

THE
DOCTOR AND
THE
ROUGH RIDER.



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THE BUNTLINE SPECIAL—A WEIRD WEST TALE
THE DOCTOR AND THE KID—A WEIRD WEST TALE

MIKE RESNICK

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ROUGH RIDER

A WEIRD
WEST TALE



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To Carol, as always,

And to Gio Clairval and Sabina Theo,
a pair of gorgeous European ladies who are
truly fine writers as well as my good friends.



PROLOGUE

From the pages of the August 19, 1884, issue of the Leadville Bullet:

FIRST ELECTRONICALLY PUBLISHED ISSUE

This is the first issue of the Bullet to be published, which is to say powered, entirely by electricity, thanks to the help of Mr. Thomas Alva Edison and Mr. Ned Buntline. The electronic genius and the inventor have essentially re-invented the publishing business, because now the presses can run night and day without anyone manually working them. We've no idea why Messrs. Edison and Buntline have chosen to set up shop in our town, but we are incredibly grateful. First electric street lights, and now this!

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GAMBLER SELLS INTEREST IN THE MONARCH

Famed gambler John H. "Doc" Holliday has sold his share of the Monarch Saloon and Casino, though he will still be retained as a dealer for poker and faro.

BUNTLINE SELLS BRASS MOLE

Ned Buntline, claiming that the local silver mines are played out, has sold his Brass Mole, the remarkable machine that can dig through solid rock, to the McGraw Mining Company of Northern California.

BASEBALL DRAWS CROWD

Yesterday's baseball game against Denver drew almost two thousand spectators, a truly remarkable total given the heat and most people's unfamiliarity with the game.

From the pages of the August 19, 1884, issue of the Medora Times:

THEODORE ROOSEVELT IN ALTERCATION

Young Theodore Roosevelt, formerly the Minority Leader of the New York State Assembly and currently the owner and resident of Elkhorn Ranch, was involved in an altercation last night in the town of Mingsville, some 35 miles west of here.

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Mr. Roosevelt was after some lost horses and stopped at Nolan's Hotel at nightfall. He was in the restaurant when a local bully began teasing him, calling him "Four-Eyes" because of his eyeglasses, and challenging him to a fight, little knowing that he was challenging the lightweight boxing champion of Harvard University. Mr. Roosevelt made swift work of the bully and summoned the sheriff to take testimony as to what had occurred before the diners and drinkers dispersed. The bully broke loose from the sheriff and his deputies and was last seen clambering onto a moving freight train that was headed for Chicago.

MARQUIS DE MORES SUES

The Marquis de Mores had gone to court, claiming that he is in fact the owner of Elkhorn Ranch, and that Theodore Roosevelt has no title to it.

"This could take months to resolve in a court of law," said the Marquis to your reporter, "and while I have no doubt as to the outcome, if Mr. Roosevelt would like to settle the matter sooner on the field of honor, with either pistols or swords, I stand ready and willing."

From the pages of the August 19, 1884, issue of the Tombstone Epitaph:

APACHES ON THE MOVE

Observers report that Geronimo, the leader of the Apaches in the Arizona Territory, has broken camp and is headed in the general direction of Tombstone. There is no evidence that Tombstone is his destination, or that he is on the warpath, but former Sheriff John Beban has been placed in charge of preparing our defenses, just in case.



1.

I EXPECTED THIS WEATHER IN TOMBSTONE, but not up here in Leadville,” said Texas Jack Vermillion as he fanned his face with his cards in the Monarch Saloon. “I do believe it’s hotter than hell today.”

“I expect I’ll find out soon enough,” replied Holliday. He pushed some cash to the middle of the table. “I’ll open for fifty.”

Three men matched his money. Vermillion looked at his cards once more, then laid them face down. “Too damned hot for me to think,” he muttered. “I’m off to get another beer.”

“Why?” asked Holliday. “The beer here’s as warm as the water you shave in.”

