

That Man from the Bitter Sands

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When Speke came at last to water, he was two days beyond death.

His cracked lips rustled like tissue paper when they moved, trying to shape a thought. The skin of his face, long burned to a desert brown, had now taken on a patina of crimson.

Yet his mind was awake, and alive within him was a spirit that even the desert could not defeat. Without doubt Ross and Floren believed him dead, and this pleased him, stirring a wry sense of humor.

The chirping of birds told him of water before he saw it. His stumbling, almost hypnotic walk ceased, and swaying upon his feet, he turned his head slowly upon his stiff neck.

The basin remained unchanged, only now he had reached the very bottom of the vast depression, and a jagged knife's edge of rocks, an upthrust from a not too ancient fracture, loomed off to his right.

He had seen a dozen such along the line of travel, yet there was a difference. The faint, grayish green of the desert vegetation here took on a somewhat deeper green. Yet without the birds he might not have noticed. There was water near.

Through the heat-engendered haze in his skull there flickered grim humor. Floren and Ross thought they had taken from him all that promised survival when they had also taken his gold. They had robbed him of weapons, tools, canteen, food, and water. They had left him nothing.

Better than anyone else he had known what lay before him. After they had gone he had worked to free himself, but when he had succeeded he did not move away. He waited quietly in the shadow of the ledge, gutted of its small hoard of gold. Only when the sun was down did he move, and then he stepped out with a long, space-eating stride, walking away into that vast wasteland, shadowed with evening.

They had left him two things they did not realize would matter. They had seemed but bits of debris in the looted camp: a prospector's gold pan and a storm square from his canvas groundsheet.

Before it grew too dark to travel he had walked eight miles. Stopping then, he scooped a shallow hole in the sand and placed in it the gold pan. Over it he stretched the canvas, and above that he built a small pile of large stones. When his dew trap was complete he lay down to sleep.

Scarcely a spoon of water rewarded the effort, yet he swallowed it and was grateful. Before the sun topped the ridge he had three more miles behind him. Near two boulders he stopped and made a sun shade of a ruined cedar in the space between the boulders. He crawled into this island of coolness and lay down.

Mid-afternoon of the second day he found a barrel cactus, and cutting off the top he squeezed some water from the whitish green pulp. On the second and third nights he also built his dew traps, and each time got a little water. When he first heard the birds he thought he was losing his reason, yet turning toward the serrated ridge, he stumbled on. At its base, among some desert willows, was a small pool some four feet across ... but lying in it was a dead coyote.

Swaying drunkenly, he stared hollow-eyed at the dead coyote and the poisoned water. He could go no farther, he knew. He must drink, yet, in his weakened state, a case of dysentery would surely kill him. It was not in him to yield, and too well he knew the ways of the wild country and the lessons it taught.

The will that had carried him more than forty miles across the desert moved him then. He dragged the remains of the dead coyote from the water. Then he gathered sticks and built a fire. When he had a small heap of charcoal, he scooped up some water with the gold pan. He covered the water until it was two inches thick with charcoal. Then he stoked his fire and waited. Soon the water was boiling.

The desert night drew darkness around him. The firelight flickered on the rock wall and upon the fragile boughs of the willow, and the smoke drifted and lost itself in the night. Sparks flew upward and vanished.

With a flat stick, he skimmed off the thick scum of charcoal and coagulated impurities. Then he added more charcoal and the water continued to boil. A second time he skimmed it, and only then did he put some aside to cool.

The very presence of water seemed to help. His brain cleared and he thought. He was now halfway across the vast bowl of desert. He was walking toward a place he knew, a ranch with a well of cool, clear water, and a man who would lend him a horse. A horse and a gun.

Forcing himself to ignore the water, he leaned back against the rocks. His lips rustled together and his tongue felt like a dry stick. He closed his aching eyes and waited out the minutes, listening like a prisoner to the faint trickle of water into the pool.

When an hour had passed, he allowed himself his first drink. Dipping up a little of the water he took some in his mouth and held it there, feeling the coolness bringing life back to the starved, shrunken tissues. Slowly he let the water trickle down his throat, feeling the delightful coolness all through him. Even that tiny swallow seemed to reach into every part of his body.

He bathed his lips and face then, taking his time, and finally allowing himself another swallow of the water. Finding in the rock a natural basin that was almost a foot across he used it as a mold, and with a rounded stone he carefully pounded his prospecting pan down into it, forcing the pan into a shape more like that of a bucket. Returning to the fire he boiled more water with charcoal, then poured it into the basin in the rock, repeating the process with his newly made pail. Adding a few more bits of charcoal, he lay back on the ground and was almost at once asleep, knowing that with the dawn the water would be clear and sweet.

