

THE ETCHED CITY

K. J. BISHOP



BALLANTINE BOOKS

THE ETCHED CITY

K. J. Bishop

B A N T A M B O O K S

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For Stuart

I despise and execrate pride and the indecent delights of that extinguishing irony which disjoins the precision of our thought.

—Lautréamont, *Poésies*

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PART ONE

There were no milestones in the Copper Country. Often a traveller could only measure the progress of a journey by the time it took to get from each spoiled or broken thing to the next: a half day's walk from a dry well to the muzzle of a cannon poking out of a sand slope, two hours to reach the skeleton of a man and a mule. The land was losing its battle with time. Ancient and exhausted, it visited decrepitude on everything within its bounds, as though out of spleen.

In the south of the country, arid scrubby plains alternated with stretches of desert. One road crossed this region, connecting the infrequent hamlets and oases, following the line of a derelict stone wall built long ago by a warlord. Along it, at distant intervals, were the remains of watchtowers and small forts. The greater part of the wall and its fortifications lay in complete ruin, but occasional sections remained intact enough to provide shelter.

One evening, late in the Husk Month, as the sun was getting on towards the horizon and the bite was at last starting to go out of its rays, the road brought the physician Raule to a tower with three standing walls. At this promising sight her dark features lifted out of the scowl they had settled into during the stifling, monotonous afternoon. Earlier that day, she had traded tales with the Harutaim nomads who always took them along the road, or rather beside it, for they held man-made paths in low esteem. They never camped near the wall, and had cautioned Raule not to do so either. They believed the ruins were haunted by evil spirits, the ancient and acrimonious undead. But Raule preferred the stone places to the empty land outside.

Inside the tower she found the ashes of someone else's campfire, a bottle, an empty meat can, and a wad of blood-soiled bandages. She alighted from her camel and left it to graze on some thorny plant that had taken root in the gravel around the stonework. After kicking the rubbish into a corner, she pitched her small tent against a wall, and built a fire on the remains of the litterer's. She ate, chewing down some strips of dried goat meat she had bought from the Harutaim. With more relish, she devoured a handful of dates, spearing them on the point of an old knife and cooking them over the

flames until they were hot and soft. Her small meal finished, she stayed seated in front of the fire wrapped in a blanket and her thoughts, tired but unable to sleep, as night came on.

The temperature dropped sharply after the sun set, and a fierce wind blew up and went hooting back and forth across the sky. As Raule listened to it she thought it might be easy to imagine djinns and ghouls out in the darkness, or to fancy that you heard the camel bells of a phantom caravan passing along the road.

When she slept at last she had dreams about the dead. These days, she saw them whenever she closed her eyes.

The wall ended at the town of Proof Rock. The sun was a late-afternoon bonfire, the earth overcooked and flyblown. Raule slouched in her saddle. Sweat glued her shirt and breeches to her skin, and her feet were baking inside her boots. She looked around without excitement.

Like most settlements in the Copper Country, Proof Rock was seemingly assembled from the detritus of other, defunct habitations. The only visible souls were a few old men and women, dozing on porches and balconies, as still as pegs of wood. Closed doors and shuttered windows completed the picture of an empty nest.

At the edge of the town there was an inn built of motley scrap metal. It had a brick porch, shaded by a tarpaulin and a mangy palm tree. A blanket slung over a wire served as the door, while sackcloth covered the windows, concealing the interior. Four camels were tethered to a rail in front of the porch. Raule appraised them. They were fit-looking mounts, handsomely caparisoned, but conspicuously lacking bells.

Raule dismounted, tied her camel to the palm tree, and went up to the doorway. She carried the medicine satchel that advertised her peaceable trade, while keeping her right hand near the scattergun she had made by sawing a shotgun short of most of its barrel.

She pushed the blanket back. Inside there was gloom, a sawdust floor, and buzzing flies. The air was searing, almost unbreathably hot. The temperature outdoors felt pleasant in comparison. The only customers were four men sitting at cards around a table crowded with bottles, glasses, and piles of banknotes. All four were clad in sombre-coloured outfits, decked out with weapons and ammunition bandoliers, and wore wide-brimmed hats that hid their features in shadow. Spectres of trouble. They all turned and looked at Raule.

One of them, a slim man, was fully muffled in a black domino, with a dustveil over his lower face. Raule smiled inwardly at such a graphic caricature of a ne'er-do-well. Then a sword hanging at his left hip, with its point resting behind him on the floor, caught her eye. The long, slightly curved scabbard was familiar to her.

