

The Hydrophobic Skunk

By Irvin S. Cobb

Directions: Read the short story and answer the questions. Refer to the text to check your answers when appropriate.

The Hydrophobic Skunk resides at the extreme bottom of the Grand Canyon and, next to a Southern Republican who never asked for a Federal office, is the rarest of living creatures. He is so rare that nobody ever saw him--that is, nobody except a native. I met plenty of tourists who had seen people who had seen him, but never a tourist who had seen him with his own eyes. In addition to being rare, he is highly gifted.

I think almost anybody will agree with me that the common, ordinary skunk has been most richly dowered by Nature. To adorn a skunk with any extra qualifications seems as great a waste of the raw material as painting the lily or gilding refined gold. He is already amply equipped for outdoor pursuits. Nobody intentionally shoves him round; everybody gives him as much room as he seems to need. He commands respect--nay, more than that, respect and **veneration**¹--wherever he goes. Joy riders never run him down and foot passengers avoid crowding him into a corner. You would think Nature had done amply well by the skunk; but no--the Hydrophobic Skunk comes along and upsets all these calculations. Besides carrying the traveling credentials of an ordinary skunk, he is rabid in the most **rabidissimus**² form. He is not mad just part of the time, like one's relatives by marriage--and not mad most of the time, like the old-fashioned railroad ticket agent--but mad all the time--incurably, enthusiastically and unanimously mad! He is mad and he is glad of it.

We made the acquaintance of the Hydrophobic Skunk when we rode down Hermit Trail. The casual visitor to the Grand Canyon first of all takes the rim drive; then he essays Bright Angel Trail, which is sufficiently scary for his purposes until he gets used to it; and after that he grows more adventurous and tackles Hermit Trail, which is a marvel of corkscrew convolutions, gimletting its way down this red abdominal wound of a canyon to the very gizzard of the world. Here, Johnny, our guide, felt moved to speech, and we hearkened to his words and hungered for more, for Johnny knows the ranges of the Northwest as a city dweller knows his own little side street. In the fall of the year Johnny comes down to the Canyon and serves as a guide a while; and then, when he gets so he just can't stand associating with tourists any longer, he packs his war bags and journeys back to the Northern Range and enjoys the company of cows a spell. Cows are not exactly exciting, but they don't ask fool questions.

A highly competent young person is Johnny and a **cow-puncher**³ of parts. Most of the Canyon guides are cow-punchers--accomplished ones, too, and of high standing in the profession. With a touch of reverence Johnny pointed out to us Sam Scovel, the greatest bronco buster of his time, now engaged in piloting tourists.

"Can he ride?" echoed Johnny in answer to our question. "Scovel could ride an earthquake if she stood still long enough for him to mount! He rode Steamboat--not Young Steamboat, but Old Steamboat! He rode Rocking Chair, and he's the only man that ever did that and was not called on in a couple of days to attend his own funeral."

We went on and on at a lazy mule trot, hearing the unwritten annals of the range from one who had seen them enacted at first hand. Pretty soon we passed a herd of burros with mealy, dusty noses and spotty hides, feeding on prickly pears and rock lichens; and just before sunset we slid down the last declivity out upon the plateau and came to a camp as was a camp!

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This was roughing it deluxe with a most deluxey vengeance! Here were three tents, or rather three canvas houses, with wooden half walls; and they were spick-and-span inside and out, and had glass windows in them and doors and matched wooden floors. . . . The mess tent was provided with a table with a clean cloth to go over it, and there were china dishes and china cups and shiny knives, forks and spoons. . . . Bill was in charge of the camp--a dark, rangy, good-looking leading man of a cowboy, wearing his blue shirt and his red neckerchief with an air.

That Johnny certainly could cook! Served on china dishes upon a cloth-covered table, we had mounds of fried steaks and shoals of fried bacon; and a bushel, more or less, of sheepherder potatoes; and green peas and sliced peaches out of cans; and sour-dough biscuits as light as kisses and much more filling; and fresh butter and fresh milk; and coffee as black as your hat and strong as sin. How easy it is for civilized man to become primitive and comfortable in his way of eating, especially if he has just ridden ten miles on a buckboard and nine more on a mule and is away down at the bottom of the Grand Canyon--and there is nobody to look on disapprovingly when he takes a bite that would be a credit to a steam shovel!