Long ago he had established a pattern of awakening, and despite his exhaustion he was stirring long before dawn. It was cold when he opened his eyes, and his body was chilled with the cold of the desert night. Hurriedly, he built a fire and let its warmth permeate his entire being. Then he drank, and after a while, drank again. Then he turned to the desert.

A fleshy-fruited yucca grew near the water hole and he picked some of the long pods. He ate one of them raw, then roasted the others with some bulbs of the sego lily. When he had eaten these he took a thin, flat sheet of sandstone and began to dip water from the hole. Despite the little water there was, it took him more than an hour to empty the hole.

From time to time he paused to rest. Once, still having his tobacco, he rolled a smoke. He would need no more water than that in his bucket, but if others came along they would not know of the coyote and the poisoned spring. He did not know if his actions would help, but a water hole was a precious thing, to be safeguarded by all who passed.

When the hole was emptied he scraped the bottom with his flat stone, throwing out huge chunks of the mud. He then enlarged the opening through which the water flowed, still only a mere trickle, and finally sat down to eat more of the pods and bulbs, and to drink more water.

Water slowly trickled back into the hole. By night it would be full, and rested, he would start on with the first shadows.

Three days later, he was mounted on a horse. In the scabbard on his borrowed saddle was a Winchester, and thrust into his waistband was a battered but capable Colt.

They had insisted he remain and rest, but Speke would have none of it. Floren and Ross had taken his gold and he had been abandoned to die, yet it was with no thought of actual revenge that he returned to the desert. Nor did he blame his sufferings upon the two thieves whom he had taken into his camp when they had been half dead from thirst. The sufferings he had endured he accepted, as he accepted so much else as a part of life in the desert, yet the gold they had taken was his, and he intended to get it back.

Speke was not a big man but he was tough. The years and the desert had melted away any softness he might have had, and left behind a hard core of that rawhide resilience that the desert demands. Never a gunman, he had used weapons as a soldier in the Apache wars, as a buffalo hunter, and in his own private skirmishes with desert Mohaves or Pimas.

He needed no blueprint to read the plan in the minds of Floren and Ross. They would go first to Tucson.

It was a sufficient distance away. It had whiskey, women, and for a desert town of the era, remarkably good food.

On a sunlit morning not long after daybreak, Tom Speke rode his shambling buckskin into the main street of Tucson. He rode past staked-out pigs, dozens of yapping dogs, a few casual, disinterested burros, and a few naked Mexican youngsters. He was a lean man of less than six feet, not long past thirty but seasoned by the desert, a man with dingy trousers, a buckskin jacket, a battered narrow-brimmed hat, and a lean-jawed look about him.

He swung down at the *Shoo Fly*, and went into the restaurant. It was a long room of adobe, walls washed with yellow, a stamped earth floor, and tables of pine covered with cheap tablecloths. To Tom Speke, who had sat at a table four times in two years, the *Shoo Fly* represented the height of culture and gastronomic delight. He did not order—at the *Shoo Fly* one accepted what the day offered, in this case jerked beef, frijoles, tomatoes, and stewed prunes (there had recently been a series of Apache raids on trains bringing fresh fruit from Hermosillo) and coffee. All but the coffee and the prunes were liberally laced with chile colorados, and there was still some honey that had been brought from the Tia Juana ranch below the border.

Tom Speke devoted himself to eating, but while he ate, he listened. The *Shoo Fly* was crowded, as always at mealtimes, and there was much talk. Turning to the kid who was clearing tables, he asked if there was any recent news of prospectors striking it rich in the area. The kid didn't know, but a man up the table looked up and put down his fork.

„Feller down to *Congress Hall* payin' for drinks with dust. Says he made him a pile over on the Gila.“

„Big feller? With blond hair?“ A man spoke up from the end of the bar. „Seen him. Looks mighty like a feller from Santa Fe I run into once. They were huntin' him for horse stealin'.“

Tom Speke forked up the last piece of beef and chewed it thoughtfully. Then he wiped his plate with a slab of bread and disposed of it in the same way. He gulped coffee, then laid out his dollar and pushed back from the table. The description was that of Floren.

