



Paladin

by Dominick Cancilla

Dover, England. March, 1920.

“Another! Another!” Norris barked.

He scampered through the brush off to the side of the wagon, daring thorns to scratch his bare skin.

Heather brought the wagon to a halt more by habit than device. The crossing of the Channel had been exhausting, but her slowness in pulling the wagon of late was due more to the drag they all felt from the death of Calliope than from anything physical. The winter break had been a joyless affair; cold, wet, and hungry. And though nearly six months had passed since his death, they still felt the loss as keenly as if it had happened only the day before. Even the change of scenery had failed to revive their spirits, or their fortune.

In the midst of the misery, Norris’ discovery of the airplanes had been a welcome distraction.

“What have you got there, son?” Freedomhowler called from his seat atop the wagon, trying to voice more enthusiasm than he felt.

“Triplane!” Norris called, running back and forth in front of the wreckage. “Come see!”

It was the fifteenth smashed German plane they’d come across since Dover, but the first triplane.

At this point, Freedomhowler was a knot of frustration and could think of nothing he wanted less than another interruption in their journey. The “Nature’s Own Remedy” reworking of the show was turning out to be a near-complete bust. Norris’ newfound healing abilities were shaky at best, and had been less and less reliable as the months wore on. Without Calliope, they really didn’t have an old show to fall back on, and it was terribly difficult to wring money from an audience when the performers themselves seemed unsure of what they were doing.

And there were other problems.

Wild Bill was being particularly troublesome. He just wouldn’t keep quiet about Calliope—kept talking about what a tragedy his death had been, and how he’d be sorely missed, and about that night when they’d all stayed up late, gotten drunk, and Cal had taken a burning stick from the fire and revealed that he could light his whistles. The constant reminders were making it near impossible for Freedomhowler to get on with life.

Then there was Drake’s will. Even though he knew the key, he was still having a terrible time decoding the thing. He had promised the man that he’d follow its instructions, only to find that the first sentences ordered whoever was reading it to stop doing so and kill himself immediately.

Ha, ha. Joke’s on me.

It had rather sapped his enthusiasm for revealing the document’s secrets.

And that whole time travel business just wouldn’t leave him alone. He kept second guessing what he had done with the device. If he had kept it, could he have written Drake out of his life before he entered it? Avoided that hunchback with the drum who seemed to bring trouble wherever he went? Just gone back ten years and invested in businesses that he now knew would be successful? The thing should be whiskey spilled and gone, but he couldn’t keep from trying to think of some way to get it back in the bottle.

All that shape changing and magic had thrown a turd into the still as well. Probably the hardest hit was Heather—something about being dainty and attractive for a spell had done a number on her libido, and the woman was spending a lot more time eyeing the men in the audience than she ever had before. It had done nothing to rein in her strength, however, and only a week back the intensity of her lovemaking had left the son of a burgomaster paralyzed, hastening their departure from the continent.

Thinking of problems with the troupe brought him back to Norris. The boy had been acting more of a mutt of late than ever before. He was getting mighty ornery about putting on pants, even when people were around, and had once bared his teeth at Grenadine when she tried to insist he get dressed.

Ah well, he thought, might as well all pile out to look at his latest find.

There was no harm in humoring him, and Freedomhowler supposed the troupe needed every distraction. He was just standing to climb down from the wagon to rouse Grenadine when a voice, clear and sharp in the afternoon air, stilled him.

“Stay where you are. Sit back down and don’t move. Those of you in the wagon, hold your place. Do as you are told and nobody gets hurt.”

A young man stood at the edge of the road a few feet in front of the wagon. He appeared no more than twenty and was dressed like a city gentleman, save for a gun belt that hung low across his hips. The tooled-leather could have been a hundred years old, but the guns—one in its holster a hair from the man’s hovering left hand, and the other pointed square between Freedomhowler’s wide eyes—were as bright as polished silver.

The young man held the gun with the same casual assurance that Annie had held her rifle back in the days

with Wild Bill, and this fact frightened Freedomhowler more than the presence of the weapons themselves.

The only weapons at Freedomhowler's disposal were his eloquence and the rifle beneath his seat. Had there been opportunity, he would have preferred to rely on the latter.

"My dear sir," Freedomhowler said, trying to sound amicable with no hint of condescension. "I am afraid you have made a mistake. We are but poor—"

The man with the sixguns cut him off. "You speak when you're spoken to, or I declare I'll leave you for the buzzards instead of giving you a proper burial. Now call in your—" he hesitated, perhaps searching for the right word before settling on "*—dog*, before we have a misunderstanding that gets someone shot before their time."

