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THE SURVIVOR

*Please print my name*

Published in England, with only British Rights. I have forgotten the name of the magazine on my check & they did not send me a copy, so I never saw it in print, I made up the story and created man and dog from a story told by a climber. Gave him  $\frac{1}{2}$  the check.

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### THE SURVIVOR

The adversary Alex had failed altogether to consider was the oncoming darkness. As he worked, exposing with his pick the deposit of red "opal," he had lost in his absorption in the stone's beauty all sense of time and of climate. Now he realized that the sun had dropped and that a wind, damp and raw, had sprung up and was blowing through the slit in the mountain and along the cliff face to which he clung like a human fly on the facade of a high rise. From hundreds of feet above the forest, where he knelt at his work, he could hear the wind whining through the pines and hemlocks below; and its cold breath, chilled by snow on the peaks, made him pause to tie his wool scarf and to button about his exposed throat the collar of his mackinaw.

All of his movements were cautious. Cognizant

of the danger in a region where the footfall of a bear or of a cougar, however light, could trigger an avalanche, and aware of the weakening effect of unprecedented rains on the loose talus sides of the cliff, he had taken care for all his covetousness to pry gently at the bright deposit instead of striking.

His pack was two-thirds filled already. Hefting the load a moment ago, he had been surprised at the weight of his find. To be sure, the "rock" had little commercial value. Some flower shop, some amateur jewelry-maker might pay a few dollars for the more choice pieces, if Alex could bring himself to part with them. But even with that knowledge, following the exhausting climb up the sheer basalt face that had left his clothing torn and his fingers bleeding, he was determined to bring down the maximum he could carry. Up here in the light, seen at close range, the richly-colored pieces seemed to him even more desirable than they had appeared below, when, scuffling in the talus pile at the base of the cliff, <sup>he</sup> ~~Alex~~ had found the two small, jagged specimens that had set him to seeking the mother lode, exposed to erosion, from which the fragments had fallen.

That had been some weeks ago. This morning the urgency to seek out the deposit had been strong, as had his self confidence, and the memory of those ~~two~~ <sup>Translucent shards</sup> ~~specimens~~ ~~of~~ ~~translucency~~ with the look of liquid in their depths had set him climbing.

(Insert 2 below Alex)

It had been late, close to noon, when Alex had

parked his car. As time wore on, he had almost given up the search. As he explored the sheer escarpment, ascending, descending, probing pocket after pocket, because he knew the deposit had to be here, his failure to find the lode had come to seem somehow symbolic, and the effort had taken on a fresh, if unreasoning, urgency.

Even now, hours later, the thrill of the moment of discovery of the half domes of brightness crystallized in cavities that had once been gas bubbles trapped in liquid lava filled him with satisfaction. Alex had hammered and picked at his find hardly conscious of time's passage and of his own growing tiredness, until the wind changed, sweeping up from the depths and whirling the fine, angular, sharp-edged gravel into his face and reminding him that night would be upon him soon.

On the ledge at his feet, as though in instinctive fear or in sympathy with his own thoughts as she frequently seemed to be, his small black and white Setter, Moss, whimpered and thumped the earth with her tail, looking up as though anxiously into Alex's face. "It's all right, Moss," he told her, as he would have assured one of his own children. "We'll go down soon."

Stooping to caress the dog, filled suddenly with love for this creature that followed him so faithfully on these occasions of challenge, as he thought facetiously of his motives for climbing, he looked down into the canyon and saw that the

trees were less distinct now as individual trees and that he could hardly see the stream at all.

For a moment he shared the dog's obvious apprehension. Looking down the way they had come, he saw that all of the lower plain that arose to the foot of the ridge was in shadow and, even as he watched, the blackness was creeping upward along the cliff like moving fingers. The steep facade as seen from his position, with the darkness stealing up by inches, looked from here to be all but unscalable. It had been a tough climb for both. In his desire to find the lode, in his almost necessity for finding it, Alex, had achieved he felt, a near miracle. For Alex, the moment of discovery, of possession, had canceled all memory of the struggle.

Beside him, looking down as he looked down, the dog whimpered again and pressed against his bent knee as though asking for reassurance. "It's all right, Moss," he repeated. "Everything's all right." But, scanning the blackness of the chute up which they had climbed and the grim, uncertain face of the scarp, he knew a further moment of doubt. To have negotiated the cliff in broad day was one thing. To descend into the maelstrom of blackness was another. Coming up, he had been fresh. Now he was tired. And Moss was tired.

Feeling the dog tremble against his leg, not so much from cold, he guessed, as from uneasiness, he regretted having allowed her to come. Given a choice, she would have come, of course. Unquestioningly-loving, unswervingly-loyal, she would

have followed him anywhere. She had proven this again and again. Alex might well have left her in the car today, he had done so a few times, telling her to "stay." But the truth was he wanted her with him as much as she wanted to follow.

