

# **Cactus and Rattlers**

by H. Bedford Jones

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Here's a real thriller for you—a double-action, big-caliber novelette of adventure in the West, by a writing man who knows his business, the distinguished author of "Sixteen Miles," "Brome's Luck," "Shadows of Saffron," and other noted stories.

## Cactus and Rattlers

At least twice a year, when he came in to Stovepipe Springs to get his mail and flour, Sagebrush answered to the cognomen of George Beam. This was one of the occasions. To his acute consternation, he had discovered that “The Springs” was crowded with life and gayety, for there was a strange female stopping at the hotel, and another pilgrim was coming in by stage this same afternoon.

Sagebrush presented a general vista of whiskers, red nose and nondescript garments, bleached by sun and white with alkali dust; yet it was his proud boast that he was the only man between Death Valley and the big bend of the Colorado who kept abreast of the times. Subscribing to several weekly magazines, he came in once every six months to get the accumulated copies. Then he sat down and answered the advertisements, requesting circulars. Thus he had a burro-load of magazines to read for six months, then a burro-load of circulars wherewith to while away the next six months—an involved and vicious circle in which Sagebrush was always trying to catch up with himself. He kept the post office on the map, however.

“Now, dog-gone it,” he observed to his three patient burros, as he tied on his grub and magazines and a bundle of postal cards, “you and me got to hike out again in order to git our correspondence goin’ in peace! Dad blame this dad-blamed town! What in hell is folks crowding in this country for, anyhow?”

Haywire Johnson, assistant postmaster and general utility man about the hotel, showed up in time to answer this query.

“Hi, Sagebrush! Aint you stoppin’ over in town? Things is pickin’ up right fast. We got a settler yesterday, and we got a tourist comin’ today.”

“That’s jest it,” growled Sagebrush. “A feller can’t have no peace no more. That makes three women in town now, not countin’ them females over to José Garcia’s shack.”

“Well, listen!” Haywire laid his hand on the desert rat’s arm. “Where’d you get that dust you weighed in over to the store, eh? Let’s you and me go in and talk, Sagebrush. If you aint got no objections to wettin’ down them whiskers with a mite o’ licker, s’pose we go inside and arbitrate.”

Sagebrush grunted, hitched his three burros to the rail, and vanished in the hotel.

Once Stovepipe Springs had been a boom mining town, but now it was dead and dried out. To west and north lay desert, to the south lay more desert and the Colorado. To the east was the Chuckwalla Range—in it and beyond it rich cattle country with water galore. Here in Stovepipe Springs, and over across the Chuckwallas, men talked different languages, had different customs and were themselves different. No cow-men came over this way unless they were well ahead of the sheriff; and Stovepipe Springs, having its own railroad connections at a distance of twenty miles, was supremely independent of the remainder of the county, and heartily despised all ranchers and cow-men.

Here, besides the hotel, were five inhabited houses and two stores, a bank and a garage. Had it not been for the literary enterprise of Sagebrush Beam, even the post office would have long since been wiped off the map. The town was a point of call for desert rats, and being at present on a detour of the cross-continent automobile highway, had more business than its looks would warrant. Its inhabitants lived only for the day when some one would strike it rich and bring back the boom.

It was three in the afternoon and blazing hot when the exhaust whistle of the autostage announced its arrival. The entire dozen persons of the local constituency gathered to watch. One of these onlookers was a small man in rusty and dilapidated attire. He stood barely five feet six, his face was a grayish mask from which shone two bright and glittery gray eyes, and there was a stoop to his shoulders—but he was not crowded. He was not only the most flourishing, but he was the most respected citizen of all Chuckwalla County.

The stage whooped out a final whistle and came to rest amid a whirl of dust in front of the hotel. The driver flung off a mail-sack, handed off an empty express-box, then swung down and vanished abruptly into the hotel. His solitary passenger, meantime, descended before the assembled gaze of Stovepipe Springs, staring around with unassumed interest. And Stovepipe Springs, after the first gasp, stared back—hard.

The pilgrim was apparently a young man, though little could be seen of his features. He wore an enormous pith helmet which shaded his face, tinted yellow goggles which hid his eyes, and from the collar of his khaki coat to the tip of his nose was wound a bright green shawl which draped back over his

shoulder. Just then Haywire and Sagebrush came out the side door of the hotel, and Sagebrush halted as though smitten.

“My gosh, Haywire!” he exclaimed. “What was in that there licker? I never seen nothing like this before—not even from tequila! Is that thing really there?”

“She is,” said Haywire, with a startled look. “Wait—it’s goin’ to talk!”

The arrival had unwound the green shawl, to disclose a mouth and chin which were certainly square-cut enough for anyone. He glanced around the circle of staring faces, and his goggles fastened upon the little man in rusty attire. Toward him the newcomer stepped, met the glittery gray eyes, and spoke.