“Then I’ll pretend it’s cold. I just can’t think straight in this heat.” Vermillion got up and trudged over to the bar.

“Pity,” remarked Holliday. “There goes some easy money. He’s not much of a poker player even when he’s thinking.” Suddenly he reached into a pocket, withdrew a bloodstained handkerchief, held it to his mouth, and coughed into it, covering it with even more blood. It was such a common occurrence that no one paid any attention to it.

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"Cards, gentlemen?" said the dealer.

"Three," said the man on Holliday's left.

The two others took two apiece, and then it was Holliday's turn.

"Just one, I think," he replied.

The cards were dealt, and Holliday took a tentative peek at the new addition to his hand.

"Up to you, Doc," said the dealer.

"Two hundred," announced Holliday, counting off the bills and tossing them in.

Two men immediately folded. The third studied his cards, frowned, stared long and hard at Holliday, and finally cursed and tossed his cards onto the table.

"Okay," he said unhappily. "It's yours."

"Thanks," replied Holliday.

"So did you pull your full house, or was it a bluff?"

"Full house?" repeated Holliday. "Maybe I was drawing to an inside straight."

"Were you?"

Holliday shrugged. "Anything's possible."

"Aw, come on, Doc," persisted the man. "I'm tapped out. At least let me know what you had."

Holliday allowed himself the luxury of a small smile. "Tapped out? What were you going to bet with if you'd pulled whatever it is you'd hoped to pull?"

The man grinned. "I thought I'd borrow it from you."

Holliday laughed—or at least it began as a laugh, but ended as a bloody cough. "You've got a fine sense of humor, Mr. Richardson. I'll give you that."

"Show me your cards so I can see whether I had you beat or not," said Richardson. He reached his hand toward Holliday's cards, and an

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instant later Holliday jerked at the knife he wore on a string around his throat, broke the string, and brought the point of the knife down hard into the table, just between Richardson's index and middle fingers.

"*After* you pay to see them," said Holliday. His voice wasn't raised, his smile wasn't hostile, but there was something in the tone of his voice that said that this wasn't a party trick, that he was fully prepared to kill any man who tried to see his hand without paying the price.

Richardson pulled his hand back quickly.

"All right, Doc," he said quickly. "Whatever you say. No offense meant."

"None taken," replied Holliday, pulling his knife out of the table with an audible grunt.

"Maybe I'll see you at Kate's one of these days," said Richardson, getting to his feet.

"Better be soon," said Holliday. "I'll be moving into the sanitarium any day now." He grimaced. "And once I move in, I'd give mighty long odds on my ever moving back out."

"Soon, then," promised Richardson and headed out into the street.

"So he's too broke to call, but he's not too broke to rent one of Kate's metal chippies for the night," announced Holliday with an amused smile. "I'll offer three-to-one that he stops to make a few bets at the Silver Bullet along the way."

There was general laughter, and Vermillion returned to the table, carrying two beers and placing one of them in front of Holliday, who gingerly touched the glass.

"Hot," he remarked.

"I don't recall Tombstone ever being any hotter," agreed Vermillion.

"Not only that, but the air there was thick enough to breathe," added Holliday. "Up here in the mountains, even the birds have to walk."

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"Maybe you should have stayed in Tombstone," said a man at the bar. Holliday shook his head. "I should have stayed in Georgia."

"Why the hell didn't you?"

Holliday turned to see who was speaking to him, and his gaze fell on two young men in nondescript clothing, neither cowboys' nor miners' outfits.

"Do I know you?" asked Holliday.

"Indirectly," said the younger of the two men. "You knew some friends of mine."

"Oh?" said Holliday, refusing to ask who the friends were, since the young man seemed so eager that he *should* ask.

"That's right," said the other man. "At least we'd like to think you knew them. We'd hate to think you gun strangers down in cold blood."

Sounds pretty damned tempting, thought Holliday. Aloud he said, "I take it that whoever we're talking about were friends of yours?"

