

Dereelicts,
Bummers,
Soodard's
And Doves

Sample

Steven C. Levi



**The Derelicts and Doves,
Scoundrels, Bummers and Saints
of Seward, Cache Creek, Jabbertown,
Fiddler's Bend and environs
on, along and adjacent to
the Noonan Trail in the Alaska
gold country
in the Winter of the Big Snow 1903,
recorded for posterity
and whoever else may want to read it.**



DERELICTS
BUMMERS
SCOUNDRELS
AND
DOVES



Steven C. Levi

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

DERELICTS, BUMMERS, SCOUNDRELS AND DOVES

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**For Janice Houghton Levi and Dolly
Scarborough Whitford, whose love of a good
story—and the more humorous the better—
made this book possible.**

A BIT OF BACKGROUND...

By 1910, the rough-and-tumble days of the Alaska Gold Rush were over. As boomtown after boomtown faded into obscurity, the sourdoughs, last of a dying breed of rugged individuals, scattered to the points of the compass. Those who had made their fortunes—and retained them after heady days and nights in the saloons and gaming houses of the northland—returned to the United States, or the “lower states,” as they were called, to the women they’d left behind...or the women because of whom they’d left in the first place. Those who still hungered for wealth after the major rushes were over clung to their dreams with the tenacity of a rat on flotsam as they waded knee-deep in any of the thousands of ice-cold mountain streams that crept out of the deeper reaches of the Chugach, Brooks and Alaska Ranges.

Of these daring individuals little is written and less is remembered. They came to the wilderness, carved a heritage and then vanished. With the passing of each breakup, the dazzle of their names and exploits became dimmer and dimmer, finally to disappear forever. But it was a rollicking age where men fought the elements for their livelihood and hid their identities under outrageous aliases such as Blind Man Kremen, Rat Face Charlie, Sheep Dip Carrigan, Slick Fingered Willy and a thousand more appellations. But in the end, history claimed them all, leaving little but their ghosts to haunt the decaying ruins of the boomtowns, the dying ember of a fire that had once set the world ablaze.

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He fed himself on beans and dreams
And worked knee-deep in mountains streams
For the gold he never found
Which lies with him beneath the ground.

— Steven C. Levi

DERELICTS

BLIND MAN KREMEN AND THE HEADLESS HORSE

The difference between Blind Man Kremen and a drunk was about six pints a day—with the drunk on the light side. The drunk often took Sundays off to repent. Blind Man Kremen, on the other hand, took no holidays and felt himself under no obligation to repent or regret. Instead, he turned the simple act of imbibing into an art form and lifted it to lofty heights. He was a master with Olympian standards, the fruition of six decades of dedicated practice and experimentation. Just as the great white shark was Nature's perfect devouring machine, in Blind Man Kremen God had created the ultimate sot.

A connoisseur of the vast spectrum of liquid refreshments Alaskan saloons, taverns and waterfront dives had to offer, Blind Man would frequent only those establishments whose offerings were not lethal—a talent he had learned early that continued to earn him longevity. When he was “on the road,” those unfortunate moments when time and circumstance forced his departure from select boomtowns—usually in a pronounced rush—he was much less selective in his choice of watering holes and elixirs.

While there were those who claimed that Blind Man Kremen was simply a stumbling soak and souse, an understandable assumption and, depending on the time of day, true, there were many who felt it was necessary to have such a denizen in the neighborhood simply to ensure that the local hooch was not overly hazardous to the health or safety of the

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local population. Such was his contribution to those communities that were, at the moment, gritting their teeth at his presence.

For his part, Blind Man Kremen was more than forthcoming. With years of seasoning, he was predictably quick to tell the difference between a fine blend of watered bourbon and the vicious bite of wood alcohol colored with ink plant or some other equally distasteful local herb. Indeed, on more than one occasion, while contingents of locals watched in amazement, Blind Man Kremen would taste of an elixir, smack his lips and proclaim loudly that April had certainly produced a fine vintage of laudanum or grain and requested of the bartender that he loosen his grip on the “regular” brew and pour it out for his paying customers.

