

## Solitude

by

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The huge rider swayed so naturally with the movement of the grey that their winding progress up the boulder-strewn trail could have been choreographed by a musician. Solitude, as they called him, was browned by the sun and leaned by hours in the saddle. His wary eyes constantly probed the terrain, both ahead and behind him, especially since he had seen the buzzards. As he approached the top of the rise, he turned the horse off the beaten path and paused for a studied look. Whatever was drawing those circling specks in the sky wouldn't be very too far beyond the boulder strewn crest.

Moving on towards the crest, the horse and rider slipped into the cover of a small clump of trees a few feet off the trail. Peering down between the trunks, the man could see a saddled dun standing near the still form of a man lying beside some large boulders along the trail. Removing his binoculars from his saddlebags, he studied every inch of the surrounding territory carefully before riding into the situation below with his right hand close to the colt on his belt.

The dun whinnied as the rancher drew closer, but shied to the other side of the prone body of a young cowhand when he dismounted to check on the hapless stranger. The cowboy had been shot through the right upper chest with a rifle. Rolling the body over, he was surprised by a groan that explained why the buzzards hadn't lit yet. The exit wound alternately sucked and spewed air with the injured man's respirations. His pulse was fast and thready.

The unconscious cowboy was obviously not in any condition to be moved very far. Grasping him by the back of his collar, the bigger man gently drug him off the trail into a defensible space between some huge boulders. The dun followed, standing nearby as the rancher positioned the cowboy in the shade with his head slightly elevated. He gathered a few sticks for a fire, and hastily boiled some water in his coffee pot. After bathing the wounds in hot water, he hacked a wide slice off the edge of a partial side of bacon from his saddle bags, and bound it over the sucking wound to seal it.

When the rancher had done what he could for the gravely ill man, Sol turned away from him to care for the horses. The dun acted well-treated, and stood calmly by his master without drawing away when the rancher reached for his bridle. Sol removed the blanket tied behind its saddle and spread it gently over the still form of the injured man. Unsaddling both horses, he watered them in a small stream several hundred yards on down the trail and rubbed them down with handfuls of grass. He hobbled them close to the makeshift sickroom.

The big rancher spent a few minutes gathering enough wood for an all-night fire before brewing a pot of coffee and frying himself some bacon. After scouring his utensils with creek

sand, he knelt for a prolonged moment of prayer before settling down beside the wounded man for a long night's vigil.

The stricken man seemed to breathe more and more evenly as the night progressed. Just after dawn, while the rancher was brewing more coffee, he came to. When he raised himself on one elbow, Solitude was instantly at his side, holding a tin cup of water to his lips. After a few noisy sips, the cowboy lapsed back into semi consciousness, so Sol fried himself a huge skillet-sized flapjack, sprinkled it with sugar, and rolled it up. Then he pulled out his worn-out old pocket Bible and sat on a rock to enjoy his concoction with coffee while he contemplated his passage for the day

When Solitude watered the horses that morning, he was impressed with the friendliness and faithfulness of the dun. He followed the rancher obediently when he led him to the stream, but he seemed anxious to return to his master's side. After cutting a couple of small pines for poles, and slinging his own blanket between them, the rancher hitched the dun to the makeshift travois. He lifted the cowboy on to the primitive conveyance for the twenty-mile ride to Solitude's small ranch.

The trip home was tediously slow. By mid-morning the unconscious cowboy was wide awake, so Sol stopped and offered him his canteen. He said his name was Johnny, but everyone called him Patches because he liked to sew deer-skin patches on the knees and elbows of his clothing to make them last longer. He had left his last job when he discovered that the foreman was rustling cattle, and he was heading back East to get married when he was shot. He figured that the rustlers had shot him to keep him from talking.

"None of them would dare meet me head-on," He explained matter-of-factly, "So they drilled me with a rifle from a distance. I'll settle the score when I find out who did it," he vowed with the confidence of a man who was accustomed to accomplishing whatever he set out to do.