Despite all reports to the contrary, I wish to state that it is no trouble at all to eat green peas off a knife-blade--you merely mix them in with potatoes for a cement; and fried steak--take it from an old steak eater--tastes best when eaten with those tools of Nature's own providing, both hands and your teeth. An hour passed--busy, yet pleasant--and we were both gorged to the gills and had reared back with our cigars lit to enjoy a third **jorum**⁵ of black coffee apiece, when Johnny, speaking in an offhand way to Bill, who was still hiding away biscuits inside of himself like a parlor **prestidigitator**⁶, said:

"Seen any of them old Hydrophobies the last day or two?"

"Not so many," said Bill casually. "There was a couple out last night pirootin' round in the moonlight. I reckon, though, there'll be quite a flock of 'em out to-night. A new moon always seems to fetch 'em up from the river."

Both of us quit blowing on our coffee and we put the cups down. I think I was the one who spoke.

"We were just speakin' to one another about them Hydrophoby Skunks," said Bill apologetically. "This here Canyon is where they mostly hang out and frolic 'round."

Vocabulary

1. **veneration**: respect or awe
2. **rabidissimus**: not a real word; taken to mean very rabid
3. **cow-puncher**: cowboy
4. **declivity**: downward slope or hill
5. **jorum**: a vessel used for drinking
6. **prestidigitator**: a magician; one who performs sleight-of-hand

I laid down my cigar, too. I admit I was interested.

"Oh!" I said softly--like that. "Is it? Do they?"

"Yes," said Johnny. "I reckon there's liable to be one come shovin' his old nose into that door any minute. Or probably two--they mostly travels in pairs--sets, as you might say."

"You'd know one the minute you saw him, though," said Bill. "They're smaller than a regular skunk and spotted where the other kind is striped. And they got little red eyes. You won't have no trouble at all recognizin' one."

It was at this juncture that we both got up and moved back by the stove. It was warmer there and the chill of evening seemed to be settling down noticeably.

"Funny thing about Hydrophoby Skunks," went on Johnny after a moment of pensive thought--"mad, you know!"

"What makes them mad?" The two of us asked the question together.

"Born that way!" explained Bill--"mad from the start, and won't never do nothin' to get shut of it."

"Ahem--they never attack humans, I suppose?"

"Don't they?" said Johnny, as if surprised at such ignorance. "Why, humans is their favorite pastime! Humans is just pie to a Hydrophoby Skunk. It ain't really any fun to be bit by a Hydrophoby Skunk neither." He raised his coffee cup to his lips and **imbibed**⁶ deeply.

"Which you certainly said something then, Johnny," stated Bill. "You see," he went on, turning to us, "they aim to catch you asleep and they creep up right soft and take holt of you--take holt of a year usually--and clamp their teeth and just hang on for further orders. Some says they hang on till it thunders, same as snappin' turtles. But that's a lie, I judge, because there's weeks on a stretch down here when it don't thunder. All the cases I ever heard of they let go at sunup."

"It is right painful at the time," said Johnny, taking up the thread of the narrative; "and then in nine days you go mad yourself. Remember that fellow the Hydrophoby Skunk bit down here by the rapids, Bill? Let's see now--what was that **hombre's**⁷ name?"

"Williams," supplied Bill--"Heck Williams. I saw him at Flagstaff when they took him there to the hospital. That guy certainly did carry on regardless. First he went mad and his eyes turned red, and he got so he didn't have no real use for water--well, them **prospectors**⁸ don't never care much about water anyway--and then he got to snappin' and bitin' and foamin' so's they had to strap him down to his bed. He got loose though."

"Broke loose, I suppose?" I said.

"No, he bit loose," said Bill with the air of one who would not deceive you even in a matter of small details.

"Do you mean to say he bit those leather straps in two?"

"No, sir; he couldn't reach them," explained Bill, "so he bit the bed in two. Not in one bite, of course," he went on. "It took him several. I saw him after he was laid out. He really wasn't no credit to himself as a corpse."

Presently my friend spoke, and it seemed to me his voice was a mite husky. Well, he had a bad cold.

"You said they mostly attack persons who are sleeping out, didn't you?"

"That's right, too," said Johnny, and Bill nodded in affirmation.

"Then, of course, since we sleep indoors everything will be all right," I put in.

"Well, yes and no," answered Johnny. "In the early part of the evening a Hydrophoby is liable to do a lot of prowlin' round outdoors; but toward mornin' they like to get into camps--they dig up under the side walls or come up through the floor--and they seem to prefer to get in bed with you. They're cold-blooded, I reckon, same as rattlesnakes. Cool nights always do drive 'em in, seems like."

"It's going to be sort of coolish to-night," said Bill casually.

