

A Desert Claim

By Robert Dorrman

The sun was going down behind the notched wall west of Death Valley. "Looks pretty, doesn't it?" said Baines. He had plodded all day through the sand, and head and legs felt heavy. "She'll look as if she was afire when the sun gets down behind her."

Cutter nodded wearily. "Everything feels as if it was afire in this place," he remarked. "Let's pitch the tent."

Baines assented willingly. Cutter lighted the alcohol-stove—there is no fuel in Death Valley—and prepared the simple supper of tea and beans, while Baines fed and watered the mules. The poor beasts plunged their parched muzzles into the water-pail and drank frantically until the inexorable hand of their master removed the soothing liquid.

The sun now was behind the wall, and made its jagged top a strip of molten iron. The alcohol-stove sent up a clear flame, by the light of which Cutter began to overhaul his rifle.

He pumped out the long shells, and holding the gun across his knees, pulled the trigger. There was a crashing report. "I thought I'd emptied her," he said, sheepishly. "Whoa, there, muley!" "That's a pretty good tenderfoot play!" Baines's tones were sharp with disgust.

"I don't know how I came to do it," said the other, contritely. "I sure thought she was empty." "Well, you put a hole in the wagon for fair."

"No, did I? I was that surprised I didn't listen." Baines rolled over into the tent, wrapping his blanket round him by the same movement.

"I reckon it's the only thing in this part of the world you could have hit except me or the mules," he said. "But it won't hurt her any. Put out your old lamp and turn in."

Cutter dropped the tin hood over the flame, and the soft, purple darkness enveloped them. So far they had toiled through the blistering heat and arid sand for nothing, but hope and the prospector are life-long friends. The two old-timers were not a whit discouraged. For a while they lay awake, discussing in low tones their next moves over the vast dead sea of sand.

At sunrise the two mules lifted their voices in raucous demands for that which the desert could not give them—water.

It was Baines's turn to cook. Cutter cast off his blanket, and picking up the water-pail, went to the wagon.

"Bring me a dipperful for the coffee," said Baines, busy over the alcohol lamp. Cutter nodded, and Baines trimmed the wick, lighted it, and put fresh beans in the pot.

"Get a move on with that water!" he called, fussily. "We want to hit the trail before it gets too hot."

Receiving no response, he looked up, and saw the pail lying on the sand and the hand that had held it slowly scratching Cutter's red head. The head turned and presented to Baines a face devoid of color and expression, with a loose lower lip and a staring eye. An unfamiliar voice croaked something in which only the word "water" reached Baines's ears.

That was quite enough. It was the one transcendently vital word in the desert prospector's vocabulary—the one word that was in his mind all day, and from which his nightmare grew when his sleep was troubled.

With a chill at his heart, Baines sprang up and ran to the wagon. There was a round bullet hole in the tail-board and another in the big water-vat, with a smashed iron hoop that had partly smothered the missile. But already the desert air had dried the wagon-bed, and the sand below was as white as chalk, although it had drunk two-thirds of their precious liquid.

Baines stooped and thrust his fingers into it fiercely. It was not even damp. Cutter watched him out of the corner of a dilating eye. Neither man moved nor spoke, Baines squatting on his heels,

frowning at the sand, and Cutter watching him.

Presently one of the burros elevated his muzzle and brayed long and loud for water. Baines turned his head and caught Cutter's eye. One glance of accusation was all. The crisis was too tragic to be spent in incrimination.

"God forgive me, Joe," said Cutter. "I wish the bullet had got me." "Oh, shut up!" said Baines. "If I hadn't been a born fool, I'd have looked last night. We're a couple of downy tenderfeet, that's what!"

He rose and studied the distance between the hole and the bottom of the vat.

"There's not enough to take us back," he said. "We've got to push on."

"I've heard there's a well near Funeral Range," said Cutter, in a voice still husky with self-condemnation. "We're not so far from there."

Baines stared across the blasted level of the desert toward the long wall of rock.

"I never heard so," he said. "But just where does the range lie?"

"Over there." After a moment of indecision, Cutter's extended arm indicated the direction.

"I don't think we can make it, pardner," said Baines. "There's nothing to prevent trying, though. Let's hike."

They hitched the thirsty, protesting burros to the wagon and mounted to the seat. There was no question of walking now. Every ounce of strength was a possession to be carefully hoarded. Baines flicked the burros with his whip, and the wheels began to cut the loose sand with a dry whine.

It is not only the fierce heat of the desert, but the excessive evaporation, that explains why travellers there must drink such large quantities of water; six quarts per man is about the average consumption of twenty-four hours. Without water there would be no cooling evaporation, and the terrific heat of the sun, combined with that developed by breathing and oxidation, would quickly produce a temperature fatal to existence. Men who had taken their last drink at sunrise have been found dead of thirst before sunset.

Baines and Cutter knew this, but they felt that it was worse than futile to speak of it. Besides, talking dries the throat. They sat hunched forward, eyes fixed on the mountains, and breathing painstakingly through their noses. The silence of the desert—never so sinister as now—enveloped them.