Every movement shot pain through the cowboy's chest, so they paused long enough to brew a pot of strong coffee, which seemed to infuse energy into the weakened man's body. A few minutes later he volunteered that he was ready to go, but preferred riding to jouncing along on the travois. The ride was painfully slow, but they reached the cabin on Sol's little ranch just as the sun was setting in the western sky.

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Patches did little more than sleep and eat for the better part of a week; but when Sol awoke the eighth day, Patches was nursing a fire in the stove. Sol whipped up some biscuits while Patches brewed the coffee and fried the bacon. The cowboy sat respectfully while Sol asked the

Lord's blessing and thanked the Lord for the food. The minute the dishes were put away, Patches wanted to check on the dun, but when he stepped out on the porch he looked so pale and weak that Sol wouldn't let him, though the horse was nickering to him from the corral

The rancher ordered the reluctant cowpoke to stay in the cabin while he rode out to check on the stock. Patches admitted that he was still awfully weak, but when Sol arrived home around supper time, he noted that the dun has been groomed immaculately. A few minor chores, like fixing the leather door hinges had also been done.

The two men hit it off well. Sol kept busy on the range while Patches puttered around closer to the cabin, doing whatever he was able. They chatted like old friends every evening as Patches continued to recover.

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Sol seemed so genuinely interested in Patches' life that the usual reservation of the rugged western culture broke down, and the man shared much of his history quite candidly with him. He turned out to be an outgoing, friendly, and intensely loyal individual who loved cattle. Though he was as tough as any, he was clean living. He didn't smoke or drink, and hadn't looked sideways at another woman since he left his sweetheart back East to come West and learn the cattle business. He had inherited a bit of money when his Dad died, and intended to go back home and get married this fall. The couple wanted to come back in the spring to establish a ranch of their own.

The better Patches felt, the more he smoldered about being shot in the back. It was a cowardly act, and he aimed to avenge it. Sol understood his anger, but tried to mitigate it with moderation.

"Why get yourself killed going after a bunch of men who would just as soon bushwhack you?" He asked.

"It's a matter of respect," Patches replied. "I'm way faster than they are, and if I let 'em get by with it they'll come back and finish the job."

"I think the little woman would rather you'd come home and get married than stay out here and get buried," Sol urged. But Patches resented the injustice and cowardice of his would-be assassins too much to listen to reason.

Patches welcomed the chance to look for his enemies when Sol asked him to help him drive some cattle from his small ranch to the sale lot in town some forty miles in the right direction. The two men rounded up about a hundred head of Sol's branded stock to take to market.

Patches turned out to be an excellent cowhand, and the dun was absolutely devoted to him. They worked together like a well-oiled machine that was beautiful for the older man to watch. They proved invaluable at keeping the herd bunched together on the trail.

About noon on the first day, they were watering the stock where the trail crossed a mountain stream. They had just dismounted to let the horses drink when a rattler buzzed dangerously close to Patches' foot. Sol's hand blurred in the fastest draw that Patches had ever seen, and his shot splattered the rattler's triangular head just as it began its strike.

"Thanks, Sol," the younger man said with genuine admiration. "I'm considered fast, but I've never seen any shootin' anywhere near that fast; and you drilled that snake dead center of the head, too. I hope you're around when I catch up with the yellow cowards that shot me."

Sol slipped the spent cartridge from the Colt's cylinder, and reloaded without comment.

The men arrived at the cattle pens at the edge of town two days later, without further incident. Sol was greeted warmly by the buyer, and introduced Patches as a personal friend. He was given a fair price for his stock without any dickering at all.

It was twilight by the time they had corralled all the cattle, so the two men checked in at the town's only hotel. They scrubbed the trail dust off with hot water and lye soap, shaved, and went down to the hotel's restaurant, where Sol ordered steaks for each of them.

Patches was impressed with the warmth that people showed for Sol. Nearly everyone greeted him like a long-lost friend. The whole restaurant even seemed to hold their conversation down as he bowed his head briefly in silent thanks for his food. Patches was used to being respected, but this man was loved.

