

**A Short Story by Joseph A. Altsheler**

# **The Lost Herd**

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# The Lost Herd

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**A Short Story**

**by Joseph A. Altsheler**



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## The Lost Herd

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Redfield parted the twining bushes with both hands, and pushed his body through the cleft, while I stood by to see the issue. He took but a single step and then threw himself back like a soldier who would escape a bullet, his face, now turned toward me, showing a yellowish hue in the moonlight. He raised his hand and wiped his damp forehead, while I gazed at him in silence, seeing fear, sudden and absolute, in his gaze, as if death had faced him, with no warning.

We stood so, for a few moments, until the terror died slowly in his eyes, when he took another step back, and laughing a little, in a nervous way, pointed before him with a long forefinger.

I advanced, but he put a restraining hand upon my shoulder, and bade me take only a single step. I obeyed and, with his hand still on my shoulder, looked down a drop of a thousand feet, steep like

the side of a house, the hard stone of the wall showing gray and bronze, where the light of the moon fell upon it.

I saw at the bottom masses of foliage like the tops of trees, and running through them a thread of silver, which I felt sure was the stream of a brook or creek. We were looking into a green valley, and now I understood Redfield's terror, when instinct or quickness of eye, or both, saved him from the next step, which would have taken him to sure death.

The valley looked pleasant, with green trees and running water, and I suggested that it would furnish a good camp to us who were weary of mountains and ravines and stony paths.

Redfield pointed straight before us, and three miles away rose the mountain wall again, steep and bare, the hard stone gleaming in the moonlight. I followed his finger as he moved it around in a circle, and the wall was there, everywhere. The valley seemed, to be enclosed by steep mountains as completely as the sea rings around a coral island.

I said that I had never heard of such a place in these mountains, and Redfield reminded me that there were many things of which neither he nor I had ever heard, and perhaps never would hear.

His retort did not dim my curiosity, in which he shared fully, and, lying down for greater security, we stared over the brink into the valley, which looked like a huge bowl, sunk there by nature. The sky was clear, the moon was rising, and we could see the boughs of the trees below waving in the gentle wind. The silver thread of the brook widened, cutting across the valley like a sword blade, and we almost believed that we saw soft green turf by its banks. But on all sides of the bowl towered the stone walls, carved into fantastic figures by the action of time and mountain torrents.

The green valley below could not remove the sense of desolation which the walls, grim and hard, inspired. My eyes turned from the foliage to the sweep of stone rising above, black where the light could not reach it, then gray and bronze and purple and green as if the moon's rays had been tinted by some hidden alchemy. I assisted nature

with my own imagination and carved definite shapes—impish faces and threatening armies in the solid stone of the walls. I felt the shiver of Redfield's hand, which was still upon my shoulder, and he complained that he was chilled. I knew it to be the stony desolation of the walls, and not the cold of the night, that made him shiver, for I, too, felt it in my bones, and I proposed that we look no more, at least not then, but build a fire, and rest and sleep.

We did as I proposed, but while we gathered the fallen brushwood, each knew what was in the other's mind; the mystery of the valley was upon us, and we would wait only until daylight to enter it and see what it held.

Redfield lighted the fire, and the blaze, rising above the heaps of dry sticks and boughs, was twisted into coils of red ribbon by the wind; a thin cloud of smoke gathered and floated off over the valley, where it hung like a mist, while the wind moaned in the great cleft.

Redfield complained that he was still cold, and wrapping his blanket tightly around him, sat close to the fire, where I noticed that he did not cease

to shiver. I spread out my own blanket, and by and by both of us lay down on the grass seeking sleep.

When I awoke far in the night, the fire had burned down, the moon was gone, and Redfield's figure, beyond the bed of coals, was almost hidden by the darkness. Damp mists had gathered on the mountain, and my hand, as I drew the corners of the blanket around my throat, shook with cold.

Not being able to sleep again just then, I rose and put more wood on the heap of coals. But the fire burned with a languid, drooping blaze, giving out little warmth and offering no resistance to the encroaching darkness. Redfield slept heavily and was so still that he lay like one dead. The flickering light of the fire fell over his face sometimes and tinted it with a pale red.

I sat by the coals a little while, looking around at the dim forest, and then the attraction of the great pit, or valley, drew me toward it.

