

The Unhonored Heroes of Ravine Morris

A Tale of Two California Itinerants

By Frank Thunen

SIX centuries before the Christian era three good men of Babylon walked into a superheated furnace and out again without harm. Some years later—to be exact, on July 19, 1905, two bad ones, first of one place and then of another, but most recently of Oroville, chanced to walk into Morris ravine; and while they tarried there the temperature rose to 120 in the shadows.

Morris ravine, it is proper to explain, is a box like gorge scooped out of the side of Table mountain and extends down to the Feather river canon, where the lower reaches of the Sierra foothills stretch out with declining elevation into the Sacramento valley. To Scotty it was a lonely spot and a strange one; yet he dismissed with good disgust the thought of waking McGill.

Though it was past noon Scotty had just pulled himself out of a heavy drunken slumber and sat up blinking like an owl in the translucent sunlight. His strange surroundings bewildered him, but he was used to being bewildered and soon turned his attention to something else. He pulled his stubby legs out of the chaparral bush, where he had stuck them five hours earlier, and after examining them carefully to make sure they were his very own, he began to look about again and to wonder where he was and how he came to be there.

Scotty was the smaller of the two, with flabby leathery face through the tan of which protruded a half inch of iron gray stubble. He was not Scotch, McGill, however, had a dash of fighting Gaelic blood in his veins and sometimes mentioned it in a potential sort of way. In addition he had a florid complexion, a bushy beard of the same hue, and a jag-like Scotty's.

Scotty hated McGill. He could not remember why. He could not have told at what time his hate had commenced, but at least it dated back a minute and a half, when the fierce burning rays of the sun beating down upon his head awoke him. He essayed to rise, but it felt so much as if some one were holding him down by the scalp that he settled back and turned with clenched fist and an accusing snarl upon his companion. McGill was still stretched upon his back, wholly unconscious of Scotty or the blistering heat. So obviously innocent of any present offense was he that Scotty suddenly changed his purpose and clasped his hand to his throbbing head. Then through a rift in the alcoholic vapor that clouded his mind he looked back for a moment upon the events that preceded their coming to the hollow.

They had tarried some time—yes, a long time—in the social atmosphere of the Madhouse saloon in Oroville. But in the end, their last nickel gone to that ultimate bourne, their welcome gone with it more or less ultimately, depending upon the state of their finances should they appear again, they had left under compulsion. It seemed a long time ago. The sun had not yet risen when, without farewell the bartender had driven the street doors upon them. Now it had rolled itself 15 degrees past the meridian. Under ordinary conditions they should have been able to get supper that night in Brady's construction camp 30 miles up the canon of the Feather river on the line of the new railroad. But with a dilly daller like McGill what was the use trying to do anything?

Where was Brady's camp? Where was the new railroad survey? Where was the Feather river? None of those things was in sight, and Scotty had no idea where they were. He had left the details of their peregrination entirely to McGill, but he saw now that McGill was wholly unworthy of the trust.

As Scotty looked scornfully upon the dormant and discolored wreck his face involuntarily screwed itself up into a contumacious grimace. His leathery features broke into a network of folds and wrinkles, and the dried surface of the abrasion on his right cheek bone cracked and bled. He crossed the spot tenderly, and his mind reverted profanely to the Madhouse bartender. Not that the bar tender had meant to be rough or unkind. It was all McGill's fault. Scotty glared at the sleeper, who, undisturbed at the turmoil in his partner's mind, snored on in the shadow of his own whiskers. How at peace with himself and the world he seemed to be! How evenly and how rationally he behaved.

Scotty mused disappointedly about the way Mac had brought on their hardships and misfortunes. He remembered the circumstances. Mac had stuck around the saloon so long, in the hope that some derelict of the construction camps would drift in with an uncashed time check and a thirst that Scotty had fallen asleep in a corner waiting for him. He was still asleep when the white vested bar tender came forth from his shrine of polished glasses and cracked ice and threw him out. His cheek came in violent contact with the curb, and then he woke. McGill had staggered out behind him.

