



Frontispiece

LAST ^{OF} _{THE} SAN PATRÍCIOS

a novel by

Terry Hagerty

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Chapter Three

October 30, 1879 -- California

Several days after the saloon fight, Sean and Michael made camp in a quiet nest of trees near the Diablo Range. They were heading for the Pacific coast; its mild winters seemed more inviting to them than the deep snow and frozen cold of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Both of them were tired and chilled to the bone, so they made their campfire a little larger than they might have otherwise. They knew that the larger the fire, the greater the chance it might draw strangers -- and not always the friendly kind. But the warmth of the flames made the hard ground on that cold October night feel just a little more tolerable.

“I think we should spend the whole winter in one place, somewhere along the coast,” Michael said.

“In one place?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Well, for one thing,” Sean said, “travelin’s what we do best.”

“Travel’s great, when you’re young -- but awful painful on the joints as ya get older.”

Sean massaged his arthritic left hip, the result of a bullet he took years ago.

“I suppose ya got a point,” Sean conceded. “Though I don’t know what either of us’d do, settled in one place for any length o’ time. We’ve been many things, Michaleen: good soldiers, bad farmers, worse prospectors, competent laborers on the railroad, better gamblers than most, an’, occasionally, fake Franciscan friars. Now, we’re too old to be soldiers, farmers, prospectors, or laborers on the railroad. That leaves gamblers an’ bein’ fake Franciscan friars, an’ neither of those are appropriate professions for anyone thinkin’ of remainin’ in one place for any length o’ time.”

“Maybe we need to find a new profession.”

“Let’s face it,” Sean said. “Neither of us figured we’d live this long. Otherwise, we’d have married an’ had children to support us in our old age.”

Michael sighed as he smiled, agreeing with his friend, but with an air of resolved melancholy.

Sean tried to brighten his friend’s mood by composing a poem off the top of his head, as he had many times before:

“My good friend, you an’ me, it must be destiny,
How we’ve survived to this day an’ the next.
Whether bright or black, we’ve had each other’s back,”

Sean paused, causing Michael to wonder, if his friend was stuck for a last line. Then Sean smiled and finished with:

“An’ kept the winds o’ fate forever vexed”

Michael laughed. "I thought ya'd boxed yourself into a corner, comin' up with a rhyme for 'next,'"

"Only for a moment, Michaleen. Only for a moment."

Michael pulled a bottle of Irish whiskey from his saddlebag and offered it to Sean, who took a long swig, before passing it back.

"Then again," Sean added, as an afterthought. "I wouldn't be adverse to tradin' my horse an' saddle for a cushioned seat on a train or my bedroll for a soft down bed in a fine hotel now an' again. I know my hip would approve."

"What you need is a rich widow who could provide ya with those cushioned seats an' soft down beds."

Sean smiled. "From your lips to God's ears, Michaleen. An', hopefully, she wouldn't be adverse to a bit o' travelin'."

"First class, of course."

"Of course."

They were cleaning up after dinner, when they first heard the sound of human feet and horse hooves approaching in the dark.

"Sounds like two comin' from the south," Michael whispered.

Sean nodded. "An' at least two more from the north."

They both lifted the small leather loops off the hammers of their revolvers that kept the guns secure in their holsters, then Michael reached into his saddlebag on the ground beside him and pulled out something that he hid under his leg.

"You in the camp," a voice called out from the dark. "We're comin' in."

Michael took off his spectacles and wiped away the smudges. "How's your stomach, Seamus?"

Sean smiled.

Michael returned the spectacles to his face, as two large, grizzled-looking men walked slowly into the light from

the south, leading their ponies with their left hands, while their right hands were close enough to their holstered guns to infer their intentions.

A balding man with a scar over his right eye stepped forward. “Any coffee left?”

“Help yourself,” Michael replied in his northern Irish brogue. “There should be enough left for you an’ your friend, an’ your two friends behind us.”

The balding fellow smiled, and called out, “Come on in, boys.”

Two more men who clearly hadn’t seen a bathtub or razor blade in months, ambled into the light from the campfire, also holding the reins to their ponies with their left hands. They had already drawn their pistols and were pointing them at the two Irishmen.

The balding fellow crouched down and took hold of the coffee pot with his gloved hand to pour himself a cup. Almost immediately, he spit it back out.

“It’s burnt,” he said. “And weak!”

“Sorry.”

“We didn’t really come for the coffee anyway,” the balding fellow said, as he got back to his feet. Then he motioned for the second, younger fellow who had come in with him from the south to step forward.

