

LOOP

There wasn't enough time to strip him clean. George just took his gun. He flapped open the man's sable-brushed vest. Two exit wounds painted the dead man's shirt: one at the center of his chest, another clean through his liver. That one had a harsher color, like the hematite he used to mine over in Leadville, before the darker ways seduced him. It was that wound that did him in. But in the Lord's grand scheme, who in all cared which hand of death touched this man? He was dead as dirt. And that was that. The loop of life was no kinder to the gallant or to the innocent. It was an unsympathetic ghost, making decisions for mortals and men, evil and less so. George knew this better than anyone.

He kept his drawing hand firmly on his pearl holster—just in case—and snatched the man's .45 from his belt. How could anyone shoot with such a heavy thing? Then, hell with it, he decided to take the whole gun belt. The man had a considerable paunch, a father's

belly, so the Mexican Loop seemed to unspool forever around his torso—at least 40 inches of cartridge holders with barely any bullets spent. Looked brand new as a matter of fact. And so was what was tucked inside. It couldn't have been more than a week old. A sheet of wrinkled notepaper with George's name.

"Shit on a dog," George said. The cedar tree where his Arabian was roped was a fine resting place for his disbelief. He slid down the knobby trunk to the dirt. His spurs met the dead man's thigh. George removed his hat. The sun pierced through the branches in heavenly bars, warming the spot on his scalp that had thinned, clouds intruded. This was a setup of the vilest kind.

A dustup beyond the hill made the sky plume. A few measures of neighs penetrated the horizon. One mare, maybe two. George had been followed ever since Pueblo. Earlier even. He had seen a gang gathered around a Poker table. One of them had half a nose. He had arrowed his eyes over George's way during the game. Barely a glance, but George felt it like a cold

bayonet through the chest. Though abscond, he had not. He finished his whiskey, thanked the barkeep with a tilt of his hat, and exited the saloon the long way—toward the Poker table—to measure them up.

The noseless man, cheeks as roughshod as a cantaloupe rind, was holding his cards so tight George thought they'd disintegrate. There were two pistoleros, brothers it seemed. And a native. An educated type, dressed dapper, sharp-like—otherwise he'd have been spectating out by the troughs. It wasn't the pistoleros nor the percipient Indian that gave George the willies. It was the man with half a nose. Ironically, his deformity was the furthest reason from what made George so uneasy. No, what filled his soul with webs and seedy ephemera was whatever was in those eyes. They were of a dark sort, and he had seen them before. Deep and colorless, like something that would swallow up stars and spit them out in a burst of tragic violence.

George sprung up, slung the gun belt over his horse, and swiftly patted the man for a wallet. He wasn't

taking flight before finding out if he had gummed this up or not. In those bloodied vest pockets were forty dollars and a tobacco pouch, half empty. He turned it over:

G.O.D.

Wilmot Tobacco Co.

Colorado Springs, Colorado Terr.

"Geoffrey Olainus Dobbs," George mouthed at the initials inscribed on the tobacco pouch. Things were getting muddier. The dead not only carried George's name, but the name of his employer. He grew exasperated at the idea of his oversight, wasn't sure how to redeem things. Grew angry at the dead.

In the distance, the horse's brays and gallops grew like thunder. George could almost sense the earth vibrate. A mile away, a dust storm billowed into the sky. By the sounds of it, the mare was being pushed hard. This was no joyride, this was catch-up. His plans for these men appeared to have half-worked.

He pocketed the tobacco pouch and the forty dollars, and swung up on his horse. With a flick of the wrist, he untied the hitch around the dried bark. He looked back at what approached. One silhouette rippled through the ground-heat, meeting the mountains. He would have liked to have searched those high-up lonely mists, to stand on their peaks. But now was not the time for such reveries.

He clicked his spurs into his horse. The poor thing wasn't expecting that sort of knock. She yelped and so did he. He galloped past the dead. Blood had already pooled beneath the corpse. Flies had made their way to feast. George slid down his saddle in stride and snagged the man's hat right from his motionless head. It bounced like a toy ball as the dust rose from the dead, a soul let astray.