Still talking reassuringly, which did nothing to lessen her trembling, he lifted the pack, thinking that it was not, after all, the first time a road back had looked dark and reflecting that it had nonetheless to be negotiated. Trying, he found to his surprise that he could not easily swing the pack to his shoulders. He had in the past carried much more without effort. It must be that he was more exhausted than he thought. To leave the opal or any part of his award seemed to him unthinkable. It had cost him too much. Hoisting the pack to a fallen rock, he sat below and slid his arms through the straps.

As he arose, carefully, a stone against which his foot had been resting gave way and began the descent down the cliff face, taking pebbles and gaining momentum as it rolled. Other small rocks, loosened by the disturbance, joined the procession, so that the sound that came up to him was like that of hail falling. When the shower had ceased, the silence seemed to him to have an ominous quality. The dog whined once more and Alex said, aware of the truth of his words, "This is risky business, Moss."

At the sound of her name, the dog quieted and thumped the earth with her brush, keeping her eyes on his face.

"Easy, girl," Alex told her. "We don't want to start an avalanche."

Adjusting the pack straps tighter and cinching the pack down, he made his way cautiously along the ledge, followed by the dog. His eyes searched the descent for foot and hand holds that looked sufficiently substantial to support the pair. The few shrubs he could see in the gathering darkness, juniper and sage, looked too shallowly-rooted to suffice, and he did not see any rocks that appeared completely trustworthy, considering the weight on his back.

Envisioning a root coming away in his hands or a stone giving way beneath his feet plunging him downward onto the jagged rocks of the stream bed three hundred feet below and doubtless carrying Moss with him, he cursed himself for having dallied so long. In a quarter of an hour, less time than it would take to make the descent, he knew that it would be dark, and he recoiled from the thought of descending in the darkness.

But even as he saw the danger, and Alex had climbed mountains long enough to know danger when he saw its face, he did not feel any particular fear for himself. This was why he climbed as a rule, to pit his own strength and ingenuity against the inanimate, the awesome, the ancient; substituting, it came to him sometimes, the challenge of mountains for the more difficult and frustrating demands of a man-made world with which he had become increasingly disenchanted.

Alex had spent countless hours studying formations. Crouched triumphantly on some ledge, or seated on some pinnacle he had conquered, he had speculated on the probable history of some fault or of some upheaval so miniscule in time as to be on any humanly-devised scale, immeasurable. If he had learned one thing during these excursions, he reflected, it had been that permanence is only a semantical invention of man's narrow perspective. The forces that had repeatedly leveled and reshaped the earth's surface denied its reality. Each fault or slip had played its part in the metamorphosis. In a few million years the stream had sliced the mountain cleanly through and had cut a niche for itself.

Here was a game of which he never wearied, a story more fascinating than found in any book; the slow; painful making of a mountain or of a stream bed, the disintegration of rock by the splitting forces of water, the creation of earth by the cooling of lava and by the decomposition of once-living cellulose.

His only regret was that he had permitted Moss to accompany him. And now it was the recognition of her fear of the descent that made him abandon the route upon which he had settled. It was too steep, too treacherous. He could not forgive himself if harm came to her through his folly and his prodigality. He, being the heavier, was the one who might trip the balance. One ill-chosen step, Alex knew, might start a landslide that would plunge them both into oblivion.



Crouched on his little island of safety, stroking the dog and studying the cliff, he saw all at once an obstacle he had not seen before. The long, vertical striations, merging in the distance, giving the perspective of lessening of slope, were in reality lines of scorched grass and dead, dwarf artemesia. The lessening of slope was an optical illusion.

But for all this, the vegetation gave him hope. These tenuous lines that indicated more solid ground were lifelines if he could reach them. Once there he and Moss could pursue a course from plant to plant and so work their way up instead of down until, finally, under the overlay of rimrock the slope would become more readily negotiable.

The prospect of going up into light instead of down into shadows pleased him. Here, Alex thought, lay man's superiority over mountain. The mountain might have every advantage of size, shape of terrain, and weather. But he alone, man, was given the wherewithal to choose, the chance to adjust his situation after contemplation of what the mountain might do to him. The reflection gave him a sly feeling of power. In a half hour or so, even with the deliberate cogitation that would be essential, the decisions to make at every step, they could be at the top. From there the slope led away gradually on a zigzag to the road below.

Alex knew that trail well. He had come up several times, to lie on his belly at the top, while Moss urged him with whimpers and barks to withdraw. Searching the cliff with

his eyes, he had felt sure that somewhere in the porosities of the lower basalt, had he the courage to seek it, he would find the red opal.

But now as he dawdled, reluctant to start the sojourn across the loose talus, he realized that the sunlight had faded further as he hesitated, and that he could no longer see as clearly the solidity that marked his newly-planned route. Looking up, he saw, too, that now the rimrock was barely distinguishable. Calculating, he reckoned that the moon was in its first quarter and would be of no assistance. Nor did the few stars he could see serve as anything save a reminder that he had thought a while ago that a man could no more conquer the universe than he could conquer the mountain, or his own soul. But he could try all three.

Recruiting strength and courage and speaking reassuringly to the dog, urging her to precede him, he left the comparative safety of the ledge and began the ascent.