Only then did Freedomhowler notice Norris slinking through the underbrush off the road not more than ten feet behind the gunman. The dog-boy had been silent so far as he could tell, but had somehow been sensed anyway. It took two calls before Norris obeyed Bernhard's order to come stand by the wagon, and even then he did so reluctantly.

"That's all to the good," the gunman said. "Now let's see how still you can be."

The gunman was too far away for Freedomhowler to reach with a spit of flame, so he hazarded another attempt to talk his way out of the situation. "I assume you're a fellow American, sir," he said, "judging by your accent."

"And I'd guess you're a Southern gentleman, judging by your inability to shut your mouth. I'll be putting 'Kentucky' on your headstone, is that right?"

"It is," Bernhard said, only realizing what he'd agreed to after the words tumbled out. Wild Bill was throwing a fit in his head, making it impossible to think straight.

The gunman then made what looked like the biggest mistake imaginable. He took his eyes off Freedomhowler and turned his head to speak to Heather

"Pardon, ma'am," the gunman said.

That seemed like Freedomhowler's cue. He reached under the wagon seat and grabbed for his rifle. The weapon's stock had barely come into view when it exploded, spraying his face with splinters.

"I'm trying to talk to the lady here," the gunman said. "You keep your peace." The smoking gun barrel seemed to track the space between Freedomhowler's eyes as he sat back in his seat.

"Now," the gunman said, turning back to Heather. "I was going to ask you, ma'am, if you can take that harness off yourself or if I need to get you some help."

"I dinna need any help," Heather said, managing a cold smile. Freedomhowler could tell she was wishing the highwayman was within arm's reach.

"Good. Take it off."

Heather did so, letting the harness fall to the road.

"Now, off with you," the gunman said, giving a little nod down the road.

Heather stood, blinking.

"Go on, it's all right. I've got them covered."

"I dinna understand," Heather said.

"I'm setting you free, woman. Go!"

Freedomhowler laughed, his relief making the sound too loud and drawing a twitch from the gun. "The boy thinks you're being held against your will, my dear! Indeed! As if such a thing were possible!"

Heather's eyes brightened up like a spring day. "Ye were tryin' t' save me?"

The man lowered his gun. "You're not his captive?"

Heather bit her upper lip, smiled, and shook her head. She almost looked girlish, and the sight gave Freedomhowler an odd feeling in his stomach.

"Is everything all right?" Grenadine asked, peeking out from behind the wagon.

"Oh it's bonny fine!" Heather said.

The man holstered his sixgun. "I'm a mite embarrassed about this," he said, turning to Freedomhowler. "I do believe an apology is in order."

"Not at all, son, not at all!" Freedomhowler said, too relieved to demand his due. He climbed down from the wagon. "It was right honorable of you to attempt a rescue, misinformed as it might have been."

Freedomhowler walked to the man and extended his hand. "Professor Bernhard Freedomhowler, impresario, general manager, proprietor, and professor de-lux of Freedomhowler's Internationally-Acclaimed Traveling Exhibition of Medicinal Wonderment, and proud purveyor of Nature's Own Remedy, at your service."

"Doc Evans," the gunman said, making Freedomhowler wince with the strength of his grip. He probably couldn't beat Heather in an arm wrestle, but he certainly could have made her work for the honor.

"A doctor?" Freedomhowler asked, working his hand to restore circulation. "Are you a medical doctor, by chance?"

"Not practicing."

"Well, sir, we are healers ourselves. We've traveled far and wide across the continent, brought our humble gifts to the crowned heads of Europe, and cured the ills of all we passed by."

Doc Evans' face took on a seriousness that made Freedomhowler worry that there was about to be gunplay once again.

"Are you for real healers or are you just another Professor Marvel, taking money from the hopeless and running to the next town?"

"Why, you cut me to the quick, sir! Mine is an honorable practice, handed down to me by my father and his father before him. And I can say on my honor as a Southerner and a gentleman that there is no ill we will not face, and no ailment that we cannot banish."

The gunman just stood staring at Freedomhowler for a moment, making the showman feel like some part of him was being peeled away.

“Okay,” Evans said. “Then I’ve got someone just outside Dover you need to see.” He turned to Heather. “Darlin’—”

“Heather,” Heather said, with as coy a smile as her thick face could make.

Doc’s expression softened a bit at that. “All right, Heather. You call me Dan. Now, if you still want to pull this thing, saddle up and get it turned around.”