After dinner, as the men rose from the table, Sol collided with a drunken cowboy who had inadvertently staggered into him. It was clearly the cowhand's fault, but Sol reached down to help him up, apologizing profusely for his "Carelessness."

The embarrassed cowboy tried to cover his inability to hold his liquor with a string of oaths. Get your dirty hands off 'a me," he bellowed as he pulled himself upright with Sol's vacated chair.

"I didn't mean to bump you," Sol replied gently, as he removed his hands. But the enraged drunk stood swaying with his hand wavering shakily above the gun holstered on his belt.

"Draw, ya yellar-bellied idiot!" he shouted at the gentle man before him.

“Easy, Sam,” Sol answered softly. “We’ve been friends a long time. We have no quarrel with each other, and I’m surely not going to draw on you.”

“Yer a chicken-livered coward,” the drunk snarled back. “You know you’d never have a chance against me.”

“Probably not, Sam,” Sol answered consolingly. “Can I buy you a dinner?”

“I don’t take nothin’ from sissies,” the drunk sneered angrily as he swaggered unsteadily towards the outside door.

When he was gone, the two men walked nonchalantly up the stairs to their room. Once inside, Patches asked curiously, “Why didn’t you take him when he insulted you so much, Sol? He couldn’t be half as fast as you are, even when he’s sober.”

“Patches,” Sol replied earnestly. “Tom is a really nice guy when he’s not drunk. He really loves his wife and kids, and works hard to provide for them. He doesn’t drink often, 'cause he can’t handle the stuff. It irritates his brain, somehow. Somebody must have talked him into a drink this afternoon, and who knows what’ll happen to the poor guy now?”

“I’d ‘a taken anyone who insulted me that much when he called me,” Patches answered. “I’m not goin’ ta be insulted like that!”

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“Let me tell you something no one else around here knows,” Sol replied softly.

“I used to drink a lot, and as the alcohol took effect I got more and more morose. I’d sit at the bar and brood. That’s why they got to calling me ‘Solitude.’ Everyone around there avoided me on those occasions, 'cause they knew how fast my gun could be. But every now and then someone who fancied himself to be a gun slick would be itching to try me. It didn’t take much prodding back then to get me to draw, and those who succeeded died before they figured out what had happened.

“Understand, Patches, it was always what men call a fair fight, if there is such a thing. They asked for it, and I gave it to them--right in the heart. But how right was it for a naturally fast man to kill a slower man just because he didn’t have enough sense to realize that he wasn’t as fast as he thought he was?”

"Anyway, one time a cocky little drunk picked a fight with me kinda' like Sam tried to do tonight. He yelled, 'Draw,' and was dead before he had cleared leather. As his body lay there on the floor, his distraught little wife ran in and threw herself on it. "O Tom," she wept. "I knew this would happen to you sooner or later. How can I live without you? "Who's gonna support the kids? O Tom," She cried as she hugged his body. "I loved you so much!"

She was such a forlorn little wisp of a woman that it cut my soul to the bone. She lay there hugging his body, weeping her heart out for half an hour or so, until some friends came and pulled her off so the undertaker could remove it."

"It sobered me instantly. I couldn't shake it. I realized that this man that I had killed so heartlessly meant everything to someone else. I had unnecessarily ruined not only his life, but hers and her kids' lives too. It haunted me for days, and the days became weeks that stretched into months. I never drank again, never wanted to.

"I tried to give her money, but she angrily refused it. I tried to excuse myself, but my conscience wouldn't let me off. I lost weight. I left town, but the guilt of it was unrelenting. It followed me wherever I went."

"Finally, Patches, I ventured into a small church when no one else was there. I was crying out to God for forgiveness on a bench in the back when the pastor happened by."

"This man was a real man of God. He didn't try to smooth over my guilt, or tell me I hadn't done anything worse than anyone else would 'a done. Instead, he showed me from the Bible that Christ took the guilt of all my sins, and paid the price for them by His own death. He showed me that all who believe in Him are justified freely from all things. I left there a saved man, born again and free from guilt 'cause Jesus Christ had died for me."