The sun stopped him on the step, and he waited until his eyes adjusted themselves to the glare. Then he walked up the street to the *Congress*.

causing on the step he eased the position of the Colt, then stepped inside and moved away from the door. Early as it was, the place was scattered with people. One game gave the appearance of having been on all night. Several men stood at the bar. One of these was a giant of a man in a stovepipe hat and a black coat. Speke knew him for Marcus Duffield, onetime town marshal and now postal inspector, but still the town's leading exponent of gun-throwing.

Speke glanced around. There was no sign of Ross, but Floren's big blond head was visible. He was sitting in the poker game, and from the look of it, he was winning.

Speke moved down the bar to Duffield's side. He ordered a drink, then jerked his head at Duffield. „An' one for Marcus, here.“

Duffield glanced at him. „Goin' to be some shootin' here right sudden,“ Speke said quietly. „I figured to tell you so's you wouldn't figure it was aimed at you.“ He indicated Floren by a jerk of his head. „Feller there an' his partner come into my camp half dead. I gave 'em grub an' water. Second day they throwed down on me, tied me up, an' stole my outfit, includin' three pokes of gold.“

„Seen the gold,“ Duffield said. „Didn't figure him for no miner.“

He glanced over his shoulder. „Better wait'll he finishes this hand. He's holdin' four of a kind.“

Speke lifted his glass and Duffield acknowledged it. They drank, and Tom Speke turned around and then moved down the bar. He waited there, watching the game, his eyes cold and emotionless. Floren raked in the pot on his four queens and started to stack the money.

And then he looked up and saw Speke.

He started to move, then stopped. His eyes stared, his face went sickly yellow.

A card player noticed his face, took a quick look at Speke, then carefully drew back from the table. The others followed suit.

„You won that with my money, Floren,“ Speke said carefully. „Just leave it lay.“

Floren took a quick look around. His big hands rested on the arms of his chair, only inches from his gun. One of the players started to interrupt, but Duffield's bold black eyes pinned the man to the spot. „His show,“ Duffield said. „That gent's a thief.“

Floren touched his lips with his tongue. „Now, look,“ he said, „I—“

„Ain't aimin' to kill you,“ Speke said conversationally, „nor Ross. You stole my outfit an' left me for dead, but all I want is my money an' my outfit. Get up easy an' empty your pockets.“

Floren looked at the money, and then at Speke. Suddenly his face seemed to set, and an ugly look flared in his eyes. He started to rise. „I'll be double d—!“ His hand dropped to his gun.

Nobody had seen Ross come in the door. He took one quick look, drew, and fired. Even as Speke thumbed back the hammer, he was struck from behind. He staggered, then fell forward.

Floren stood, his unfired gun in his hand, and looked down at Speke. Ross held the room covered. Floren lifted the muzzle of his gun toward the fallen man.

„Don't do that,“ Duffield said, „or you'll have to kill every man in this room.“

Floren looked up at him, and hesitated.

„Don't be a fool," Ross said, „pick up your money and let's go.“

It was two weeks before Speke could leave his bed, despite excellent care by Semig, a Viennese doctor attached to the Army. It was a month before he could ride.

Duffield watched him mount the buckskin. „Next time don't talk," he advised. „Shoot!“

Tom Speke picked up the trail of Floren and Ross on the Hassayampa and followed them into Camp Date Creek. Captain Dwyer of the Fifth Cavalry listened to Speke's description, then nodded. „They were here. I ordered them out. Ross was known to have sold liquor to the Apaches near Camp Grant. I couldn't have them around.“

Swapping the weary buckskin for a zebra dun mustang, Speke returned to the trail.

At Dripping Springs Speke drew up and swung down. Cherokee Townsend came from his cabin with a whoop of pleasure. The two had once traveled together across New Mexico. In reply to his questions, Townsend nodded. „Bout two weeks back," he said. „Didn't take to 'em much. Big fellow is ridin' a bay with three white stockings. The other one an appaloosa with a splash of white on his right shoulder. They headed for Prescott.“

Townsend was, he said, staying on. „Watch out for 'Paches," he said. „They are out an' about. I've buried twenty-seven of them right on this place.“

Speke rode on, sparing his horse but holding to the pace. He saw much Indian sign.

In Prescott the two had remained more than a week. They had left town headed west. Everywhere he was warned of Indians. The Apaches were out, and so were the Hualapais and Mohaves. There were rumors of an impending outbreak at Date Creek, and General Crook was going down to investigate.

Neither Floren nor Ross was a man of long experience in the West. During their time in his camp, before they had robbed him, he had seen that. They were men who had come west from Bald Knob, Missouri. Tough men and dangerous, but not desert-wise.

