

Alta Creek Showdown

By

Neil V. Young

Chapter 1

William Schofield sat at the poker table. Across from him, the grizzled miner Old Joseph Freemantle hunkered down behind his cards. His gray eyes the only clue that in this latest game he might have the winning hand.

At six-foot-two and 26 years of age, William knew he couldn't look more different from his poker opponent. He was easily in his late sixties, short and hump-backed, and as covered with dust and grime as William was clean. Unlike Old Joe's worn and faded ten-gallon hat, William sported his tan Hardee campaign hat, the right-side brim held up with the pin that read 1st Cavalry USV above a pair of crossed sabers. He'd been out of the Army for some three and half years now, but like so many accessories he wore every day for years, it kind of grew on him. Now he rarely ventured outside without it, rain or shine,

"Hey," Old Joe, the oldest miner in town, said as he shot a hocker past his bearded mouth and towards the spittoon in the corner. He missed by nearly a foot. "War Hero! You in or not?"

"I'm in." William tossed in his coins. "Get a little impatient aren't we?"

"I know, patience." Joe said as the brown tobacco leaves churned between his brown and yellowing teeth. "I ain't put in all them years and extended my claim four fold without some kind of plan."

"Yeah there's a reason that land went so cheap." William said. "It's been milked dry."

"I got a good deal"

"You got the leftovers when everyone else went to the Klondike."

Old Joe scowled at William. "So what then? If it's so bad, why did Mister Rough Rider end up back here again? It surprised me."

"Me too." William didn't so much say as spit the words. It was a sore spot with William, and if Old Joe knew anything, he knew how to seek out and pour salt in sore spots of peoples' lives.

"Then why?" Old Joe said. "Your old man and his businesses here that good?"

"Yeah we make a ton of money selling supplies to you hold outs and all the Johnny come latelies of the gold rush that was."

"Bah!" Old Joe opened his mouth wide as tobacco juice crept out the side of his mouth and mixed in with his greasy white beard.

William didn't let the old codger bother him. The hand of a brass statue, one belonging to some Greek looking woman, was only a few inches above his head. The hand held a gas lamp, unlit now, but William believed it brought him luck. Since he'd been sitting in the corner chair, he'd known nothing but luck in these games. For what that was worth.

Across the dingy, musty saloon, the afternoon sun bore down through the aging, yellowing glass with the words 'Goldstrike Saloon' painted on it. The scorching rays continued their ages-long ravaging of the wooden floorboards, long ago bleached a

grayish-black color. A paper poster, curling around the ends, clung to the mirror behind the bar, announcing a new year's park concert in nearby Prescott, Arizona, welcoming in the year 1903. Behind the bar, the only other denizens in the saloon, bartender Charlie Grainger and the local priest Father Delgado sat chatting, about what William had no immediate desire to know.

This was what life in Alta Creek consisted of, one day much like the other. Alta Creek was a shell of its former self, its desolate streets and shuttered buildings a dim reminder of the bustling times when gold veins, rich and thick, called out to fortune seekers the world over. Adding to that were the cattle pens, which invited drives from as far away as Seligman. And they came in droves, putting the town on the map and culminating in a population of over 10,000 with some sixty saloons, twice that number of cathouses, and sole, lonely church.

But as the Wild West lost its expanse, so too did Alta Creek lose its allure when the gold dried up and the cattle trails were dammed by barbed wire and homesteads. The prospectors left for digs elsewhere, and the cattle were more efficiently driven to railheads in other parts of the state. Long gone were the wild, raucous days of miners and cowboys drinking their fill and squandering their pay in a fit of revelry. Even automobiles pattered up and down the trails more often now, casting a great doubt on the horses, which had for so long been the mainstay of transportation.

Only a fraction of the original prospectors held on, and those not sucked into the Klondike Stampede back in '98 still held on to their claims, feverishly working with a hope that renewed with each trickle of gold dust they somehow wrestled out of the ground. Some of that sat in a bag in the center of the oaken table, Old Joe's bet, a few grains of gold dust that represented nearly two weeks of panning the town's namesake, the Alta Creek.

"We got visitors. Looks like a traveling medicine show." Thomas Warwick poked his aged head through the saloon doors, up to his chest. On his black leather vest was pinned a silver star, and William could just see the top of Warwick's Colt .45 Peacemaker sticking out of his holster over his extended beer belly and wide thighs.

"This I gotta see." William set his cards face down on the table and got up.

"Ah who cares?" Old Joe pulled out a wad of slimy brown tobacco with his forefinger and thumb. He threw the distasteful contents at the spittoon with his usual inaccuracy before digging into his pouch for more.