In fact, it was he who first named the “Sheep Dip” served by Jonathan Carrigan’s infamous Sheep Creek Mercantile and Saloon. Blind Man Kremen, it has been historically authenticated, was quick to charge Carrigan with the invention of a concoction of a particularly cheap and loathsome vintage of poison made with a “dip from the dregs of a barrel and combined with the questionable purity of the waters of Sheep Creek. And alas, my good man,” he had said to the seething proprietor, “I am most distressed to note that this mixture appears sadly favored on the side of the sheep.” History also records that Kremen received an unexpected though hardly unneeded baptismal in Sheep Creek shortly thereafter courtesy of the strong arms and rude temper of the newly named “Sheep Dip” Carrigan.

Additionally, it should also be noted that, although Blind Man Kremen was a rum belly, he always seemed to have enough money to pay for those necessities of life that made the gold mining camps livable. Blind Man had no use for credit, incidentally. They were not the best of friends, as they had never become too well acquainted. However, one should not be left with the impression that Blind Man was above extending what credit he had to the very last inch of his most lengthened fiscal reach. Still, he never seemed to want for finances.

It was said that at one time he had been the proud owner of a sizable strike near Hurricane Gulch and that the sudden wealth had snapped his mind. Others stated he had always been a drunk, even back to the days when his family had given him a choice—a ticket to Skagway or a somewhat bespeckled bed in the isolating confines of a Portland sanitarium. Blind Man, ever true to the romantic spirit and the quest for wide-open spaces, had chosen travel to seclusion, not being particularly unfavorable toward the former or favorable in particular to the latter. How-

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ever, it was also rumored that he had arrived at the Seward docks somewhat laden with substantial portions of his siblings' expected inheritance. No one was even sure if Kremen was, indeed, his last name, but no one was willing to question the six-foot-three veteran of more than one run-in with a grizzly – not all of them of the four-legged kind.

It could also never be inferred that Blind Man Kremen was in full control of his faculties. Though he occasionally displayed skill, daring and quasi-intelligence when it came to late-night games of chance, Blind Man, like a seasoned politician hoary with mold from long years of keeping the top of his desk pristine from pen scratches and marked cards he himself had not altered, most of the time was simply tiptoeing on the very ragged edge of senility.

Like the other gold-hungry invaders from the contiguous United States, he had quickly acquired a sobriquet that identified him personally yet gave no clue as to his family name. This was a blessing to many of the rough-and-tumble characters who were singularly tight-jawed when it came to discussing former friends and residence. Blind Man acquired his name because it was commonly acknowledged, and so stated north and south along the Noonan Trail, that sooner or later Kremen, last name unknown, would certainly drink himself to blindness. Kremen, a nonbeliever of the most persistent sort, proceeded to firmly establish himself in the annals of Alaska as the epitome of the self-fulfilling prophesy on the free whiskey offered to him and him alone at the Carbuncle Saloon in Barnsnaggle one Fourth of July.

Kremen did go blind that night, though it was not a permanent condition; and the next morning he awoke painfully swearing that he considered himself to be most fortunate in still being alive, considering the oceanic amount of liquid refreshment in which he had indulged the previous evening. Vowing never again to touch another drop of the demon rum or any of its close relatives, he proposed to seal his commitment with a rather hefty flagon of some treacherous brew. It was only the hair of the dog, he proclaimed as he proceeded to his next drink, which was "the hair of the cat." Or so he claimed. By the time he reached the feather of his family parrot that had been taught the juiciest lines of rather seedy limericks, he was once again on the wagon. This wagon, however, had wheels that turned and was destined for his ramshackle abode for that night – the attic of Bales Hardware.

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Thereafter, it must be said to his credit that Blind Man Kremen made certain he never again chose a domicile that was not within convenient crawling distance of his place of recreation.

Just as every day must have a night and every dog its day, every man must have his nemesis. For Blind Man Kremen, it was Sheep Dip Carrigan, who was constantly stewing over his first encounter with the legendary sot. Though Carrigan swore he would even the score, he could never seem to fool Blind Man Kremen, even when the drunkard was as sober as a sailor on shore leave. Blind Man imbibed regularly at the Sheep Creek Saloon and Mercantile because his credit was unusually good—primarily because Sheep Dip refused to abandon his quest for vengeance and wanted his quarry as close as possible—and there was always the chance to acquire a few extra bottles as the result of wagers.

