

Otis James

# Dick in the Desert



James Otis

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## Dick in the Desert

*For the lad to whom I have given the name of Dick Stevens this little story has been written, with the hope that he may enjoy the reading of it even as I did his modest manner of telling it.*

**James Otis.**

## CHAPTER I. DICK'S DADDY

Between Fox Peak and Smoke Creek Desert, on the western edge of the State of Nevada, is a beautiful valley, carpeted with bunch grass, which looks particularly bright and green to the venturesome traveller who has just crossed either of the two deserts lying toward the east.

"Buffalo Meadows" the Indians named it, because of the vast herds of American bison found there before the white men hunted simply for the sport of killing; but those who halt at the last watercourse prior to crossing the wide stretches of sand on the journey east, speak of it as "Comfort Hollow."

To a travel-stained party who halted at the water-pool nearest the desert on a certain afternoon in September two years ago, this last name seemed particularly appropriate.

They had come neither for gold nor the sport of hunting; but were wearily retracing their steps, after having wandered and suffered among the foot-hills of the Sierras in a fruitless search for a home, on which they had been lured by unscrupulous speculators.

Nearly two years previous Richard Stevens – "Roving Dick" his acquaintances called him – had first crossed the vast plain of sand, with his wife, son, and daughter.

His entire worldly possessions consisted of a small assortment of household goods packed in a stout, long-bodied wagon, covered with canvas stretched over five poles bent in a half-circle, and drawn by two decrepit horses.

The journey had been a failure, so far as finding a home in the wilds was concerned, where the head of the family could live without much labor; and now the homeless ones, decidedly the worse for wear, were returning to Willow Point, on the Little Humboldt River.

The provisions had long since been exhausted; the wagon rudely repaired in many places; the cooking utensils were reduced to one pot and a battered dipper; the canvas covering was torn and decaying, and the horses presented a skeleton-like appearance.

The family had suffered outwardly quite as much as the goods. Young Dick and his father wore clothing which had been patched and repatched with anything Mrs. Stevens could push a needle through, until it would have been impossible to say what was the original material; but to a boy thirteen years of age this seemed a matter of little consequence, while his father preferred such a costume rather than exert himself to tan deer-hides for one more serviceable.

Mrs. Stevens and six-year-old Margie were in a less forlorn condition as to garments; but they also needed a new outfit sadly, and nearly every day young Dick told them confidentially that he would attend to the matter immediately after arriving at Willow Point, even if it became necessary for him to sell his rifle, the only article of value he owned.

"Once across the desert, mother," he said, as the sorry-looking team was drawn up by the side of the pool, and he began to unharness the horses while his father went in search of game for supper, "and then we shall be well on our way to the old home we had no business to leave."

"It is this portion of the journey that worries me most, Dick. You remember what a hard time we had when the animals were in good condition; and now that they are hardly able to drag their own bones along, the danger is great."

"No more than when we crossed the river; and even though father did feel afraid there, we got along all right," was the cheerful reply. "There should be plenty of game here, and after a square feed things won't look so bad."

Mrs. Stevens turned wearily away to make preparations for the evening meal in case the hunter should bring in a supply of meat, but made no reply. She understood why young Dick spoke

encouragingly, and felt proud that the boy displayed so much tenderness for her; yet the fact could not be disguised that dangers beset the little party on every hand.

It required but a small amount of labor in order to make ready for the night.

Tired as the horses were, there was no likelihood of their straying very far; and Dick simply removed the harness, allowing the animals to roam at will. The wagon served as a camp; and the most arduous task was that of gathering materials with which to make a fire, when nothing larger than a bush could be seen on either hand.

Then there was no more to be done save await the return of the hunter, and it was not until the shadows began to lengthen into the gloom of night that young Dick felt seriously alarmed.

He knew his father would not have gone very far from the camp in search of game, because he was on foot, and there was no more promising place for sport than within the radius of a mile from where they had halted. Besides, when hunting took the form of labor which must be performed, Richard Stevens was not one who would continue it long, unless he was remarkably hungry.

Young Dick's mother gave words to her anxiety several times; but the boy argued with her that no harm could have befallen the absent one in that vicinity, and for a time her fears were allayed.

When another hour passed, however, and nothing was heard from his father, even Dick lost courage, and believed that the culminating point in their troubles had been reached.

His mother and Margie had entered the wagon when night was fully come, knowing they must go supperless to bed unless the hunter returned; and to Dick the thought that these two whom he loved so dearly were hungry, brought him almost as much sorrow as the unaccountable absence of his father.