"Ah, come on Joe. How often do we get a medicine show these days?" Father Delgado said as he approached the table with his usual warm grin. He was a short man, of dark complexion and black hair that belied his true age, just short of fifty. Even

in the saloon, he wore his collar, though at the moment that was the only way anyone could identify him as a man of the cloth.

"What would God say about medicinal concoctions?" Old Joe slid his chair back and hefted his pot bellied body out of it.

"He'd probably say you can thank me for the entertainment value to what's left of this town."

"It's not a sin?"

"Not one that comes to mind."

"All right. I'm coming."

William headed for the swinging doors, eager for some diversion to the monotony that was Alta Creek. It's not like he wanted to return. William was born here when the town was booming, the son of the local dry goods store and trading post owner. He always found reasons to stay out of the town. As a teenager, William took to wrangling cattle rather than wait on customers with his father. Though his pop's business was successful, he never took an interest in it. Years later, William found himself at the end of a cattle drive in Prescott when he saw the recruiting stand for the First Cavalry, US Volunteers, commanded by Theodore Roosevelt.

Roosevelt's men were looking for men who could ride and shoot, and William fit the bill nicely. From there, it was east to New York for training, then deployment from Florida to Cuba. The Spanish-American War lasted about four months, but America in general and William in particular performed brilliantly. At

the end of the Battle of San Juan Hill, William was promoted to Sergeant and cited for bravery on more than one occasion. After the war, William signed up for the regular army to fight Filipino insurrectionists. And for two years, he did exactly that, learning to spot and kill guerillas no matter where they hid in the limitless jungles of the Philippines. If growing up in the West taught him how to shoot, service across the globe perfected the skill. After two years, there wasn't much he couldn't hit with a rifle.

William emerged from The Goldstrike and into the near desertion of Alta Creek's main road, bathed in the auburn light of sundown. His eyes were immediately drawn to a large black box of a wagon, pulled by a horse of equal color. A man, standing taller than William and dressed in a black undertaker's suit but pale as whitewash. The man was busy stacking open topped wooden crates filled with bottles off the back of the wagon. Sheriff

William locked eyes with the man. Those silvery-gray orbs seemed to stare right through William and into his soul. They were probing, leaving William feeling naked and vulnerable there in the street. A shiver ran down William's spine, such that he shifted his gaze to the wagon, which proved to be enclosed with the words "Doc Hobart's Miracle Potions" painted on the sides in exaggerated white lettering.

William's eyes dotted to the horse pulling the wagon, but got not reprieve there, either. The horse was shaggy, all black,

with a frame so gaunt its ribs shown through. It hardly looked capable of supporting a rider much less a heavy box wagon like the one he saw before him.

"I am selling my tonic today." The man, Doc Hobart William supposed, spoke in a monotone voice, never raising an inflection or showing emotion of any kind.

A few tense moments went by, then the sheriff spoke. "Well . . . what does it do?"

"It revitalizes the body." Doc Hobart said. He might as well be talking about mold at the bottom of a steamer trunk, William thought.

"I could use some revitalizing." Charlie Grainger grabbed one of the bottles. Soon the sheriff and Father Delgado snatched up the tonic as well.

William moved in to get a closer look. The bottles were clear but held a thick, black liquid. What struck William the most was the detail etched into the glass. Swirling patterns and hieroglyphs danced across the bottle, their colors shifting from red to orange in the sunlight. It reminded him of that new drink, Coca-Cola, that he'd tried in Florida. Coca-Cola bottles were uniquely shaped, but nothing of this sophistication.

"Excuse me." William brushed aside the nervousness Doc Hobart instilled in him. The man turned and brought his gray gaze upon William. "This bottle is very ornate. It must have cost you a great deal to make it."

"My tonic justifies the effort."

"Speaking of." Charlie set the bottle down and grabbed into his front pocket. "I'll give it a try. You don't put on much of a show, but I need something to get me going in the morning when I run outta coffee."

"Before we do. May I inquire as to your faith?" Father Delgado held the bottle back in a manner that made William think he wanted to scrape horse droppings off his hand.

"My faith?" Doc Hobart said as he stood back, bumping up against the wagon. His eyes flared as he looked upon the priest. "Of all the inequities you have experienced in this town, all the vices and sin, you worry about my motivations?"

"Frankly yes." Father Delgado said. "I have questions."

"I will not answer personal or religious questions."

"How about the tonic?"

"Yes."

"Good." Father Delgado held up the bottle. "Because I was wondering why your bottles all had upside down crosses on them."

