

A Dying man

Eight days and eight nights, walking. Not a soul in sight. Not a drop to drink. Only miles and miles of sand extending in every direction. Phillip Buchannan, captain of Her Majesty's Royal Air Force, was the sole survivor of a medical team flying from Cairo to Nigeria. An outbreak of smallpox had begun spreading rapidly in a military base near Lagos, leaving five officers killed and seven others showing early symptoms of the disease, numbers rising. Buchannan, along with five other doctors, had left Cairo with strict orders to control the situation using any means necessary. However, mid-way through the Sahara, the intense heat caused the engine to overheat, catching fire rapidly and bringing the plane to the ground. He was now alone at the mercy of the desert, praying for a miracle and doing the only thing he could do under the African sun, walking. For eight days and eight nights he had been walking. Not a soul in sight. Not a drop to drink, only sand in every direction.

He thought of his wife Catherine and his children Susan, Mary and Thomas. He thought how they would react when they saw officers wearing brown uniforms knocking at their house in London, carrying a sealed envelope

with the simple words typed: We regret to inform you that Captain Phillip Buchanan of Her Majesty's Royal Air Force has been reported missing in action... How friends and acquaintances would see them walking through Hyde Park and greet them, not as Catherine, or Susan, or Mary or Thomas, but as Phillip Buchanan's widow Catherine and Phillip Buchanan's orphans Susan, Mary and Thomas.

Will my wife remarry? He questioned. How long will my children remember me? His death in the dessert would re-baptize him. Re-identify him. He came to the dry conclusion that after his death in the dessert he would no longer be Phillip Buchanan, Captain of Her Majesty's Royal air force, but just Phillip, another man swallowed by the hungry dessert, never to be found. Never to be buried, never to be remembered.

His survival skills were keeping him alive at the moment, but as the hours passed he grew weaker. His skin had become hard and cracked and his arms and legs reduced to a size perceivable as that of a child's body. Being in the hottest place on the planet he knew his blood wouldn't cure his thirst, but at least it could relieve him for a moment, so he reached into his pocket, took out

a small pocketknife, placed it against the palm of his hand and sliced it with the silver blade. Blood started oozing from his hand into the sand like a faucet leak. He placed quickly his mouth on the wound and began to drink his dripping blood. It tasted thick and metallic, like swallowing a coin, but at least it was cooler than the Saharan air as it flooded his blistered tongue and nearly-calcified throat. It calmed his thirst for a brief moment.

After he felt relieved, he cut a piece of his shirt and used it as a bandage for his hand. He then sat down to rest for a moment and began to contemplate the vastness of the desert. Suddenly, a black and white dot interrupted the scene of burnt yellow and brown. In the distance, on top of a dune, a rider appeared. The man was dressed in an all-black Tuareg's tunic and rode a white stallion. Buchanan wasn't sure of what he was seeing but, whatever it was, it was moving. It was alive. He began to jump and scream for help, pulling what little strength he had to plead and scream and wave his arms. Only the wind was keeping both souls company, so the rider noticed him quickly. The rider turned around, rode his majestic beast towards Buchanan until the black and white dot wasn't a dot anymore, but rather a shadow; and then the shadow wasn't a shadow anymore, but it was a figure; a figure with arms and legs and hair

and teeth. He greeted the captain.

-Salam alaykum- (peace be with you).

- Water sir... Could you give me some water please –replied Buchannan, as he gestured with his hands in hopes the rider could understand. After a moment of silence, the rider slowly reached into his tunic, pulled out a leather canteen and threw it to the dying man.

Buchannan opened the canteen and began drinking. God had brought him a miracle in the shape of a Tuareg. Finally, God had heard him. As water began to reach his chapped lips, drop-by-drop, he began to feel life returning to his body. Suddenly, his mouth felt dry again.

He opened his eyes and felt his tongue burning like coal on a fire. The cold cascade that was just falling on his mouth had become hot, Sahara sand piercing down his throat. As the sand crumbled its way into his stomach, he began to feel his throat close up and his breath escape him. He was dying again. He threw the canteen to the side and began to vomit uncontrollably. When he finally purged himself, he looked up to the rider, who was looking down motionless.

- Why have you done this to me? He demanded. The rider slowly uncovered his face and gently said
- Water is life captain, but just like water, Life left this place a long time ago.
- Al-lāh be with you, my friend.

As he said these words, the rider and his stallion began to transform into sand and, as gently as his words, they began to vanish into the desert wind, leaving Phillip. Not Phillip Buchannan, Captain of Her Majesty's Royal air force, but just Phillip, another man swallowed by the hungry dessert, never to be found, never to be buried, never to be remembered in his original stage. A dying man.

JM William