I knelt down at the brink, holding to the scrubby bushes with each hand, and looked over,

but I could no longer see the trees and brook below. The valley was filled with mists and vapors, and from some point beneath came the loud moan of the wind.

I stayed there a long time, gazing down at the clouds and vapors, which heaped upon each other and dissolved, showing denser vapors below, and then heaped up in terraces again. The stone walls, when I caught glimpses of them, seemed wholly black in the darkness of the night, and the queer shapes which took whatever form my fancy wished were exaggerated and distorted by the faintness of the light. The place put a spell upon me; if Redfield would not go with me in the morning to explore it, though knowing well he would, I resolved to go alone, and see what, if anything, was there besides grass and trees and water. I felt the strange desire to throw myself from a height which sometimes lays hold of people, and instantly pulling myself back from the brink I returned to the fire. Redfield was yet sleeping heavily and the flames had sunk again, flickering and nodding as they burned low. I lay down and slept until morning, when I awoke to

find that Redfield was already cooking our breakfast. He proposed that we begin the descent in an hour, and like myself he seemed to have accepted the conclusion that we had agreed upon the attempt, though neither had said a word about it.

The valley assumed a double aspect in the bright light of the morning, green and pleasant far down where the grass grew and the brook flowed, but grim and gaunt as ever in its wide expanse of rocky wall. The rising sun broke in a thousand colored lights upon the cliffs, and the stony angles and corners threw off tiny spear points of flame. The majesty of the place which had taken hold of us by night held its sway by day.

We had no doubt that we should find a slope suitable for descent if we sought long enough, and we pushed our way through the bushes and over the masses of sharp and broken stone along the brink until our bones ached and our spirit was weak. Yet we encouraged each other with the hope that we would soon reach such a place, though the circle of the valley was soon proved to be much greater than we had expected.

Noon came and we were forced to rest and eat some of the cold food that we had wisely brought with us. The sun was hot on the mountains and the stone walls of the valley threw the light back in our eyes until, dazzled, we were forced to look away. But we had no thought of ceasing the quest; such a discovery was not made merely to leave the valley unexplored, and rising again after food and rest we resumed our task. About the middle of the afternoon I saw a break in the wall which we thought to be a ravine or gully of sufficient slope to permit of our descent into the valley, but it was nearly night when we reached the place and found our opinion was correct.

The ravine was well lined with short bushes which seemed to ensure a safe descent, even in twilight, and we began the downward climb, seeking a secure resting place among the rocks for each footstep and holding with both hands to the bushes and vines.

The sun, setting in a sky of unbroken blue, poured a flood of red and golden light into the valley. The walls blazed with vivid colors, and the green of the trees and grass was deepened.

Redfield stopped, and touching me on the shoulder pointed with his finger to the little plain in the center of the valley where a buffalo herd was grazing. Such they were we knew at the first glance, for one could not mistake the great forms, the humped shoulders and shaggy necks.

Neither of us sought to conceal his surprise, and perhaps neither would have believed what his eyes told him had it not been for the presence and confirmation of the other. We knew, as everybody else knew, that the wild buffalo had been exterminated in this region years ago, and that even now the only herd left in the whole United States was somewhere in the tangled mountains of Colorado, and yet here we were gazing upon another herd of these great animals, at least fifty of them, for we could count them as they moved placidly about and cropped the short turf.

We remained a quarter of an hour in that notch in the wall exulting over our second discovery, for we considered the tenants of the valley of as great importance as the valley itself, and exchanged with each other sentences of surprise and wonder. The sun hovered directly over the

further brink, and poised there, a huge globe of red, shot through with orange light, it seemed to pour all its rays upon the valley.

Every object was illumined and enlarged. The buffaloes rose to a gigantic height, the trees were tipped with fire, and the brook gleamed red and yellow where the rays of the sun struck directly upon it. Again we said to each other what a wonderful discovery was ours and looked to the rifles that we had strapped across our backs, for seeing the great game of the valley we had it in mind to enjoy unequalled sport. I lamented the speedy departure of the day, but Redfield thought the night would give us a better chance to stalk the big game, and thus talking we resumed the descent. The sun sank behind the mountains, the red and golden lights faded, and the valley lay below us in darkness. The buffalo herd had disappeared from our sight, but feeling sure that we should find it we continued our descent, clinging to the bushes and vines, and wary with our footing.