They had left town forthwith, crossing the long high bridge over the Feather river, and Scotty had thought they were headed for Brady's camp. But where was it? There was no sign of a railroad survey running through Morris ravine. No engineer could be so absent minded as to run a railroad into a trap like that. Boxed in on three sides by sheer walls of lava 300 feet high, how could it ever get out, except the way it came in?

A quarter of a mile to the north the hollow ended abruptly against the perpendicular bluff. There on the brink of the rim rock a lofty steel frame tower stood out against the sky, like the skeleton of a fire ravaged lighthouse overlooking a sea of waving heat, and three lines of shining copper, each nearly as thick as Scotty's thumb, led from the top of the tower down to another in the bottom of the gorge; then on to another and another, straight over Scotty's head and beyond toward the mouth of the hollow.

Scotty's roving eyes traveled blinking along the burnished lines, shimmering and wavering in their own caloric rays like wind blown streamers of fine silk. He followed them until they disappeared beyond a point of the mountain southward. Then his gaze fell again contemptuously upon McGill. His lip curled with infinite scorn as he looked upon the unconscious culprit of his hate, and his expression



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he calls me to one side and says, 'Mr. McGill, says 'o, it's a long hot stretch along the power line trail and nary a drop of water till you hit Hubbard's Flat up on North Fork, cep'n a few springs you can't find. You better take a little somethin' along, Mr. McGill,' he says, just like that, and he gives me this."

Mac drew the cork and took a nip.

"Here, you orn'ry hog!" exclaimed Scotty, stretching forth his hand, "that's what you been doin' all the way; they ain't no more'n a third of it left. You gimme some of that."

McGill permitted the flask to be taken from him, and in two noisy gulps Scotty had reduced the contents to one-sixth.

"That's 'nough, that's 'nough, now, Scotty," protested McGill, making a successful grab. "That's gotta last 100 miles, Scotty."

Scotty licked his lips and looked wistful. 's' low down orn'ry, Mac, you swillin' all that whisky an' not sayin' nothin' 's' low down orn'ry, I say. You gimme 'nother drink, Mac, please, jes' one."

"Only couple jolts left, Scotty," said Mac, patting the flask lovingly. "That's gotta last—here, quicker snatchin'—gimme that bottle, Scotty!"

But Scotty already had it to his insubstituting lips. With one prodigious gulp he drained the flask to the last ambrosial drop and then smashed it on the rocks.

"That's orn'ry trick you played me, Mac," he complained. McGill's resentment was silent. With patient resignation

he looked upon the shattered fragments of glass and then got slowly to his feet. "Beat he goin', now," he counseled. "Long way to next drink."

Scotty arose stiffly, and without another word the two shouldered their meager blanket rolls and set off for the head of Morris ravine.

They had not proceeded far before they began to be afflicted with cosmidsrosis in a pronounced form. By tacit consent they stopped in the lattice work shadow of one of the steel frame towers of the electric power line. Dropping his blankets, Mac squigged the sweat from his forehead with his forefinger and observed, "Hotter'n hell, ain't it?"

Scotty let his blankets slide down his back to the ground and sat upon them without venturing an opinion as to whether any other place could compare with Morris ravine for temperature. But his failure to respond did not disturb Mac, who took another dab at his sweaty brow and stood in admiring contemplation of the lofty steel structure before him. From the projecting steel beams at the top hung three monster insulating pendants, each an articulated series of massive tiles, like stacks of inverted soap plates designed for a Titan's service. These supported the heavy rod-like wires.

Mac's eye followed the triple line of copper straight ahead to the end of the hollow, where the face of the



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lava rim rock seemed to tremble in the intense heat as if it would crumble and fall asunder. The intervening stretches of gleaming copper flickered and danced in wavering lines of fire.

"Mighty hot stuff in them wires, Scotty," said Mac. "Tough one of 'em, and—pat! No more whisky for poor Scotty!"

"Huh!" grunted the subject of that fanciful conception, resting his elbows upon his knees and dropping his head into his hands.

"Huh!" echoed McGill interrogatively. "Don't you believe that? Them wires has got a hundred thousand voltages in each one of 'em. There's half a million horsepower scottin' by here every second. How'd you like to be kicked by half a million horses all at once, Scotty?"