Freedomhowler shook his head. “Whoa, whoa. Hold on there, Dan.”

The gunman snapped around to look him square in the eye. “It’s Doc or Mr. Evans, however you want to call it.”

“Sorry, uh, Doc. But I think we have ourselves a misunderstanding here. My poor troupe has a lot of country to cover, and we really have no interest in—”

Whatever Freedomhowler had planned to say was cut short and burned away when his eyes fell on the glittering buckle of Doc Evans’ gun belt. The buckle was a big, Texas-style affair, but formed from interlocking rings, identical to the strange device he’d recovered from Drake. They were perfect save for a scar across the face, like they had turned away a bullet.

“You were trying to say something?”

“No, sir, on second thought I just can’t bring myself to turn my back on the sick or injured. Lead on to Dover.”

At some point in the conversation, Grenadine had walked to Freedomhowler’s side.

“I don’t think we should go back,” she said. “It’s at least fifteen miles, and I have a bad feeling about this. I sense death. If we turn back, someone will die.”

“If you don’t turn back, someone will die,” Doc Evans said, hands hovering near holsters.

“Now, now, now,” Freedomhowler said with a nervous laugh. “No need for that. Grenadine here has a touch of the second sight, but sometimes it leads her a little astray, doesn’t it, Poppy?”

Doc answered before Grenadine could defend herself. “No, she’s right. There’s death here.” He nodded toward where the smashed triplane lay. “I’ve killed more men than I care to count, and no doubt more lives will fall to my hand in time to come, but I tell you right now, there’s a man that’ll die without help and you’re the first help I’ve found. I tell you, too, that if you refuse me or if you’re full of wind, then you’ll be feeding the worms before you see another sunrise.”

“We will be glad to help your friend,” Freedomhowler said, holding arms out to show that he spoke for the group. “And you have no need to fear. There is no ailment that Freedomhowler and Nature’s Own Remedy can not cure.”

It was a good speech, but the leaden feeling in Freedomhowler’s belly showed that he, for one, was not convinced.

Grenadine returned to her seat within the wagon. Freedomhowler rode on top; Norris ran along the side of the road. Doc Evans showed no interest in riding in the wagon, so he walked at Heather’s side as she pulled the wagon back toward Dover. They would chat, and every once in a while Evans would touch her hand or shoulder to emphasize some point. This didn’t stop Freedomhowler from talking to him, and the slim gunman would turn and walk backwards with complete confidence while answering.

“Tell me now, Doc, you have something to do with these airplanes we’ve been finding?” Freedomhowler asked.

“I do,” Evans said. “Can’t say I’m proud of it. Can’t say I’m ashamed, either.”

“Should I infer that you were a pilot or perhaps an anti-aircraft man during the Great War?”

“More the latter, I suppose, but I wasn’t in any army and I didn’t use any cannon. I’d been told that the Germans would be using flying machines to attack London, so I came here to knock them out of the sky before they could cross the Channel.” He patted a sixgun with his right hand.

Freedomhowler looked down on him incredulously. “Do you mean to tell me that you brought down flying machines with a pistol? You must admit it seems incredible. A rifle, perhaps, for low-flying craft, but a pistol?”

“I don’t care how it seems, that’s how it is. It got so British pilots would lead German planes out my way. They didn’t know it was me doing the work, but they knew that any enemy plane that crossed the Channel hereabouts went down in flames. The Germans must have thought there was some kind of anti-aircraft battery, so they kept sending bombers and reconnaissance flights, but I got them, too. I shot down some hundred and eighty planes, and one dirigible, which was the hardest.”

The poor man had to be deluded. Freedomhowler knew a little something about firearms, as did the incredulous voice in his head, and there was just no way such a story could be true. At best, the man had fired toward dogfights he saw overhead and took credit whenever an enemy craft went down. Although, granted, every wrecked craft they’d found so far had been German.

“That must be a mighty fine set of firearms you have there,” Freedomhowler said, hoping to turn the discussion to the object of his interest. “May I be so bold as to ask where you got them?”

Evans walked in silence for a moment, then said, “You do what I asked, and I’ll tell you what you want to know.” Then he showed his back to Freedomhowler and returned his attention to Heather.

“Are ye all right?” Heather asked.

Evans shook his head slowly. “I was a doctor once, a long time back. I used to save lives, deliver babies. But

there's been a whole lot of killing since then, and it's left my mouth so sour that I want to spit out the taste and spit out my last breath with it."