The man tugged the brim of his hat down, as though he was wary of her eyes. But then his fingers clad in black gloves, drummed on the table in apparently idle fashion, and Raule read their movement

Nice to see you. Wait till later.

The other three gave her looks that plainly said “later” as well, but with different intent. She was unconcerned about that; later they’d be dead drunk.

Excepting the ghosts in her dreams, Raule hadn’t seen a face she knew, either friend or foe, for more than half a year. Though she thought about leaving then and there, life had been too lonely lately, and so she chose to stay. Wanting a drink, and water to wash with if any was to be had, she walked to the bar. No one was there. Her nose picked up a raw smell.

Looking over the counter, she saw the body of an elderly man, who was no doubt the innkeeper. Something sharp and heavy had broken his skull open like an egg. The blood around him was still wet. A shelf behind the bar held a few bottles, but Raule decided to forgo alcoholic refreshment for the time being. There was a gap between two sheets of tin in the back wall, with another room visible beyond. Without looking at the men again, Raule moved towards the gap.

“Woman, stop.”

It wasn’t the voice of her acquaintance at the table. It was of iron and clinker. Raule halted.

“How would you say that man died?” the voice drawled.

“I would say,” Raule answered, not facing around, “that he fell and hit his head.”

There was ugly laughter, briefly. Then the shuffle and snap of cards signalled the resumption of play.

Just teasing.

Raule went through the opening and found herself in a bedroom-cum-storeroom. The shelves held a few sacks of beans and some hoary sausages. On the floor lay a strongbox, broken open and empty. An unlikely leadlight door of yellow-and-green glass roundels led out to an open yard. Raule squinted at the sudden light. In a corner of the yard there was a pump with a bucket beside it. She tried the pump, which yielded brown water. She cupped some in her hands and splashed it on her head and neck. The muddy residue stayed in the lines on her palms. She wasn’t going to try drinking it, but in case the camel was thirsty she filled the bucket and walked back around the side of the building. The camel drank a few mouthfuls, then gave the bucket a disdainful kick, spilling the water, which the dry ground rapidly swallowed.

Raule drank from one of the several canteens she carried, then settled under the palm tree and closed her eyes close. However, she kept her ears open.

The sun inched down the sky. Shadows lengthened. An emaciated, three-legged hound limped across the road. Brass-coloured ants that were half as long as Raule’s thumb came crawling out of

hole in front of her feet. She kept count of them.

Nine hundred and thirteen ants later, gunfire erupted indoors.

Even though Raule had been half-expecting it, the sudden earsplitting noise gave her a jolt. She jumped off the porch and lay flat. She heard several pistols being rapidly emptied and men bellowing like bulls.

Then all went quiet again.

Raule crept to the doorway. Squatting, she lifted the bottom edge of the blanket a little and peered into the room. Dark figures lay prone on the floor amid overturned chairs and broken glass. Only the veiled man was standing, wreathed in gunsmoke, lit by a cat's cradle of thin sunbeams threading through new bullet holes in the walls and roof. He reloaded the pair of long-barrelled revolvers he had in hand and holstered them. Then from the curved scabbard he drew a yataghan sword and swung it down three times, severing each fallen man's head. That had always been his preferred way of making sure of a kill. Raule thought it was something of a comforting habit, too, like some people's habits of straightening crooked-hanging pictures, or always wearing a certain item of clothing.

She got to her feet. As she went to move the blanket, the wire fell down. The man started, and brought the sword up. Seeing only Raule there, he lowered it again.

Raule stepped inside and took a few paces into the smoke, stopping several feet short of the man and the mire of sawdust and blood he stood in. She glanced down at the bodies. "Who was cheating?"

"Who do you think?" The voice from behind the dustveil was pleasant, with the slight breathy timbre of a northern accent.

"It seems you've still got your sweet touch, Gwynn."

"You use it or lose it," he said dispassionately. He wiped the sword on the nearest corpse's sleeve, then sheathed it. He removed his hat, then the domino and the veil, disclosing foreign features: a white, finely tapered face, graced by an expression of urbane serenity. His eyes were waterish green, as though they held brine. His hair was black, long, braided in a queue. "It's good to see you, Raule," he said. Locating an unbroken bottle and glass on the table, he poured himself a drink. "One for yourself?"

"Maybe later."

When he had quenched his thirst, he stepped over the bodies and held out his hand, smiling. With that smile the strange peace in his looks dissolved, and a baneful quiddity showed itself.

Raule had a moment of hesitation. There were other people she would have preferred to meet. But Gwynn had once been a comrade, and in some ways one of her better friends. She didn't have so many of those left that she could afford to be choosy. She took his grip.