He believed, however, that it was his duty to appear unconcerned, as if confident his father's prolonged absence did not betoken danger. He trudged to and fro in the immediate vicinity of the vehicle, at times whistling cheerily to show there was no trouble on his mind; and again, when it was impossible to continue the melody because of the sorrow in his heart, repeated to his mother that nothing serious could have befallen the absent one, that probably he had unconsciously wandered a long distance from the camp on the trail of game.

"It don't stand to reason he will try to make his way now it is dark, mother dear; but within an hour or two after sunrise he'll be here, and the breakfast we shall then have will make up for the loss of supper."

Mrs. Stevens made no reply; and listening a moment, Dick heard the sound of suppressed sobs.

His mother was in distress, and he could do no more toward comforting her than repeat what he did not absolutely believe.

He knew full well that unless some accident had befallen him, his father would have returned before dark; that he would not have allowed himself to be led so far away from the camping-place that he could not readily return; and the boy's sorrow was all the greater because it was impossible to console his mother.

Clambering into the wagon, he put his arms around her neck, pressing his cheek close against hers, and during what seemed a very long while the two remained silent, not daring to give words to their fears.

Then Dick bethought himself of a plan which offered some slight degree of hope, and starting up suddenly, said, —

"I ought to have done it before, an' it ain't too late now."

"Done what, Dick dear?"

"Gone out in the direction father took, and fired the rifle two or three times. It may be he has lost his bearings, and the report of the gun would be enough to let him know where we are."

"But you must not go now that it is dark, my boy. Suppose you should lose your way? Then what would become of Margie and me?"

"There's no danger of that, mother. I've been in the woods often enough to be able to take care of myself, surely."

"Your father would have said the same thing when he set out; but yet we know some accident must have befallen him."

"Let me go only a little way, mother."

"Of what avail would that be, my son? If the purpose is to discharge your rifle, hoping father may hear the report, why not do it here?"

"I will, if you won't let me go farther."

"I can't, Dick dear. I might be braver under other circumstances, but now the thought of your leaving me is more than I can bear."

"I won't go so far but that I can see the wagon," Dick said, kissing his mother and little Margie much as though bidding them good-by; and a few moments later the report of his rifle almost startled the occupants of the wagon.

During the next hour Dick discharged his weapon at least twelve times, but there was no reply of whatsoever nature.

If his father was alive and within hearing, he was too badly disabled to give token of his whereabouts.

The supply of cartridges was not so large that very many could be used without making a serious inroad upon the store; and realizing the uselessness of further efforts in this direction, Dick went back to the wagon.

Margie had fallen asleep, her head pillowed in her mother's lap; and Mrs. Stevens, unwilling to disturb the child, was taking such rest as was possible while she leaned against the canvas covering of the wagon.

Dick seated himself beside her. It was not necessary he should speak of his failure, for she knew that already.

He had thought it his duty to join her for a few moments, and then go outside again to act the part of sentinel, although such labor could be of little avail; but before he had been nestling by her side five minutes his eyes were closed in slumber; and the mother, her mind reaching out to the absent father, spent the hours of the night in wakefulness, watching over her children.

The sun had risen before Dick's eyes were opened; and springing to his feet quickly, ashamed of having slept while his mother kept guard, he said, —

"I didn't mean to hang on here like a baby while you were awake, mother, but my eyes shut before I knew it."

"It is well you rested, my son. Nothing could have been done had you remained awake."

"Perhaps not; but I should have felt better, because if anything has happened to father, though I don't say it can be possible, I'm the one who must take care of you and Margie."

Mrs. Stevens kissed the boy, not daring to trust herself to speak; and he hurried out, for there was before him a full day's work, if he would do that which he had decided upon in his mind the evening previous.

There was no reasonable hope any one would come that way for many days – perhaps months.

They were alone, and whatever was done must be accomplished by this thirteen-year-old boy.

"I'm going after something for breakfast, mother, and then count on trying to follow father's trail," Dick said, after looking around in every direction, even though he knew there was no possibility of seeing any human being.

"There is no reason why you should spend the time in trying to get food for us, Dick dear. Margie and I can get on very well without breakfast, and you will have the more time to hunt for your father; but remember, my boy, that you are the only one we can depend upon now, and without you we might remain here until we starved."

"I'll take good care not to go so far from the wagon but that I can find my way back; for surely I'll be able to follow on my own trail, if there's no other. Hadn't I better do a little hunting first?"

"Not unless you are very, very hungry, Dick. Food would choke me just now, and there is enough of the bread we baked yesterday morning to give you and Margie an apology for a breakfast."

"I can get along without; you shall eat my share. Now, don't worry if I'm not back until near sunset. The horses are close at hand, and you may be certain they won't stray while the feed is plentiful. Stay in the wagon, even though there is nothing to harm you if you walk around. We must be careful that no more trouble comes upon us; so keep under cover, mother dear, and I'll be here again before night comes."