While Blind Man Kremen had a seasoned exterior, his disposition was usually mellow. Though Sheep Dip swore to break the calm, passive countenance of his traditional customer, try as he might, he could not harass Blind Man to any particular peak of pique. In spite of the abuse and verbal badinage Sheep Dip heaped upon him, the derelict took it without choler, giving only his characteristic “Tsk, tsk, tsk” while warning Sheep Dip to “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Sheep Dip, a poor student of both literature and religion, was usually just as quick to respond that, “I do unto others as they would do unto me had they think of it first.”

Once in a state of inebriation, however, Blind Man often reached a plateau from which he could be convinced to participate in any stunt, and most particularly when the performance of that stunt involved the payment of a bottle of unquestionable vintage. The more ancient the bottle and copious the amount, the more enthusiasm Blind Man had to partake in the wagering.

Once, for instance, he allowed Sheep Dip Carrigan to nail him inside a crate in Nenana and be shipped by wagon to Gold Creek down the Noonan Trail, three days of rather rugged travel. The bet was only that he make the trip. Blind Man accepted the wager willingly and allowed himself to be nailed into the tight 5x5 dry goods crate accompanied by several bottles of moral sustenance for the journey. Anticipating the three days would be spent in a glorious, alcoholic haze and enthusiastic for his arrival in Gold Creek, where he would collect the fruits of his labor—in this case the liquid of the fruit—he did not, however, take into account the chicanery of the human species.

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Alas, two days out of Nenana, a band of bloodthirsty Apache warriors, thousands of miles north of their usual haunts, attacked the luckless wagon train—which, in this case, was a single wagon with a drunk drover choking on his bandana to keep from breaking into hysterical laughter. The heathen savages, God have mercy on their godless souls, proceeded to lay waste to the wagon, or at least so it appeared to the ears of the terror-stricken Kremen, who fell silent in his wood coffin.

With much “ugh-ing” and “how-ing,” the brutal savages tipped the crate off the wagon and built a roaring fire beneath it. Kremen, in an understandable funk to exit the crate regardless of the dire consequences to his body, scalp or soul, desperately clawed at the planks to gain his freedom. But, as soon as he was able to pry some of the boards loose, the crate took a mysterious tip, and suddenly the flaming box was rolling down a slight incline and stopped only when it had splashed into a bog.

With water oozing through the bottom—or what was now the bottom—of the crate and fire licking the top, Blind Man Kremen was more than pleased to hear the familiar call of the cavalry trumpet and far-off hoofbeats—albeit of one horse—as a band of miners rode to his rescue. Though he later vociferously claimed he was entitled to the prize, as he was the sole survivor of the farthest north Apache massacre, a story he told and retold to snickering sourdoughs from Nenana to Seward, he never did properly win the bet.

Another time, when it was rumored that Russian nobility was being escorted through Alaska by the United States Navy and was due to arrive in Gold Creek, Blind Man Kremen was convinced by Sheep Dip Carrigan that it would be a fine show if the Russians could observe the first Alaskan “Wild Man” in captivity. After assurance that all he would have to do was wear a coat of bear fur, and that he would be amply rewarded upon completion of the escapade—for *rewarded* read *paid off with three cases of prime, unwatered whiskey*—Kremen agreed to subject himself to the apparently modest indignity of portraying the “Wild Man of Alaska: Captured in the Dense Forests of the Denali Mountains by Trained Native Trackers and Bloodhounds!!!”

Kremen, in the throes of inebriation at both the time he made the wager and the time he was to consummate his end of the bargain—both events being less than fifteen minutes apart—decried the outrageous state of inequity in the world as he was stripped of his clothes, rolled in glue and then in the shorn hair of bear, moose, rabbit as well as the collected lint dustballs from the score of saloons in Gold Creek. Though the

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Russian dignitaries never did arrive, Blind Man Kremen spent two days in bondage, stumbling over the rough-hewn planks of the cage as he howled in indescribable anguish, one hand glued (in both senses of the word) to his crotch where he protected his family jewels from the indignity that had befallen the rest of his corpus. Incidentally, only later did Kremen discover that the glue was not water-soluble—he carried hunks of unknown fur on his body until his dying day.

The bad blood between Sheep Dip Carrigan and Blind Man Kremen came to a head on the Fourth of July the next year. The miners were celebrating as usual, which meant they were drinking heavily, when it came to Sheep Dip's attention that Blind Man Kremen was seated in the corner of the Sheep Creek Saloon itching for a drink. Itching, it should be added, was precisely the word to be used. Earlier that spring there had been an outbreak of most annoying lice, and it appeared that every sourdough from Jabbertown to Hurricane Gulch had the bug.

