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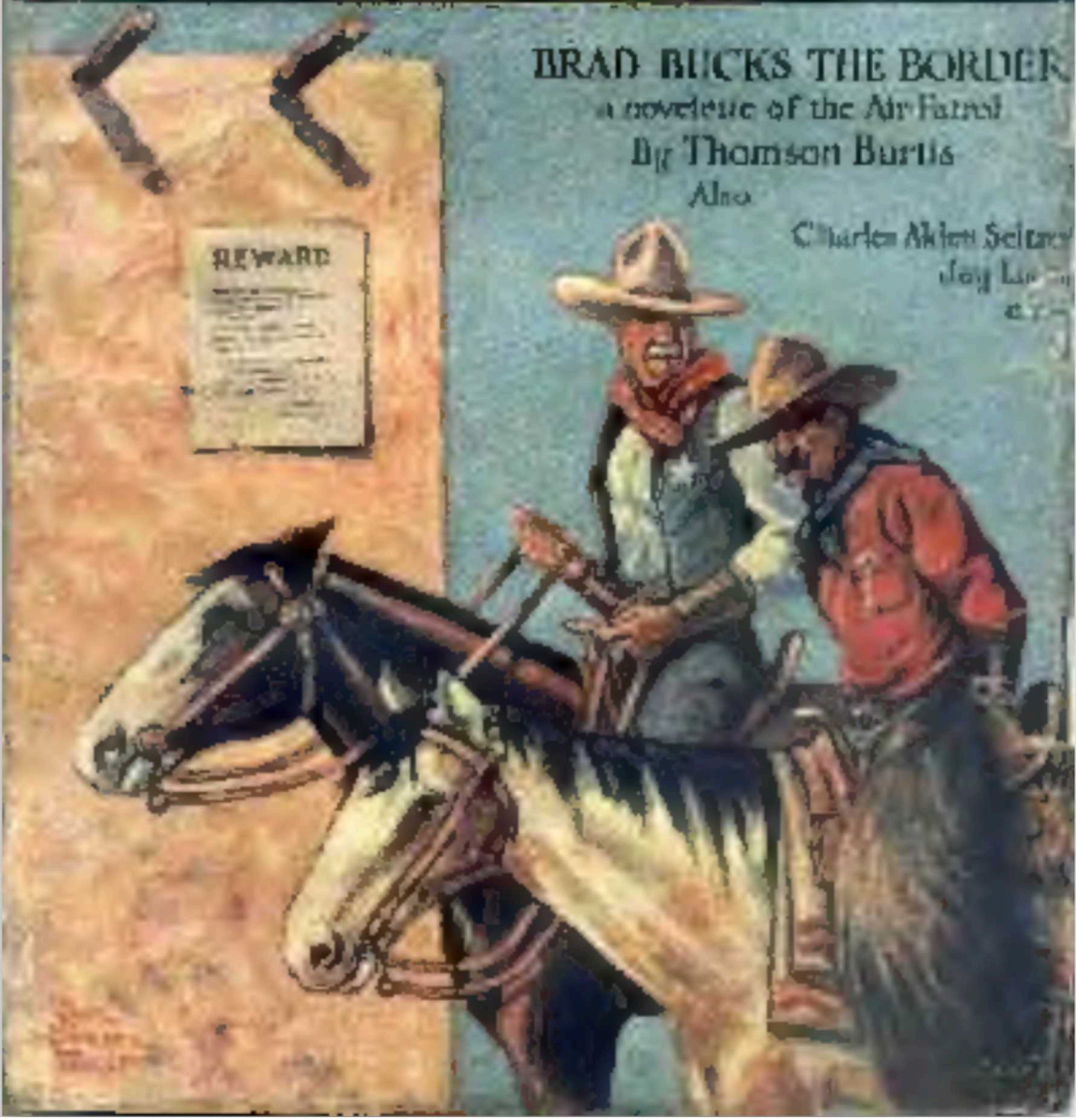
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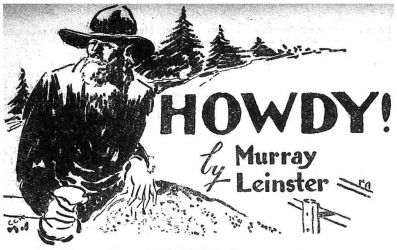
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*** START OF THE PROJECT
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HOWDY! ***



HOWDY!