He had been following the Arkansas River west toward Canon City. Dobbs would be waiting for him there to finalize the pact. He had only been given a down payment of 10%, mainly for logistical expenses, but even

that was lower than normal. The remainder would be blood profit. It was a skunk's business. George always knew that. It was ingrained in him even before he could hold a rifle. Guilted upon him by the very man that taught him how to kill. But such dealings did not deter. Rarely would things deter a man of his nature. Marriage, maybe. Children. But of violent delights, ones with purpose at least, those sirens would wail for him and he'd succumb to their song, to their wants, like clockwork. And the loop would continue. Gold up in Pike's Peak? Oil in Florence? These were designs of better men, more industrious. To him, like his father before, nothing was more valuable than that of a human soul. But an oversight was the chink in his armor. Knowing an innocent man, a father, was wronged, at his hand no less, shook him to his core. Cold.

"Goddamn it," he exclaimed to the wind. He yielded his dashing gray Arabian. She shook her head and huffed, roused, still, from the sprint. "Easy, girl." George looked westward, "Just ponderin'." The world

was calm. But his thoughts were as tumultuous as the mighty river to his left. The destination, his payday, was in Canon City, but that was not where his conscience was telling him to go.

He caressed his horse's withers. Her fur, velveteen, was a heavy storm cloud—grey, but patched with promises of white. Her muscles twitched slowly, comfortably, knowing well this calloused hand. George went for his satchel and removed the dead man's hat, looked inside the brim. There was an address. He considered it, then looked northward, toward Colorado Springs. Its rightful place.

"Goddamn it," he said again looking that way, but for different reasons all together now: Ahead, where the clouds met the earth, an Indian was watching everything transpire through a gilded rifle.



There wasn't enough time to shoot him dead. Wolf Fang just minded his hand and waited for Gabriel's move. Gabriel, holding his cards tautly, as though they were someone's neck, wagged his finger quick and shifted his eyes over to the Greek warily approaching the table. It was a bust through and through. A stalemate. There was no way in hell the Greek would risk a shootout in this establishment, full of patrons and whores, men of good standing, and less so. They were going to remain idle, even finish the game perhaps, which, to Wolf Fang, was another bust entirely since he was only holding a pair of fours.

He folded and started rolling a cigarette. The Greek—for a moment shorter than a hair—paused midstride. Wolf Fang's chest twitched. His newly gilded rifle was out of reach since his hands were tied up licking the smoke. But the Greek strolled out of the saloon before anyone else noticed the tension. The moment seemed a lifetime. But Wolf Fang realized this man was the right man—the Greek they were after. The man that had killed

his brother, a snake of a brother who carried white children's scalps like leather-bound books. But his brother nonetheless.

And at that same moment of recognition he saw truth. The veridical eyes of a man not unmeant for death, but surely not fated for it by Gabriel's hand. They were eyes with intent, far from aimless, leagues from sinister. He felt wrong about it. Though that's something he'd wager never to admit to his fearsome new chief, whose eyes were darker than tar, who sliced off his own nose with a bowie, as though it were jerky, after the gangrene got to it. Wolf Fang sighed. His contrition toward the charms of the wicked was weaker than their temptation.

Two uneventful hands later, Gabriel spoke. He regarded the pistoleros. Young boys, but of a hard nature. They were brothers. Seemed only to engage when talked to together, as if they were the same person at some point in the past. "You boys get a scent on which direction he's going. I'm gonna have a word with the savage for a bit." They placed their cards face down,

hoping the game would continue to make up for their losings. "Go on. We'll meet you at the edge of town," Gabriel added. Disappointed, they dropped their chips and headed through the swing doors as though their thighs were tied together with twine.

Gabriel brought his kerchief up to the trench where his nostril used to be. Wolf Fang could see clear through to the septum. A glob of greenish pus or mucus—he couldn't tell which—clung to the sides, like newly applied glue. Gabriel closed his good nostril with his gloved hand and blew fiercely, catching the expectorate with his hanky. He folded it once over and tucked it into his chest pocket, cleared his throat: "It's him ainnit?"