Additionally, it was obvious that Blind Man Kremen was well on his way to another night of pink snakes and elephant moose. This was obvious because the derelict was in the midst of a deep, philosophical, two-sided conversation with himself, commenting upon the varied depths of degradation into which he had been pushed by persons unnamed. In spite of the fact Blind Man Kremen had sworn to himself not to partake in any further wagers with Sheep Dip Carrigan because of the painful consequence that inevitably followed, Blind Man was prime for another bet.

Stepping outside while Kremen was engaged in his conversation, Sheep Dip reversed the saddle on his horse then hitched the animal backwards to the rail in the front of the Sheep Creek Saloon. He returned within and approached Kremen.

"Well, Blind Man, are you ready for a wager? I'll be you three bottles of import you can't ride my horse around the saloon three times."

"What did 'e say?" Blind Man asked himself.

"Tink 'e said dat 'e wanted to make a bet," Blind Man replied to himself.

"Not so sure want tuh do it. Still have hair on m'balls from duh las' time," he confided to himself.

"Got three bottles of import," said Sheep Dip as he set the treacherous glass cylinders on the counter.

All four of Blind Man's eyes settled on the offering.

"Tink should trust him?" he said to himself.

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"Don' know," he replied. "'E's not tuh be trusted. Told him duh las' time 'e'd better not pull a fast one..."

"Yeah. But the bottle's 'r dere."

"But don' know if 'e kin be trusted."

"'Ell, le's give it a try."

"Yeah. Le's."

And so they agreed to bet Sheep Dip.

Once they were outside the saloon, three sourdoughs hoisted the giddy inebriate aloft onto the saddle. Still arguing with himself as to the wisdom of accepting yet another wager with a scoundrel such as Sheep Dip Carrigan, Blind Man suddenly let out a bloodcurdling scream in harmony: "*God damn! Dis horse don' 'ave no 'ead!*"

The horse in question, a usually passive dray animal, suddenly burdened with an hysterical rider, broke into a panic and exploded down the Noonan Trail with a desperate rider howling in terror at the top of his lungs.



"An' dat ain' all," Bill the Walrus told the three other poker players at the Ivory Spittoon in Talkeetna two weeks later. "Dat damn 'orse hot-footed it all duh way intuh Gold Creek where Blind Man, still a-arguin' wid his'self, sold dat damn 'orse tuh Muskrat Mike who, yuh knows jus' 'ates Sheep Dip Carrigan. An' yuh know, Ah's jus' a-wondrin' how drunk dat ol' Blind Man Kremen really was!"

STINK WATER JACK AND THE SANDERSON BURGLARY

Whad'yuh mean, we'd be mor'n happy to go out an' repair some damn cabin!" Wild Man Saunders wiped his nose with what was left of his right parka sleeve. Being stuck for the winter in a jerkwater town like Hog Flats on the frozen shores of Lake Minchumina in the interior of Alaska didn't really fit his idea of luxury. "If we'd skedaddled out of town when I told you, we wouldn't still be holed up here, dammit all!"

"Look. I told you that we had a good chance of gettin' caught here if we didn' git. But you wanted one more game. One more damn game! Then the river froze!" Stink Water Jack was irate at being frozen in for the winter in Hog Flats. It wasn't that the men had better prospects elsewhere; it was just that neither of them particularly enjoyed being in a gold rush boomtown so small their reputations preceded them wherever they went.

Stink Water Jack, reputedly the most unsanitary human being in Alaska—and holder of the title with few serious contenders—had drifted into Hog Flats in the Ought Years, as they were called. Specifically, he came in the winter before the Big Snow, or as it would have been to his relatives, distant by both geography and preference, 1903. Stink Water had come through Dyea, whereafter his reputation for knavery preceded

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him at such a colossal clip that it was less than a week before he was offered the modest choice of moving up the trail or finding himself suspended, as they said, between heaven and earth.

Developing a sudden attraction for the vast and vacant out-of-doors, he packed that same evening, the call of the wild stirring in his bones, and set tracks for the Chilkoot Pass heading north for Whitehorse, Dawson and the Klondike Strike. In White Horse, a turn of luck found him the caretaker of a collection of diamonds. Had said diamonds been in the form of cufflinks or a lady's brooch, the subsequent uproar need not have happened. Unfortunately, these diamonds were from ten to ace and had been secreted ever so clumsily in his right sleeve. After a single ill-timed sneeze, the jig was up.

