



Alkali Dust

ALKALI DUST

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It was a black, moonless night—a night that creates fear in the heart. I stood for a moment, listening for a sign of life. Not even the soft sigh of the wind greeted my ear. The heaven, a great, impenetrable dome, seemed within touch of my hand. I removed my hat and swished it through the air. The noise fell as a relief to my ears. I took a step forward, and the sand grated beneath me. Another step; then another. Welcome was the sound. Again I stood motionless, my head bared; and again the oppressive silence. The darkness seemed to creep upon me—to close about me in suffocating folds. I clinched my fists and strode rapidly forward—one, two, three steps. Again I listened; not a movement was heard. I was alone on the plain; alone in the great world—the last being to go before my Maker, to shrink, cowering—

"Hullo, stranger! Any tobacco? I guess I'm hurt. Unhorsed this morning; the mare handed me one before she left. Been crawling all day for shade. Strike a match, will you? God, but it's a night!"

Strange; but without a cringe, I stopped and turned. The rapid beating of my heart slumped to normal, and I put forth a careful foot in the direction of the voice. It fell short. I advanced the other; there was a constrained groan.

"Careful, friend—my hip. Oh, it's all right! Why in blazes don't you strike that match? Got any?"

I struck a light. Poor fellow! His hip undoubtedly was broken. It lay stretched away from his body, and he was on his back. A leg of his trousers had been torn away and the limb lay exposed. His track, made in crawling through the dust, stood out clearly and stretched away beyond the circling glow of light. Almost instantly the match failed, and I struck another.

"You got it right, friend! Which way were you headed? I believe that leg ought to be around where it belongs; don't you?" I didn't like the drawn face, nor the clots of saliva at the corners of his open, parched mouth. My heart went out to

the fellow.

“Go ahead, son. I tried it this morning—lost my nerve. Any drink?”

To my regret, I had none. But immediately I kneeled and, removing my belt, laced the limp member to its mate. Then I arose, thrust my hands deep in my pockets, and stood wondering whether I dare venture the question poised on my lips. At length it fell.

“Your name, old chap?”

But the manner of his reply closed that channel of conversation. Indeed, I was at fault—I should have followed his reserve. But the stare, as I had caught his eyes in the light, clung to me. I didn’t feel right over it.

I rolled a coat and placed it beneath his head. Then I stepped away.

Now came again the tense quiet of the night, its blackness, its oppressiveness—I shook it off. Back East I had a home. Back there somewhere in that country he too had a home. . There was no mistaking the well-shaped head, the nose of refinement, the Eastern tongue—ever its own.

I liked the fellow. I only hoped he would talk. Again I turned to him.

“Boston, New York, or Philadelphia?” I ventured; and I felt his head turn toward me—his eyes pierce the night to engage mine. The reply came in a voice hard and dry.

“Boston, son—and a woman.”

Instinct, perhaps it was; but I knew it. Delicacy, Western delicacy, withholds one from pointing that way. What but woman sends man from Life to—loneliness and thoughts that sting you back of the eyes—a pain that wheels you right about and sends you striding from it!

“Single?” I asked, for several reasons.

“See here, Sammy—that isn’t it, perhaps, but it’ll do. Sammy, were you ever so loved by a girl that you had to leave her, had to quit the country because you loved her, had to cut deliberately all communication, had to close her from your

memory, to—to see no one who looked like her, to blank from your life the whole image—her smile, her eyes, her hair, her music, her—her soul? Damn it, her very soul! Did you, Sammy? Think what that means!”

The abrupt change unnerved me. But it had started me thinking, thinking over a whole chain of events in my life—thinking out there on the plain in the black stillness of night. I couldn’t see the man—didn’t want to. I desired to be alone. The girl in my life—

“Son, this strap—ease it a trifle—please.”

I kneeled beside him and rewound the belt. It was not unwelcome, this interruption to my thoughts; the whole subject always left me sick at heart. Still that indefinable longing to be alone! I turned away.

“Where to?” he broke in. “Can’t you sit here and talk? You’re a decent chap—blamed decent. Sit down!”