By Murray Leinster

Author of "Fog," etc.

They had hated for

years, these old-timers,
and the habit clung.
Twice each day they
met in the deserted
gold camp, spoke, and
parted. But the winters
grew long and the rock
more barren; their
hate, one day, took an
unrecognizable form.

Once upon a time—as all good stories should begin—Eyrie was a town. A real town, with a full complement of dance-halls, saloons, gambling houses and a jail. Champagne came in cases over the mountain trails, to be drunk out of tin cups or, more informally, from the bottle itself. Ostrich feathers and pink spangled gowns, once a piano,

even carefully crated paintings for the Eyrie House, came upon the backs of burros or in huge, lumbering wagons.

It was named by a young Easterner and it sprang up as by magic. The first girl baby in the camp could have gone to college in the East on the dust and nuggets showered upon her as gifts. The first court in the county, and the county was as large as many New England states, was held in Eyrie. For a space, while the placer workings held good, it was a whirlwind. Then came a period of decay, with the more prosperous elements drifting to newer and consequently more alluring spots.

For perhaps five years, perhaps ten, it slumbered. Only a

few of the more patient worked their cradles beside its swift stream. Here and there a Chinaman frugally earned riches by panning the sands the superior white man considered beneath his notice. Eyrie was a half deserted mining camp.

But then came the hardrock men. They came, they saw—and Eyrie was reborn. Its earlier grandeur was forgotten in the magnificence of its new youth. A thousand shafts dotted the hills about it. Plumes of steam drifted from a thousand hoist engines. Again a whirlwind of activity. Again came the champagne and the pictures and the brightly painted ladies and the immaculate, imperturbable gentlemen who wielded

pasteboards instead of picks, and juggled chips instead of blasting powder for their fortunes.

And again it died. Even the Chinamen deserted it this time, having discovered the charm of payment in gold for definite work in another's diggings. It died completely, now. The doors of the log cabins sagged upon their leathern hinges. Grass grew again in its streets. Saplings sprang up close beside the porch of the Eyrie House, thrusting aside the rotted planking for space in which to grow. A deathly silence fell again upon the town and all the hills about it. Its day was done, its glory departed. Even its history was forgotten, utterly. There was nothing but decaying, blank-windowed cabins and a sagging

board building that had once been the prideful Eyrie House to tell of the ancient times. All else was vanished.

And somewhere, far back in the haze of unremembered days, lay the beginning of the enmity between Jake Trotter and Bill Weaver. No one remains to tell the story of its beginning. Soon it will be useless to recall it, and therefore it is wise to record it before oblivion smears across the page. For it was a peculiar enmity.

Alone of all the population, they remained behind. Jake Trotter was perhaps fifty when he was left alone with his enemy. He watched the last belated hardrock man pull out, glumly loading his worldly goods upon a single

burro.

"Leavin' the town to me?" he queried, with a feeble attempt at levity.

The one who was departing, cursed.

Jake chuckled. "No use swearin'," he said. "The main lode ain't been hit yet."

The other turned quickly. "You got any signs?"

Jake chuckled again. "Think I'd ha' said anything if I had?" he queried in his turn.

The hardrock man grunted, cinched his last knot, and trudged away. He was a lonely figure, making off down the valley that seemed a chasm between its confining hills, and yet gave upon a two thousand foot drop at its further end. Jake watched him out

of sight and then grinned, somewhat unconvincingly. It was not altogether pleasant to be completely alone.

He was congratulating himself, though, as he turned away. He had said just the right thing to disarm the suspicions of the last man. He went slowly up the deserted street. It was unspeakably desolate. Every house empty. Doors yawning open. Posters still flaunting bright colors, calling everyone to the High Jinks Dance Hall. And the dance hall was empty. Already dust was gathering thickly upon its floors and the once so brightly polished bar. Jake was alone.