Wolf Fang's lies were too obvious for this man. Gabriel took pride in his biblical name to a radicalized degree on many occasions. Messenger of God in more ways than one. There was no option here but the truth. "I believe so."

Gabriel rapped his fist against the table, the chips bounced up all at once as though the Lord himself had tied them all to the same string in the sky. His voice turned sharp, "You either know, or you don't. We ain't paying you to believe."

"It's him, boss," Wolf Fang said.

"That's George Kopsis. You swear to it?"

"Whatever gorilla god you pray to?"

Wolf Fang brought his cigarette up slowly, took a long drag. He considered blowing it right into Gabriel's face, into his pockmarked cheeks and vitiated nose, but quelled the urge.

"I swear to it," Wolf Fang said, exhaling the smoke through his functioning nostrils. "I'll never forget the face of my brother's undoer."

Gabriel spoke with narrowed eyes, "Then we follow through. Do what Dobbs says. No shoot-em-ups until he finds the target."

"How will we be certain he terminates the mark before we encroach?" Wolf Fang asked.

Gabriel licked his mustache with his dry white tongue and spit on the floor, "This ain't his first rodeo. Man's a professional."

Saliva as thick as spaghetti clung between Gabriel's mustache and beard so he re-withdrew his kerchief. "Besides, once the deed is done we can check the body to ascertain."

He wiped his face clean and threw the thin cloth on the table. Hated using one more than twice. The man had hundreds of them in pristine condition, unused, tucked in his portmanteau. They were gifts from the man upstairs. The man they called Dobbs. The head honcho of this entire cleansing.

Wolf Fang leered at the obvious rudeness: The kerchief had been sullied with an ungodly hue of spit, mucus, streaks of blood, left there on the table with no regard, with Dobbs' initials embroidered on one of the corners: G.O.D.

They rode through the night. The pistolero brothers reckoned the Greek was following the job and

not aiming to double back in the chance he thought they were on his tail. "A contract's a contract," they said in unison. One of the wiser things to come out of their herpetetic mouths. They'd catch up to him before he ever made it to Canon City.

By sunup they came upon the Greek's camp. By the looks of it he hadn't gotten much sleep. The river sand had a dance-diagram of boot prints, some of them in a sort of pacing pattern. Near the firepit there were at least ten cigarette butts. A half-full bottle of bourbon was embedded in the sand like an errantly thrown knife. Swallows danced lightly around the warm streams of air.

Wolf Fang's deep red fingers flittered over the crackling coals. "Wood's still hot," he said. "Shouldn't be gone more than an hour."

"Saphead left his drink," one of the brothers laughed, uncapped the bottle and took a long, deep swig. He exhaled hard, as if it were a quenching glass of water. His brother snatched the bourbon and mirrored his kin's motion, then tucked the bottle into their shared rucksack.

They shared everything, these boys. From whiskey to whores.

But something felt funny. The camp's presentation seemed off. Staged. It reminded Wolf Fang of the first time he saw a theater play in Kansas City; real but not quite. And who would leave a bottle of fine Kentucky half-buried near a fire? The Greek did not cover his tracks, did not double back to throw them off, didn't even smother the fire.

Gabriel, still saddled on his horse, pulled his bandana down from his face. It had been covering everything but his inky eyes.

"We need to double-time this shindy," he said, brushing a fleck of tumbleweed from his shoulder. "Canon City ain't in his cards."

"Should we split up?" Wolf Fang asked, thinking the Greek may have changed his mind midway through and double-backed to Pueblo or headed north to Colorado Springs.

“No,” Gabriel said. “He’s the last one on the list. We close this loop together. Like apostles.”

One of the pistolero brothers tugged his collar wide, as though he were overheating. He fanned his face with his wrinkled hat. Wolf Fang found this peculiar. The day had just opened. A blanket of morning fog crawled across the pasture. The sun was barely a fingernail peeking through the mountains. The pistolero tried to speak. What escaped his mouth was nothing more than a low rumble. His brother, presuming what he was going to say, stepped forward. A film of sweat had invaded his face as well, and it couldn’t have been more than 65 degrees out.