“Am I correct in assuming that this is Stovepipe Springs?” he asked.

“Yep,” returned the small man curtly.

“Excellent! An admirable spot. I am Percival Henry J. Tompkins, a humble member of the American Society of Mammalogists, in search of material for a paper on the fauna of the great American desert.” Mr. Tompkins spoke in a precise, neatly clipped voice. “I seek a temporary domicile here—”

“Git over to Mormon Wells, then,” snapped the small man.

“You misapprehend my meaning,” said Mr. Tompkins patiently. “I seek rooms at your hotel, and a guide. I want a man who knows the desert, who can lead me to the haunts of its creatures. Particularly I desire to study the habits of the *crotalus cerastes*.”

With a flick of his shoulders, the small man turned as though to leave. Mr. Tompkins reached out and laid a restraining hand on his shoulder, unwarned by the gasp from those near by.

“My dear sir, I am addressing you—”

What happened was startling to see. The little man moved with a swiftness that the eye could not follow, then stood snarling, his gray mask of a face glittering with sheer malignity. Tompkins, knocked sprawling half across the road, rolled over, sat up, and then struggled to his feet. He stood blinking around.

“That—er—that was a most remarkable thing!” he exclaimed in his precise tones. “Did somebody run into me?”

With a sneer and a snap of his teeth, the little man turned and departed toward the bank, which he owned. Haywire drew the old desert rat hastily aside.

“Look out! Sidewinder’s feelin’ mean today. Him and that female woman have been talkin’ chicken-ranches, I reckon. Oh, my gosh! Now that there mistake for a human is headin’ this-a-way—”

Mr. Tompkins, indeed, seemed to sense a general lack of cordiality all around him, except in the gaping countenance of Sagebrush, whom he now approached.

“My friend—”

“Pilgrim, don’t bother me!” said Sagebrush defensively. “It jest can’t be true!”

“I’ll pay three dollars a day to a man who knows the desert.”

Sagebrush changed countenance. So did the remainder of Stovepipe Springs. There was a general forward movement, but the desert rat was the first to recover voice.

“You’re done, pilgrim, you’re sure engaged! What was it you wanted to find?”

“*Crotalus cerastes*. Undoubtedly you can introduce me to specimens?”

Sagebrush swallowed hard, but had a reputation to sustain, and upheld it nobly.

“You bet!” he announced promptly. “Lots o’ them specimens up around Marble Cañon, and over by Lost Waterhole I’ve seen ’em so thick you couldn’t hardly move without steppin’ on ’em. I’ll take you right where them things breed, Perfesser.”

The “Perfesser” looked slightly startled, but nodded assent.

“Very well; you are engaged. We shall have to hire an automobile.”

“You got to see Sidwinder Crowfoot about that. He owns ’em all.”

“Very well. Come to my room in an hour, when I have had a chance to remove the stains of travel. By the way, where is the hotel? I wrote to engage rooms, but see no hostelry.”

“Right yere under your nose, Perfesser. Hassayamp is takin’ in the mail—thar he is. —Hey, Hassayamp! Meet my friend the Perfesser. This is Hassayamp Foster, Perfesser. The Perfesser’s a bug-hunter, Hassayamp, and wants a bed.”

“My beds won’t help him none,” said Hassayamp, a lean and melancholic individual who came forward, chewing a ragged mustache. “I got a room for you, Puffesser.”

“With bath,” said Tompkins. Hassayamp halted and blinked.

“Bath? Good gosh, we don’t allow no washin’ in the springs this time o’ year! Got to use a cream separator to git enough drinkin’ water. Rains are over, but they aint filled the springs yet—not for another two weeks, I reckon.”

“I refer, sir, to a bathroom attached,” explained Tompkins.

“Well, there aint none,” said Hassayamp. “Whar’s your grips?”

Two enormous and bulging suitcases, each as big as a small trunk, were in the stage boot, and Hassayamp hauled them out with antagonistic air, and led his victim away.

The Stovepipe House was built for desert use, not for looks. The front building contained post office and hotel dining-room; and passing through this, Tompkins descended the rear steps and found two long adobe structures stretching in front of him, each divided into cells; between them drooped some parched flowers and shrubs. He was shown to his cell, a room twelve by twelve, furnished with all the comforts of home.