Dick was not as confident he could follow his father's trail as he would have it appear to his mother; but he decided upon the direction in which he would search, and set bravely out heading due west, knowing he could hold such a course by aid of the sun's position, as his father had often explained to him.

Dick was hungry, but scorned to let his mother know it, and tried to dull the edge of his appetite by chewing twigs and blades of grass.

After walking rapidly ten minutes, more careful as to direction than he ever had been, because of the responsibility that rested upon him, he stopped and shouted his father's name; then listened, hoping to hear a reply.

Save for the hum of insect life, no sound came to his anxious ears.

Once more he pressed forward, and again shouted, but without avail.

He continued on until, seeing the trail made by the wagon when they had come in from the stream, he knew he was very near to the border of the valley.

Surely his father would not have gone outside, because he had said before they arrived that only in the Buffalo Meadows were they likely to find game.

Then Dick turned, pushing on in a northerly direction at right angles with the course he had just been pursuing, and halting at five-minute intervals to shout.

His anxiety and hunger increased equally as the day grew older. Try as he might, he could not keep the tears from over-running his eyelids.

The sun was sinking toward the west before he heard aught of human voice save his own; and then a cry of joy and relief burst from his lips as he heard faintly in the distance his own name spoken.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" he cried at the full strength of his lungs, as he dashed forward, exultant in the thought that his father was alive, for he had begun to believe that he would never see him again in this world.

Mr. Stevens continued to call out now and then to guide the boy on the way, and as he drew nearer Dick understood from the quavering tones that his father was in agony.

"I'm coming, daddy! I'm coming!" he shouted yet louder, as if believing it was necessary to animate the sufferer, for he now knew that some painful accident had befallen his father; and when he finally ended the search his heart literally ceased beating because of his terror and dismay.

Dick believed he had anticipated the worst, but yet was unprepared for that which he saw.

Lying amid the blood-stained sage-grass, his shirt stripped into bandages to tie up a grievously injured limb, lay "Roving Dick," his face pallid, his lips bloodless, and his general appearance that of one whom death has nearly overtaken.

"Daddy! daddy!" Dick cried piteously, and then he understood that consciousness had deserted the wounded man.

He had retained possession of his faculties until aid was near at hand, and then the long strain of physical and mental agony had brought about a collapse.

Dick raised his father's head tenderly, imploring him to speak – to tell him what should be done; but the injured man remained silent as if death had interposed to give him relief.

Looking about scrutinizingly, as those born and bred on the frontier learn to do early in life, Dick saw his father's rifle twenty feet or more away, and between it and him a trail of blood through the sage-brush, then a sinister, crimson blotch on the sand.

Mr. Stevens's right leg was the injured member, and it had been wrapped so tightly with the improvised bandages that the boy could form no idea as to the extent of the wound; but he knew it must indeed be serious to overcome so thoroughly one who, though indolent by nature, had undergone much more severe suffering than he could have known since the time of leaving the wagon to search for game.

It seemed to Dick as if more than ten minutes elapsed before his father spoke, and then it was to ask for water.

He might as well have begged for gold, so far as Dick's ability to gratify the desire was concerned.

"To get any, daddy, I may have to go way back to the wagon, for I haven't come upon a single watercourse since leaving camp this morning."

"Your mother and Margie?"

"I left them at the camp. How did you get here?"

"It was just before nightfall. I had been stalking an antelope; was crawling on the ground dragging my rifle, when the hammer must have caught amid the sage-brush; the weapon was discharged, and the bone of my leg appears to be shattered."

"Poor, poor daddy!" and Dick kissed him on the forehead.

"We must be four miles from the camp," Mr. Stevens said, speaking with difficulty because of his parched and swollen tongue.

"I should say so; but I went toward the west, and after travelling until noon struck across this way, so have no idea of the distance."

"I shall die for lack of water, Dick, even though the wound does not kill me."

"How shall I get it, daddy?" the boy cried piteously. "I can't leave you here alone, and I don't believe there's a drop nearer than where we are camped."

"You *must* leave me, Dick; for you can do no good while staying here, and the thought that help is coming, even though there may be many hours to wait, will give me strength. Can you find your way to the camp and back after nightfall?"

"I'll do it somehow, daddy! I'll do it!"

"Then set out at once, and bring one of the horses back with you. I should be able to ride four miles, or even twice that distance, since it is to save my life."

"But you'll keep up a brave heart, daddy dear, won't you? Don't think you are going to die; but remember that mother and I, and even little Margie, will do all we can to pull you through."