"Frank and Tom McLaury. You killed them at the O.K. Corral."

"May I suggest that you have very poor taste in friends?" said Holliday.

"*We* liked them well enough," said the younger man.

Holliday shrugged. "*You* were welcome to."

"I don't like your attitude, Holliday," said the younger man.

"A lot of people share your opinion of it," agreed Holliday with a pleasant smile. Suddenly the smile vanished. "And it's *Doc* Holliday to you."

The younger man tensed, and his fingers poised over the handle of his pistol.

"Don't do that, son," said Holliday, still not raising his voice.

"Or you'll make me regret it forever?" came the sarcastic reply.

"Try it, and your forever ends in about half a second."

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The young man's friend grabbed him by the arm and tried to lead him away.

"Come on, Billy!" he urged. "Look at him, nothing but a skinny old lunger. He's not even worth a bullet."

"Listen to your friend," said Holliday. "He makes sense."

The young man pulled back for a moment, then uttered an obscenity and pointed his finger at Holliday. "I'll see you again!" he promised.

Holliday pointed back, and pretended that his finger was a gun and he was firing it. Most of the gamblers laughed, and finally the two men left the saloon.

"You know who they were, don't you?" asked Vermillion.

"Sure," answered Holliday. "But I wasn't going to give them the pleasure of saying I knew. The kid's Billy Allen, and the bigger kid is Johnny Taylor—and I'll lay fifty-to-one that neither of 'em ever saw either McLaury brother or got within two hundred miles of Tombstone."

"Then what was that all about?" asked one of the poker players.

"Just a couple of kids looking to make a reputation," said Holliday.

"Happens a lot," added Vermillion. Suddenly he grinned. "Never the same kid twice, though. Doc keeps his fair share of undertakers in business."

There was general laughter, and then Holliday announced that he was there to play poker, cards were dealt, and a moment later bets were made.

The game continued for another hour. Then Holliday was seized by another coughing fit, and it left him weak enough that he relinquished his seat and walked slowly to the bar, accompanied by Vermillion.

"I'd go outside for a bracing breath of cold, clear air," he muttered, "but . . ."

"I know," agreed Vermillion.

"Sometimes I wonder why the hell I ever left Arizona," said Holliday.

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Vermillion grinned. "It just might have had something to do with those arrest warrants that were issued against you and Wyatt."

"They were sworn out by Wyatt's political enemies," said Holliday. Then he grinned. "And all the men I beat at poker."

"Then why *don't* you go back?"

"You know why," replied Holliday. "This is where I've chosen to die of this damned consumption. They've got the best facility west of the Mississippi, and I didn't live in this airless town for two years so I could go back down the mountain now that it's time to die."

"Is it time?" asked Vermillion.

"It's getting close. I'm coughing up more blood than usual, and even the whiskey doesn't kill the pain. And when you drink as much of that poison as I do . . ." He let the sentence trail off.

"I'm sorry, Doc. I thought you had a few more years."

"I thought so too," said Holliday. "Oh, well, I've only got a couple of regrets."

"That you didn't marry Kate?"

Holliday chuckled. "Hardly. She's made my life a living hell for more than ten years. Think of what she could do if I married her."

"She broke you out of jail, though," noted Vermillion.

"Couldn't nag and badger me in jail," said Holliday. "No, my greatest regret is that Wyatt and I aren't friends any longer."

"I know you're not, but I don't know why."

A self-deprecating smile crossed Holliday's face. "Blame it on my aristocratic upbringing. I said a few things about Josie I shouldn't have said."

"His wife?"

"His *Jewish* wife," answered Holliday, emphasizing the subject he should have avoided. "I loved her like a sister. I was just drunk, and drunks say mean, stupid things that can't be taken back."

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“And your other regret?” asked Vermillion quickly, trying to change the subject.

“That it’s going to be the consumption that takes me, slowly and inch by inch, instead of a bullet.”