"I had thought you must be decorating a gallows by now," she said. Their old foe, General Anford

and his Army of Heroes, liked leaving enemies alive no more than Gwynn did.

He cocked an eyebrow. "I? A jig was never my favourite dance, you know."

Raule heard less bravado than self-mockery in his words. Having become famous, or at least infamous, Gwynn had always professed amusement at the disparity between the grandeur that my demanded of a famous man's life and death, and the bathos and indignities that actual circumstances tended to force upon both.

"Is Anforth still after you? I can't imagine he's given up," said Raule.

"Oh, he never will. The old bulldog pursues me as ardently as ever. He's made me worth a fortune. If only one could buy shares in oneself, I could be a rich man. You must have been keeping well to the backblocks if you haven't seen my face on a reward notice lately."

"I'm afraid I've dropped out of the social circuit."

The unpleasant smile crossed Gwynn's face again. "I've heard all the parties are deserted this year. Even people of quality only want to hobnob with the lynch mob of an evening. I take it you're doctoring in this territory?"

"Around and about. There's enough work."

"Of the paying kind?"

"No, not really."

In fact, Raule was close to destitution. Few of the people she treated had the means to pay for her services with anything more than a night's shelter and a frugal meal. When they did manage to scrape up a little money, she couldn't always bring herself to take it. Not wanting to dwell on the subject of her poverty, she asked Gwynn whether he had news of anyone else.

"I saw Casvar at Flat Mountain," he answered. "He was rotting in a cave, with gangrene in a broken leg. He asked me to do the decent thing, and I obliged him. In Quanut I saw a grave with Red Harni's name on the marker. Have you seen anyone?"

"Evoiry, a few months back. He was selling firewood at a souk. He looked all right."

Gwynn nodded. His left hand fingered the hilt of his sword. Raule's eyes went to it. Gwynn had brought it with him from the north. It was of Maghian manufacture and its true name was Heron Wing Scythes Over a Mountain Lake, but Gwynn had given it another name in his native Anvalli: Gol'achab, meaning Not My Funeral.

Raule noticed that the gemstones that had decorated the hilt were no longer there. Gwynn saw her looking. "I traded all that rock candy for a few necessities a while ago," he volunteered. "She may have lost her beauty, but she still works, and she saves me bullets from time to time."

Raule glanced in the direction of the late innkeeper. "Was that one?"

"No." Gwynn stepped back and nudged one of the bodies with the toe of his boot. "This fellow took exception to something the man said, and was somewhat overenthusiastic in his response." Looking down at the corpse, he shook his head. "Poor bastard. His nerves were wound up like piano wires. I never saw him look happy. Life must have been a burden to him."

"They all must have been pretty high-strung, to get in a four-way firefight over cards," Raule commented.

"I daresay."

"What are your plans, then?"

Gwynn walked past her. "Sleep. I want to leave at nightfall." He disappeared outside, and returned carrying a knapsack. He took off his gloves and rolled up his shirtsleeves, and began stripping the corpses and gathering up what money had escaped drowning in the blood on the floor. Raule left him to it and went out into the comparatively fresh air. She squatted on her heels under the palm tree, surveying the street, where the old-timers slumbered on. *I know how they feel*, she thought.

In a while, Gwynn came up from the backyard, gloves tucked in his belt, shaking water off his hands.

Raule crossed her arms behind her head and yawned. "Well, I don't think anyone here will try to arrest you."

Gwynn took a long, yellow-grey cigarette and a box of matches out of his waistcoat pocket. Striking a match on the metal wall, he lit up and inhaled deeply. "A pity," he said, "to have to leave this place . . ."

"I don't know. I think I'm ready for somewhere quieter."

"I know of a nice graveyard."

Raule gave a little smile. The grave would come soon enough. She asked which way Gwynn was going. He said east. She told him she was going west and south.

He pointed his cigarette at the buildings over the street. "There's no work for you here, then?"

She shrugged. "I saw a dog in need of a wooden leg." She cocked her head towards the doorway. "Who were those men, anyway?"

"Some fellows I travelled with for a few days. They weren't the best company."

He moved away and took the four camels off the rail and around to the back. Raule lifted her mount's saddle off its hump, then sat down on the porch and stretched her legs out. The three-legged dog appeared again and trekked back over the street. Raule fanned flies away. It crossed her mind that

the bodies indoors ought to be buried, or they would spread disease.

That might be good for business.