"No, ye canna talk like that," Heather said.

"Sure I can. But I'm happy to have met you before I found a way out of this world." He reached out and clasped her hand, just for the briefest of moments. "Sometimes all I live for is the small pleasantries."

The moment was broken by a bark from Norris. "Look at this!" The dog boy had found a recent grave by the side of the road, its crude marker almost mistakable for a mile post. Had Doc Evans not warned him away from calling attention to such things, they would have counted another forty before reaching their destination.

The small house sat about a half mile from the main road. It was a four-room cottage, with a large garden to one side. It sat in the center of acres of clear-cut field, littered here and there with smashed German machinery. Smoke curled lazily from the stonework chimney.

Doc Evans bid them set up camp while he went inside. Dark was an hour off at best, and they would need to spend the night.

After a time, the gunman came out again, his eyes damp but his face expressionless. He approached Freedomhowler, who was helping Heather sort through their provisions for some sign of supper, since their host had made no offer of food.

"He's alive, but he's not well," Evans said. "You'd best do your work on him now, and be sure it's your best. I don't handle braggarts and failures well."

It wasn't exactly a subtle threat.

"Of course, sir. I have every confidence that we can return your friend to complete health in short order." He gathered a few bottles that he had pulled from storage in the wagon. "Norris! Heather! Accompany me into our

new friend's home so we can practice our healing arts. Grenadine, if you could entertain our guest?" He would have rather left Heather with the gunman, considering their obvious attraction, but there were cases when a patient had to be, to put it delicately, restrained for treatment, and Heather was quite expert at such things.

"He's in the front room," Doc said. "Don't bother coming out until he's well."

The front door of the house closed, leaving Doc and Grenadine alone with the small cooking fire Freedomhowler had started. Evans picked a spot on the ground where he could stare into the fire and still see the front of the house. He sat on the hard ground.

Grenadine took a seat on the dirt beside him and tried a smile. It did no good.

"May I read your palm for you, Doc? While you're waiting?" she asked. She hadn't yet found a man who would turn down a chance to have a lovely woman hold his hand on some pretence.

"I already know my future," Evans said. "I don't need you to read it."

"You're very sad."

"Knowing that doesn't make you a mystic."

They sat in silence but for the crackle of the fire.

After a time, Grenadine whispered, "I was a nurse during the war. I...tired of...death. So many boys, so many—bodies. I know how hard it is."

Evans softened, reaching over to took her hand, holding it tenderly between his. "I didn't mean to talk sharp to you, ma'am, and I'm not saying what you saw didn't hurt, but it's a long way from tending the wounded to killing the living. I don't care if a man's throwing his fists at me, flying a war machine, or looking at me down the sights of a rifle, I feel like I'm killing a piece of myself when I put a hole through is heart."

He sighed.

"You know, the Germans don't take defeat lightly. After a time, when they realized there was something here stopping their planes, they attacked in force. I felt like I shot down the whole German air force that afternoon, leastwise they never sent another plane.

"It took me days and days to find and bury every mother's son of them. Some looked like they'd barely had their first shave. They're in my mind every day. They're in my dreams every night. Them and hundreds more like them."

Grenadine's face was slack with horror. "It's not possible. Not just you. Not with those guns. It just can't be."

With slowness in respect for Grenadine's shock, Doc pulled one of the guns from its holster. "These guns are not with me, they *are* me. They are why I live. They are why I just want to die."

"Then why don't you?" Grenadine asked, in near a whisper. It was a question not like her at all, but there was a cold fist in her chest, brought by the words of this murderer or madman and the things they made her remember.

Doc put the barrel of the revolver to his head and pulled the trigger. Once. Twice. A third time. There were three clicks as the guns hammer fell. "Because the guns won't let me," he said. Then he pointed the gun into the sky and pulled the trigger. There was an explosion like thunder, and Grenadine began to scream.

Freedomhowler entered the house first. It was dark, save for the light from an open stove that shone across the room onto a bed on which a figure lay beneath a pile of beautiful quilts. Once they were all inside, Heather closed the door and they walked as a body to their patient's side.

He lay in shadow, but the fire flickered high enough for just a moment that they could see his face. Heather gasped.

“Oh, lookit him. As old as the hills he must be. ’Tis a miracle there’s breath in him at all.”

Norris bent close over the sleeping man and sniffed rapidly up and down his chest. “Smells like Evans. Rrrrrf? There is piss in his sweat—bad kidneys. There is fear on him, and cold.”