The twilight was not so deep that the gray mountain walls did not show through it, and as

we painfully continued our descent the trees and the brook rose again out of the dusk. Nearing the last steps of the slope we could see that the valley was much larger than it had looked from above, and our wonder at the presence of the herd was equalled by our wonder at the manner in which it had ever reached such a place, as there seemed to be no entrance save the perilous path by which we had come.

At last we left the bushes and stones of the ravine and, standing with feet half buried in the soft turf of the valley, looked up at the sky as if from the bottom of a pit.

The twilight was as clear around us as it had been on the mountain above, and we could see a pleasant stretch of sward, the land rolling gently, with clumps of bushes and large trees clustering here and there.

We did not pause to look about, both being filled with the ardor of the chase, and we walked quickly toward the little bit of prairie in which we had seen the buffaloes, examining our rifles to be sure that they were loaded properly. I felt that sense of unreality which strange surroundings

always give.

The night, now fully come, was not dark, the stars were appearing and a pale light glimmered along the edges of the cliffs, which seemed, as I looked up, to overhang and threaten us.

We reached the brook that we had seen from above, a fine stream of clear water, a foot deep and a dozen or more across. We paused there to drink and refresh ourselves, and found it cool and natural to the taste. I supposed that it flowed into some cave through the mountain, since I could not imagine any other outlet; but the matter remained for only a few seconds in my mind, as Redfield began to tug at my sleeve and urge me on to the chase, to which I was nothing loth.

Yet I noticed that there were no other signs of animal life in the valley. Not a rabbit popped up in the grass; the trees were fresh with foliage, but no birds flew among the boughs. All around us was silence, save for the soft crush of our own footsteps and our breathing, now quickened by our exertions. I called Redfield's attention to this silence and absence of life, and we stopped again and listened but heard nothing. The night was

without wind; I could not see a leaf on the trees stir, the air felt close and heavy, and Redfield told me that my face was without color; I had noticed that fact already in his.

Fifty yards farther and we came to the open space in which we had seen the herd, and we felt sure that it was not far beyond us, for the heads of the animals had been turned south and we believed they had continued to move in that direction as they nibbled the grass. We paused to take another look at our rifles, our ardor for the chase rising to the highest, leaving us no thought of anything but to kill.

I had never before hunted such big game and I felt now the thrill which leads men to risk their own lives that they may take those of the most dangerous wild beasts. The twilight had deepened somewhat, and though of a grayer tone in the valley, where mists seemed to be collected and hemmed, it was not dense enough to hinder our pursuit.

Redfield paused suddenly and put his hand upon my shoulder though I had seen them as soon as he. The herd was grazing in the edge of a

little grove a few hundred yards ahead of us, but within plain sight. This closer view confirmed our count from the mountainside that they were about fifty in number, and admiration mingled with our wonder, for they were magnificent in size, true monarchs of the wilderness, grazing, unseen by man, while the rush of civilization passed around their mountains and pressed on, hundreds of miles into the Farther West. Their figures stood out in the gray twilight, huge and somber, surpassing in size anything that I had imagined. I felt a joy that I was one of the two whose fortune it was to find such game, a proud anticipation of the trophies that I would show. I saw the same exhilaration in Redfield's eyes, and again we spoke to each other of our fortune.

I held up a wet finger, and finding that the wind was blowing from the herd toward us we resumed our advance, sure that we could approach near enough for rifle shot. The herd was noiseless, like ourselves, the huge beasts seeming to step lightly as they cropped the grass, the scraping of the bushes as they pushed through them not reaching our ears. Again the sense of

silence, of desolation oppressed me. The grayness over everything, the trees, the grass, the mountains, Redfield, myself even, the unreality of the place and our situation seized me and clung to me, though I strengthened my will and went on, the zeal of the chase directing all else.

Our stalking proceeded with a success that was encouraging to novices like ourselves, and a few more cautious steps would take us within good rifle shot. We marked two of the animals, the largest two of the herd, standing near a clump of bushes, and we agreed that we should fire first upon these, Redfield taking the one on the right. If we failed to slay at the first shot, which was very likely, the chase would be sure to lead us directly down the valley, and we could easily slip fresh cartridges into our rifles as we ran. Nor could the game escape us within such restricted limits; and thus, feeling secure of our triumph, we slipped forward with the greatest caution until we were within the fair range that we wished. Then we stood motionless until we could secure the best aim, each selecting the target upon which we had agreed.