On the second day out of Prescott, Speke found two Indian ponies. Badly used, they had obviously been released by Indians who had gone on with fresher, stronger horses. Speke caught up the two ponies and led them along with him, an idea forming in his brain.

On the third day he spotted them ahead of him, and he deliberately created dust off to their left and behind. That night he left his own horse and rode one of the others, and took the other unshod horse around their camp. He left four separate sets of tracks across their trail for the following day.

Moving on cat feet, he slipped down to the edge of the camp. A small fire was burning. Floren was asleep, and Ross sat nearby. Waiting for more than an hour with Indian patience, he finally got his chance. He slipped the muzzle of his rifle through the strap of a canteen and withdrew it carefully. He could have stolen the other also, but he did not. He made his way some distance, then deliberately let a

small gravel slide start. Glancing back, he saw Ross come to his feet and leap from the firelight.

It was the beginning of his plan. He watched them draw up when they reached the tracks of the unshod ponies the following morning. To anyone, this certainly meant Indians. Indians often rode horses shod at trading posts or stolen from the white settlers, but white men almost never rode an unshod horse for any length of time. The tracks were headed west and south. Floren and Ross pulled off the trail, working north. Remembering the country ahead of them, Speke was satisfied.

In the four nights that followed, he succeeded in alarming their camp with stealthy noises at least twice a night. He left pony tracks ahead of them and near the camp. Steadily, they bore off to the north, trying to avoid the unseen Indians.

They were worried by the Indians they believed were congregating nearby, they had but one canteen between them, and they were getting only disturbed sleep when they slept at all. It was a calculated war of nerves. Twice Speke lay on a bluff or behind a rock near the camp and heard them arguing fiercely.

Ahead of them on the following morning, he built a signal fire. He used a blanket to simulate Indian signals, then went south a few miles and did the same thing. They were now well to the north of Ehrenberg and headed for Hardyville. At dusk he lit two more signal fires and used the smoke, then put them out and worked closer to the camp of the two outlaws.

Floren was thinner, haggard, hollow-eyed. Ross was tighter, snappish, and shiftier. They built a tiny fire to make coffee, and Speke waited. When Ross reached for the pot, he fired rapidly—three times.

The first shot struck the fire and threw sparks, the second drilled the coffeepot—Speke could see the sudden puff of steam and smoke when the coffee hit the fire—and the third shot struck a log on which Floren was seated.

Following the shots there was silence. Evidently the firing had caught both men away from their rifles. Moving a little, Speke watched the fire, relaxed and at ease. He had suffered from these men, and now he expected to recover his gold, and to do it, if possible, without killing.

Yet they had planned for him to die, and only the presence of Duffield and the rest had saved him in the saloon. It was not a consideration of mercy that moved him, rather a complete indifference to the fate of the two men. He wanted his gold; this he had worked for, slaved for. Whatever they had won gambling he would consider his—won with his money and payment for this long trek.

Day dawned with low clouds and a hint of rain. He saw them move out slowly, and knew they had spent an uncomfortable and altogether miserable night away from their bedrolls. Twice during the day he sent them into hiding with quick shots from ambush, not aimed to kill.

Twice he heard them bickering over the canteen, and an idea came to him. He knew they kept the gold close to them, so to get at it was scarcely possible, but there was something else he could get. And that night he stole one of their horses.

At dawn, after a quiet sleep on the desert, Tom Speke was awake. Gathering his horses, he left them concealed in the shelter of an upthrust of rock, and then moved closer to watch.

Already an argument was ensuing. One canteen, one horse, thirty pounds of gold, and two men.

Coolly, Speke rolled a smoke. He could have written the story of what was to happen now. Harassed beyond limit, their nerves on edge from constant attack, from sleepless nights, and from uncertainty as to their enemies, the two were now facing each other. In the mind of each was the thought that success and escape could belong to one man, and one only.

Floren was saddling the horse. Then he picked up the gold and tied it behind the saddle. He seemed to be having trouble. Ross dropped his hand to his gun—he failed to calculate on the shadow, and Floren turned and fired.

Ross staggered, took a step back, then yelled something wild and incoherent. He went down to his hands and knees and Floren swung into the saddle and rode away.

Ross remained on his hands and knees. Speke drew deep on his cigarette and watched Floren go. He was heading northwest. Speke smiled and got up, then went back for his own horses. When he had them he walked down to Ross. The man had fallen, and he was breathing hoarsely.

