cattle country with water galore. Here in Stovepipe Springs, and over across the Chuckwallas, men talked different languages, had different customs and were themselves different. No cow-men came over this way unless they were well ahead of the sheriff; and Stovepipe Springs, having its own railroad connections at a distance of twenty miles, was supremely independent of the remainder

of the county, and heartily despised all ranchers and cowmen.

Here, besides the hotel, were five inhabited houses and two stores, a bank and a garage. Had it not been for the literary enterprise of Sagebrush Beam, even the post office would have long since been wiped off the map. The town was a point of call for desert rats, and being at present on a detour of the cross-continent automobile highway, had more business than its looks would warrant. Its inhabitants lived only for the day when some one would strike it rich and bring back the boom.

It was three in the afternoon and blazing hot when the exhaust whistle of the auto-stage announced its arrival. The entire dozen persons of the local constituency gathered to watch. One of these onlookers was a small man in rusty and dilapidated attire. He stood barely five feet six, his face was a grayish mask from which shone two bright and glittery gray eyes, and there was a stoop to his shoulders—but he was not crowded. He was not only the most flourishing, but he was the most respected citizen of all Chuckwalla County.

The stage whooped out a final whistle and came to rest amid a whirl of dust in front of the hotel. The driver flung off a mail-sack, handed off an empty express-box, then swung down and vanished abruptly into the hotel. His solitary passenger, meantime, descended before the assembled gaze of Stovepipe Springs, staring around with unassumed interest. And Stovepipe Springs, after the first gasp, stared back—hard.

HE pilgrim was apparently a young man, though little could be seen of his features. He wore an

enormous pith helmet which shaded his face, tinted yellow goggles which hid his eyes, and from the collar of his khaki coat to the tip of his nose was wound a bright green shawl which draped back over his shoulder. Just then Haywire and Sagebrush came out the side door of the hotel, and Sagebrush halted as though smitten.

"My gosh, Haywire!" he exclaimed. "What was in that there licker? I never seen nothing like this before—not even from tequila! Is that thing really there?"

"She is," said Haywire, with a startled look. "Wait—it's goin' to talk!"

The arrival had unwound the green shawl, to disclose a mouth and chin which were certainly square-cut enough for anyone. He glanced around the circle of staring faces, and his goggles fastened upon the little man in rusty attire. Toward him the newcomer stepped, met the glittery gray eyes, and spoke.

"Am I correct in assuming that this is Stovepipe Springs?" he asked.

"Yep," returned the small man curtly.

"Excellent! An admirable spot. I am Percival Henry J. Tompkins, a humble member of the American Society of Mammalogists, in search of material for a paper on the fauna of the great American desert." Mr. Tompkins spoke in a precise, neatly clipped voice. "I seek a temporary domicile here—"

"Git over to Mormon Wells, then," snapped the small man.

"You misapprehend my meaning," said Mr. Tompkins patiently. "I seek rooms at your hotel, and a guide. I want a

man who knows the desert, who can lead me to the haunts of its creatures. Particularly I desire to study the habits of the *crotalus cerastes*."

With a flick of his shoulders, the small man turned as though to leave. Mr. Tompkins reached out and laid a restraining hand on his shoulder, unwarned by the gasp from those near by.

"My dear sir, I am addressing you—"

What happened was startling to see. The little man moved with a swiftness that the eye could not follow, then stood snarling, his gray mask of a face glittering with sheer malignity. Tompkins, knocked sprawling half across the road, rolled over, sat up, and then struggled to his feet. He stood blinking around.

"That—er—that was a most remarkable thing!" he exclaimed in his precise tones. "Did somebody run into me?"

With a sneer and a snap of his teeth, the little man turned and departed toward the bank, which he owned. Haywire drew the old desert rat hastily aside.

"Look out! Sidewinder's feelin' mean today. Him and that female woman have been talkin' chicken-ranches, I reckon. Oh, my gosh! Now that there mistake for a human is headin' this-a-way—"

Mr. Tompkins, indeed, seemed to sense a general lack of cordiality all around him, except in the gaping countenance of Sagebrush, whom he now approached.

