

From chapter 1 of “The Great Liquor War”

When I got into town I found a good place to camp on the edge of town, up on a ledge covered with aspen and surrounded by spruce. I stripped the pack and saddles from my horses, picketed them, and set about to cook some supper.

About the time I started the fire another fellow with just a riding horse came into the grove, dismounted and began to make camp. In those days it was a good idea to be careful who you invited into your camp, for not only did others judge you by the company you kept, but sometimes the company you kept wasn't against taking things without asking: maybe your life. I kept an eye on him for a bit, decided he wasn't a danger I couldn't handle, and called him over.

“Might as well join the fire,” I called out. “No sense two of us heatin' up the night.”

He waved at me and a few minutes later came over with his plate, cup, and a slab of bacon. He was a well set up man just a little older than me, wearing laced miner's boots that were in pretty good shape. His pants were made of canvas, a lot like what we call jeans now only they hadn't been dyed blue, and his jacket looked like it had been made for him as part of a suit, although it was startin' to show some wear. Like me he wore a bushy moustache that hung down both sides of his mouth, but unlike me, his side burns were also bushy and extended down to the corner of his jaw.

Now his hat was of special note. It was one of them round, hard things with a reverse curl brim. I think they call them a derby. There were places them days where a hat like that would get you in a fight.

Not that folks didn't wear derby hats back then. There were all kinds of head gear in the country, but most had been beaten and smashed about and generally made into part of the landscape. Most of the underground miners would take a beat up hat, maybe a derby, and shellac it until it was almost as hard as the rocks that might fall on their even harder heads. I always wore a Stetson and the one I was wearing then had held water for my horses more than once. His headgear looked like it had been brushed regular and was the property of some city swell. The point is, he was pretty well fixed up in comparison to the way most folks had to dress at the place and time.

Take my own rig for example. On my feet was a pair of moccasins, one of several pair I had made from the hide of the elk whose meat had been keeping me alive through the winter. I had two pair of bib-coveralls, and the ones I wore only had one small patch on the seat, and one seam stitched up at the hip, so they were my good ones. The blue flannel shirt I wore had been new six months before, so it wasn't faded too bad, but it was the only one I owned. I had a good sheep skin vest, but the hide on the outside hadn't been white for a long time, and the coat in my pack had been made from the hide of a bear who had out worn it before me. I had one pair of long johns, which had been washed before I headed for town, and I already mentioned my hat.

There were many men carrying pistols in those days, usually in a pocket, or behind the waist band of their pants and hooked in a suspender, but I wore a gun belt. I took it from the body of a man my Maw shot on the trail from Kansas. While Paw and I were rounding up the stock one morning, this gentleman decided that Maw and my sister would be easy pickings. He was wrong. It was a nice, wide belt, with an Army Colt in the holster, and, on the other side, a 15 inch Bowie knife. Later I had made a sheath to hang next to it and hold a 4 inch skinning knife.

After he set his things down by the fire, he straightened and stuck out his hand.

“Jerry Hill,” he said. “Pleased to have somebody else cook, for a change.”

Now I hadn't said anything about cooking, just that I'd share the fire, but I didn't object, considering that he offered the first smoked side meat I'd seen in a couple of months.

“Hank James,” I replied, gripping his hand. It was a firm hand that had done a lot of work, but he didn't have a build up of callus like I did from shoveling river gravel into a rocker. “I wasn't plannin' on it when I first mentioned it, but I'll sure enjoy a slice o' that bacon” I fished out my skinning knife, knelt down and began to slice. “Elk's good meat, but after a few months o' the same thing it gets kinda old, no matter when you shot it.”

“A fair collection of knives,” he commented. I looked up at him then followed his gaze down to the Bowie knife on my right side.

I returned to slicing the bacon and said, “They're both fair and that's a fact. The Bowie's sharp enough to slice bacon 'r anythin' else, but she's a bit heavy fer the job.”

“Come for the fight?” he asked, as he stuffed a Hudson's Bay Company pipe. It was one of those big ones usually kept for Bay employees. They had a curl in them and you could put enough smoking in them for a week. Me, I never liked to light up until after I'd eaten, even back when I did smoke. In those days I usually smoked a little clay thing that held enough for about two drags; the Bay had them too, but only for trading. More often than not I was just sucking on an empty pipe or a broken stem.

“Yup,” I replied. “Figured I could use a change of air.”

“Be some big money made on this fight,” he advised. “Couple of big-time fighters from down below the line. Portland or Spokane. Something like that.”