On the trail again — this time with only those essential provisions one could gather for a hasty exit from a second-story hotel room with a contingent of outraged miners hot on one's tail — Stink Water passed through White Horse quickly. Farther up the trail, he learned of the incredible speed with which communication traveled even in pioneer days. Though no one had passed him on the trail, he was surprised to see a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman waiting for him at the outskirts of Dawson. Word of his exploits had spread with the speed of wildfire, and the local constabulary, intent on maintaining a modicum of law and order even in a boisterous boomtown, escorted the bedraggled gambler to the Dawson city limits and pointed west, toward Alaska.

Wild Man Saunders had a similar history, though his career began in Portland. There, at the advanced age of forty he had made unwarranted passes at a woman half his age. Since her facial and physical accouterments were hardly what one would describe as "becoming," the woman's family was far from displeased at the match. In fact, the prospective father-in-law even offered the dandy a full, albeit junior, partnership interest in the family glue factory. With the promise of a hefty salary coupled with the prodding of a sawed-off, double-ought-buck-loaded shotgun, Saunders was convinced of the error of bachelorhood and consented to a meander up the aisle.

A meander was, indeed, what occurred. Once locked into the groom's chamber on the pulpit side of the Community Presbyterian/Methodist Church of Portland, Saunders was able to pry some previously sturdy window bars loose and regain his freedom. Taking the first ship out of Portland, the *Ulysses*, which was fortuitously leaving momentarily, he found himself in the town of Seward.

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After attempting a series of dreary occupations, none of which he seemed to shine at, he was forced to seek his fortune elsewhere. With a minimum of trail gear and pursued by a crowd of irate diners from the Seward Soup Kitchen who preferred eating their beans with dumplings made of flour and salt rather than soap flakes and alum, he beat tracks north. A rather bedraggling month-and-a-half in the Bush later, alternatively running from old acquaintances and into grizzly bears, he fell into a poker game at Sunshine Lake with Stink Water Jack. Stink Water, diligently working to maintain the undisputed hold on his title, could find no other players in Sunshine Lake—whether for reasons of sanitation or skill with cards, history does not record.

The card game, which lasted well into the night, was a draw simply because neither man was able to cheat better than his opponent. And, as the night broke into day, both men realized that the deck of cards had become suspiciously fat. Two independent, secretive counts by the card players revealed there were more than sixty cards in the deck, a surprise claimed by both men. However, as neither had inserted more than a half-dozen each, it did come as a shock to both to learn his opponent was as bungling a knave as himself.

A friendship was formed. Long-lasting it was, primarily because almost every man in the north was familiar with the reputation of at least one of the pair. Therefore, since birds of a feather flock together, it was not hard to assess them as nothing more than odious fortune—pun intended—looking for a perch upon which to settle.

Fortune was not kind to the duo, however; and though they did stake a modest gold claim on Donkey Creek, it was no more lucrative than any other of their ventures. After a season made lean by ticks, lice, claim jumpers and poorly watered whiskey, they were forced to subsist on handouts, odd jobs (an occupation that had already earned Stink Water his name) and the occasional sour milk of human kindness.

Thus did the pair eke out a meager subsistence waiting for the springtime sun to thaw their gold claim on Donkey Creek. They lived in a rude tent set against a barn and prowled the street in search of whiskey, foodstuffs and such odd jobs as offered the least exertion for the greatest remuneration.

“An’ how was I to know that damn river would freeze that night? Hell, we still coulda made it out of here all right, but you were the one thought we out to try to take the preacher. Now, *that* was real dumb. You

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been in America too long. Preachers up here ain' as dumb as they are in Peoria or Cleveland."

Wild Man was referring to the pair's latest encounter with Lady Luck. They had decided to set up a lottery under the auspices of the Hurricane Saloon. By selling tickets to miners who were too drunk to fully comprehend that the drawing was to be held the previous June, the two felt they would make a killing. But, as fortune would have it, Stink Water had sold a ticket to a peripatetic preacher out of Dawson. The situation could have been salvaged had the pair bothered to inform the Hurricane Saloon that it was holding [or had held] such a lottery. They had not done so; and when the owner, Mad Jack, came a-callin', the conversation was short and unpleasant.