“Don’t do no cussing nor singing after midnight,” warned Hassayamp as he shoved in the two enormous grips, “’cause a lady’s got the next room. When the bell rings for supper, you show up prompt; my old woman’s liable to be real ornery if folks don’t ’predate hot vittles. Two-fifty a day. What did you go tangle up with that old desert rat Sagebrush for? I’d ha’ been

glad to pilot you around my own self. Int'rested in mines, are you? Don't let him show you no specimens, Puffesser. That old rascal would salt hell and unload it on a pilgrim. Don't you trust nobody around here but me. I got two quartz lodes and a placer location that'll make your eyes water—"

"Not interested in mines, thanks," said Tompkins, cutting short the flow of talk. "If I saw a good chicken-ranch, I might invest, but not otherwise. Ever hear of anyone around these parts by the name of Ramsay? Alec Ramsay. Might have passed through here a year or so ago."

"Nope," said Hassayamp, shaking his mustaches. "Well, if ye want anything, come and holler for it."

Hassayamp withdrew; in more haste than he had previously displayed, he ducked around the side of the hotel, rambled down the desert sands of the nominal alley, and in three minutes was rapping sharply at the back door of the adobe bank. This was opened to him by the small gray-faced man, who was no other than Sidewinder Crowfoot. Hassayamp slid inside and closed the door behind him.

"Well?" rasped Sidewinder. "What's up?"

"That bug-hunter," said Hassayamp agitatedly. "What ye think he said? That if he knowed where there was a good chicken-ranch, he might buy it!"

A thin smile appeared in the gray mask. "That so? We'll see about it."

“And he asked if I knowed anyone around here, a year back, name of Alec Ramsay.”

The smaller man started, and his eyes glittered venomously.

“So that’s it—so that’s it!” murmured Sidewinder. “I thought he didn’t act right natural. By gosh, I’ll look into him!”

“Wa’n’t Ramsay the one,” began Hassayamp, “that bought that there claim from Mesquite up in Pinecate Cañon, and got mixed up with—”

“Shut up!” snapped the other man suddenly. “Listen to me, now. I’ll attend to this gent myself, if he needs it. Let him run as far’s his hobbles will let, for a while. First we got to fix up Miss Gilman. You got to take her out day after tomorrow—*sabe*? I’ll have her all primed up about the location—you sell it to her. Take her up the Chuckwalla road, then off to Pinecate mesa and up the cañon to that big boulder. Sell her the same ground we sold that Ramsay fool. There’d ought to be water in it right now, and it’ll look mighty pretty. Sell her any location she picks out. *Sabe*?”

“All right,” said Hassayamp. “And ye needn’t worry much over that bug-hunter. He’s jest a natural-born fool.”

“Maybe,” was the response. “But don’t be too durned sure.”

Sidewinder’s doubts would have been verified could he have seen Professor Tompkins at the same moment. Tompkins had removed goggles and helmet, reveal snapping blue eyes which looked anything but weak, and close-cropped red hair that spelled trouble. Also, from beneath his shirt he had produced

an automatic pistol, and was now carefully examining its load. When he spoke to himself, his voice lacked all the precision and clipped utterance it had displayed in public.

“Confound it, there’s one thing I sure overlooked!” he was musing as he frowned at a silver plate set into the butt of the pistol. “If I take it off, dust will get into everything; if I leave it on, I’m running risks. Well, guess I’ll run risks! If I need you, my friend, I’ll sure need you real bad.”

The initials on the silver plate were P. A. R.—which by no stretch of the imagination could be made to fit the name Tompkins.

## CHAPTER II

The usually free-and-easy dining-room of the Stovepipe House was hushed and uneasy when supper came around, before the unwonted presence of a strange female. Tompkins had a table to himself, and at the next table was Miss Gilman; there were only two other occupied tables.

Tompkins was interested in his fellow-p'lgrim. She was a young woman; she was possessed of an indoor complexion; and if not exactly beautiful she had an air of character and firmness; when she smiled, indeed, as she did whenever Haywire came to her table with his tray, a dancing light came into her eyes, and Haywire was straightway confused and flustered. Seated with his wife at another table was Hassayamp, and Tompkins observed that the proprietor addressed his better half in a tone of voice intended to reach other ears.

"Marier, we got to improve on Manuela's cookin' 'fore next week, when them road-workmen git here. I aint stuck on Mex cookin' my own self. We'll be right crowded up with folks workin' on the highway next week. Mose Pincus tells me today there's a feller name o' Rosenblum comin' in from Meteorite, goin' to open up a army goods store for this here district; wants him a shack big enough to hold six kids and a missus, and a store front. Speakin' as the president of the Stovepipe Springs chamber o' commerce, I'd say this here town is started on her boom. They tell me Sagebrush Beam weighed in a right smart o' dust today, too. Wouldn't s'prise me a mite if a rush'd start this way that'd ride Gold Hills a mile! Dang it, I wisht we

didn't have to ship in these here aigs; somehow, they don't taste like aigs should, as I remember 'em."

