

The Lonesome Gods

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Who can say that the desert does not live? Or that the dark, serrated ridges conceal no spirit? Who can love the lost places, yet believe himself truly alone in the silent hills? How can we be sure the ancient ones were wrong when they believed each rock, each tree, each stream or mountain possessed an active spirit? Are the gods of those vanished peoples truly dead, or do they wait among the shadows for some touch of respect, the ritual or sacrifice that can again give them life?

It is written in the memories of the ancient peoples that one who chooses the desert for his enemy has chosen a bitter foe, but he who accepts it as friend, who will seek to understand its moods and whims, shall feel also its mercy, shall drink deep of its hidden waters, and the treasures of its rocks shall be opened before him. Where one may walk in freedom and find water in the arid places, another may gasp out his last breath under the desert sun and mark the sands with the bones of his ending.

Into the western wastelands, in 1807, a man walked dying. Behind him lay the bodies of his companions and the wreck of their boat on the Colorado River. Before him lay the desert, and somewhere beyond the desert the shores of the Pacific.

Jacob Almayer was a man of Brittany, and the Bretons are an ancient folk with roots among the Druids and those unknown people who vanished long ago, but who lifted the stones of Karnak to their places. He was a man who had walked much alone, a man sensitive to the wilderness and the mores of other peoples and other times, and now he walked into the desert with only the miles before him.

The distance was immeasurable. He was without water, without food, and the vast waste of the desert was the sickly color of dead flesh deepening in places to rusty red or to the hazy purple of distance. Within the limits of his knowledge lay no habitation of men except the drowsy Spanish colonies along the coast. Yet, colonies or not, the sea was there, and the men of Brittany are born to the sea. So he turned his face westward and let the distance unroll behind him.

Now he had not long to live. From the crest of the ridge he stared out across the unbelievable expanse of the desert. The gourd that hung from his shoulder was empty for many hours. His boots were tatters of leather, his cheeks and eyes sunken, his lips gray and cracked.

Morning had come at last, and Jacob Almayer licked the dew from the barrel of his rifle and looked westward. Although due west was the way he had traveled and due west he should continue, off to his right there lay the shadow of an ancient trail, lying like the memory of a dream across the lower slope of the mesa.

The trail was old. So old the rocks had taken the patina of desert time, so old that it skirted the curve of an ancient beach where once lapped the waters of a vanished sea. The old trail led away in a long, graceful sweep, toward the west-northwest, following the high ground toward some destination he could not guess.

West was his logical route. Somewhere out there the road from Mexico to the California missions cut diagonally across the desert. By heading directly west he might last long enough to find that road, yet the water gourd was dry and the vast sun-baked basin before him offered no promise. The ancient folk who made this path must have known where water could be found, yet if the sea had vanished from this basin might not the springs have vanished also?

Jacob Almayer was a big man, powerful in the chest and broad in the shoulders, a fighter by instinct and a man who would, by the nature of him, die hard. He was also a man of ironic, self-deriding humor, and it was like him to have no illusions now. And it was like him to look down the ancient trail with curious eyes. For how many centuries had this trail been used? Walked by how many feet, dust now these hundreds of years? And for how long had it been abandoned?

Such a path is not born in a month, nor are the stones marked in a year. Yet the ages had not erased the marks of their passing, although without this view from the crest it was doubtful if the trail could be seen. But once seen and recognized for what it was, following it should not be hard. Moreover, at intervals the passing men had dropped stones into neat piles.

To mark the miles? The intervals were irregular. To break the monotony? A ritual, perhaps? Like a Tibetan spinning a prayer wheel? Was each stone a prayer? An invocation to the gods of travelers? Gods abandoned for how long?

„I could use their help,“ Jacob Almayer said aloud, „I could use them now.“ Either path might lead to death, and either might lead to water and life, but which way?

Curiosity triumphed, or rather, his way of life triumphed. Had it not always been so with him? And those others who preceded him? Was it not curiosity more than desire for gain that led them on? And now, in what might be the waning hours of life, it was no time to change.

Jacob Almayer looked down the shimmering basin and he looked along the faint but easy sweep of the trail. He could, of course, rationalize his choice. The trail led over high ground, along an easier route; trust an Indian to keep his feet out of the heavy sand. Jacob Almayer turned down the trail, and as he did so he stooped and picked up a stone from the ground.

The sun lifted into the wide and brassy sky and the basin swam with heat. The free-swinging stride that had carried him from the Colorado was gone now, but the trail was good and he walked steadily. He began to sweat again, and smelled the odors of his unwashed clothes, his unbathed body; the stale smell of old sweat. Yet the air he breathed, however hot, was like wine—like water, one could almost swallow it. Soon he came to a pile of stones and he dropped the stone he carried and picked up another, then walked on.

Upon his shoulder the gourd flopped loosely, and his dry tongue fumbled at the broken flesh of his lips. After several hours he stopped sweating, and when he inadvertently touched the flesh of his face it felt hot and dry. When he paused at intervals he found it becoming harder and harder to start again but he kept on, unable to rest for long, knowing that safety if it came would be somewhere ahead.

Sometimes his boots rolled on rocks and twisted his feet painfully, and he could feel that his socks were stuck to his blistered feet with dried blood. Once he stumbled and fell, catching himself on his hands, but clumsily so that the skin was torn and lacerated. For a long minute he held himself on his hands and knees, staring drunkenly at the path beneath him, caught in some trancelike state when he was neither quite conscious nor quite unconscious, but for the moment was just flesh devoid of animation. Finally he got to his feet and, surprised to find himself there, he started on, walking with sudden rapidity as if starting anew. Cicadas hummed in the cacti and greasewood, and once he saw a rattler coil and buzz angrily, but he walked on.