“I could backshoot you right now if you’d like,” said Vermillion with a smile.

“You’re all heart, Jack.”

“That’s not what Kate’s chippies say,” laughed Vermillion.

“And they’ll keep saying it as long as you keep paying them,” said Holliday. He straightened up. “Well, I can lean on the bar all night, or I can go home and cough myself to sleep. See you tomorrow, Jack.”

“I’ll be here,” said Vermillion.

Holliday walked out into the sweltering heat of the night. His instinct said that he should be able to take a deep breath of cool mountain air, but his brain told him that there simply wasn’t any cool air to be had within a hundred miles, even at this altitude.

He stood in front of the Monarch for a few moments, hoping for an errant breeze that never came, then turned and headed off toward Second Street, where he shared living quarters with Kate Elder at the back of her brothel. A small prairie dog suddenly blocked his path, which was more than passing strange since there were no prairie dogs at this altitude or in these mountains. Rather than walk around it or trying to scare it away, Holliday stopped.

“You know they lie in wait for you?” said the prairie dog in a familiar voice.

“I figured it was a strong possibility,” answered Holliday.

“You are not afraid,” observed the prairie dog.

“Why should I be? I go up against kids trying to make a reputation from time to time. But I’m the first shootist they’ve ever faced.”

“Why should you think so?”

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"They're still alive," said Holliday with a grim smile.

"Do not be careless," said the prairie dog. "We have things to discuss—important things."

"Now?"

"Soon," said the prairie dog, and vanished.

Holliday had gotten about halfway to Kate's brothel when Billy Allen stepped out into the street about twenty feet away from him.

"Been waiting for you, Doc," he said. "It's gonna be a pleasure to kill you."

"Be more of a pleasure if both of you faced me like men," said Holliday with no show of alarm or concern. "You can come out of hiding, Johnny. I can see you over there in the shadows."

Johnny Taylor walked out into the street and stood about fifty feet away from Billy Allen. "How are you going to handle this, Doc?" he asked with a smile. "Which one are you going to try to shoot while we're both drawing on you?"

"You think this is a contest?" said Holliday, pulling out his pistol, instantly putting a bullet between a startled Billy Allen's eyes, and turning to aim at Taylor. "You think I'm going to wait for a referee to ring the bell? You came here to kill me, son. I'm going to let you in on a little secret. The graveyards are full of kids like you who thought they could kill men like me."

Johnny Taylor went for his gun, but it was too late. Holliday fired another shot before his gun had cleared his holster, and he was dead before he hit the ground.

"Damn!" muttered Holliday, holstering his gun and pulling out his handkerchief as he felt another coughing seizure coming on. *Isn't one of you ever going to be good enough to put me out of my misery?*

"Don't turn around, Doc," said a deep voice from behind him.

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“Hands in the air. Reach for your gun and you’ll still have one hand left to vote for me come reelection time.”

Holliday tensed.

“Don’t even think of it, Doc. I’m not one of those kids you just killed.”

Holliday raised his hands and turned to face his newest antagonist, a tall man with a gun in each hand.

“Sheriff Milt Andrews,” he introduced himself. “And you, sir, are under arrest for murder.”

“If you’re here this quick, you saw what happened,” said Holliday. “Those two were waiting for me.”

“No question about it.”

“They were here to kill me, not talk to me,” continued Holliday.

“Anything’s possible,” agreed Andrews. “But neither of them pulled a gun, and we got enough people coming out now because of the sound of the gunshots that I won’t be the only one to testify that they both died with their guns in their holsters.”

“You *saw* it!” said Holliday angrily. “You *know* it was self-defense.”

“I saw it,” echoed Andrews. “And if I wasn’t Billy Allen’s uncle, I might even agree with you. Now let’s go on over to the jail.” Holliday coughed again. Andrews waited until he was done and then shot him a cold, humorless smile. “I’ll have Kate Elder send over a supply of your handkerchiefs, since I don’t figure you’re getting out anytime soon.”