William and the others re-examined the bottles they held. At first, William found his eyes drawn to the series of hieroglyphs that honestly looked hand painted, white symbols. They almost appeared to jump out at him. But in the corners of each of the labels had crosses, and he had to turn the bottle upside down to see them properly. He looked over the bottle to see Doc Hobart staring at him through icy grays.

William found he lacked the courage to lock eyes with the skeletal, white man for more than a second, and even that felt like an eternity. As a former Rough Rider with the First Volunteers, he'd stared down men before. After killing his first Spaniard, he got 'the look' his sergeant had told him about. It worked nicely whenever he got into a scrape. He found he received a lot more respect. He wasn't always liked, but he was respected. But this man, this skeleton of a man Doc Hobart, was a different thing altogether. He had a distant look, not of a killer but something else entirely. The rest of the man looked ready to be planted six feet under, but those eyes.

"I think you'd best leave." Sheriff Warwick set the bottle down on the portable table. "We're all God-fearing people out here. We don't take much to people who disrespect the Lord."

Doc Hobart's face remained deadpan. He tipped his hat to the sheriff and nodded to Father Delgado. "It wasn't always this way." The doc said in monotone. "Years ago, this place was a den of sin. That's why you came here, wasn't it Father?"

Father Delgado's face went blank and his eyes grew big. "Yes." The priest said. "But how did you know that? Have we met before?"

"No." Doc Hobart lifted the bottles onto his wagon. "But I know you. Why else would a priest come to a place like this? Why else would he remain when so few remain?"

"You came here." William said.

"My travels take me many places." Doc Hobart said. "Many of them do make the wrong decisions."

"Okay," Warwick said as he stepped to the front. "I've heard enough of this scary talk, Mister Hobart. Please leave."

"Is that the way you all feel?" Doc Hobart asked as his steely gaze fell upon the small crowd. They looked to the ground and shuffled their feet, but no one said a word.

"I'm the law around here, sir." Wakefield fingered the gold star on his chest. "If I ask you to leave, you leave. If not, I we can certainly take a trip down to the jail for a spell."

"You will live to regret this treatment of me." Doc Hobart said as he shut the door on the back of his wagon. It clanged as if made of metal, but William was sure the wagon was made of wood. The gaunt man stepped down and came face-to-face with the sheriff.

"I can tell you this." Sheriff Warwick said as he stared down Doc Hobart. "If you don't leave right now, you are the one who is going to regret it."

Doc Hobart's flesh-colored lips parted to reveal a smile. This was a wicked affair which caused wrinkles across his face and revealed yellowish, black spotted teeth. No wonder this man didn't smile a lot, William thought.

"I will depart." Doc Hobart walked to the front of the wagon, and the emaciated horse that pulled it. "But I will depart along Clear Trail Road, right along Boot Hill."

"Take off any way you please." Sheriff Warwick pointed down the road. "Just leave."

"There's nothing for a hundred miles down that road." William said. "You'd be better going back the way you came."

"Where I go doesn't really matter." Doc Hobart turned and looked at William, and William felt a shiver go down his spine. "I have more places to visit. But all in good time."

"It doesn't make sense to go out that way." William held the strange man's gaze, impressing even himself with that small victory.

"You don't belong here." Doc Hobart's eyes seemed to relent from their icy glare, for which William was grateful. "Everyone else should stay put. But you, you should leave and soon."

"I can't go anywhere without my father."

"You may find that decision in error." Doc Hobart climbed onto the buck board and took his seat. "I have given you all the advice I can on the matter."

"What is that supposed to mean?" William felt a surge of anger, though this stranger made him nervous at his core.

"Enough, my son." Father Delgado made the sign of the cross and came to stand by William. "He is obviously a lost soul. He rambles."

"My soul is anything but lost, Father." Doc Hobart's gaze blinked back as he looked to the priest. "Your soul may not find

as much rest as you think it will. Your vessel certainly won't. Farewell."

The shell of a horse pulled the wagon, and together with Doc Hobart at the reins, lumbered off into the desert. William found himself staring at the back of the black wagon, watching it head toward the horizon.

"Come on, my son." Father Delgado said as he turned to head back to the saloon. He stopped when he saw William wasn't following.

"Why does he want to go that way?" William asked, his eyes never leaving the loping wagon.

"Who knows, my son. He has obviously been out in the desert too long, and from the looks of him and that horse, they need watering badly."

"He's stopped." William pointed to the wagon, which came to rest in front of the old wrought iron gates to Boot Hill.