He came to a sudden halt and his eyes narrowed. A man was looking at him, very nearly the

counterpart of himself. Bushy, straggling beard, already beginning to show a speckling of gray. Mud stained clothes. Rough work shirt. Heavy boots. Holster at his side. Bill Weaver, the only man in all the world Jake had despised wholeheartedly.

"Howdy, Jake," drawled Bill. "Looks like we got to run the town."

Jake spat deliberately, and looked at his sole fellow townsman with hostile eyes. "I reckon," he said slowly, "you're figurin' on spyin' on me."

Bill shook his head. "I was thinkin' the same about you," he meditated. "Just thought I'd tell you I shoot awful quick if I find anybody trailin' me."

Jake's whole body trembled a

little with his hatred. “An’ I reck’n I’d better tell you,” he said evenly, “that I’m puttin’ trap guns around my workin’s.”

Bill grunted. “You leave me alone, an’ I’ll leave you alone. But I’d feel a lot better if I saw you mornin’s, so’s I’d know you wasn’t layin’ out to watch where I go.”

Jake nodded. “I was goin’ to say that myself,” he said grimly. “An’ you keep to your end o’ town!” He stalked away, seething.

Then a little comedy began, which, rather oddly, did not seem to stale with age. At sunrise, Jake arose. He cooked his breakfast silently, and ate it morosely. He washed his dishes with meticulous care. Then he took down an antiquated but perfectly

oiled rifle from the wall.

He walked out of his cabin. Going to meet the man he hated. Making sure Bill was not lying in wait to mark, each day, a little more of the path to his workings. Glowering, he made his daily progress.

Bill was waiting. He always was. Grinning a little, perhaps. But the grin vanished when Jake drew near. Jake would stand no nonsense.

Sourly, the two regarded each other. Booted, armed, whiskered, bristling.

Bill spoke first. “Howdy.”

It held an intonation of purest sarcasm. Jake replied in kind. “Howdy.”

He glared at Bill. The glare was returned. Jake turned upon

his heel and walked away. He made his way deviously to his workings. Twice he paused to search the hills behind him, exhaustively, for any sign that Bill was spying upon his route. At last he dived below ground.

At night they met again. This time they did not speak. Simply stared, hostilely, and went into their respective cabins.

Summer passed. Fall arrived. The snow line above them crept down and down. In two weeks it would reach the valley. Jake considered it gloomily.

The next morning he jerked his thumb at the encroaching blanket of white. “Supplies,” he said grudgingly. “Go down tomorrow.”

Bill grunted. “Yep. Was goin’

to say that myself."

They went down, two silent figures, bristling, avoiding all speech. All the long day they trudged without talk. At night they camped, wordlessly. Each cooked his own supper and ate alone. In the morning they rolled out of their blankets at the same time. Bill blinked. Then, "Howdy."

The word held an intonation of purest sarcasm. Jake replied in kind. "Howdy."

He glared at Bill. The glare was returned. They loaded their burros again and went on.

They made their purchases separately. They spent three days in the tiny village. Each morning, shortly after sunrise, they found each other. Each morning they

regarded each other with unwavering distaste. Each day they avoided each other thereafter.

They went back up in the hills.

Winter came, and banked the valley with snowdrifts. Work was impossible. Jake regarded a blanketed universe with completest gloom. Bill unlimbered a mouth organ and played, alone in his cabin. The thin music, drifting through the icy, still air, was weird in the wilderness. It was barely audible where Jake sat listening, more like the wraith of past gaiety in the High Jinks Dance Hall than music of the moment.

One night it stopped. It did not come again that night, or the

night after.

On the third day Bill was waiting, as usual. “Howdy.” The word was friendly enough, but it was spoken in a tone calculated to give offense.

Jake glared at him. “Mouth organ broken?”

Bill grunted. “Yep.”

“Let’s see.”

Bill tossed it over. They never approached nearer than fifteen feet. Jake picked it up and gazed hostilely at Bill. The gaze was returned. They parted.