“What can you do for him?” Freedomhowler asked, keeping his voice low for the sake of the sleeping man.

“Call a priest.”

“That’s not funny!” The patient stirred at the outburst, and Freedomhowler pulled his voice back. “That’s not funny. Can you help him?”

Norris thought for a moment. “Calming fear is more your line than mine. With the rest, a week or two ago I could have made him right in an hour. But now, and with night coming...I can hardly think of anything but the moon and night smells. But, it has been a while since I have tried a healing, so perhaps the rest did some good. I am confident there is at least a chance.” He smiled unreassuringly, showing teeth that seemed to Bernhard a mite sharper than they had been just hours before.

“Well, you’re going to have to do better than try if we’re going to—” Freedomhowler’s demand was cut short by the sound of a gunshot and scream outside.

“Grenadine!” Freedomhowler cried out, bolting for the door. “Stay here and save that man!” he yelled before bursting from the house.

Heather and Norris waited a moment, not knowing quite what would happen next. When there were no further gunshots, they felt fairly safe to assume that Freedomhowler’s panic been unnecessary and that he had handled whatever the situation was. They were still trying to decide what to do next when their patient spoke.

“Gunshot,” the old man said. “He’s back, isn’t he?” His voice was dry and harsh, like you’d imagine a mummy to sound. His eyes were pale and cloudy.

"It's all right," Heather said. "We're here to help."

"I don't *want* help," the old man said with enough force to bring on a spell of hard, dry coughing. Then, when it was over and Heather had given him a drink from the cup by the bed he repeated, "I don't want help."

Norris sniffed the air. "You are afraid...It is Doc Evans you are afraid of, isn't it?" The old man nodded. "What is he to you, your grandson?"

"No," the old man said. "He's my pa."

Freedomhowler saw Doc Evans holstering his gun and trying to assist Grenadine who had drawn herself into a fetal heap on the ground.

"What happened? What happened?" he yelled as he ran through the space between them.

"I'm sorry," Evans said. "It was my fault. I was showing her something and it upset her."

"She can't abide loud noises," Freedomhowler said, dropping to the ground beside Grenadine and taking her in his arms. "It's all right, my dear. Everything will be fine, just fine."

It took some time for Freedomhowler to calm Grenadine. He helped her to the wagon and into its single bed. She insisted on packing her ears with cotton before trying to sleep, and refused to discuss what she had witnessed in Freedomhowler's absence. By the time he returned to sit with Evans, twilight was shining its last.

"She all right?" Evans asked.

"She will be," Freedomhowler said.

Evans nodded toward the house. "Your friends are taking their time."

"As a medical man, you know that these things are not quickly done."

"I'm not a medical man any more."

They let that hang in the air for a moment, then Freedomhowler said, "You promised to answer my questions when we got here."

"That's not exactly what I promised, but I have no secrets. I assume you want to know where I got the guns. Everyone does."

Not knowing if he should play innocent or not, Freedomhowler simply admitted that this was true.

"Okay," Doc said. "You're a Southerner, so you'll appreciate this. I got them from the man who prevented the destruction of the South."

Freedomhowler took that like a slap, "Now see here, sir!"

Doc waved a hand to cut Freedomhowler off. "Hold on now, hear me out. You can join the rest and call me crazy when I'm done, but wait for your turn. You know that in 1858, there was a series of assassinations in the United States?"

"I do," Freedomhowler said. It was a piece of history every good American knew. Over the course of a year, some 40 politicians, businessmen, military officers, statesmen, and other men of import were killed in the south, as were dozens of prominent abolitionists in the north. Each of these people was shot clean through the heart and no bullet was ever found. It made a sensation across the country.

"Those assassinations prevented a civil war. Had they not taken place, the North would have continued to refuse to return escaped slaves to the South, the South would have attempted to secede from the union, and the North would have invaded to prevent the separation. More than a half a million would have died. Atlanta would have been burned to the ground."

"No, sir, I will not hear such a thing!" Freedomhowler protested. "The men of the South stand by our honor, and we would not have allowed such a thing to happen."

“Southern honor would have fed the war, not prevented it. But with the more adamant lovers of slavery dead, other leaders came forward and helped form the Lincoln Accord.”

It was another familiar piece of history. The accord called for the North to give no harbor to freed slaves, and for the South to grant irrevocable freedom to coloreds under the age of 13 or over the age of 50. As slavery faded away over the course of a generation, former slaveholders received government subsidies to cover the cost of their lost labor, with a guarantee that those subsidies would continue for as long as they lived. There was protest to be sure, but it was ineffectual. Five years later Congress passed the Davis Amendment, freeing all remaining slaves regardless of their age, and the country celebrated by amending the constitution to grant voting rights to all citizens of age, including former slaves and women.