The wages of sin being ever high, the spoils of the enterprise were confiscated. Later it developed that the revenues from the sale of the tickets were split evenly between saloon owner and preacher. Though Stink Water and Wild Man were certain most of the money ended up in the garters of Madame Rosa from Seattle, there was little they could do about it.

"How was I to know he'd only been a preacher since he killed a man up in Dawson? Hell, he didn' look like no Klondike rusher to me."

"He didn' look like no Klondike rusher." Wild Man sarcastically echoed his partner's whining voice. "Hell, you don' ever use your head. That's why we're where we are now."

"Yeah, well, we wasn't doin' that good when you got caught pilferin' whiskey from the bottom case of bourbon in the back room of Casey's Saloon."

Stink Water alluded to the pair's attempt to tunnel under the back room of a saloon and, after removing some floorboards behind stacked cases of bourbon, strip the bottom layer from the inventory. All went well until Wild Man stuck his arm through the hole in the floor and into the snarling mouth of a rather large and vicious dog. Though the struggle was short, the malamute claimed victory with a substantial portion of a parka sleeve.

The debate continued, each man serializing his partner's errors. The harangue would have continued well into the night had not a bottle, thrown by a drowsy prospector in the barn overhead, splattered against the wall just outside their tent.

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"Shut your #\$\$&\$\$# mouths!" The offended prospector's voice was deep enough to dissuade any thoughts of heroism on the part of either of the derelicts.

When the irate prospector had returned to his warm bed of straw in the barn, the two men began their conversation anew but at a lower volume.

"What's this 'bout a cabin?" Wild Man was still unsure exactly what Stink Water had gotten him into. "I thought we'd agreed we din' want to do any work this week."

"The job's a snap. Better'n that. It's got some real nice ben-ee-fits. Let me tell yuh 'bout it. You know ol' man Sanderson's General Store? Well, remember when it got burnt in the back last week from them three drunks? Well, ol' man Sanderson wants us to replace the burnt logs."

"So?" Wild Man was unthrilled.

"So? So? Whadya mean, 'So?' Don' ya think? Listen. What was to happen if, say, when someone was a-repairin' them logs, they sorta forgot to nail in a timber or two? Yuh know, leave a log loose so's someone could get in at night?"

"That's a great idea, Stink Water. But ah kinda remember the last time you talked me into somethin' like this." Wild Man waved his de-sleeved parka under Stink Water's nose. "It din' come out so good. An' just where an' when am I gonna get repairs for *this*?"

"Will you relax? Later tonight, we'll slip back there and bean the dog good. I've got a great plan. All I gotta do is find a club. Then you'll get your sleeve back and some bourbon to boot."

That is not exactly the way the encounter transpired, but suffice it to say Wild Man did retrieve his sleeve at the expense of a chunk of Stink Water's arm. Apparently, the watchdog had tired of chewing on the rabbit-and-weaselskin parka and preferred a more active participant. If nothing else, Stink Water's arm was that. It became particularly active when the malamute took a rather healthy grip of the forearm and attempted to drag the unfortunate derelict up through the floorboards.

In spite of the sad state of affairs afflicting his partner, Wild Man did not shirk in his duty to retrieve several bottles of bourbon before he went to the aid of his screaming partner. Stink Water was outraged only until he learned his sacrifice had not been in vain, and both proceeded to get royally drunk and raised Cain until half the contingent of miners in the barn came out and beat both sense and silence into them.

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Hoping to further extend their streak of good fortune, the two miscreants presented themselves to Old Man Sanderson as grunt labor for as long as he needed them. Old Man Sanderson was as blunt as he was intelligent.

“See where them logs burned out here?” The shopkeeper pointed to the charred remains of the back of his establishment. “You fix it up good, huh?”

And that was the extent of the instructions.

The two derelicts, with villainy in their hearts, proceeded to whip-saw some abandoned logs into the approximate length of the timbers to be repaired. Though the work was both tedious, they did not seem in any particular rush. They worked well into the evening—not that anyone could tell when evening began or ended in the wintertime—and around midnight they finally came to the soon-to-be treasonous timber.