Miss Gilman departed, and thereafter Hassayamp essayed no more information at large. Tompkins, who was decidedly hungry, was the last out of the dining-room. He came through the post office lobby, performed the delayed ceremony of registering, and was then escorted outside to the street by Hassayamp. They found Miss Gilman standing under the sunshade and looking up at the glorious sunset that flooded all the sky with gold and scarlet. She turned at their approach, and Hassayamp performed the introductions.

"Miss Ethel Gilman, lemme make you acquainted with the Puffesser. You folks want to make yourselves to home in Stovepipe Springs. We don't put on no airs here, and everybody's sociable. Miss Gilman, she figgers on startin' a chicken-ranch and settlin' in our midst, and I dunno but what we might make her our school-teacher. This time next week we'd ought to have six Rosenblums, and we got four little Garcias right now, and Manuela tells me her brother is liable to come over from Chuckwalla City next month, and he's got five more. That looks right healthy, don't it? Then take the old Alcora Dance Hall down the street, it'd make a right smart school, if we fix her up and spill a little paint around and so forth. The Puffesser is likewise int'rested in hen chickens, Miss Gilman. He's lookin' up bugs right now, but—what did you say your name was, Perfesser?"

Tompkins cleared his throat and bowed to the young woman.

“Percival Henry J. Tompkins, entirely at your service, madam. May I solicit the pleasure of your company in a short walk, to breathe the inspiring evening air and view the noble aspect of the Creator’s handiwork in the heavens?”

“Gosh!” murmured Hassayamp in awe. Miss Gilman gave Tompkins a curious glance, as though wishing to peer past those tinted goggles; a smile was in her eyes, as she made demure assent.

“Thank you, I’d enjoy showing you the sights. You just arrived today?”

“Only this afternoon, madam,” returned Tompkins. “Mr. Foster, if you apprehend any specimens of *crotalus cerastes* in the near future, I should be glad if you would confine and preserve them for me.”

“I’d sure like to, Puffesser,” said Hassayamp, blinking, “but we aint got a bug in the house. If you was to go up to Garcia’s, you might have some luck.”

Tompkins waved his hand, and strode off beside Miss Gilman, who seemed rather red in the face.

Neither of them broke the silence. They passed down the street, came to the fast-disappearing rows of ancient buildings, relics of boom days, and presently were walking along the open desert, following the white road that went straight as a die across the horizon. The silence became oppressive, until suddenly Tompkins chuckled and spoke in his natural voice. It was a drawling, rather whimsical voice, and drew a swift glance from the girl.

“Our friend Hassayamp is a human phonograph,” he said.

“You’ll go too far one of these days,” said Miss Gilman. Tompkins stopped short and stared at her.

“Eh? Just what do you mean?”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed the girl sharply, yet with a laugh in her eyes. “That red hair and your natural voice and the shape of your head don’t go with your assumed character, Mr. Tompkins. Take off those glasses and let me see what you look like. And stop fidgeting with that pipe in your pocket. Take it out and smoke. I’d like you to.”

Tompkins broke into a laugh, reached up and removed the goggles, and met the curious regard of Miss Gilman.

“What do you wear them for?” she demanded. “You look better without ’em.”

“Protection,” he drawled, bringing forth his pipe. “You’re an observant young woman, but I trust fervently that you’ll keep your observations to yourself. I look very much like another man, and do not care to be recognized for him—or mistaken for him.”

The girl laughed. “You don’t look like a criminal, Mr. Tompkins!”

“I’m not. I’m really a mammalogist. Now, everybody here is positive that a bug-hunter is crazy, so I’m making it easy all around by playing up to the part. You, however, don’t look like a chicken-raiser.”

“But I am—at least, that’s what I’m going to be. I’ve come from Los Angeles to start a ranch here. Land is cheap; there’s no fog; the climate is ideal, and for a while I can sell all I can raise right here in town.”

“D’you mean it?” asked credulously.

“Of course I do. The prospect looks a whole lot better to me than the prospect of your finding any animals or bugs out on the desert.”

“You don’t know a whole lot about the desert, do you?” he asked, dryly.

“No. Do you?”

“A little.” Tompkins puffed at his pipe rather hard for a moment, frowning at the sunset, then he came to a halt, and turned to the girl with an air of decision.

“See here, Miss Gilman, really I don’t want to intrude into your affairs, but I think that you’re going ahead rather blindly. Are you all alone here in town?”

“Yes.” Her eyes dwelt on his strong, rather harsh features, with questioning scrutiny. “But I’ve lived on ranches, I’ve taught school, I have some money saved up—and really, Mr. Tompkins, I’m able to look out for myself.”

“No, you’re not,” he said quietly. Suddenly a look came into his eyes that made the girl catch her breath, so furious and deeply filled with passion was it. “You’ve got to get out of here!” he exclaimed with abrupt anger in his voice. “You don’t know what sort of a place this is—what sort of men are centered

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