“The savage may be onto something,” the pistolero struggled to say. “We can cut him off near—” he cleared his throat and tried again. “We can cut him off near Stone City if he decides to, to double back, boss.”

“I ain’t parting this herd,” Gabriel affirmed with a spit. “That’s final.”

The pistolero started coughing, then hacking. A fit unseen by Wolf Fang. His brother followed not five seconds later. Both of them clutched at their throats as if an invisible lynch-rope had just noosed around them. Their eyes started bulging out of their sockets, quivering like jelly. Their faces lost color. One of them fell to his knees and spat out a wad of blood. Wolf Fang came to his aid, but then the other brother stiffened and fell backward, like a downed pine. He spasmed, then stopped. Wolf Fang tried slapping some life back into him, but it was a fruitless affair. “He’s gone blue,” he said.

Gabriel dismounted his horse impatiently. He stole a log from the fire. It glowed red with heat. He pressed it hard onto one of the pistolero’s cheeks to rouse him. The pistolero let out a horrifying whimper as his skin melted onto the wood—the last thing that ever escaped his lips. Wolf Fang looked over at the older brother, stiff as a fence post, and said, “Both dead.”

Gabriel was looking around the plain for an answer. Or an assassin. A thunk came from one of the horses. They looked over and saw the answer then. There, next to the pistolero's horse, was the bottle of bourbon. The two surviving members of the Dobbs party acknowledged each other.

"Strychnine. Maybe arsenic." Wolf Fang said.

Gabriel ambled to the edge of the camp and put his hands on his sides. He licked his mustache and spit. He tapped the brim of his hat upward for a better look of the land. The sun had just debuted from the mountains in a glorious light. It passed over the plains like a curtain being drawn, but storm clouds were impending nearby, poised to arrive by late afternoon.

"He knew we were coming," Gabriel said.

"I surmised that myself," Wolf Fang said.

"Well why didn't you say nothin'? You jis' sit there like a damn totem pole."

"Yes, boss."

"These deaths are on your conscience. Not mine."

Gabriel mounted his horse as an idea formed.

"You think he may be headed to Dobbs?" Wolf Fang asked.

"Of course he is. That's his payday."

"I mean you think he knows that Dobbs has him marked?"

Gabriel reached into his portmanteau and removed an old booklet. He licked his thumb and flipped through some of the pages. He said, "Dobbs ain't even in Canon City. He's expectin' us to finish this before he makes it back for payment."

Gabriel sighed at the dead pistoleros, "What a shame..." He eyed the bottle of felled bourbon next to the horse, drew his pistol and fired off two rounds, bursting the bottle into glittering shards, finishing his thought. "Perfectly good bottle of bourbon." The horse brayed and side-trotted a few strides, vexed.

Gabriel looked at Wolf Fang and said, "Bury these boys. I'm headed to Colorado Springs. Find the Greek and shoot him in the back."



George had hoped all four of the louts had taken a swig of the bourbon. It's not that he underestimated the Indian. He knew he was educated. But he overlooked the fact that he was also cunning.

The Henry rifle aimed right at George's head was a splendiferous shooting iron. It was gold-plated, newly so. So beautifully bright, even the sun deflected away from its shine. George knew it was the Indian's pride and joy, his display of rank. He slowly raised his arms to the sky. He considered just clicking his spurs into his Arabian and making a break, but knew, simply by the distance between them, that the redskin was a crack shot. He flicked his chin toward the rifle and said, "Nice Henry."

Wolf Fang was holding it as steady as a rooted redwood. A sudden movement would send a lead arrow right between the Greek's hairy brow. Wolf Fang detected a speck of attrition in the Greek's syrupy voice, as though the last few days changed his disposition in some way. He saw that same enfeebled look in his eyes back at the Poker table in Pueblo. Though he said nothing of the sort. He just kept his aim steady, and thought on what to do. What to do.