She felt torpid, and not just because of the heat. She thought about getting up and seeing if she could, in fact, unearth some work in the town. With such an elderly population, it would be strange to find no ill health. Or she could ride on. Probably Gwynn expected her to. But her body wouldn't move and she drifted off into sleep, and a dream. She was back in her hometown, a place larger than Pro Rock but otherwise not unlike it. Everything was normal except for the people, who had no heads. They walked up and down the dry streets, and worked in the languishing bean fields, with their upper vertebrae poking up from the stumps of their necks.

Gwynn woke her. The broiling jaw of the day hung slack. The sky was darkening, and all the flies in the world seemed to be at the inn. Gwynn was veiled again and wore a bulky overcoat. He had roped off the riderless camels behind his own and looked ready to depart. He asked Raule if she would consider backtracking east for a short way. She asked why. With his whip he gestured back at the dead men and camels. "I'm reduced to a vagrant salesman's existence. I have a contact at the Yellow Clay souk, to whom I can sell these beasts and the considerable property I inherited from my late colleagues today, including three dozen excellent firearms. However, I'd rather avoid the eyes of the crowd. If you care to come and do the trading, half the profits are yours."

"No."

"No?"

"It's not a bad offer. But I'm afraid I don't care for the provenance of your generosity."

Gwynn gave her a long look. "Have you taken up martyrdom to pious ideals, Doctor?"

"Not martyrdom, I hope. But maybe I've taken up an ideal or two." She stretched her legs out again and folded her arms in front of her. "Even if those men weren't worth much, whom did they kill to get all that gear in the first place?"

"Others who were worth less, no doubt. How many worthy people out here have any money?"

"None, since the worthless never stop robbing them."

Gwynn shrugged. "Well, do as you like." He made his camel kneel, got onto its back, and urged it up. He kicked it into a walk. "Take care of yourself," he said over his shoulder.

While he rode away, Raule looked in the other direction. The town was deserted. The palm trees rustled in the first night breeze.

"Well, now it's just thee and me," Raule said to her camel. She got up and made ready to go.

While she buckled saddle girths and checked stirrup leathers, she thought about how badly she needed some money. Riding west through the town, past the silent houses with their dark windows and

now deserted porches, she struggled with the faculty which she thought of as her phantom conscience.

Being only a phantom, it had little strength. “Damn you,” she muttered, not really sure whom she addressed. She turned around, rode back, and caught up with the small caravan and its diplomatically silent owner.

Down the dark road, jolting and creaking, a line of wagons rolled. There were fifteen all counted drawn by mule teams and accompanied by some bone-thin cattle and dogs. Some of the people under the big canvas hoods waved at the two riders. Raule waved back. She might have been inclined to linger and talk, but Gwynn was looking straight ahead, plainly not keen to be sociable to the stranger. Most of the time, however, he was a talkative companion. He had numerous stories of recent adventure and suffering—specifically, his adventures and other people’s suffering, almost invariably connected—that he told with the air of an amiable ghoul. The life of an itinerant doctor provided its own share of macabrely amusing moments, and Raule fell easily into a pattern of swapping grisly anecdotes with her old comrade. This was now their second night of travelling east. In accordance with Gwynn’s preferences, they rested during the hottest hours of the day. When they weren’t talking, Raule frequently looked up and studied the constellations pinned around the sky. The Manticore arched his tail above the Crown, while the Rider Queen stood forever ready to fling her lasso; the Running Boys chased the Hopping Girl; the Vulture harried the Seven Guests out of the Inn; the Tortoise trudged with the Cup on its back, trying to reach the Old Woman on the other side of the sky; the Lizard led her children homewards, following the wily Bat. Raule wondered if, in millions of years, the stars would shift into positions that showed how the stories ended.

“So which of you robbed the innkeeper?” she ventured to ask Gwynn at one point.

“The fellow who killed him,” he answered. “I’d won it all by the time I killed *him*, mind you. That might make it clean money now, depending on how you look at it.”

“I’ve been trying to get away from the old life,” Raule said.

The period of history that had caught them both up in its turbulence was over. The war was lost. Three years had gone by since General Anforth won the victory that ended the revolution and saw its leaders sent to the lime kilns. The Army of Heroes, under Anforth still, hunted its old enemies across every territory in the Copper Country. Sometimes a ballad telling of someone’s heroic death against overwhelming odds could be heard; but betrayal by erstwhile allies, followed by trial and execution or just a quick lynching, was the more usual reality.

“So what waits at the end of your itinerary, Doctor?” Gwynn said. “What’s your desideratum, that mirage in your eye?”

“I’ve been thinking of heading across to the Teleute Shelf,” she said.

“No doubt a good choice. I’ve heard life’s quite civilised there.”

“So I believe.”