Freedomhowler was about to ask how it was that Doc Evans could possibly know what would have happened had it not been for the assassinations, when firelight caught the buckle of the gunman’s belt.

“So it was a man from the future who carried out these assassinations,” he asked.

Evans was taken aback. “You thought of that pretty quickly. Most folks either sorta smile and walk away at this point or flat out call me crazy.”

“I have some experience in these matters.”

“Hmm. Well then, maybe you’ll know this, too. The man from the future came to me because somehow or other his time machine had broken and he was dying from what he called *tem-po-ral* displacement disease. This was in 1865, and back then I had been practicing medicine in the western territories for about thirty years.”

“Thirty...years?”

“Yep. I was born in 1802.”

The old man told them his name was Bradley Evans, and after Norris and Heather helped him sit up in bed, he attempted to explain his situation as best he could.

“I was 45 years old and shared a doctoring practice with Pa in, I think at that time it was Wyoming territory. This man came to us with a pile of money and asked that we keep him hidden and help him die. The man called himself Matt Dylan, and we could tell it was a made-up name, but he was in pain and terrible sick with nothing I had ever seen before. Horrible wounds would open in his skin and then close themselves just as quick. He’d lose teeth and then have them back the next morning. The pain was terrible and there was nothing we could do for it. We couldn’t even get the man drunk.

“This Dylan was with us about a month, and Pa spent a lot of time talking to him while I took care of the regular duties. We tried to put the man out of his misery, but even though he wanted to die, he just couldn’t be killed. You come at him with a knife or a gun, and his gun would be out faster than a man that sick had any business moving. You didn’t even want to try and take his guns, even when he was asleep. He’d go for a week without water and eat poison like candy. In the end, we could do nothin’ but let his disease tear him apart.

“Dylan had said we could have his things as payment when he died. He had a lot of money and more gold than we’d ever seen in a box on the cart he brought himself in on. He had a stack of calling cards that just said, ‘Have gun, will travel,’ on them and the address of some hotel. We thought that meant he was some kind of gunman. There were some other things, too, machines and such, most of which we never did figure out.

“We had all these things and Pa made a big mistake. Instead of burying the gun belt with the dead man, he tried it on. As soon he did, he got this burning in the small of his back. We found out that this little piece of metal, about the

size of your small finger nail, had burrowed into the skin at the base of his spine, and from that moment on he was just like this Dylan character, but without the disease.

“Pa could draw his gun faster than you could see. He could hit anything with one shot, and it was like he had eyes in the back of his head. If he cut his finger, it was better a minute later. But the bad of it was he had this new reflex where he would defend himself even without thinking about it. It wasn’t long before we were in town and one of the cowhands who was always teasin’ him for havin’ so much book learnin’ made fun because Pa was carrying a gun. This drunk fool tried to draw on Pa, and before he’d even cleared leather Pa had blown a hole clean through his heart.

“Then gunslingers and people wantin’ to make a reputation started showing up to try Pa out. They’d come up to him on the street, try to shoot him in the back when he rode by, barge into our place in the middle of the night. And I had to help Pa bury them, one after another after another.”

Bradley’s eyes glazed over for a moment, like he wasn’t there. But just when Heather began to think they’d lost him, he started again.

“Then Pa started getting younger instead of older. People started askin’ questions.

“We moved to California, and on the way the stagecoach was robbed. Pa killed five men and I helped dig their holes. All the killing got to me. It got to Pa, too. Neither of us could practice medicine any more, and we lived on what we had and what people gave us for doing little jobs before they started to get scared and we had to leave. Sometimes we collected bounties, which was like making things worse to make them better.

“Then in 1900, Pa packed us up and moved us to England. He said Dylan had told him things about the future, and that one of them was that there was going to

be a 'world war' with Germany attacking other countries in Europe and Africa, even the United States. Dylan said that this man Hitler would be in charge in Germany, that he'd send explosives that flew by themselves to blow up England, and that millions would die in death camps, all because Dylan would die before he could make it to the future to stop the war.

"Pa decided he was going to be a hero and save the world.

"Well, the Great War came, but there was no Hitler. There were no death camps. There were no flying bombs, unless you mean the airplanes. Nobody attacked the United States. It was all a lie. And it was years and years of more bodies and more buryin'. It was years of people from other towns convincing troublemakers to come pick on 'the crazy American' so that they could get put out of other people's misery. Our garden grows tall on them.