George waited for the Indian to speak. For, at the very least, a return of pleasantries after complimenting his rifle. He cleared his throat, and waited. The Indian had tied his horse to an old Bristlecone pine about fifty yards from where he was standing now. The wind was blowing to the east, cajoling a mesmerizing dance from the mare entwined to the swaying pine. Her mane bounced with every flutter.

George was upset at himself for not hearing any of it, perhaps because of the wind, but he didn't mind that now. He was still consumed by his possible oversight. He

started feeling foolish at his arms akimbo, but convinced himself not to move until the stand-off was more elucidated upon.

“I could have killed you,” Wolf Fang said.

“I know,” George replied.

“Shot you in the back, if I were so inclined.” He could very well have been a sculpture right then.

“Why din ya?” George asked, feeling better about his circumstance.

The rifle in Wolf Fang’s grip wavered a few millimeters, as though his subconscious were willing him to put the firearm down and do what his ancestors did to the settlers of this native land. Ingratiate themselves. Open arms. All of that. But the weakness was only momentary. For his contrition toward the charms of the wicked was weaker, much weaker, than the temptations for it. He considered what to do with the Greek’s horse.

George sensed it. The Indian’s gilded rifle was going to be unleashed onto something. But where was

that finely aimed slug headed? George spoke carefully now, permissively. “May I lower my arms?”

“You may not,” Wolf Fang said.

“Well, if you were aiming to shoot me, I believe the deed would’ve already been done.”

“That may be true, Greek. It may be not.”

“May I be so curious as to ask who you are?”

The inquisition offended Wolf Fang. He assumed that the Greek’s memory was as unerring as his own, seeing as how they were both in the same line of business. He straightened his rifle and tightened his trigger finger. “You know me, Greek. Don’t be coy.”

George, in fact, did know this man. He knew what he had done, and worried this was a vendetta of sorts. But then he thought of the noseless man, and said, “Did the deformed man drink my sling?”

“You poisoned two of our men,” Wolf Fang said, walking over to George, tremorless in his resolve. “Unfortunately, Gabriel was not one of them. Who am I, Greek?”

George emptied his lungs. He relished his last breath and lowered his arms. Wolf Fang reacted to his accordance. The rifle blast seemed to echo miles each way. It shattered through the atmosphere, then boomeranged around a few seconds later. When he opened his eyes, he felt no bullet sting, just the heat of it across his left ear, blistering the thin skin and cartilage. It was a miss, but on purpose. The Indian was nearly at arm's length now. He cocked his rifle once more, and raised it toward George's horse, a foot from her muzzle. George apologetically raised his arms again.

"Who am I, Greek?"

"You are *Honiahaka*. Of the Southern Arapahoe. The Rock Men."

At that moment, Wolf Fang felt a pang of camaraderie, a past confluence of their violent lives, now dastardly entwined by two ugly men. He lowered his rifle, away from the Greek's beautiful horse.

"Dismount," Wolf Fang ordered, directing him down with his rifle.

George, not stealing his eyes from the shooting iron, slowly dismounted the horse and patted her neck. He caught his breath and said, "I killed your brother, *Pachu'a*."

George felt her tension subside—his storm-clouded horse—as the Indian took two steps back, his rifle recanted. A cooling zephyr ran its fingers across George's face. A respite, he believed, all the way from the mountaintops, guiding him to a refrain. His loop of violent charms was only as interminable as his will for it. He pined for it to be severed, snipped like a lariat restraining his goodwill. But a storm's electricity strobed from the mountains. The Indian had other designs in mind.

"You took his tobacco pouch," Wolf Fang said, running his dark hands over the rifle. "The man you shot."

"I did." George was still caught between the tension of the moment and its uncertainty. "But it only befuddled me."

"He was on contract," Wolf Fang said.

An unyielding sense of dread stiffened the Greek's pulse. He asked through his anger, "Who was the mark?"

"You were."

George scratched his beard with both of his hands. He pondered for a moment, then said, "Your party was sent by my employer. By Dobbs."