Twice before noon they moistened the muzzles of the burros and took a small drink apiece, which only aggravated their burning thirst. It was almost impossible to swallow the food they prepared as they rode monotonously along, but it was a momentary relief to chew something. It left their mouths drier than ever, however, so dry that the gums cracked and their tongues grew swollen and furry.

All day long they rode in silence over the silent waste, their hot eyes fixed on the mountains that seemed to dance and palpitate in the heat. The unclouded sky was brassy with fierce sunlight. The coarse sand seemed to smoke under it. Not a bush or a blade of grass relieved the dreadful aridity which could not

yield a lizard sustenance. And all day long the burning air was as still as death.

"Shall we keep on?" asked Cutter, as the sun sank, blood-red, behind the mountains, and the purple shadows began to creep stealthily out of the ravines.

Baines worked his stiff, burned lips. "The burros'll break down any minute if they don't have a rest," he said.

"That's all we can give 'em, poor beasts!" They halted, hunched forward on the seat, and breathed greedily the night air. But there was no rest for them. Every nerve-cell and drop of blood cried aloud for water, water! Cutter was the first to give in. With a groan he crawled back toward the vat. Baines was at his heels, and they fought for the first dipperful. It was a scanty one! The edge of the cup rattled on the bottom of the vat, and for a moment the two men stared unsteadily at each other, sobered by the horror of their plight.

"We can't stand here and die!" cried Cutter, fiercely.

He crawled to the seat again, and with whip and reins, urged the burros forward.

The poor beasts began a broken march, staggering along and stopping with dropped heads, then staggering forward for another short distance. They were at the end of their endurance, and soon one of them fell. His mate stood swaying beside him, his strength gone.

Cutter groaned, burying his raw, drawn face in his hands.

"It's only God who can help us," said Baines. "One last drink, pardner, before we hit the trail on foot."

With throats contracted and bodies aching as if with fever, it was the hardest thing they had ever done—that even division of the last dipperful of the fluid that meant life. It was like throwing a thimbleful in a furnace. Cutter bit the cup savagely, smeared his tongue and lips across it, then hurled it across the sand.

"I'm burning up, Joe!" he cried.

The silence of the desert was even more profound than in the daytime. It seemed as limitless as the ocean, and as they lurched forward, almost as unstable. It seemed to swell and sink under their dragging feet. Presently Cutter fell and pulled Baines down with him.

"Water!" he cried. "For God's sake, water!"

With difficulty Baines raised him to his feet. Again they started, choking, gasping, and reeling like drunken men. Their ears rang with the pounding of their fevered pulses. Baines had released his grip on Cutter's arm. In the delirium of his thirst he forgot his partner. He was alone, all alone in an abysmal silence and utter blackness. He was on fire, there was an iron band round his throat, and it was red-hot. His blood seethed. Every step was torture, yet he forced himself blindly on and on toward the cool, deep water-hole that his frenzied brain pictured. He knew it was there, somewhere ahead in the sinister silence that would give no clue.

The early summer dawn found him still painfully groping his way forward. He was really alone, but he did not notice it. Cutter was a thing of the long ago. As the light burned suddenly above the mountains, he stopped and cast a despairing look round. The ridged and canon-split wall was very near, but between him and it was a swelling dune that his worn body could not pass.

He saw without emotion that a wagon had passed that way. In that breathless valley tracks sometimes remain un-

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disturbed for years. But his eye followed the parallel lines mechanically, and stopped at an oval black object marked by an upright rod and drooping pennon.

He staggered up to it; then, with his heart beating sickeningly, he fell on his knees and wrenched weakly at the white plug in the little barrel. It came at last, and with a sob of joy he put his lips to the hole and drank, but sparingly. As soon as the sides of his throat ceased to cleave together, he filled the palms of his hands with water and dashed it over the burning skin of face and bosom.

He was so absorbed that he did not hear the shout from the dune. A shadow—that rare thing in the desert—startled him, and he looked up into the healthy, keenly interested faces of two men.

"Cutter!" he cried, with a painful return of memory.

"Is there another one of you?" exclaimed one of the men. "John, get the team and we'll find the poor beggar if he's in Death Valley."

When Baines came to himself he was under a little A tent, and the man called John was bathing him in deliciously cold water. He talked soothingly as he wielded the sponge:

"The boys'll find your partner all right. He can't be far off. Lucky you stumbled on one of our kegs, wasn't it? We're surveyors for the T. and T. Railroad, you know, and we drop a keg at every camp. Makes the back trail safe and sure. We'd just left before you came—running a chain over that ridge."

In his heart Baines said yes, but he lay silent and anxious, thinking of Cutter. It seemed an interminable time before he heard the swish of wheels in the sand. As he started up from his blanket, a hearty voice called out:

"Got him all right! And just in time."

The mules stopped before the tent, and the same pleasant voice said:

"He was lying beside an outcropping of rock that showed a good bunch of free silver. I guess he's earned the claim."

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