Cutting it short and stubby, leaving a rough edge for a handgrip, they slid the timber into place against a back wall at floor level. Though the opening was not large enough to allow the sturdy structure of the Wild Man to pass, the wizened frame of Stink Water would have no difficulty slipping through the opening and returning with armfuls of merchandise.

The next morning Old Man Sanderson examined the work and paid the two off as handsomely as they could have expected.

“You fellas want cash or trade?”

“*Cash!*” they cried in unison.

That night they celebrated in an orgy of anticipation. Awash in a sea of alcohol—unwatered, at that—they planned their act of larceny in a most uncharacteristic fashion—with restrained voices.

The next morning, at a mutually convenient hour (noon), Wild Man began packing the canvas flap of the tent and proceeded to move their meager belongings to a location at the rear of Old Man Sanderson’s trading post while Stink Water, much to the dismay of Sanderson, entered the establishment to buy a pair of celebration cigars.

“Yes, sir,” Stink Water said to the old man as he snapped a sulfur-coated match to light his cigar and gave a casual eye to the darkest corner of the room. “Yes, sir. Why, you know, the other day I was talking to Blind Man Kremen out of Gold Creek. Did yuh know he’s sellin’ some fine dogs? Ever thought of buyin’ a dog?” Fresh from his escapade with Casey’s malamute, Stink Water was thinking ahead.

STINK WATER JACK AND THE SANDERSON BURGLARY

"No. Don' like dem dogs." For Old Man Sanderson, this was a long conversation.

His curiosity satisfied, Stink Water went to the back of the store and reported his findings to his partner. To say that Wild Man was ecstatic at the news would have been a gross understatement. To say that the two celebrated modestly that evening would have been an error. To say they were prepared for any unexpected contingency was a grotesque overstatement.



"Are you sure he doesn't have a dog?" Wild Man was still uncertain as to the veracity of Stink Water's information. Sad experience had shown that Stink Water's knowledge of the facts invariably proved to be lacking in completeness. "You *are* sure he said he didn't have a dog?"

"Look. I'm sure he doesn't have a dog. And I'm so sure that I'm willin' to go in first. All right? What d'ya have to worry about?"

"I don' know but I've got this strange feelin'..."

"Just shut up and help me with this log."



"An' I tells yuh," Old Man Sanderson told Johnny Muldoon as he sat on a log chair before the smoking hearth of Muldoon's cabin outside of Talkeetna, "I never seen them two again. Why, just as soon's they pulled that damn log back, what'd they see but one mean #\$\$% bobcat. Hell, she come a scootin' outa dat cage like she was greased lightnin'. Everybody in town laugh and laugh and laugh. An' we ain' seen hide nur hair o' dem two since."

BLIND MAN KREMEN AND THE BOOT HILL HOTEL

It wasn't often that Blind Man Kremen, Stink Water Jack and Wild Man Sanders ever got together. This should hardly come as a surprise, however, since all three of these nefarious characters were basically in the same enterprise, which was no business that required physical labor and was more frequently known as "livin' off the land" – not digging in it.

Stink Water and Wild Man had been keeping a fairly low profile the spring after the Big Snow; and Blind Man Kremen, a bit farther up the trail, was just being Blind Man Kremen, drinking heavily and adding to his somewhat speckled reputation. But fate had an encounter in store for them, and it came that spring, known today as the Spring of the Plague. There wasn't really a plague of any kind, it was just a scare tactic employed by Stink Water and Wild Man to turn a profit.

It had started just after breakup when a cheechako who had come into Cache Creek collapsed with a case of the pox. Since no one knew what dreaded disease the cheechako had, and since he came from out of town, there was immediate panic as to the possibility that some deadly microbe had invaded the pastoral harmony of Cache Creek. Doc Buckalew was in Seward at the time, and when the cheechako began throwing fits, the townspeople of Cache Creek had an attack of the crazies.

For the next week, everyone in Cache Creek went around eyeing everyone else with suspicion. A sneeze was enough to clear a saloon, and a cough closed down the General Store for three days as residents drank

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only boiled water and ate local vegetables rather than store-bought flour or canned fruits.

Stink Water Jack and Wild Man Sanders weren't affected by the plague panic at all. Accurately figuring that whatever disease there was they'd already got—and probably years previously—the two also correctly assessed that the panic was a condition during which tin horns such as they could make a profit. Having been forced to leave almost every other locale on short notice and in somewhat of a hurry, the duo had been traveling light—which was, in their estimation, better than not traveling at all—and were in need of food and whiskey. With the plague, they smelled profit.