"Yes. To close your loop." But Wolf Fang wasn't aiming for this death on his hands. He was looking for a partner in a new venture. More deaths, though, he did have in mind.

George put two and two together. The noseless man, the two pistoleros, *Honiahaka*. Sent by the very man he trusted to protect him at times like these, times of employment. A rage scraped against the Greek's brain. It shot from his eyes and penetrated the earth, the soil around him. All he could see was red. Dobbs' betrayal was of the vilest kind. But there must've been a purpose to it, terminating contracts willy-nilly. Men of his ilk

rarely murdered mindlessly. There was always a purpose.

George looked up at Wolf Fang. The Indian was taller than most of his kin. He was indeed statuesque, totem-like, a boon to the notions of which George aspired on better days than this. The sun was beaming behind the Indian, manifesting a dusty, angelic haze around his steady posture, but it was dying out. George shielded his eyes and asked, "Why?"

After a time, long and purposeful, Wolf Fang cast his eyes on the Greek, but did not gift him any sign of emotion. "Designs of more industrious men," he said, resting his rifle on his shoulder. "He's changing operations. The remaining men are his new muscle. Dobbs is going to conquer the territory with gold."

The rifle the Indian was holding took on a more sinister meaning now. George wanted to snatch it from its resting place and break it in two, like kindling. "And that shiny gold Henry rifle was your remittance for killing me?"

"Dobbs promised a future without violence," Wolf Fang replied.

George wasn't taught that. It did not reconcile with his stubborn sensibilities. He eyed the rifle again, thought hard, then said, "Violence is timeless, friend. Unencumbered by the spin of the earth or even the hand of God."

"You're right," Wolf Fang said. This was his chance. There was no other moment in his designs that was rawer than this. Held aloft by the Greek's seething vengeance, the Indian had a proffering of one final wicked charm: "Gabriel... Dobbs... Feed for the worms, George. We won't just sever their loop; we'll burn it to ashes. And take the gold for ourselves."

A light drizzle had started. The wetness aroused the scent of Buffalo grass from the plains. George inhaled, keeping the odor cozy in his lungs as long as possible, reminiscing of better times as a boy. But was he ever an innocent? He opened his eyes. He was close enough to the Indian to seize his rifle.

Wolf Fang was startled rightly by the Greek's quickness, but all he scrambled to was a curious smirk. It wasn't until the Greek aimed the rifle and cocked that gilded lever when everything went stiff in the Indian's body. It happened swifter than he could muster a decent memory of his life. Swifter than actually hearing the discharge, or even the slug burrowing through his leathery chest. It just went black. A few flashes of the approaching storm followed before the light went. Or was it simply the hide of the Greek's beautiful mare?

He wished it were.

George's eyes were wet for some reason. He intimated it was the rain, and nothing more haunting. His chest throbbed for reasons he could only assume were rifle-related. He wiped at his stinging eyes and cursed out as the drizzle became a downpour. The deep cloud cover turned the afternoon dark and disquieting. He freed the horse the Indian had roped onto the pine. Slapped it hard enough so the wet dust that kicked up obscured its direction.

He had not eaten since the early morning and his body was qualmish. He ambled up onto his horse and pecked his boots into her sides. She began trotting northward. To Colorado Springs. He had a few things he wanted to say to Dobbs, and if Gabriel were there, he'd have a word with him, too.

The trail tapered off. He was cutting a straightaway through the land as it widened. His horse blew heavy and shivered, disapprovingly. He stroked her soft wet cheek and leaned into her left shoulder. He whispered something into her ear, but she shook it off. Then he caught the horse's eye with his own, and she seemed to tolerate the new direction they were headed. He didn't bother looking back at the Indian. He was the last Arapahoe of his kin, and the Greek was responsible for closing the loop of his bloodline. He shook off that thought. The Indian was dead as dirt. And that was that. The loop of life was no kinder to the gallant or to the innocent. It was an unsympathetic ghost, making decisions for mortals and men, evil and less so.

George knew this better than anyone.