Scotty was studying the ground between his feet and paid no attention to his companion's monologue.

"Scotty, I say, Scotty," persisted Mac. "I studied electricity for five years in McGill college in Montreal. The man sitting hunched on his blankets refused to be awed or even interested by the assertion. McGill drew a tattered sleeve across his face, and his vision slid away from Scotty and other things mundane into the depths of the brazen sky. Suddenly he broke into speech again. "I say, Scotty, them two eagles is so high they don't look no bigger'n flies."

Scotty bestirred himself and gazed far into the remote nothingness. "Nor they ain't," commented he without having seen them at all.

"What d'ye mean?" demanded Mac. "You think I got sun spots in my eyes? You think I don't see no eagles?"

"Course they's eagles, but they ain't no bigger'n they looks," explained Scotty.

McGill pondered this strange theory a moment. "What d'ye mean by that?" he finally inquired.

"Jes' I say," replied Scotty impatiently. "They's not of an assation in her voice. 'Fill me that tub with water down at the spring,' she ordered with the ease and assurance of one who is used to being obeyed. Then she resumed her drenching process, and the volunteers carried out her instructions.

Between the house and the lava bluffs the ground was strewn with stacks of cut and seasoned brush, extending entirely across the head of the gorge to the power line right of way, and the fire hissed and crackled and raged along the inflammable track thus fortuitously laid for it. Nearer and nearer it came, advancing by leaps and bounds, shooting upward in walls and spires of flame and filling the air with clouds of smoke and pungent light ash. The brilliant glare of the sun was dimmed to a sickly yellow. The eyes of the fire fighters smarted; their nostrils burned, and their breath wheezed through strictured lungs. The pine shakes on the roof of the cottage steamed in the increasing heat, and McGill's whiskers grew a brighter red and began to curl. The terrified child, no longer awed into silence by the strange visitors, broke into a fresh crescendo of woe, and the strong form of the woman shook with hard dry sobs of discouragement and distress.

There was but one chance to prevent the fire from reaching the cottage. That was to remove the intervening brush heaps beyond its reach, and it required quick action. With a vim and energy that surprised even the fire fighters, Mac and Scotty, alighting their faces as well as they could from the blistering heat, rushed into the lower extensions of the treacherous fire trap and dragged load after load of brush down into the marsh below the spring until they had cleared a space from the house back to the edge of the steep naked slopes of loose lava rock below the bluffs.

The fire raced on to meet them, bearing down toward the house until it reached the line of their cleared way, guarded against this trap by drunken tips. Thus occupied the widow came upon them, much to Scotty's annoyance; for he had been dreading the inevitable outpouring of feminine gratitude. Without prologue or preamble she opened the subject.

"Ain't you gettin' me, a poor lone widow's property with your old cigarett smokin' enough without doin' it again?" she demanded, acidly.

Scotty could only gasp, so McGill arose and volunteered as spokesman. "You're mistaken, lady. There were two birds did all the damage."

"Birds! I should say birds! Two fine birds you two air—jail birds, I guess! I know your likes. That's the third time 's' been seein' this crap by drunken cigarett smokin' traps this summer. My old man, he set one himself. He's dead now over a month; he don't smoke no more. He's dead just like you two is goin' to do."

"By Jupiter! I don't blame 'em!" swore Scotty, rising to his full height, which was half a foot or so less than that of his towering accuser. "That's the thanks me an' Mac gets for savin' your house for you! That's gratitude!"

"Ain't nothin' all right!" argued the widow. "It wasn't no more than it was beholden for you to do after settin' fire to everything. I know you deny it, but I know your likes. I didn't live with Bill Marlow 10 years for nothin'. And you two air just the same. You came in from the opposite direction to throw me off the scent, but you can't fool me. Why don't you go to work and earn a decent, respectable livin'? I guess I know what drink—"

"Come on, Scotty," interrupted McGill. "Best be goin', now, and he led the way down the hollow.

Scotty followed, but the widow saw him stop a hundred yards away and deliberately and maliciously light his cigarette.