"I settled here, Patches, on the little ranch that you've been recovering on. It isn't much, but it supports me well enough that I can even contribute a bit to the needs of others. Mostly, I'm at peace with God, and that's good enough for me.

I'd rather you'd keep my past quiet so no half-cocked gun slick will want to try me. I don't think I'd ever be able to draw on another man again."

After his story, Sol knelt at his bedside and poured his heart out in thanks to God for the forgiveness of his sins, and his peace with God.

Patches slipped away, so as not to disturb this man who had commanded his respect so fully. As he stepped outside for some fresh air to clear his confused mind, a single gunshot rang out from down the street. Quickening his pace, he rounded a corner to find several men kneeling over a stricken man. It was Sam.

"Tell Molly that I loved her," Sam gasped as the last of his life ebbed away.

One of the kneeling figures looked up at Patches and murmured, "Poor fool picked a fight with a faster man," as they closed his eyelids.

Suddenly Patches was very glad that Sol hadn't accepted the foolhardy challenge of this inebriated man. It was a dastardly way to treat someone who was not in control of his senses. The somber man went straight back to the hotel to tell Sol. "He'll know just what to do," he thought half aloud.

Sol was up instantly. "I wanna be the one who tells Molly," he said as he dressed hurriedly.

"I'll go with you," Patches volunteered.

The two men walked quickly to a small neatly-kept cabin at the edge of town, where Sol strode grimly to the door as Patches followed pensively.

When Sol knocked, Molly's voice called out, "Is that you, Sam?"

"No, Molly, it's Sol," the big man answered just loud enough to be heard.

"Be there in a minute," a muffled voice called, as they heard her scurrying to get dressed.

"Is Sam in jail?" Molly asked anxiously as she opened the door.

"No, Molly, he's dead," Sol replied gently. "He picked a fight with the wrong man this time, and got shot in the heart."

"O Sol," she anguished, leaning her forehead on the big man's chest. "It was bound to happen. He just couldn't stop drinkin' whenever someone got him started."

Sol placed his holy hands on her shoulders, infusing spiritual strength into her aching soul as she leaned her head on his broad chest and wept.

"We loved each other so much," Molly finally said as she pulled back, emotionally stabilized.

"You want I should arrange the funeral with Hurley?" Sol asked gently.

"Please do, Sol," she said through her tears. "I've got to go and tell the kids."

"Want me to stay?" he asked.

"Thanks," she replied. "I need to do it alone!"

Hurly agreed to a simple funeral in the morning. Since the town's only minister was out of town, they settled for a quiet grave-side ceremony. Molly asked Sol to "Say the words."

Sol's earnest discourse flowed with the tender elegance of a man as acquainted with God as he was with grief--a man who truly loved the folks he was addressing. He preached the sinfulness of mankind, the righteousness of God that must judge our sins, and His love in sending His Son down to pay for those sins on the cross. He urged one and all not to forfeit the payment by refusing to accept Christ as their personal Savior. Tears trickled from many a hardened eye as the Word of God came alive in that ten-minute eternity that held them so spellbound. Sol finished by praying for Molly, and the children, as well as the unknown man who caused this senseless disaster.

The reality of what had happened sank into Tom and Molly's ten-year-old son when the grave diggers began shoveling dirt over the simple pine box that held his father's remains. His pathetic sobs brought tears to Sol's eyes, which mingled with the child's as the big man leaned over to hug him. Molly finally got enough control over her own grief to sustain the child, and the family walked forlornly toward home hand-in-hand.

When they were free to go, the two men headed back toward Sol's ranch. It was a somber ride, each man lost in his own thoughts. After a couple hours of silence, Patches suddenly blurted out, "Forget the revenge, Sol. I want to know your God."

"You want I should introduce you to 'Em, or should we get a preacher?" Sol asked slowly.

"You're the best preacher I know," Patches answered earnestly. "You help me!"

"I'd love to," the big man replied softly as he reigned in and reached into his shirt pocket for his familiar little Bible. There was joy in the presence of the angels for the rest of that day.