While the two men from the north kept their guns at the ready, the younger fellow squatted down in front of Michael and proceeded to strip him of everything he had in his pockets, whether it had any value or not. Lastly, he took Michael’s revolver.

“A Colt,” he said, happily, and slipped it under his belt.

Sean had remained uncharacteristically silent. He just sat on his bedroll with a sullen look on his face. Suddenly, he winced in pain and doubled over, holding his stomach.

“What’s wrong with him?” the balding fellow asked.

“Stomach pains,” Michael said. “We’re on our way to the nearest town to see a doctor about it.”

The younger fellow reached down and grabbed Sean by the shoulders in order to sit him back up -- just what the Irishman wanted him to do.

Sean pulled Michael’s Colt from the younger robber’s belt and shot a hole clean through his midsection.

This surprised the others just long enough for Michael to draw a second gun he had hidden under his leg, then twist his body and blast away, hitting the two men behind him square in their chests, before turning back around to point his revolver at the only one not yet bleeding. He didn’t need to keep looking at the robbers behind him, but their leader watched, as the two men gasped one last breath each, then crumbled to the ground, dead before they hit it.

Michael and the balding robber stared at one another for a moment, waiting for the other to make a move -- until Sean shot the man in the temple.

“He made fun o’ your coffee,” Sean said, as he pushed the younger man off of him.

The two Irishmen laid out the four dead robbers side-by-side, then Michael retrieved his recently lost possessions from the younger man, before joining Sean in searching the pockets of the others for anything of value: money, gold, jewelry, and, of course, guns and ammunition. They found quite a lot. Apparently, the dead men had been successful thieves.

Afterward, they checked the ponies for what might be in the saddlebags: a couple extra shirts, some food, jerky, coffee, and, surprisingly, some reasonably fresh, if slightly bruised, fruit.

“Oranges for breakfast, Sean!” Michael declared.

Sean found a Winchester repeating rifle cradled in a saddle sling on one of the horses. “Been thinkin’ o’ buyin’ one o’ these.”

They took the saddles and blankets off the ponies and led them to a patch of grass, where their horses had been grazing, then removed their bridles, so they could eat as well, while tethered with ropes tied to trees to keep them from wandering away. Then, they brushed their matted, dirty coats, something the robbers clearly hadn’t done in quite some time.

The ponies all had brands, which meant they were probably stolen, which meant it would be dangerous for the Irishmen to keep them. The last thing they needed was to be caught with stolen ponies, even if they hadn’t been the ones who stole them. Horse stealing was a hanging offense, and they were strangers in these parts, with no one to vouch for their innocence. But neither of them wanted to just set the ponies free up on the cold, desolate mountain range.

As for the robbers, Sean and Michael had thought for a moment about taking them to the nearest town to collect any reward there might be on them, but without any wanted posters, let alone even knowing who they were, they might not be able to prove the robbers were, in fact, robbers.

“Besides,” as Michael said, “we may be gamblers and fake Franciscans, but we aren’t bounty hunters.”

So, the two men buried the robbers in shallow graves, without any markers. Still, Sean felt compelled to say a prayer over them. Father Seamus was never far from his consciousness.

The next morning, they headed out at first light, keeping an eye out for anyone who might happen to see them with the stolen ponies.

After an hour or so in the saddle, they came out of a cluster of trees to see a truly beautiful sight: a herd of wild mustangs racing across the valley in the distance, running free and defiant.

The ponies saw them, too, and began to whinny and stamp their feet.

The two men dismounted from their horses and removed the bridles once again from the branded ponies.

“Go on, then,” Sean said, just above a whisper. “Have a run with your new friends.”

Michael and Sean barely had to encourage the ponies with a couple swats on their hind quarters, before they took off at the gallop toward the mustang herd.

The two Irishmen watched them and smiled.

Then, Sean was inspired to add, as he took notice of the lead mustang out front:

“What a sight to see, runnin’ wild an’ free,
Kickin’ up his heels . . .”

“They’re hooves, not heels,” Michael added, finishing the line.

“Across the broad terrain,” Sean continued, undeterred, “Wind flowin’ through his mane.
Aye, me an’ Michaleen knows how that feels.”

Michael laughed, once again amazed at how his traveling companion could master his rhyme and meter on the spur of the moment.

Sean just continued to watch the ponies run joyfully with the herd of mustangs -- until they disappeared from view over a ridge in the distance.

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