Fifteen minutes later the two wayfarers seated themselves in the shade of a big digger pine a comfortable half mile from the Marlow spring. They had opened their packs and spread upon the ground a feast of crackers and cheese and sardines.

"Meybe," agreed McGill. "See them drop and circle round like a corkscREW. Bet they light on that tower on the edge of the bluff—nope—yes—say, they ain't eagles at all; they're only hawks. Look at that; they're settlin' on the wires. Look out, you fool birds! you'll get your toes scorched!"

"Huh!" Scotty snorted contemptuously. "An' you say you studied elect'ricty in McGill college! How the hell's they gonna get their toes scorched without they touch somethin' else besides the wires?"

"No, s'pose there's two of 'em, Scotty, on different wires," defended Mac. "See that! The fools are peckin' at each other! Look at that fell—"

There was a report like a pistol shot; a visible pale greenish flash enveloped the birds for an instant; a metallic singing twang sped through the wires; the birds fell, and Mac rejoiced at the tragedy. "Didn't I tell you, Scotty?" he gloated. "They don't keep a hundred thousand voltages under their foot feathers very long, hah! Did you see 'em drop like a couple of fall hats, kep'runkin' into the brush under the bluff? And look 'er there—the line's busted and fell in the brush,

too. See, it's a burnin'! They'll get cooked to smithereens."

With a flash and report one of the lines had parted at the tower on the bluff and fell writhing and hissing and spitting streams of live fire into the thicket of brush at the base of the rim rock. Scotty looked on stupidly for a moment, and then sprang into the air with sudden inspiration. "Beat it, Mac! The whole thing's gonna blow up!"

"Can't blow up, Scotty; wait—can't blow up. Hist, whis' that?"

From somewhere in the vicinity of the blazing underbrush came a shout of "Fire!" in a strong feminine voice, followed by the piercing wail of a child.

"That's the Widow Marlow, and her orphans," promptly decided McGill. "Come on, Scotty; we gotta put that fire out. No, leave your blankets; we gotta run for it."

Up the canon sped the men over the rough trail, dodging obstacles, dashing through underbrush and braving out of a mass of impenetrable thickets, panting and wheezing and sweating until they came upon a clear view of the humble cottage, not a stone's throw from the now raging brush fire.

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There was but one chance to prevent the fire from reaching the cottage. That was to remove the intervening brush heaps beyond its reach, and it required quick action. With a vim and energy that surprised even the fire fighters, Mac and Scotty, alighting their faces as well as they could from the blistering heat, rushed into the lower extensions of the treacherous fire trap and dragged load after load of brush down into the marsh below the spring until they had cleared a space from the house back to the edge of the steep naked slopes of loose lava rock below the bluffs.

The fire raced on to meet them, bearing down toward the house until it reached the line of their cleared way, guarded against this trap by drunken tips. Thus occupied the widow came upon them, much to Scotty's annoyance; for he had been dreading the inevitable outpouring of feminine gratitude. Without prologue or preamble she opened the subject.

"Ain't you gettin' me, a poor lone widow's property with your old cigarett smokin' enough without doin' it again?" she demanded, acidly.

Scotty could only gasp, so McGill arose and volunteered as spokesman. "You're mistaken, lady. There were two birds did all the damage."

"Birds! I should say birds! Two fine birds you two air—jail birds, I guess! I know your likes. That's the third time 's' been seein' this crap by drunken cigarett smokin' traps this summer. My old man, he set one himself. He's dead now over a month; he don't smoke no more. He's dead just like you two is goin' to do."

"By Jupiter! I don't blame 'em!" swore Scotty, rising to his full height, which was half a foot or so less than that of his towering accuser. "That's the thanks me an' Mac gets for savin' your house for you! That's gratitude!"

"Ain't nothin' all right!" argued the widow. "It wasn't no more than it was beholden for you to do after settin' fire to everything. I know you deny it, but I know your likes. I didn't live with Bill Marlow 10 years for nothin'. And you two air just the same. You came in from the opposite direction to throw me off the scent, but you can't fool me. Why don't you go to work and earn a decent, respectable livin'? I guess I know what drink—"

"Come on, Scotty," interrupted McGill. "Best be goin', now, and he led the way down