Before him the thread of the trail writhed among the rocks, emerged, and then fell away before him to a lower level, so faint yet beckoning, always promising, drawing him into the distance as a magnet draws filings of iron. He no longer thought, but only walked, hypnotized by his own movement. His mind seemed to fill with the heat haze and he remembered nothing but the rocks, dropping and carrying stones with the deadly persistence of a drunken man.

Now the trail skirted the white line of an ancient beach, where the sand was silver with broken shell and where at times he came upon the remains of ancient fires, blackened stones, charred remains of prehistoric shells and fish bones.

His eyes were bloodshot now, slow to move and hard to focus. Dust devils danced in the desert heat waves. He clung to the thread of the path as to the one thing in this shimmering land of mirages that was real, that was familiar.

Then he tripped.

He fell flat on his face, and he lay still, face against the gravel of the partial slope, the only sound that of his hoarse breathing. Slowly he pushed himself up, got into a sitting position. Drunkenly he stared at his palms, scraped and gouged by the fall. With infinite and childish concentration he began to pick the sand from the wounds, and then he licked at the blood. He got up then, because it was his nature to get up. He got up and he recovered his gun, making an issue of bending without losing balance, and triumphant when he was successful.

He fell twice more in the next half hour, and each time it took him longer to rise. Yet he knew the sun was past its noontime high, and somehow he must last out the day. He started on but his mouth was dry, his tongue musty, and the heat waves seemed all around him. He seemed to have, at last, caught up with the mirage, for it shimmered around him and washed over him like the sea but without freshness, only heat.

A man stood in the trail before him.

An Indian. Jacob Almayer tried to cry out but he could not. He started forward, but the figure of the man seemed to recede as he advanced ... and then the Indian's arm lifted and pointed.

Almayer turned his head slowly, looking toward the ridge of upthrust rock not far off the trail. Almayer tried to speak, but the Indian merely pointed.

Jacob Almayer leaned back and tried to make out the looks of the Indian, but all he could see was the brown skin, breechclout, and some sort of a band around his head. Around his shoulders was some sort of a fur jacket. A fur jacket? In this heat? Almayer looked again at the rocks; when he looked back, the Indian was gone.

The rocks were not far away and Almayer turned toward them, but first he stopped, for where the Indian had been standing there was a pile of stones. He walked toward it and added his stone to the pile. Then he picked up another and turned toward the ridge. There was a trail here, too. Not quite so plain as the other, but nevertheless, a trail.

He walked on, hesitating at times, reluctant to get away from the one possibility of safety, but finally he reached the ridge where the trail rounded it, and he did likewise, and there in a corner of the rocks was white sand overgrown with thin grass, a clump of mesquite, a slim cottonwood tree, and beneath it, a pool of water.

Jacob Almayer tasted the water and it was sweet; he put a little on his lips, and it had the coolness of a benediction. He put some in his mouth and held it there, letting the starved tissues of his mouth absorb the water, and then he let a little trickle down his throat, and felt it, all the way to his stomach. After a while he drank, and over his head the green leaves of the cottonwood brushed their green and silver palms in whispering applause. Jacob Almayer crept into the shade and slept. He awoke to drink, then slept again, and in the paleness of the last hours of night he awakened and heard a faint stir upon the hillside opposite the ridge beside which he lay. He squinted his eyes, then widened them, trying to see, and then he did see.

There were men there, men and women, and even he in his half-delirium and his half-awareness knew these were like no Indians he had seen. Each carried a basket and they were gathering something from among the squat green trees on

the hill. He started up and called out, but they neither turned nor spoke, but finally completed their work and walked slowly away.

Daylight came ... one instant the sky was gray, and then the shadows retreated into the canyons and the dark places among the hills, and the sun crowned the distant ridges with gold, then bathed them in light, and the last faltering battalions of the shadows withered and died among the rocks and morning was there. In the early light Jacob Almayer drank again, drank deep now, and long.

His thirst gone, hunger remained, but he stood up and looked over at the hill. Had he seen anything? Or had it been his imagination? Had it been some fantasy of his half-delirium? Leaving the spring he crossed the small valley toward the hillside and climbed it. As he walked, he searched the ground. No footsteps had left their mark, no stones unturned, no signs of a large body of people moving or working.

The trees ... he looked at them again, and then he recalled a traveler who had told him once of how the Indians gathered the nuts from these pines ... from the piñon. He searched for the cones and extracted some of the nuts. And then he gathered more, and more. And that evening he killed a mountain sheep near the spring.

At daylight he resumed his walk, but this time his gourd was filled with water, and he carried fresh meat with him, and several pounds of the nuts. As Jacob Almayer started to walk, he picked up a stone, and then an idea came to him.

How far would an Indian walk in a day? Those who followed this trail would probably have no reason for hurry. Would they walk fifteen miles? Twenty? Or even thirty? Or would distance depend on the water supply? For that was the question that intrigued him. Where they stopped there would be water. The solution was to watch for any dim trail leading away from the main route toward the end of the day.

Soon he found another pile of the stones, and he dropped the one he carried, and picked up another. And at nightfall he found a dim trail that led to a flowing spring, and he camped there, making a fire and roasting some of his meat. As he ate and drank, as he watched his fire burn down, as he thought of the trail behind and the trail ahead, he looked out into the darkness.

Jacob Almayer was a Breton, and the folk of Brittany are sensitive to the spirits of the mountains and forest. He looked out into the darkness beyond the firelight and he said aloud, „To the spirits of this place, my respects, humble as they are, and in my heart there will always be thanks for you, as long as I shall live.“

The fire fluttered then, the flames whipping down, then blazing up, brighter than ever. From far off there came the distant sound of voices. Were they chanting, singing? He couldn't tell ... it might have been the wind.