Now, I didn't mention anything to him at the time, but there had been a couple of shysters operating down in Oregon and Washington the year before. They had been staging big events, starting a lot of talk, and at the center of a lot of betting. Most of what happened was a lot of money changed hands. The fights were pretty poor entertainment. I wondered if it was the same pair.

After we had a meal, I took my Bowie off and put it in my saddle bag. When I put my pistol belt back on I cinched it up a little tighter than usual so that the Colt was still on my left with the butt forward, but much higher and covered by my coat. They didn't like you to carry firearms in most towns in those days, but many did, and more than one unarmed miner was found on the edge of town with both his poke and his life long gone. Anyone who took the time to look close would know I was armed, but as long as I didn't make a fool of myself, it was unlikely anyone would mention it. Jerry and I mounted up and went on into town.

This Hill fellow seemed to be pretty flush and bought a lot of drinks that night. We moved about from place to place, and in one - had a name like the Payload or Nugget, or some such - we come across one of the boxers.

The place had a piano about half way back in the room right up against the side of the stairs that ran up to the rooms. In between the corner and the end of the piano, his back to the wall, sat this big man with a shaved head and bushy eyebrows. He had a bunch of starry-eyed fools standing around listening to how tough he was. He had one of the paid help from upstairs sitting on his knee, and rouge on his cheek.

He was also one of the con-men I'd seen in Portland the year before.

From our spot at the bar Jerry Hill tipped his head so the brim of his fancy hat angled toward the boxer and the crowd around him. “Bully Boy Smith,” he advised, “from Los Angeles, California. You might think he's a tough one, but the other fellow's even bigger.”

When I'd seen those two fighters in Portland this one had called himself Bully Boy Murphy and the other one had been Banger O'Toole.

"What's the other fellas name?" I asked.

"Banger Jones," Jerry replied.

I wasn't too surprised. The few con men I'd met by that time in my young life had impressed me with their lack of respect for most people. These two hadn't even gone to the trouble to think up new names.

Liars and thieves were two things that upset me a great deal, and still do. Part of it was the Christian teachings I'd got from my folks, and part of it was the support most folks needed from those around them just to survive. The biggest part of it was the hard work my Maw and Paw had put into their lives for very little reward, and most of that taken by someone like the confidence artist who sat before me flaunting the results of his crooked life.

While Jerry and I were backed up to the bar, the door swung open and a fellow bigger than the boxer walked in. He wore a flat-topped, dark blue, billed cap something like I'd seen the telegraph people wear down below the line. He also wore a dark blue jacket, a tie, and low-heeled, high top boots. His cap had a badge on it, a round bit of brass but I couldn't read what was stamped into it.

Now, as I mentioned, the law in those days had made it plain that no one was to wear guns, at least in town. Of course, in that room of perhaps forty miners and gamblers, there were probably ten carrying but they had them well hid. The Provincial Policeman's revolver was an evident bulge under his jacket on the left side.

"The cop must weigh three hundred pounds," I remarked.

"Yup," Jerry acknowledged. "Jack Kirkup. Pretty good man, for a cop. Good thing, too. He's even tougher than he looks."

As he walked through the room, the Constable gave it his best professional appraisal. When he neared our space at the bar, Hill called him over and introduced us. The policeman said nothing, simply nodded an acknowledgment, gave my hand a quick, firm shake, and continued on through the room. I watched him do a circuit and head back toward the front door.

"Well, I've had enough of this high livin' for one night," I said to Hill, my thoughts on the policeman and the con man by the piano. "Think I'll wander back to camp and get some shut eye."

Hill made some remark about my having been in the bush too long, but I managed to get out of the room and onto the boardwalk. To my right I could see a large dark form near the corner of the building. As I expected, it was Constable Kirkup and I walked toward him.

"Just thought you might like to have some back-ground on the boxers," I said.

In the wash of light from the window of the saloon I saw him nod.

"Last year, when I was in Portland," I continued, "a couple of fellows was puttin' on a boxing match. There was a lot of money bet and spent, but the fight wasn't much better than a couple of good friends might have. From what I hear they been makin' a career out of it. One fellow called himself Bully Boy Murphy and the other was Banger O'Toole." I tipped my head toward the saloon. "Murphy looked an awful lot like that Smith fella."

Kirkup still didn't say anything. He nodded and I turned away. Then as I approached my mount at the hitch rail, a fairly high, smooth voice came out of the dark.

"I'd be much obliged if you were to put that pistol in your saddle bags, the next time you come into town," he said. "There's a lot of shady folks in town, what with the fight and all. Besides, trouble happens pretty easy when folks drink too much."

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I said, and swung into the saddle.

“Thanks,” he said. “And thanks for the tip on the two fighters. If you are a betting man, put your money on Jones.”