

Nuggets From The Past

by  
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A CLOSE CALL

In my younger days, about a dozen years ago, I was accustomed to <sup>hiking</sup> ~~hike~~ alone through the foothills of the Sierras, in particular the Foresthill Divide. I often became so absorbed in my surroundings -- old abandoned gold mines, ghost town sites, animal tracks etc., that I <sup>sometimes</sup> overlooked the time of day to the extent that <sup>I</sup> would arrive home late for dinner. Naturally, my wife often became upset at my disregard for her schedule and even more, her worries over my whereabouts.

On this particular Saturday morning I announced <sup>to my wife</sup> that I would be hiking alone that day. When she inquired "where" I told her there was a certain old road running off in a southerly direction from the Foresthill Road. When we first arrived on the divide in 1978 I made it my business to follow ~~to~~ its end every old trail in every direction "just to see where it went".

On this day I drove my vehicle to a parking place just west of the Lake Clementine turn-off. Thinking that I would be gone for a short time, I left my lunch and water ~~behind~~ in my car. I walked through a gate, following an old rutted road south about a mile where it halted on the rim of the Middle Fork of the American River canyon.

Here I stood, looking down, and was so impressed with the view that the world stopped for me until my feet began to move,

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downward over a steep foot trail that dropped me at least 2,000 feet until I stopped at the edge of the smooth flowing river.

It was more than hot that day. It was very hot. So hot that I removed all my clothing and waded into the cool water. The river was shallow at that spot, enough to cover my knees and half my thighs and golly! - it felt good!

I swam a little, thinking that in all our world there wasn't a prettier place to be in, and there I was, alone in the middle of it, alone and naked and enjoying every minute of it.

But I was not alone I soon determined. Near the opposite shore was an equestrian trail that gave direction to a pair of mounted /young ladies, totally absorbed in their conversation and just as totally unmindful of my presence. I remained riveted as I watched them trot by, standing perfectly still lest they catch any movement of mine.

At such a time I coarsely asked myself if they saw me would they giggle or scream. Finally they rode out of sight and I relaxed. That was when I grew mindful of the time of day so I emerged from the salubrious stream, donned my clothing and headed up the steep trail to the top.

I soon lost the faint footpath and with that I searched nervously for trees that would afford me the benefit of their shade. There were none. I was thirsty and hungry and I reproachfully recalled my stupidity in leaving my lunch in my car.

By this time I was growing weak fast. The ascent seemed to be steeper now and the sun seemed hotter. In my frantic search for shade I literally crawled between the numerous/<sup>manzanita</sup>bushes, both to rest and absorb the modicum of shade they offered. Methodically I staggered or crawled from bush to bush like a man desperately striving to remain alive.

I was dehydrated, my mouth as dry as the Mohave Desert. I grew weaker from lack of food. My brain was acting strangely as I actually considered lying motionless under a manzanita and closing my eyes to await the release of death.

Somehow I continued on from bush to bush, using strength I did not know I had. I am a believer in guardian angels. Surely one of them was prodding me now, pushing, pulling until finally I reached the top of the canyon, more dead than alive.

I sagged to the ground, completely spent. Finally, after gathering all the strength I had left, I rose shakily to my feet. I gazed down into the canyon below me and murmured weakly to myself, "It's a trap."

Somehow I staggered the remaining mile to my car, stopping to rest numerous times. Once inside the car I rested my forehead on the steering wheel for what seemed an hour. I was too exhausted even to open my lunch bag. All I wanted was to get home and let my body sag to a couch.

It was eight o'clock when I arrived home. My good wife met me at the door looking worried.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

My brain wasn't tracking right. I ignored her question. Then, in a weak rasping voice I asked, "How long would you have waited before you called the sheriff?"

She looked surprised then silently placed her arm around my waist and led me to our living room couch. Nothing ever felt so good as I sank into its pillowed comfort. Within five minutes I was sound asleep.