In truth, Raule had no serious intentions. Like Gwynn, she had a price on her head, but it was comparatively small one, and as a native of the land she had the advantage of being ordinary. No one ever noticed one more small, thin, dark woman among the rest in a market or saloon crowd. Moreover the people who dwelled in the hamlets out in the wilderness were, as a rule, glad to have a doctor come by, and if any of them had ever matched her face with that of Raule the brigand, malign wit, doctor and associate of murderers, none had ever betrayed her. She was drifting, numbly content to go to bed alive and wake up alive, letting days and weeks and months slide past.

“And you, my gunslinger riding towards the sunrise; are you going to the prairies?”

“No. I’ve got my sights on the real Orient. Sarban, Ambashan, Icthiliki where the girls are pretty.”

“Ah, an eastern paradise. One with gardens and shady terraces where you can laze all the lotus-eating day, and beautiful servants bring you more wine than you can drink, and you can get filthy rich without lifting a finger?”

“All that goes without saying, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed it does.” Raule drifted off into a reverie about the sweet life in such a place.

Later that night, they came to a ghost town huddled around an abandoned mine. They didn’t both stopping. Anything worth scavenging would be long gone.

An hour past dawn the next morning they reached Yellow Clay.

Looking through their spyglasses, they saw many sky-blue uniforms in the crowd at the souk. The soldiers weren’t just idling. They were asking questions and checking papers. A group of unlucky people stood roped together under guard. More soldiers were setting up a camp at the edge of the town.

Gwynn quietly cursed.

Raule shrugged her shoulders. “Well, we can go on. There’ll be another place somewhere.”

“We?”

“Now I’ve come this far, I want to collect my share.”

And so they continued to go east. They reached the other end of the wall. Where it finished, the road forked into two tracks diverging across a flat, reddish brown plain. Raule pointed to the track on the right. "That's the way I came," she told Gwynn. "There wasn't much down there."

"Then we'll go this way," he said, taking the left-hand path.

Four hours of riding in climbing heat brought them to a range of broad, fissured red rock hills with thin bushland on top. The road went up the first hill in steep switchbacks, then followed a dry gory through the bush. Acacias and spindly blackpod trees made up most of the taller vegetation, with narrow grass and tough, tangled succulents growing over the ground. The camels pulled towards the blackpods and tore off leaves. Something had already thoroughly chewed the lower branches. The culprits presently became visible: some skinny goats, with bells and brands proclaiming them to be someone's property.

A mile further on, the trail passed through a group of shacks. A painted board nailed to an acacia read: PATIENCE.

Patience, if that was the hamlet's name, had no inn; but one shack bore a sign proclaiming that guests were welcome. Raule and Gwynn stopped outside it and dismounted. A lot of knocking finally brought a man to the door. He was sleepy-eyed and surly. He pointed at the dirt floor to indicate that this was the bed, and named an exorbitant price. Raule haggled him down to half of it. There was nowhere for the camels. The man flatly refused to have them inside; was his house now a shitting place for livestock? They would have to be left out in the open. He beckoned a girl-child out of the shack. At some time, she had been horrifically burned: below a soiled mobcap, her face was a real one-eyed mask of dense scar tissue. "My daughter," the man said with a mean laugh, "will keep an eye on your animals."

Raule suggested they take watches. Gwynn agreed, and offered to take the first, so Raule brought her bedding into the shack and fell into her usual troubled sleep. Gwynn woke her in the afternoon and took his turn to stretch out on the floor, with his hat over his face. Their host was ostensibly sleeping too, sprawled on an old coach seat serving as a divan, but now and then his eyes opened and darted around. Was he afraid they would steal the dirt from his floor, the spiderwebs from his ceiling?

To pass the time Raule took some cards off a shelf and played hands of solitaire. When she was too bored to shuffle the cards again, she opened one of her saddlebags and brought out an old journal. Once upon a time she had kept copious medical records. She had thrown away all but this one book of notes, which dated from one of the last, hardest months of the war. She knew it by heart, and skimmed through it without having to do more than glance at each entry, her eyes travelling along the close lines of writing, which contained not only useful information but personal memories. For many of the men and women whose bodies' travails were detailed in the book, the jottings about their bones, muscles, organs, temperatures, excreta, vomits, fits, and deaths were the only written record that they had ever lived. Gwynn's name never appeared, for while calamity had regularly brushed near him, it had just as regularly failed to strike a noteworthy blow. His was a lucky litany of close shaves and narrow scrapes.

Halfway through the journal, Raule stopped reading and put it away. From the same bag she pulled

out the one other piece of reading material she owned. It was a traveller's guide to the Teleute Shelf which she had bought as a curiosity some six months ago.