"And I've had enough.

"There had been a little machine Dylan left behind that you touch it to wherever you're sick and it makes you better. It stopped working some time back, and I'd been begging Pa to stop using it on me years ago. Pa doesn't need it, but I'm dying without it, and I tell you right now that it's not a moment too soon.

"I hurt everywhere a man can hurt. All the way to my soul. And if you want to help me, help me end it and I'll send a blessing down on you from my reward. I'll tell you, too, Pa is burning inside. He doesn't get sick, he doesn't get old, and he's already lived way, way too long. You find a way to kill him, and I promise you'll have another blessing coming down to you."

It was a hell of a speech from a man who looked barely strong enough to move his lips.

"This be more than a girl can understand," Heather said. "Your Pa seems like such a fine man."

Bradley smiled a weak smile. "He is a fine man, but he's a fine man who's seen too much and lived too long with nothing for balance."

"We will do what we can for you," Norris said. "Both of you."

Bradley shook his head. "You can't. You kill me, and Pa will kill you whether he wants to or not. You try and kill him, and it's the same. Just leave. Just leave and go."

They helped the old man lie down again, and in a moment he was asleep.

Norris gestured for Heather to come with him to a spot beside the stove.

"I dinna see what we can do," said Heather.

"I cannot kill him," said Norris. "It would be right, I can smell the need on him, but I cannot do it."

"Aye." Heather nodded knowing what was being asked of her. "But what about his Pa?"

Norris thought for a moment. "If his Pa will try to kill you when you say his son is dead, then we will have to make it impossible for him to hurt you." Another moment of thought. "I will go out and ask him to demonstrate his shooting skill. You do...what needs to be done, and listen. After you hear twelve shots, his guns will be empty. You will then come out and give him the news. Without his guns, there will be time to calm him down or at least restrain him before he can hurt you."

Heather sighed. "Aye."

Evans had one of his guns out and was showing Freedomhowler its hilt. "This red stripe is sort of an energy indicator. The bullets aren't really bullets at all but some sort of energy source, and the stripe shows how much power is left in the bullet currently in the chamber. When a bullet is empty, the chamber rotates a new one into place. I've got a belt full of replacement bullets, and if I don't replace an

empty one, I end up doing it in my sleep, just like cleaning the guns.”

“Incredible,” Freedomhowler said. “How many shots can you take with each bullet?”

“It depends. The power changes depending on the target. You use as much power on a person as you do on an airplane, and you end up punching right through him and destroying buildings or killing people behind him. On average, I guess each bullet is good for about 10,000 shots. Between the two guns, that’s about 120,000 before I have to reload. In the years I’ve had the gun, I’ve only had to replace a bullet four times.”

In all his years with the Wild West show, Freedomhowler had never even imagined such a thing. “Remarkable. Would you do me the honor of allowing me a little target practice?”

Evans shook his head. “Wouldn’t work. Only I can fire the guns. In fact, if someone tries to steal ‘em, I’ve got these fighting skills that—”

Doc Evans cut himself off as the door to his house opened and Norris came out. Freedomhowler found himself holding his breath as the naked man trotted across the yard to them.

Doc Evans stood, hand now holding his gun with purpose. “Is it done?”

“Your boy is awake,” Norris said, “and talking. All will be well, but it is going to take time. Heather is with him.”

“All right,” Doc said. He holstered his gun.

“As we spoke,” Norris continued, “Bradley mentioned that you are indeed quite an excellent shot with those pistols.”

“Did he.”

“Indeed. And although he was not enthusiastic about the subject, I, for one, would be quite interested in putting you to a little test, just for curiosity’s sake and to pass the time until Heather brings us further word.”

Doc looked at him with suspicion. "What do you have in mind?"

Norris pretended to consider the question, although he already had a plan well in mind. "What if I threw a dozen objects in the air. How many do you think you could hit before they struck the ground?"

"I really don't truck with showing off, but since you're helping me I'm willing to do this one thing. So long as you promise to be satisfied."

"Oh, certainly!" said Norris. "Freedomhowler, would you be so kind as to fetch a dozen coins?"

Freedomhowler wasn't quite sure where Norris was going with this, but the man seemed to have something in mind. He went to the wagon, fetched the coins and, while he was there, checked that the cotton in the slumbering Grenadine's ears was well in place.