It was very late that night that thin strains of music came from Jake’s cabin. Very late, indeed. The unaccustomed noise woke Bill. Next morning they met in the street as usual.

Bill’s greeting held its

invariable bite. Jake tossed the mouth organ back. His own word had a sting.

Bill picked up the mouth organ. They parted in mutual dislike. Arrived at his cabin, Bill tried the instrument. It worked.

Spring came again, with a rush of melted snow and mud. The stream was a turbid torrent. Summer arrived. They went down for supplies. Each day they exchanged precisely two words. They came back, unwavering in their hostility. Summer passed. Then fall. Winter came once more.

Cumbersomely, the seasons passed in their appointed course. Twin shafts, each carefully hidden, grew deeper and deeper but no more productive. Twin

citizens of Eyrie, Jake and Bill grew somewhat more lined, and somewhat more bent. The speckles of gray in Bill's beard grew white, and the black grew gray. Jake's steps grew just a shade slower, and on the long climb to his hidden shaft he paused more frequently to search the hillsides behind him for a trace of Bill's spying. If, as an incident, the pauses made the climb easier, it was purely an incident. Jake was not old yet. Oh, no.

He had contrived an ingenious windlass with two ropes, by which he could hoist his bucket and swing it away from the shaft, then dump it. It made the work easier, but at best it was slow. Still, well worth doing. The

mother lode was below, thick, rich quartz, with the gold in speckles, here and there even a nugget. It would run, oh, three hundred a ton, anyway. Maybe four, or even five. Riches. Life. Like Eyrie used to be.

But the occasional tiny fragments of riches he was able to accumulate grew less and less. He had had a stake. Not too much, but enough to run him for a while. Now and then he ran into a tantalizing incrop of worth while ore—not enough to be worth mining, but ore which he could crush himself in a makeshift mortar and wash, wastefully, for the infinitesimal flakes of uncombined gold. For a hard day's work he could sometimes, with luck, get two or even three

dollars' worth of glittering dust.

At last even that failed him. Shamefacedly, he abandoned his workings for a space. Far off, through the hills, there was a brooklet which even the thrifty Chinaman had not bothered with. With deep blushes, Jake built a cradle there. He washed out the sands, manfully, though ashamed to be doing placer work—he, who was a hardrock man. A steady four dollars, sometimes five. Supplies were secure. He went back, joyfully, to his shaft. The rock was barren, here, but it was a layer overlaying the mother lode, of course. Everyone knows just such things happen. One must have faith. Much faith.

They went down for supplies. Hostilely. They came back.

Enemies. Fall, winter, spring, summer. Fall, winter, spring, summer. Time passed. Eyrie went back, more and more, to the forest from which it had been torn.

Only once in all the years did the two hold any other converse than their morning salutation. That was after they had been working for five years.

Jake had felt premonitory twinges. Snow was deep on the ground outside. Clouds presaged a storm. The preliminary winds were whistling dismally through the saplings among the cabins and the larger trees beyond. They moaned creepily among the empty houses. Voices of the past. That rustling, not the last, reluctant, ash dry leaves, but the movement of people. That

whining noise, not the wind, but music from the High Jinks. The streets are alive with shades. They walk up and down, laughing uproariously, though the sound is whispers. Red shirts. High boots. Holsters and all too ready guns. Women, laughing shrilly. Gaiety ——Queer that a rabbit should scurry through the throng, unseeing and unseen. A rabbit on Main Street! And those trees, saplings, growing before the door of the Eyrie House. They closed the entrance, yet people do not seem to notice. They walk through them. Bubbles bursting. Mist. Lonely, sick pain in a cooling room. Then darkness, darkness, until the windows grow slowly gray.

Bill found him. He banged on

the door, angrily. Jake croaked an indistinguishable word and Bill thrust open the door and came in. Snow whirled thickly in behind him.

He glared at Jake, lying upon his bunk, with frost crystals from his breath upon his blanket. “Howdy,” said Bill, with elaborate irony.