A map inside the front cover showed the vast Salt Desert spreading southwest of the Copper Country, crossing the belly of the world. Further west, the Teleute Shelf was a curved line, meeting the desert on its outward swell. From the book Raule had learned that the escarpment rose over a thousand yards high and held on top a whole other, abundant world of countries. In a past age, said the introductory essay, the Teleute Shelf had been the edge of a continent and the Salt Desert a sea. Now, however, the desert was a completely waterless place. Raule knew something of it. Mercantile concerns held power there, maintaining fortified mining compounds that operated like miniature provinces. For water and everything else these were dependent on the vital artery of the railroad. But the book described an opposite climate on the highlands of the Shelf. The lines fell over themselves with depictions of fertility: emerald-green mountains, unpenetrated jungles, huge rivers teeming with fish, and rain that fell for weeks upon weeks. Raule couldn't imagine so much water. There were also sections on twenty-odd major cities, from which she received a vivid impression of places that were old, big, and full of history. While she was not so naive as to imagine that any of them would be paradise, she could not help but be somewhat beguiled by the descriptions of architecture, gardens, palaces, universities, theatres, fashions, and the other features and trappings of a well-established material civilisation.

She glanced at Gwynn, who lay as still and quiet as a stone. His native country of Anvall was a land where the only seasons were degrees of winter. A place as white as the moon and colder than a thousand graves, was how he had once described it. In summer its borders melted, like morning ice crystals on the top of a cistern, and fell into a heaving black sea; in winter the sea returned them. Did he dream of water? she wondered. Or the cities he had sometimes spoken of, fastnesses built half of rock, half of ice? Was he called back at night to that strange cold top of the world, or did he dream of pleasure in Icthiliki's flowery towns?

When he woke, she asked him. He replied, with a laugh, that he was rarely able to remember his dreams.

That she had not known this before was typical of their relationship, she mused. Dreaming was a luxurious subject that neither of them, in the past, would have thought to raise with the other.

The revolutionary war had attracted numerous foreigners to the Copper Country. Professional mercenaries, the bad and the crooked, idealists and romantics wanting a cause, opportunist wanderers, and sundry adventurous flotsam had flocked to the rebel army. Gwynn was one of several dozen outlanders who had joined the company to which Raule was attached as a surgeon. The revolutionaries had initially enjoyed popular support, but as the war dragged on, conditions inevitably became hungry and dangerous, and the wind of opinion changed. The people began looking to the Army of Heroes to restore the status quo and peace. The revolutionaries found themselves suddenly unwanted, and when it was all over they found themselves wanted in the wrong way. For the sake of survival many companies turned to banditry. Raule's was one such. By that stage Gwynn had become their leader. For a wild couple of years they lived as highway pirates in the comparatively populated north of the Copper Country, robbing banks and trains to support a prodigal lifestyle, while still fighting the army wherever they encountered them. But the will of the people prevailed. Aided by

General Anforth, the towns formed militias, and from then on the wages of crime came less in gold and more in lead. Former fellows turned coat in droves, becoming informers and bounty hunters. The proud and the mad, and those who were simply unable to think of anything else to do, marauded the way into shallow graves. Gwynn, to his credit, had disbanded the gang, giving everyone a chance to disappear and survive. That was over a year ago. Raule had managed to fade away, but in more ways than one, and more than she had intended to.

The revolution had been an important dream of hers. After the war she had come to wonder what. Now she didn't wonder. All her thoughts of politics and great affairs and history had become like sand blowing around in a very distant wind.

Their host had gone outside earlier, carrying some traps. Gwynn had moved to the coach seat and was cleaning his guns. He had several pistols, a pair of shotguns, and a fine Speer repeater rifle that normally lived beside his saddle in a calfskin case. He hummed softly while he made them all immaculate. The scarred child came into the room with two tin bowls of soup. She left them on the floor and hurried away. Raule picked a chunk of meat out of one bowl and tasted it. It had the familiar flavour of goat. She didn't think it was too bad, but Gwynn ate only a mouthful of his, then pushed away and made his own repast of a cigarette and a few swallows of liquid from an unlabelled bottle. Raule finished her soup and reached for Gwynn's.

"Mind?" she asked.

"Go ahead."

While she ate and Gwynn went on with his cleaning, Raule thought her situation over. As a doctor, a native, and someone whom Gwynn had cause to trust, he no doubt considered her an asset worth hanging on to. If she was useful to him, she could expect to profit. Such pragmatism had always informed his notion of friendship to a considerable degree. This suited Raule, as it allowed her to maintain an equally self-interested detachment in her dealings with him, without any dishonour.