Some 30 minutes later he lay panting on the scanty flatness underneath the overhang of the cliff that he had been struggling to reach. He was almost intolerably thirsty, and he knew that Moss was thirsty. As she hunkered beside him, trembling, he could hear her dry panting that was not unlike a death rattle. Fear, he thought, had stopped her salivation, as it had for a time stopped his own.

The cliff above them, through which Alex must now find passage in some fissure through which both he and Moss

could make their way upward, was still some fifty feet of sheer wall that he had found to his perturbation consisted of great, vertical blocks of layered basalt rather than the more reliable sandstone or metamorphic rock that he had hoped to find.

Inching along the ledge, feeling with his hands for support or obstruction, he thought to himself that it was good that the rattlesnakes that paradoxically, chose this kind of abode as the least likely for their enemy, man, to penetrate, had holed up for the night. At least there was not that danger to be reckoned with. The danger, Alex knew this well, lay in the condition, the aging of the mountain itself. The hexagonal columns were old and doubtless rotten through and through, weathered in untold thousands of years and weakened by recent rains. Transverse joints had cut the columns into giant stacks of insecurely-balanced rocks that towered above him.

Even as the realization of the instability of the columns came, his foot slipped and dislodged a bit of rock from the ledge. As he clung to an outjetting corner, seeking a fresh foothold, he could hear the warning rattle as the dislodged stone gathered company in its plunge down the cliff face. The sound was followed by a strange, metallic clanking that slowly diminished, until only an occasional rumble like distant thunder came up to tell him that really big stuff was moving along the talus core that terminated in the stream bed.

As he dropped to his hands and knees to creep beneath the overhang of a block around which he must pass, the

dog again whined softly behind him. In his intense concentration on each step, he had forgotten that she was following. Now he took her up carefully and passed her along ahead of him, scratching behind her ears with his free hand and speaking comfortingly. "Go, Moss!" he commanded, pointing ahead. "Go, girl!"

As though his words had given her new strength or fresh courage, she dropped to her belly and moved rapidly away from him up the slope on a diagonal, her brush waving. Seeing that she disturbed nothing in her progress upward, he almost envied her lightness of foot and her relative weightlessness. Again, as he rested, crouching, it occurred to him that the addition of the pack to his own weight could be his nemesis. Pulling the straps more securely and shifting the burden so as to balance the load, he arose stiffly, with all the deliberation he could manage.

When the pack struck the corner of the large rock under which he had been crouching, he staggered forward to his hands and knees once more. As the weight of the opal shifted, forcing him face down into the talus, he felt rather than heard the ominous rumble as the stack of boulders began to disintegrate above and behind him.

Clearly now he knew what was happening. Dislodged, disrupted by the nudge of his pack that he had decided only a moment ago not to sacrifice, weakened by thousands of years of dry degeneration, the entire segment of cliff was toppling

down and forward to carry him with it. All of his senses precluded the possibility of a nightmare.

Lifting his face with an effort from the crumbling talus, Alex shouted with all his might, "Go, Moss!" But he had no notion as to whether or not the dog could hear him.

All about him now was thunder and chaos. Above his prone body, protected momentarily by the overhang, he could hear and feel the gradual disintegration of the chimney. In that moment of survival he realized that he wanted badly to survive. If he was spared, he thought, without hope, he might have learned a little of that which he had been seeking by pitting himself against the mountain. The mountain had bested him. Eventually the blocks would have tumbled of their own weight. Ironically, by his clumsiness, he had upset the timetable a trifle.

In the final flash of seconds, he saw plainly that which had bested him was not really the mountain but his own human frailty. Fatigue, self-indulgence, unreasonable urgency, and failure to acknowledge his own limitations had all played a part. He himself had betrayed himself, just as he had betrayed the dog that followed him so faithfully.

Far away, up the slope, he thought he heard above the roar her scream of pain, or terror. Raising his head, shouting again with all his strength, "Go, Moss! Go!" he saw the ledge give way. As he slipped free of the pack and lunged forward on his hands and knees in the direction the dog had taken,

he caught a glimpse of the stars, glowing brightly above the rim. And then they were snuffed out, as tons of rock, rolling and gathering speed as they rolled, falling and flowing down the slope like a liquid, brought his view to a swift conclusion.

It was a nearby valley rancher who discovered the slide and the dog the following morning. Inured to the rattle of falling rock during his 40 years of scrabbling on the unproductive plain, he had thought little of the sound the previous evening. This morning, the sight of the car, glimpsed from a distance as he went about his morning chores and the whimpering of the dog had brought him from his farmstead.

He knew all at once what had happened. The dog and the car belonged to that fool of a mountain climber. Time after time, at his work, the rancher had watched the man risk his life on the talus heights. The man had been caught by the landslide. The dog had escaped somehow.

Kneeling to try to comfort the trembling animal after he had made his way to the car, he looked with astonishment upon the metamorphosis. To be sure, in 40 years, he had seen the mountain change shape a little and had seen the stream change course as slides dammed the channel. But there had been no such avalanche as this in his memory.

And yet, looking up, he was amazed to see that only a slight disturbance in the peak itself was visible.