I wheeled and sat beside him. Then I wondered what the dawn would bring. It was apparent that we should remain here till daybreak. Then something must be done; what, I was unable to collect my thoughts to determine.

“Sam”—he was tender, this fellow—“what brought you to this ungodly country? Wait—you needn’t tell me. I’ll let you know why I’m here. And I can’t say why I do either, Sammy. There seems to be something within impelling me on. It’s true!” And he reached out a hand to know that I was close beside him.

“Back there tonight, Sammy, under this same great dome—perhaps tonight she too is gazing straight at it—there is a pair of eyes looking a love that was mine—a love that I need. Back there tonight lives one who is happy . . . one who is happy. Though I can’t, Sammy—I can’t believe it! She—she—” He dropped to his back. Again he was on his elbow. “Back there she is, the cause of all my lone plays, all my listless wanderings, the—the—” He stopped. Then he began, rapidly, “Back there is one who caused my first mind-agony, my first heart-rending, my—my present indecency. There, back there, she is, the one who sent spinning my little world; the one who sent me from all that is dear, all that makes life worth living, all that keeps a man to his mother’s teachings! And where? Why to this? And you know what this is—I’ve seen your kind before.” There was silence. Soon he broke it. “Come, Sammy, loosen up. I need it. I want to know of others who suffer because of them—but not to know they suffer so

hard.” The man dropped to his back and was still. I sat, my knees drawn up and my head resting between, listening to his heavy, irregular breathing.

I didn’t answer him right away—I couldn’t. Slowly, reluctantly, my thoughts slipped back to a little suburban town “back there,” where the streets ran up evenly from a main thoroughfare, lined with elms and maples, the houses regular and pretty. And before I could shut it out, shut out that last scene, it came tumbling upon me in my helplessness. She stood before me, as I beheld her that last night, brown from the sun of a summer spent in the mountains. We talked—as we had before she went away, but I knew something was wrong. And as I approached the subject of our plans for the winter—December was to have seen us wedded—her head fell in silence. Do you know what it means—is there anything so clutches your heart in a grip of steel, burning steel, as the knowledge that you have lost? Perhaps you know and can understand. There was left to me one thing. I loved the girl—would always love her. To make her happy, ever my one desire, was still left to me. I believe I kissed her as I left the porch. Later I closed my practice and set out—a knight-errant. I learned the particulars, he was out West—that was all I knew—somewhere out West. I would bring him back.

Two years I slipped from camp to town, from town to camp. And now here tonight, under a black, cheerless sky, was I reviewing it all. For a moment I thought I would tell him—our cases were parallel—yet, were they?

Sleep might overtake him—perhaps it had already! Then dawn and a way out.

“Let’s have it, Sammy?”

I recoiled—he had been so still!

“Let you have it, my friend—why? You’ve enough—without mine.” I evaded him. Our natures were different. Then a thought struck me. “How came you to leave, friend, in the light of the fact that you loved and were loved in return? Never a happier combination!” And I sat close beside him.

“Listen!” He spoke deliberately, spoke as though each word was a piece torn from his heart. “Listen! When a girl is engaged, when she hesitates to inform you because she dreads the unhappiness to follow, and when finally she is compelled to tell you! God, but it was hard! That’s all, Sammy—that’s all!”

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I saw the first rays of dawn break over the range, and creep farther and farther down the valley, throwing a pale pink over the landscape, sending shadows slinking off into the light. A whinny from my horse aroused me. I arose, and turned to the man sleeping at my feet. I gazed long and earnestly.

A second whinny disturbed me and I wheeled. Far above two great buzzards circling round and round, faded into the haze. From a neighboring sand-hill a jack-rabbit appeared, paused a quivering moment, then scurried away. The morning light grew brighter. A third whinny and the horse now slowly wended his way toward me. And again I turned to the man at my feet. His hair had fallen away from a broad, clear forehead, his face in calm repose was not that of a man but a boy. And as I gazed, the faintest smile began to play about his lips. I wondered if he knew—if he knew that his troubles were almost ended. Mine? But what of mine!