The herd seemed to have no suspicion of our presence. However acute might be the buffalo's sense of smell, it had brought to them no warning of our presence. Their heads were half buried in the long grass, and as I looked along the barrel of my rifle, I felt again the stillness of the valley, the utter sense of loneliness which made me creep a little closer to Redfield, even as I sought the vital spot in the animal at which I aimed my rifle.

Redfield whispered that we could hardly miss at such good range, and then we pulled trigger so close together that our two rifles made one report.

We were good marksmen, but both the buffaloes whirled about, untouched as far as we could see, and looked at us. The entire herd followed these two leaders, and in an instant fifty pairs of red eyes confronted Redfield and myself. Then they charged us like a troop of cavalry, heads down, their great shoulders heaving up. We slipped hasty cartridges into our rifles and fired again, but the shots, like the first, seemed to have no effect, and, in frightened fancy, feeling the breath of the angry beasts already in our faces, we turned and ran with all speed up the valley, in

fear of our lives and praying silently for refuge. I hung to my rifle with a kind of instinct, and I noticed that Redfield, too, carried his. I looked once over my shoulder and saw the herd pursuing, not fifty feet away, in solid line like the front of an attacking square. I shouted to Redfield to dart to one side among some trees, hoping that the heavy brutes would rush past us as we could not hope to outrun them in a straight course, and he obeyed with promptness. We gained a little by the trick, but the buffaloes turned again presently, and then we seized the hanging boughs of two convenient trees, and, managing to retain our rifles, climbed hastily up and out of present danger.

The buffaloes stopped about a hundred feet away, still in unbroken phalanx, and stared at us with red eyes. I was filled with fear; I will not deny it, I felt it in every fiber. I had heard always that these beasts, however huge, were harmless, their first rush over, but they were looking at us now with eyes of human intelligence and even more than human rage; a steady, tenacious anger that threatened us, and seemed to demand our

lives as the price of our attempt upon theirs. I felt cold to the bone, and the angry gaze of the besieging beasts held my own eyes until I turned them away, with an effort, and looked at Redfield. Then I saw that he was as white and afraid as I knew myself to be. I told him that we were besieged, and he rejoined that the attitude, the look of our besiegers, betokened persistency.

While we talked, the buffaloes began to move and we hoped that we had been mistaken in our belief, and that they would abandon us, but the hope was idle. They formed a complete circle around us, a ring of sentinels, each motionless after he had assumed his proper position, the red eyes shining out of the massive, lowered heads, and fixed on us. Redfield laughed, but it was not the laugh of mirth. He asked me what we had to fear from the buffalo, which was not a beast of prey; they would turn away presently and begin to crop the grass again, but his tone did not express a belief in his own words.

The night had not darkened, but the curious grayness which was the prevailing quality of the atmosphere in the valley had deepened, and the

forms of the beasts on guard became less distinct. Yet it seemed only to increase the penetrating gaze of their eyes, which flamed at us like a circle of watch fires. The sentinels were noiseless as well as motionless. The wind whimpered gently through the leaves of the trees, but there was nothing else to be heard in the valley, and saving ourselves and the buffaloes, nothing of human or animal life to be seen. Redfield said to me that he wished our guards would move, that while they stayed in such fixed attitudes he felt as if we were watched by so many human beings. His voice was at a higher pitch than usual, and I felt a strange pleasure in noticing it, for I knew then that he had been affected as I by our peculiar position. He burst suddenly into a laugh, and when I asked him where he found amusement, he reminded me that both of us yet carried our rifles, though we seemed to have forgotten the use for which they were made. He added that the sentinels were within easy range, and since our object was now self-preservation and not sport, we could sit on the boughs in perfect safety and shoot as many of them as we chose, unless they retired.