Working with swift sureness, Speke carried the smaller man into the shade of a cedar and, ripping open his shirt, examined the wound. Ross had been struck on the top of the hipbone, knocking him down and temporarily shocking him into a state of partial paralysis. The bullet had torn a hole in his side, a flesh wound, from which blood was flowing.

Heating water, he bathed the wound. Then, making a decoction from the leaves of a creosote bush, he used it as an antiseptic on the wound. Then he bandaged it crudely but effectively. Ross revived while he worked, and stared at him. „You ... is it?“

„Uh-huh.“

„Figured we'd lost you.“

„Ain't likely.“

„Why you helpin' me?“

Speke sat back on his heels. He nodded at the horse he had stolen. „I'm leavin' you that horse and a canteen. You head out of here. If I ever see you again, I'll kill you.“

He got to his feet and started for the horses. Ross stared after him, then tried to lift himself to an elbow, managed it. „You leavin' me a gun?“

„No.“

„Then I'm a sittin' duck for Injuns.“

Speke smiled a rare smile. „Maybe you'll be lucky.“

He walked his horse away on Floren's trail. He was in no hurry. Before them lay the breaks of the Colorado. Soon Floren would be stopped by the canyon itself. Speke had been long in the desert, and the desert teaches patience. There was no escape for Floren.

For days Speke had directed his smoke columns and his actions to cause the two outlaws to pull farther and farther north, until now Floren was in a cul-de-sac from which there was no way out except back the way he had come. But Floren would not know this. He would waste time looking.

It was a hot still day when the search ended. A day of a high sun and the reflecting heat from the face of vast plateaus of rock and the cedar-clad hillsides.

Lizards panted even in the shade, their mouths held open, their sides pumping at the hot, thin air.

Floren was hollow-eyed and frightened. Whichever way he went he faced awesome canyons, and the only water was far, far below. Only a few drops slopped lonesomely in his canteen, and the horse he rode was gaunt and beaten. He swung down, and his heels hit hard, and he stared over the brink into the vast canyon below.

Trapped... Seven times he had found new routes, and each had ended in a cliff. Seven times he tried and seven times he failed. And now he knew there was no way to turn but back. He turned toward the horse, and as if expecting him, the animal went to its knees, then rolled over on its side. Fiercely, Floren swore. He kicked the horse. It would not rise, it could not rise. Better yet without the horse he could take the gold and find a way down the cliffs. Then a raft ... feverishly, he rushed at the horse and stripped off the pack of gold. He started to take his rifle, then shrugged. It would only be in the way.

Shouldering the gold, he walked to the cliff's edge. There was no way over at that point. He turned, then stopped abruptly. One hundred yards away was Speke. The prospector held a Winchester cradled in his arm.

Speke said nothing. He just stood there, silent, still, alone.

Floren touched his lips with his tongue. He held the gold sack in his right hand. Anyway, at that range ... a pistol ... he looked toward his rifle. Too far away.

Speke shot from the hip, and the sack jerked in Floren's hand. Another shot. Speke moved a step forward and Floren dropped the sack and drew. He fired quickly, hastily. He missed...

Speke fired again and Floren felt the bullet tug at his shirt. He took a hasty step back, then fired again himself. The bullet struck far to the left. Speke swung his rifle and fired. Rock fragments stung Floren's cheek. He jerked his head back up.

Speke said nothing. He worked the lever on his rifle and waited. Floren started forward, and a bullet kicked up sand ahead of him. He took a hasty step back.

The edge ... could not be far behind. He glanced back and Speke fired swiftly, three shots. They scattered rock around his feet and a ricochet burned Floren's face. He was no more than six feet from the edge.

„You ain't goin' to make me jump!“ he shouted angrily. He threw up his gun and fired.

Speke waited a minute, then walked swiftly forward and picked up the gold. He backed away, then dropped the sack and fired. His Winchester '73 carried eleven bullets and he was counting them.

The shot whipped by Floren's face, so close it drew blood.

Floren was frightened now. His face was drawn and white. He stared with wide eyes and haggard mouth. Speke picked up the gold again and backed to his horse. Lashing it behind the saddle, he swung into the leather.

As he did so, he dropped the lead rope of one of the Indian ponies. „Help yourself,“ he said, and rode slowly away.

Floren started after him, shouting. Tom Speke did not turn his head or glance back. He merely rode on, remembering Tucson and the *Shoo Fly*. He would enjoy a meal like that now. Maybe, in a week or so...

He had lots of time ... now.