When Norris had the coins in hand, he asked Evans, "All right then, how much time do you require between coins. A second?"

Doc shook his head. "None. Just throw 'em all as high as you can all at once. But first move over more toward the trees, so that my shots don't go toward the house or your wagon."

This was quite incredible. Wild Bill was hooting and hollering in Freedomhowler's head like he was watching his own show back in the day. If Doc hit even four of the coins, that would be better than Annie could have done.

Norris walked to where Doc had indicated and, without so much as a word of warning, threw the handful of coins high in the air.

The guns were out faster than Freedomhowler could see, and flame spit from them in what seemed a continuous stream.

It was impossible to tell how many shots were fired.

The gunfire stopped. Had that been a dozen shots? Heather had no way of knowing—it had come far too fast for her to count. Though her life depended on it, all she could do was hope that Norris had done as promised, and that her own preparations would hold.

On the bed, the old man lay dead, his face beneath a pillow. He had awakened when she lifted him to pull it away, and smiled when he saw what she intended to do. But then he had made her promise that she would put his Pa out of his misery as well. She had not wanted to, because even in the short time she'd known him Heather had felt stirrings for the handsome man who had tried to save her from imagined slavery. But the old man told her that if she truly cared for the gunman, she would take his hated life from him, and the way he said it had cut her to the core.

Heather opened the door.

Some distance away, Doc Evans was holstering his gun. Freedomhowler was standing slackjawed as Norris ran about in the dust barking and yapping as he picked up coins. "One! Two! Three! I think he knocked the center from all twelve!"

Heather didn't know what had happened and she didn't pay it any mind. Doc Evans—Dan—wasn't reloading, so the window of opportunity was open. She walked right up to him.

"Dan," she said with tear-filled eyes, "I canna do more than just say yer wee one is no more. He begged t' die, and I killed him with me own hands."

Then she reached for him, her hands grasping and snapping his neck quick and clean as could be. But Doc's gun was already up and pressed against her bosom. The crack of his neck was buried in the boom of his sixgun.

Doc Evans fell backward, but even as he did so his arm re-aimed at where Heather's forehead had been, and

had she not fallen herself the second shot would have cleaved her skull.

Freedomhowler shouted.

Norris yelped.

Within the wagon, a pulse of energy awakened Grenadine to her own scream.

Heather landed on her seat, sitting up with blood pouring down her chest. She moaned aloud in pain and began clawing at the strings of her bodice, soon giving up on untying the reddening rawhide and just ripping them open. Beneath the bodice was the door of Doc Evans' stove, positioned to protect her heart but with a bullet-sized hole punched through.

Freedomhowler pressed his handkerchief to Heather's bleeding breast. "My dear! My dear!" was all he could think to say.

Then realization lit Heather's eyes.

"I'm not dyin'. I kin breathe. I'm not dead!"

Indeed, the iron plate, her generous bosom, and layers of thick muscle had been just enough to keep the gunshot from her pounding heart.

Norris pushed aside Freedomhowler to see what he could do for his wounded companion, but was in turn pushed aside when Heather's eyes fell on the still form of Doc Evans.

"No!" she cried, and scrambled across the dirt to the fallen man. She picked him up, cradled his head to her bosom. "By heaven above, what've I done!"

Then she held him, and bled, and rocked, and sobbed until, with a click of bone and a shudder Doc Evans opened his eyes.

In the moment that Heather saw Dan Evans alive and well (if rather messy with her blood), her still-beating heart made the leap from flirty infatuation to full-bore, ox-power love. She brushed away Norris' attempt to heal her wound

and scooped up the grinning gunman in her arms to dance about the fire with him.

For his part, Dan Evans was quite impressed by this woman who had attempted to give her life to bring him peace. When he could catch his breath between Heather's loving squeezes, he professed his love in so many words.

At about this time, Grenadine was stumbling from the wagon, half dazed and wondering what all the fuss was about, only to be hit by the whirlwind of Heather dragging Dan up the wagon steps.

There is no polite way to describe what took place in the wagon over the next few hours. Suffice it to say that Dan Evans proved exceedingly difficult to injure in any meaningful way, and the following day found the group hard at work fashioning a pair of new axles for their vehicle.

In days to come, there was a quiet, respectful ceremony for Bradley Evans, at which nobody could think of quite what to say. Then, after a little packing and with no tears, Freedomhowler's Internationally-Acclaimed Traveling Exhibition of Medicinal Wonderment took to the road again, with Heather McInnerney leading the way, Dan Evans close by her side.