It certainly was. I don't remember a chillier night in years. My teeth were chattering a little--from cold--before we turned in. I retired with all my clothes on, including my boots and leggings, and I wished I had brought along my ear muffs. I also buttoned my watch into my lefthand shirt pocket, the idea being if for any reason I should conclude to move during the night I would be fully equipped for traveling. The door would not stay closely shut--the door-jamb had sagged a little and the wind kept blowing the door ajar. But after a while we dozed off.

It was 1:27 A. M. when I woke with a violent start. I know this was the exact time because that was when my watch stopped. I peered about me in the darkness. The door was wide open--I could tell that. Down on the floor there was a dragging, scuffling sound, and from almost beneath me a pair of small red eyes peered up **phosphorescently**⁹.

"He's here!" I said to my companion as I emerged from my blankets; and he, waking instantly, seemed instinctively to know whom I meant. I used to wonder at the ease with which a cockroach can climb a perfectly smooth wall and run across the ceiling. I know now that to do this is the easiest thing in the world--if you have the proper incentive behind you. I had gone up one wall of the tent and had crossed over and was in the act of coming down the other side when Bill burst in, his eyes blurred with sleep, a lighted lamp in one hand and a gun in the other.

I never was so disappointed in my life because it wasn't a Hydrophobic Skunk at all. It was a pack rat, sometimes called a trade rat, paying us a visit. The pack or trade rat is also a denizen of the Grand Canyon. He is about four times as big as an ordinary rat and has an appetite to correspond. He sometimes invades your camp and makes free with your things, but he never steals anything outright--he merely trades with you; hence his name. He totes off a side of meat or a bushel of meal and brings a cactus stalk in; or he will confiscate your saddlebags and leave you in exchange a nice dry chip. He is honest, but from what I can gather he never gets badly stuck on a deal.

Next morning at breakfast Johnny and Bill were doing a lot of laughing between them over something or other.

Vocabulary

7. **imbibed**: drank

8. **prospectors**: people searching an area for minerals, such as gold

9. **phosphorescently**: in a way that emits light

1. Which best expresses the narrator's sentiments on skunks?
 - a. Skunks are disgusting and worthy of hatred.
 - b. Skunks must be respected for their fearsome abilities.
 - c. Skunks are one of nature's most beautiful creations.
 - d. Skunks are pests that should be attacked on sight.
2. Which does **NOT** apply to Johnny?
 - a. He takes things too seriously.
 - b. He is a talented chef.
 - c. He is a skilled horseback rider.
 - d. He knows how to tell a story.
3. Which best describes the conditions in which the narrator and his companions were camping?
 - a. They were sleeping under the stars and foraging for their food.
 - b. They were staying in small tents and eating beans from a can.
 - c. They had luxurious accommodations and plenty of food.
 - d. They were staying in a five-star hotel in downtown Flagstaff.
4. Which best explains why Bill and Johnny tell the narrator and his companion about the Hydrophobic Skunks?
 - a. They were trying to teach them about nature.
 - b. They were trying to warn them.
 - c. They were trying to scare them.
 - d. They were trying to motivate them to help more.
5. Which statement best describes the narrator?
 - a. He is a rugged cowboy.
 - b. He is a crafty salesman.
 - c. He is a fearless hero.
 - d. He is a gullible tourist.
6. Why does the narrator button his watch into his shirt pocket before he goes to sleep?
 - a. He wants to protect his heart.
 - b. He is preparing to flee.
 - c. He set the alarm to wake up early.
 - d. He needs a comforting noise to go to sleep.
7. Which event happens last?
 - a. A rat frightens the narrator.
 - b. Johnny cooks dinner.
 - c. The narrator learns about hydrophobic skunks.
 - d. The men travel to the bottom of the Grand Canyon.
8. Which figurative language technique is used in the following sentence?
"Humans is just pie to a Hydrophoby Skunk."
 - a. Simile
 - b. Metaphor
 - c. Personification
 - d. Hyperbole
9. Which best describes the narrator's **tone** in this sentence from the last paragraph?
"He is honest, but from what I can gather he never gets badly stuck on a deal."
 - a. He is being humorous.
 - b. Serious
 - c. Melancholy
 - d. Intolerant
10. Which best explains why Johnny and Bill laughing at the end of the story?
 - a. They are laughing about how the narrator is afraid of rats.
 - b. They are laughing at the narrator's funny story.
 - c. They are laughing about how much money they made.
 - d. They are laughing about how they fooled the tourists.