Both William and the priest watched as Doc Hobart climbed down and walked into the cemetery itself. He carried with him a large, ornate pitcher that reminded William of one of those old Grecian urns he saw in pictures back on New York.

"Is this crazy lout going to dishonor the dead?" Father Delgado walked toward Boot Hill.

William rushed to catch up, fingering his Mauser pistol as he did so. That old sidearm was hardly something anyone would expect in a western town such as Alta Creek. In fact there

probably wasn't another of its kind for a thousand miles in either direction. William had taken it off the Prussian observer he killed when he and other Rough Riders stormed a bunker at the top of San Juan Hill. At first he thought it an exotic toy, but after firing it he found it reliable, accurate, and rugged. A 'Broomhandle' they called it, and indeed its handle looked like the top of a broom, but it was much more than that.

He drew the Mauser pistol now as he ran, surprisingly slowly compared to Father Delgado. What they would do when they got there, William wasn't sure. Probably stop Doc Hobart from doing whatever he intended to do with that jug.

"Maybe we should get the sheriff." William said between breaths.

"Sheriff!" Father Delgado yelled so loud William's ears rang. "Sheriff!"

That was one way to handle it, William noted. The sound of heavy boots on the floorboard walkways told William the sheriff was on his way.

By the time William got to Doc Hobart, the man was at the center of the cemetery. He held his pitcher upside down and a black, ichor-like fluid was dumped in a puddle on the ground. The man remained as stoic as ever.

"What did you do?" Father Delgado asked. "In the name of the Lord, man, let these people rest in peace!"

"They don't rest in peace." Doc Hobart stepped around the black liquid and walked back to his wagon. "As I recall, it was their sorry souls that founded this town. It was their lives that populated it. And it is they who will repopulate it."

"You're a madman." Father Delgado stared at the black ooze on the ground.

"This was the Devil's playground once." Doc Hobart's voice seemed to boom out of his mouth. The thin, pale man seemed to shudder as he said those words. "Just because you are here does not mean he intends to give it up!"

"An agent of Satan!" Father Delgado grabbed the silver cross he always kept around his neck. The next thing William knew, his pistol was leveled at Doc Hobart's black clad frame.

"Do you intend to use that?" Doc Hobart asked as his ice-like gaze fell upon William's Mauser.

"No." William again met the man's gaze. The soullessness of his stare was back, and even though he was the one with the gun, William felt his very soul was in mortal danger. "Not for dumping fluid on the ground."

"Men have died for less."

"Yeah, well, not today."

Doc Hobart climbed into his wagon and without shaking the reins, started his traveling medicine show back down the trail. He didn't move fast, but he was half a mile down the road before the sheriff arrived, this time with his side-by-side scattergun.

The scrawny figure of his deputy, a young man who was all of eighteen years, Adam Carlisle. The deputy was sweating almost as much as his oversized boss. He kept pulling up his gunbelt, which slid off his wiry frame.

"What happened? What was he doing in Boot Hill?" The sheriff panted as he spoke. Clearly, William thought, this man was as out of shape as he looked.

"He emptied out a pitcher vase." William noticed for the first time that he still held the Mauser in his hands. He silently cursed himself. After fighting his way through the war, he should be more alert. There was just something about that man, this Doc Hobart that ground on his very soul. He never thought he would be intimidated, indeed frightened, by anyone or anything after what he'd seen, and it was disturbing to realize that wasn't the case.

Sheriff Warwick, with deputy in tow, went over to the spot Hobart had poured out the goo. Father Delgado was still there, knelt over in prayer. There were times William truly admired the priest, setting up shop way out here by himself, in a town known for its sin as much as it's gold. Despite not knowing any of these deceased, Father Delgado watched over them, here now to defend them and protect them against someone whose obvious insanity let him to deface the spot of their final rest.

"I don't see it." Sheriff Warwick's voice was carried with the wind to William's ears. The rest of the conversation was

lost to William, but he didn't mind. Right at that moment, he wanted to rest, and that bothered him. He felt drained just locking eyes with that traveling medicine man.

"Well I don't see anything." Sheriff Warwick removed his hat and wiped his forehead. His skin was red from the sun. "He must have poured out water, because it's already dried up."

"It didn't look like water." William said.

"Whatever it was, it's gone now." The sheriff plodded back towards the buildings of Alta Creek, off in the distance.

"You saw it." William said to Father Delgado as he passed. "It wasn't water."

"Didn't look like it at the time." The priest said. "But it didn't do anything to the deceased here. I'm just glad he left and that you didn't have to use that German gun of yours. Come on back to the Goldstrike. I'll come up here tomorrow and do a proper blessing."