Their way was taking them towards the Saint Kaseem Crack, a massive trench in the earth that split the Copper Country from north to south. There would certainly be guards at the bridge, plenty of them. No doubt she could help Gwynn smuggle himself past them. But if subterfuge failed and it came to a fight, she was at best an ordinary shot and didn't fancy her chances. Gwynn's good luck had never protected anyone but himself. She owed him no debts. If they found a souk before the bridge, she could take her money and go. But if they didn't, was it worth tempting fate? She decided it wasn't.

"If we don't find a market before the Crack, I'll be going back west," she said. Gwynn made an acknowledging grunt while he squinted down the Speer's barrel.

They left Patience that evening when the shadows were stretched out long and violet. The road wound down out of the hills and continued on across the arid plain. The light of a half-moon showed small islands of nail grass separated by channels of sand. To Raule's eyes the grass-and-sand archipelago looked like one small area of ground repeated over and over, as though it had been made by a lazy god with a stamp. She imagined herself riding around that land in circles, never leaving until she came to grief or grew old.

When they had ridden for some three hours without coming across any other sign of human presence, she remarked, “At least the Army of Heroes doesn’t seem interested in this territory.”

“There wouldn’t be much for a hero to do here,” Gwynn said.

Later on in the night they reached a mining town that had several streets and was actually on the maps. Dozens of people, mostly men of hard-bitten aspect, were out and about. A building with recessed curtained windows and GENTLEMEN’S CLUB painted in scrolling letters across its verandah looked to be the queen of the main street. Next door to it was a saloon from which a loud noise of piano and singing came. At the end of the street were a gallows and a graveyard, and, along with these amenities, a water cistern and a trough. After they had filled up their canteens and let the camels drink, Raule leaned against the cistern and studied her map. She estimated that they were three or four days away from the Saint Kaseem Crack. The only other bridge marked on the map was the one on the Ghan Highway, two hundred miles to the north, virtually next door to General Anforth’s headquarters in Glory City.

Raule asked Gwynn how he planned to get over the trench.

“How?” he echoed the question. “Don’t you know camels can fly?” He was drinking from the unlabelled bottle again, holding it under his veil. To Raule’s nose it had a bouquet of brass cleaner.

“That’s the drunken answer,” she said. “What’s the sober one?”

“The sober answer,” he replied, “is possibly not available at the moment. But I shall try. I plan to approach our little abyss at midday. I plan that our friends garrisoned there will be disinclined to come out of their nice cool bunker. In fact, I plan that they will be asleep.”

“And if they’re not asleep, what’s your plan?”

“To shoot better than they do.”

“I see. So as long as you grow enough arms to use all your guns at once, you’ll smoke the opposition? If you’ll forgive an agnostic’s scepticism, I’d say you’re going to die.”

“Care to wager?”

“Not a chance. If I win, you’ll be dead, so who’ll pay me?”

“Plenty of people, if you can salvage my head to show them.” Gwynn threw the bottle over the road into the graveyard. “Are you still going back?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps you should stop here, then.”

“There’s supposed to be a place called Gravel up ahead,” Raule said. “I’ll ride till there.”

They mounted and went on. The moonlight dimly showed country that became more desolate with every mile. The clumps of nail grass grew sparser, and occasional brown, pebbly sand hills appeared.

~~The dawn broke over true desert. Dramatic outcrops of black rock rose from a plain of hardpan. The coarse brown sand formed steep ramps where prevailing winds had blown it up against the rocks. Fairly wide wagon ruts and the usual bones and garbage served to mark the trail. They followed it for two nights, looking out for Gravel.~~

On the third night a strong wind rose. It worsened through the night and dawn, scooping up sand from the slopes and flinging it wildly around. Gwynn tied his domino around his face, and Raule knotted a scarf of her own likewise. Though they rode with their heads down, the sand, which was fine as dust, still got into their eyes and nostrils and lodged in every part of their clothing. The camels became restive, bellowing their displeasure at being forced to continue. It became hard to see the road.

“Gwynn!” Raule shouted. “How about waiting this out?”

The wind snatched away his answer, but she saw him raise his whip in assent. They took shelter on the leeward side of the next outcrop of rock, and huddled down next to the camels. With shrieks and shrill moans, the wind churned the sand up into spinning clouds that blotted out the sky. Now that the camels had nothing to do, they took the opportunity to show their annoyance with the situation by spitting their cud at the wind. The wind, in turn, picked up the reeking slime and cast it around liberally, scattering droplets back over the small party.

The storm blew for several hours. Meanwhile, the sun grew into an afrit wielding a scourge of heat. Gwynn slept. Raule couldn't do more than doze fitfully.