"My friend—"

"Pilgrim, don't bother me!" said Sagebrush defensively.
"It jest can't be true!"

"I'll pay three dollars a day to a man who knows the desert."

Sagebrush changed countenance. So did the remainder of Stovepipe Springs. There was a general forward movement, but the desert rat was the first to recover voice.

"You're done, pilgrim, you're sure engaged! What was it you wanted to find?"

"Crotalus cerastes. Undoubtedly you can introduce me to specimens?"

Sagebrush swallowed hard, but had a reputation to sustain, and upheld it nobly.

"You bet!" he announced promptly. "Lots o' them specimens up around Marble Cañon, and over by Lost Waterhole I've seen 'em so thick you couldn't hardly move without steppin' on 'em. I'll take you right where them things breed, Perfesser."

The "Perfesser" looked slightly startled, but nodded assent.

"Very well; you are engaged. We shall have to hire an automobile."

"You got to see Sidewinder Crowfoot about that. He owns 'em all."

"Very well. Come to my room in an hour, when I have had a chance to remove the stains of travel. By the way, where is the hotel? I wrote to engage rooms, but see no hostelry."

"Right yere under your nose, Perfesser. Hassayamp is takin' in the mail—thar he is.—Hey, Hassayamp! Meet my friend the Perfesser. This is Hassayamp Foster, Perfesser. The Perfesser's a bug-hunter, Hassayamp, and wants a bed."

"My beds wont help him none," said Hassayamp, a lean and melancholic individual who came forward, chewing a ragged mustache. "I got a room for you, Puffesser."

"With bath," said Tompkins. Hassayamp halted and blinked.

"Bath? Good gosh, we don't allow no washin' in the springs this time o' year! Got to use a cream separator to git enough drinkin' water. Rains are over, but they aint filled the springs yet—not for another two weeks, I reckon."

"I refer, sir, to a bathroom attached," explained Tompkins.

"Well, there aint none," said Hassayamp. "Whar's your grips?"

Two enormous and bulging suitcases, each as big as a small trunk, were in the stage boot, and Hassayamp hauled them out with antagonistic air, and led his victim away.

HE Stovepipe House was built for desert use, not for looks. The front building contained post office and hotel dining-room; and passing through this, Tompkins descended the rear steps and found two long adobe structures stretching in front of him, each divided into cells; between them drooped some parched flowers and shrubs. He was shown to his cell, a room twelve by twelve, furnished with all the comforts of home.

"Don't do no cussing nor singing after midnight," warned Hassayamp as he shoved in the two enormous grips, "'cause a lady's got the next room. When the bell rings for supper, you show up prompt; my old woman's liable to be real ornery if folks don't 'preciate hot vittles. Two-fifty a day. What did you go tangle up with that old desert rat

Sagebrush for? I'd ha' been glad to pilot you around my own self. Int'rested in mines, are you? Don't let him show you no specimens, Puffesser. That old rascal would salt hell and unload it on a pilgrim. Don't you trust nobody around here but me. I got two quartz lodes and a placer location that'll make your eyes water—"

"Not interested in mines, thanks," said Tompkins, cutting short the flow of talk. "If I saw a good chicken-ranch, I might invest, but not otherwise. Ever hear of anyone around these parts by the name of Ramsay? Alec Ramsay. Might have passed through here a year or so ago."

"Nope," said Hassayamp, shaking his mustaches. "Well, if ye want anything, come and holler for it."

Hassayamp withdrew; in more haste than he had previously displayed, he ducked around the side of the hotel, rambled down the desert sands of the nominal alley, and in three minutes was rapping sharply at the back door of the adobe bank. This was opened to him by the small gray-faced man, who was no other than Sidewinder Crowfoot. Hassayamp slid inside and closed the door behind him.

"Well?" rasped Sidewinder. "What's up?"

"That bug-hunter," said Hassayamp agitatedly. "What ye think he said? That if he knowed where there was a good chicken-ranch, he might buy it!"

A thin smile appeared in the gray mask.

"That so? We'll see about it."

"And he asked if I knowed anyone around here, a year back, name of Alec Ramsay."