It was the power of surprise and fear that had prevented us from thinking of this before, though the weapons were in our hands, and I felt a sense of shame that we had permitted ourselves to be overwhelmed in such a manner. I waited before raising my own rifle, to see the effect of Redfield's shot. I saw him select his target and look down the barrel of his rifle as he sought to make his aim true. The eyes of the buffalo had seemed so human in their intelligence and anger that I expected to see the animal, knowing his danger, retreat when the rifle was raised. But he made no motion, looking straight into the muzzle of the weapon which was threatening him. Redfield pulled the trigger and fired, and then both of us cried out in surprise and displeasure.

The buffalo did not move, and if the bullet had touched him there was no mark upon him that we could see to tell of its passage. Redfield said it was the bad light that had made him miss, but I believed it was a trembling hand—that the chill, though the night was warm, which affected me had seized him, too. Yet I steadied myself now that my own time to fire had come, and took

good aim at the buffalo nearest to my tree. It may have been the strength of my imagination, and in reality the eyes of the brute may not have been visible at all at such a distance and in the night, but I was sure that they were staring at me with human malice, and another expression, too, that I interpreted as defiance. I was seized with a sudden and fierce anger—anger because I had been afraid, anger because there was a taunt in the eyes of the beast.



The Buffalo

I pulled the trigger and looked eagerly at the result of my shot; then I cried aloud in disappointment, as Redfield had done. The buffalo, untouched, was staring at me with the same malicious eyes, not even moving his head when I fired.

Redfield laughed once more in a mirthless

way, and I told him angrily to hush; that he was afraid but I was not, and I would fire again. I put in a second cartridge but the shot was as futile as the first, and Redfield, who tried once more, had a similar lack of success. But we told each other, and with all the greater emphasis because we were not sure of it, that it was the imperfect light and our nerves strained by the descent of the rough cliff. I noticed that Redfield's voice was growing louder and more uneven as we talked, and his eyes were gleaming.

At last we exhausted our cartridges without touching the silent ring of sentinels, or making any of them move, and Redfield, throwing his rifle to the ground, laughed in the curious, unnatural way that makes one shiver. I bade him stop and I spoke with anger, but he paid no attention either to my words or my manner. His laughter ended shrilly, and then he said that he understood it all: that these animals had been hunted from the face of the earth except this lone herd, which was left here to hunt any man who came against it. Behold the present as the proof of what he said!

I laughed at him, yet my laughter, like his, sounded strange even in my own ears, and looking at the silent ring of sentinels, I believed his words to be true. When or how we should escape I could not foresee, and I did not feel the fear of death; and yet there was nothing that I had in the world which I would not have given to be out of the valley. The rifle which I had used to such little purpose burned my hands, and I let it drop to the ground.

Redfield laughed again in a shrill, acrid way, and when I asked him to stop, jeered at me and bade me notice how faithful our besiegers were to their duty.

Not one of them had moved from the circle, their forms becoming duskier as the night deepened, but growing larger in the thick atmosphere. The sky above was cloudless, and we seemed to see it from interminable depths; the huge cliffs rose out of the mists, shapeless walls, and the trees became gray and shadowy. Redfield began to talk, volubly and about nothing, varying his chatter with the same shrill, unpleasant laughter, and I, finding it useless to bid him hush,

said nothing. Yet I wished that he would cease, and I might hear other sounds, the leap of a rabbit or the scamper of a deer, anything to disturb that horrible chatter, and the equally horrible silence, otherwise. Securing myself in the crook of a bough and the tree I tried to sleep, and I think that at last I fell into a kind of stupor, in which I heard only Redfield's shrill laugh. But I awoke from it to find a clear moon, and our silent line of sentinels still there. The wind, risen somewhat, was moaning up the valley and the night was cold.

Redfield was silent then, but when I called to him he answered in a natural tone for the first time in hours and asked me if I had anything to suggest, as we must change our present position very soon. I told him that we must descend from the trees, find the path out of the valley and leave by it, at once. He pointed to the sentinels and said nothing would induce him to face them, but I told him we must do it since it was the only thing left for us, though I will admit that my own sense of fear was of such strength that my words were braver than myself.

The moon came out again and the forms of our guards grew more distinct, ceasing to have the shadowy quality which at times in the last hour had made them waver before me. Nevertheless, the light still served to distort them and enlarge them to gigantic size, and my imagination gave further aid in the task.