"I know it, Dick, I know it. You are a good lad – far better than I have been father; and if it should chance that when you come back I've gone from this world, remember that you are the only one to whom the mother and baby can look for protection."

"You know I'd always take care of them; but I am going to save you, daddy dear. People have gotten over worse wounds than this, and once you are at the camp we will stay in Buffalo Meadows till it is possible for you to ride. I'll look out for the whole outfit, and from this on you sha'n't have a trouble, except because of the wound."

"Give me your hand, my boy, and now go; for strong as may be my will, I can't stand the loss of much more blood. God bless you, Dick, and remember that I always loved you, even though I never provided for you as a father should have done."

Dick hastily cleared the mist from his eyes, and without speaking darted forward in the direction where he believed the wagon would be found, breaking the sage-brush as he ran in order that he might make plain the trail over which he must return.

## CHAPTER II. A LONELY VIGIL

It was not yet dark when Dick arrived within sight of the wagon, and shouted cheerily that those who were so anxiously awaiting his coming might know he had been fortunate in the search.

As soon as his voice rang out, startlingly loud because of the almost oppressive stillness, Mrs. Stevens appeared from beneath the flap of the canvas covering, and an expression of most intense disappointment passed over her face as she saw that Dick was alone.

"It's all right, mother!" he cried, quickening his pace that she might the sooner be relieved from her suspense. "It's all right!"

"Did you find your father?"

"Yes; an' I've come back for one of the horses. He's been hurt, an' can't walk."

"Thank God he is alive!" she cried, and then for the first time since the previous evening she gave way to tears.

Dick did all he could toward comforting her without making any delay in setting out on the return journey.

While he filled the canteen with fresh water he repeated what his father had bidden him to say; and when his mother asked concerning the wound, he spoke as if he did not consider it serious.

"Of course it's bad, for he thinks one of the bones has been splintered; but I don't see why he shouldn't come 'round all right after a spell. We've known of people who had worse hurts and yet got well."

"But they were where at least something of what might be needed could be procured, while we are here in the desert."

"Not quite so bad as that, mother dear. We have water, and I should be able to get food in plenty. After I've supplied the camp, I'm goin' on foot to Antelope Spring, where we can buy whatever daddy may need."

"Across the desert alone!"

"A boy like me ought to be able to do it, and" —

"Your father hasn't a penny, Dick dear."

"I know that, mother; but I'll sell my rifle before he shall suffer for anything. Now don't worry, and keep up a good heart till I come back."

"Can't I be of some assistance if I go too?"

"You'd better stay here with Margie. Father and I can manage it alone, I reckon."

Then Dick set about catching one of the horses; and as he rode the sorry-looking steed up to the wagon, his mother gave him such articles from her scanty store as the wounded man might need.

"You're a good boy, Dick," she said, as he stooped over to kiss her; "and some day you shall have your reward."

"I'll get it now, mother, if I see you looking a little more jolly; and indeed things ain't quite so bad as they seem, for I can pull our little gang through in great shape, though I'm afraid after it's been done I sha'n't be able to get you and Margie the new outfit I promised."

"We should be so thankful your father is alive as not to realize that we need anything else."

"But you do, just the same, whether you realize it or not; an' I'll attend to everything if I have time enough. Don't trouble yourself if we're not back much before morning, for I reckon daddy can't stand it to ride faster than a walk."

Then, without daring to stop longer, lest he should betray some sign of weakness, Dick rode away, waving his hand to Margie, who was looking out of the rear end of the wagon, but giving vent to a sigh which was almost a sob when they could no longer see him.

Young though he was, Dick understood full well all the dangers which menaced. Although he had spoken so confidently of being able to "pull the gang through," he knew what perils were before them during the journey across the desert; and it must be made within a reasonably short time, otherwise they might be overtaken by the winter storms before arriving at their old home.

The beast he rode, worn by long travelling and scanty fare, could not be forced to a rapid pace; and when night came Dick was hardly more than two miles from the wagon.

He could have walked twice the distance in that time; but the delay was unavoidable, since only on the horse's back could his father be brought into camp.

When it was so dark that he could not see the broken sage-brush which marked the trail, it was necessary he should dismount, and proceed even at a slower pace; but he continued to press forward steadily, even though slowly, until, when it seemed to him that the night was well-nigh spent, he heard a sound as of moaning a short distance in advance.

"I've come at last, daddy. It's been a terrible long while, I know; but it was the best I could" —

He ceased speaking very suddenly as he stood by the side of the sufferer, whom he could dimly see by the faint light of the stars.

From the broken and uprooted sage-brush around him, it was evident the wounded man had, most likely while in a delirium of fever, attempted to drag himself on in the direction of the camp, and had ceased such poor efforts only when completely exhausted.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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