He cast one comprehensive glance around, then went out again. He came back in, bringing wood. He made a fire. Looked at Jake. Muttered in his beard and flung out into the storm again. Came back with an unsavory dose he forced upon the sick man. He cooked, for one. He fed Jake. Without speech.

For three days he nursed Jake in a hostile silence. Then Jake

was able to sit up. He glared at Bill's blankets in one corner. Bill had been forced to move in while Jake was disabled, but he had ostentatiously brought his own food.

"Thought you'd gone off," said Bill, offensively, "to spy on my workings. That's why I came."

A lie. A damned lie. Even a particularly damned lie. No man in or out of his senses would have tried to go prospecting in six feet of snow, more or less. Jake accepted it.

"An' I been staying here," concluded Bill, defiantly, "so you'd know I wasn't hiking off after yours. You're the sort of son of a gun who'd try shootin' if you thought it."

Jake turned his face to the wall, and slept.

Later, Bill produced a greasy pack of cards. “Play,” he said offensively. “Take my mind off wanting to choke you.”

They played cards in strict silence. For a week. Then Jake brought in an armful of wood. Within ten minutes Bill’s blankets were gone. He, also. That night his mouth organ sounded thinly in the solitude.

Time—— Time—— The sun rolled overhead, dizzily. Now its path diverged to the south, and the wild birds made haste to overtake it. It swung to the north again and they made haste to return, joyfully. Trees put forth green, which turned again to yellow and red and gold. The

saplings before the Eyrie House became young trees. Twin hidden shafts grew deeper.

Jake washed gold for his supplies and dug manfully, but a little more slowly, through the barren rock. It was a wide streak of barren, but the mother lode would be worth it. Never give up. Never. Bill ought to. Digging like a fool over yonder in the hills somewhere. Washing a stream, too. Jake had seen wet mud on his shoulders, surface mud, one evening when there had been no rain. Fool!

They went out for supplies. Jake was getting tired now, but he still hated Bill. Old men, both of them. He stopped much more often on his way to his shaft. Eyes bothering him a little, too. Had to

look very carefully to be sure Bill wasn't spying on him. Take a good, long look. If it rested him, too, no harm in that. He wasn't stopping for rest, though. Oh, no.

The packs were slim, as they came back. Jake concealed the size of his pack as well as he could, but it was undeniably not as full a list of staples as he could have wished. Even beans were sort of short. He'd only bought half his usual supply of bacon. Have to go hunting for meat. He shouldn't have got in that poker game. He used to play a good stiff hand, too. Foolish. Foolish.

But Bill's pack was slimmer. Bill was a fool. Hadn't been washing enough. Spending too much time in that crazy shaft of his. Nothing under it. Silly to dig.

Not like Jake's shaft. The mother lode was under that. Bill would be hard put, all summer. Worse, in winter.

Summer. Glamorous green. Rippling water. Then fall again. Jake took down his rifle and went out hunting. More time lost from his mining. He got two deer. He would jerk them. Wouldn't have to buy any bacon, this time. A plan was forming in his mind, dimly. Bill was a fool. He couldn't wash out enough to buy supplies for winter. Jake could. He had just enough. His stream was panning less, now. Somehow, he didn't seem to put as much through the rocker. Had to rest so much—probably from eating fish instead of meat. Not age. Certainly not.

He heard a shot, dimly. Two days later, he heard another. Bill. What was he hunting for? Thought he was bent on sinking that crazy shaft of his——

Jake broke the tacit compact. He spied on Bill. And Bill was jerking meat for the winter. Jerking a lot of it. Too much. He probably hadn't got enough dust to pay even for a good supply of flour. Fool.

There was much meditation. Jake hated Bill, certainly. Hated him like poison. But you couldn't let a man starve right in your own town, no matter how much you hated him. And Bill would certainly starve before he would accept anything from Jake.

Jake spied again. He found Bill's placer works. A cradle, so

arranged that a part of the stream flowed through it. Wooden riffles at the bottom. A spill at the lower end. The heap of sand and clay that Bill was planning to wash out.