Redfield became silent again, and I thought he might be asleep, but when I looked at him I saw his eyes shining with the same unnatural light that I had marked there before, and I felt with greater force than ever that we must not long delay our attempt to leave the valley. But I remained for a while without movement or without thought of what we should do. The belief that we had come there to be hunted by the survivors of the millions whom we had hunted out of existence became a conviction, and I felt a reluctance to meet the eyes of the avenging beasts, eyes that I could always see with my imagination if not with my own gaze. The light of the moon struck fairly on the sides of the great cliffs and the grotesque and threatening faces which my fancy had carved there in the rock

lowered at us again. I could even distort the trees into gigantic half-human shapes, leaning toward us and taunting us, but I shut my eyes and drove them away. I had not forgotten the curious light gleaming in Redfield's eyes.

An hour later I told Redfield that we must descend, that we could not stay forever where we were and it was foolish for us to delay, wearing out our strength and weakening our wills with so long and heavy a vigil. He said no, that he would not stir while those beasts were there watching; he could see a million red eyes all turned upon him and he knew that as soon as he touched the earth the owners of those eyes would rush upon him and trample him to death. I felt some of his own reluctance, but knowing that it was no time to waste words I told him that he could stay where he was, if he chose, but I was going; I had seen enough of the valley and certainly I would never come near it again. So speaking I began to descend the tree, and Redfield instantly began to tremble and beg me, like a child, not to go. He said he could not be left there alone and he would not be for all the world. Strengthened in my

purpose by his pleadings and believing that my method would compel him to come I again bade him stay if he wished, it was nothing to me; but while I said these things I continued to descend. When he saw that I was in truth going he began to lower himself from his tree, though still begging me not to make the attempt.

My foot struck the ground and I stood there afraid, but resolute. Our guards still gazed at us but made no movement to attack, and I drew courage from the fact.

Redfield was shivering, and perhaps my own courage was not of the best, but I pointed to a dark line in the face of a distant cliff where the moonlight fell clearly, and asked if it were not the ravine by which we had come. He said yes, and not giving him time to think and to hesitate about it I seized him by the arm and pulled him on, telling him that we must reach the ravine as quickly as we could and leave the valley. Then we advanced directly toward that segment of the watchful circle which stood between us and the point we desired to reach.

I retained my firm grasp upon Redfield's arm

and I felt the flesh trembling under my fingers. We did not recall until long afterward that we had forgotten our rifles. As we advanced, the line of buffaloes parted and we passed through it. Redfield cried out in childish delight and said they were afraid of us, but I shook him, more in anger than from any wiser motive, and hastened our steps. Fear rolled away from me and I felt an exhilaration that made me walk with buoyant step. I dropped my hand from Redfield's arm and we walked on at a swift pace, my eyes fixed on the dark line in the cliff which marked the ravine, our avenue of escape from the valley. Redfield suddenly put his hand upon my shoulder and motioned me to look back. When I obeyed I saw the buffaloes following us in a long line, as regular and even as a company of soldiers. Redfield laughed in the mirthless way which marked him that night and said we had an escort who would see that we did not linger in the valley. I could not say that he was wrong, but I grew impatient with him when he tried to make a jest of it and talked of our bodyguard. I knew that he was trembling, and I asked angrily, though not in words, why they could not let us alone. We

were leaving as fast as we could, and as for coming back, nothing could drag me to that valley again; no, nothing, and I said the “nothing” aloud with angry emphasis.

Our guard did not desert us, but followed at fifty or sixty yards with noiseless step. And again I noticed that there was no other animal life in the valley, though the grass was green and the woods abundant, a place that the birds and rabbits should love.

The outlines of the pass grew more distinct, the tracery of bushes and vines that lined it was revealed, and in a few minutes we would arrive at the first slope. I felt like a criminal, a murderer, taken in disgrace from the place of his crime, and this feeling once having seized me would not leave, but grew in strength and held me. Redfield was my brother in crime, and certainly his face, his nerveless manner, showed his guilt.

I hastened my footsteps, eager to leave the place. Redfield kept pace with me, and in silence we reached the first slope. It was a rugged and toilsome ascent, but I thought little of such things, the joy of escape from the valley

mastering all other emotions. A third of the way we paused, and, looking back, saw the silent line of sentinels watching at the foot of the cliff, their eyes turned up at us.

Then we resumed our ascent, and, reaching the top of the cliff, left the lost herd, forever.



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- **Credit**

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