When the wind finally abated, the sun was well past its zenith. Raule lifted her head. Brown gobs covered her, Gwynn, and the camels. The land might have expelled them out of its deepest reservoir of dirt. While the heavier grains of sand had fallen back to the ground, the finer grains remained suspended in the air, covering the sky with an umber pall. She shook Gwynn awake, and they dusted off their clothes and their gear as well as they could. Gwynn assiduously stripped and cleaned all his guns. Raule, too, went to work with reamers and oil on her scattergun and the old carbine that she kept for shooting occasional game. When they were done at last, Gwynn favoured moving further off the road to camp. It occurred to Raule that if Gravel was any distance from the road, they easily might have passed it during the sandstorm and not seen it. She suggested looking around, and pointed out a high rock with a sand ramp half a mile down the road, which would give them a good view.

The slope brought them some eighty feet above the road. At that height, they found themselves above the thickest layer of dust in the air, and could see past the area where the storm had been. Raule took her spyglass out of its case and scanned the horizons. The search yielded nothing in any direction but the ubiquitous sand and rock.

Nothing. Or, perhaps not. Back the way they'd come, flickering in the brown, heat-warped distance there was a row of dots that she had at first taken for small rock spurs; but it struck her that the spacing was unusually regular. Possibly it was a row of shacks or tents.

Or smaller, closer objects.

She turned to Gwynn. He was gazing down the road the other way. “Gwynn, give me your glass for

a minute.” His had a better lens than hers did.

Complying, he asked, “What is it?”

Looking through the stronger lens, Raule was able to ascertain what the dots were.

“Trouble,” she said.

It was a line of camel-mounted figures. She estimated at least two dozen, riding at a brisk jog. They lacked the animal herds that nomads would have had with them. She did some calculations, and judged that they were less than ten miles away.

“Looks like Heroes.” Raule gave the glass back to Gwynn. He looked through it, and nodded.

“It seems so.” He didn’t sound particularly surprised. He lowered the glass quickly. “That was a flash off a lens. I’m afraid they’ve seen us. The Crack can’t be far. We’d better not dally.” He kicked his camel into a run. Raule lost no time in following suit.

As she bounced in her saddle alongside Gwynn, she said, “I doubt they came out here just for the scenery. Would they, by any remote chance, happen to be on your trail?”

“I ran into some trouble about a month ago,” he answered, sounding uncomfortable. “I thought I’d shaken them.”

“Did you really?”

“I should have told you. I apologise.”

“Has it occurred to you that if you didn’t leave little piles of corpses everywhere you go, you’d be harder to track?”

“I’ve tried, but things always seem to snowball.”

They reached the bottom of the slope. After dismounting with haste, Raule spat over her shoulder. “Whatever your head’s worth, it’s overpriced! Does Anforth know he’s searching for an empty vessel?”

“We’d better travel light,” Gwynn said as if he hadn’t heard her, and started pulling bags off his camels’ humps and throwing them onto the ground.

Raule imagined what he would look like with a dagger between his shoulder blades. But her anger dissipated with a speed that surprised her. In its place she felt a sense of fatalism, as if death had already drawn a bead on her. She couldn’t see an escape route. If she went her own way now and the soldiers decided to split up and chase her, she didn’t envision surviving long. Having little of her own to get rid of, she helped Gwynn. She was about to cut the ropes securing a sturdy leather pack on one of the spare camels, when he stopped her. “Not that one,” he said. “It’s a bit too valuable.” She shrugged and moved on to the next pack. As she climbed into her saddle, she spared a glance at the

pile of discarded luggage, which included the guns from Proof Rock. It would be good salvage for someone.

They took off down the road, kicking up clouds of dust, the spare camels following behind on the ropes.

After several minutes, Gwynn spoke:

“Do you want to know what I traded my poor sword’s beauty for? It’s in that pack.”

Raule looked askance at him.

“Dynamite.”

Raule allowed a pause of some length to elapse. At last she said, “That’s splendid. How much?”

“Enough to take out a guard bunker. And that bridge.”

“That was your plan?”

“Yes. I was going to tell you.”

Raule thought about the heat, and how rough the going was now that they weren’t just walking, and how big the bang would be if the explosives ignited. Then she thought about how, if they lived long enough to cross the bridge and blow it up, she was going to be stranded on the far side of the chasm.

“It occurs to me,” she said, “that you’re an arrogant, ridiculous, piss-eyed, mullock-brained, dunghengendered bastard, and you deserve to be forgotten by the world.”

Gwynn did not try to dispute the matter.

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