Carefully, Jake spilled a little pile of gleaming yellow over the heap. When Bill washed that out, he'd find enough dust in the clean-up to give him beans and flour for the winter. He'd think it was a pocket he'd struck. Something like that. You couldn't let a man starve, even if you hated him. He, Jake, was all right. He'd have plenty of jerked meat.

He erased his footsteps carefully and returned to the deserted town. Bill came in a little later. They looked at each other, the picture of hostility

personified. They went each into his separate cabin. Night fell.

It was a long distance to Jake's placer stream. Jake had kept out a little, of course, but most of his dust had gone to keep Bill from starving, during the winter. They would be starting down for supplies in a week or so, now, though, and if he could get a little extra to buy some more blankets—! Somehow, winters seemed to get colder, these past few years.

He walked painfully the last yards and saw his rocker and cradle, and his gravel heap to be washed. He was a hardrock man, but one had to have supplies, to get down to the mother lode. He'd wash out a little more dust——

He suddenly stiffened. Some

woodsman's sixth sense told him that something was wrong. Someone had been here. He searched, and found tell-tale scratches upon the ground. He searched further, and found footprints, incompletely erased. Bill!

Jake raged. Spying on him! He'd always hated Bill. Spying!

He worked that day in a fury. There would be a reckoning when they met that night. Spying! He'd shoot the liver out of the son of a gun!

And at nightfall he drained the cradle, picked out the last lumps of larger gravel, carefully swept off the remaining sand—and blinked. His clean up was huge, for him. Five, six ounces or more! Maybe he'd struck a pocket, or

the stream was going to be a bonanza or— He remembered the morning's discoveries. Bill——

The long hike home was a time of meditation. Bill, his enemy, salting his gravel pile to give him dust. Bill, who hated him. Bill, who had insulted him, whom he had insulted, every day for years.

He was walking firmly when he got to the place where he would meet Bill. He understood it all, now. Bill had seen his slim pack of supplies. Bill had thought, as he had thought of Bill, that he was unable to wash out enough dust to outfit himself for the winter. Bill had jerked meat for his own use, to spare the dust for a winter's supply of beans and flour and bacon for Jake, whom

he hated.

Hated! They'd hated each other for years. Funny how they'd looked out for each other. Bill nursing him, defiantly. He mending Bill's mouth organ, venomously.

Bill was waiting. Bill was looking at him queerly.

Jake's eyes blazed. "You son of a gun!" he cried furiously. "Spying on me! Salting my gravel heap!" The fury suddenly died out of his voice. "Bill, what'd you do that for?"

And Bill, his enemy; Bill, with deep lines and weather marks upon his features; Bill, whose hair was white save that in a few narrowing spaces it was streaked with gray—— Bill flushed a fiery, bricky red. He

looked like a schoolboy, ashamed at having been caught.

He stammered, and then suddenly he burst out. “What’d you salt mine for? I’d a mind to kill you for it!”

Jake stared at him, helpless. His enemy—“I thought—” He stopped. “I lost most o’ my dust in a poker game, last trip out. That’s why my packs were light.”

“So did I,” Bill told him, defiantly. “I thought you weren’t pannin’ out.”

They stared at each other, two old men, who had hated each other for years. Presently, Jake said slowly, “Bill, what’d we fuss about, anyway?”

“Durned if I know,” said Bill angrily.

Silence again. After a long

time Jake spoke once more. “Say, Bill,” he said diffidently, “supposin’ we both move in the Eyrie House? Needn’t keep but one fire, then. Save time.”

“I was thinkin’ that myself,” Bill grinned. “Say,” he added suddenly. “Remember them card games we had when you were sick?”

Jake nodded. Bill rubbed his hands.

The next morning Bill rolled out of his blankets. Jake had just wakened and was staring up at the ceiling, happily. They were in the Eyrie House. Bill looked over at his ancient enemy.

“Howdy,” he said maliciously.

Jake gazed at him. It was a tense moment.

"You go to hell," he said recklessly, "you old son of a gun!"

And happiness, at that sign of amity, began to reign.

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