Providence, being what it is, shone the day that Stink Water and Wild Man heard the news of the plague. More fortunately, there was a rumor that another case of the pox had been discovered, this one in the vicinity of Hurricane. Immediately upon their arrival in Hurricane, the two tin horns sat down in the only saloon in town and began to speak familiarly of the pox as if it were their next of kin. Their stories of skin rot and gangrene were such that even Doc Buckalew's hair would have turned white. In fact, their tales of the pox became so progressively fantastic that not only did they scare half the residents of Hurricane into their cabins for the rest of the summer, they almost scared themselves out of their own scam.

Right in the midst of their story of a woman in Portland who had lost her right ear and four fingers of her left hand to the pox, a miner came rushing into the Raven's Leg Saloon and yelled for a doctor because one of the men out at Slippery Rock was "real bad sick." This simple statement, much to the astonishment of the miner, cleared the saloon as if he'd been a grizzly stung on the nose by a hive of hornets.

Stink Water and Wild Man, seizing upon the pecuniary possibilities, volunteered their services to render aid to the isolated, pox-struck men. Ever the entrepreneurs, the two angels of mercy also made certain to send the miner well ahead of them to "spread the bad news," as it were, up the Noonan Trail. Then the two derelicts proceeded toward Slippery Rock at a leisurely pace to allow time for the bad news to stir up panic long before they reached their destination.

It did. By the time the two sots rode into the camp, there were men hightailing it to the high country or begging God for forgiveness for sins none of the other men even knew about—like cheating at games of chance involving some of the men who were standing around and listen-

BLIND MAN KREMEN AND THE BOOT HILL HOTEL

ing to the confessions. One man even locked himself in the outhouse for safety, which caused a great amount of anxiety among the less concerned miners. The confessions didn't make for a lot of good feelings, which was fine with Stink Water and Wild Man because the greater the panic, the greater the profit.

As soon as they arrived, the two nefarious characters ordered that a huge fire be built and water be put on to boil. They didn't know what to do with the water when it did boil, but Stink Water had always heard Doc Buckalew mention something about boiling water and it sounded professional so he went ahead and ordered that. Someone suggested the two derelicts might consider taking a bath in said hot water, which caused them to become somewhat incensed. There were harsh words, briefly, and thereafter the two derelicts were left alone—primarily because none of the miners at Slippery Rock cared to upset the only two men in the Territory who were unafraid of the pox and its accompanying characteristics as so graphically painted by legend, myth, rumor and these same angels of mercy.

Giving the two characters wide berth, the miners hotfooted it into Hurricane, where they spread the word of the impending plague that had somehow made the leap from Cache Creek to Slippery Rock without stopping in Hurricane first. With Hurricane Creek in the midst of an attack of the crazies, the town now went wild. Under normal circumstances, right-thinking folks would have figured out that the pox was nothing more than a deep rash brought on by an allergy; but the news of the alleged pox in Slippery Rock struck like a thunderbolt, and only those who couldn't walk stuck around in town. Even Hatless Harry Holmes stayed out of town.

Business at the saloon fell off—first time on record—and it appeared that the only business that was booming was Bandersnatch Charlie's. Bandersnatch, so named because he was always quoting some verse no one could understand, was in the coffin business. Business was good, as Charlie was wont to say "'cause people were just dyin' to get into my boxes."

Charlie, as it turned out, was making good money. He didn't even have to advertise his services. Some folks just thought they might get a little jump on the grim reaper, so to speak, and ordered their coffins early. Charlie didn't mind the business, and while everyone else was holed up in their cabins with the latchstrings on the inside, Charlie was

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making coffins paid-in-advance. He didn't mind the pox—he was making money.

Business was doing so well for Charlie that when Blind Man Kremen came through Hurricane on a “rented” horse eating a “borrowed” chicken, Charlie pulled him off his mount and put him to work carrying slabs of timber from the sawmill to the coffin shop. Blind Man Kremen argued for a bit, driving his price up, then settled for room, board and a few bottles of “the good stuff” on the side.

The room, however, was a board—a coffin with a blanket thrown inside—the board was beans, which Blind Man Kremen loathed with a passion, but the few bottles on the side were enough to convince the man to do anything short of sustained physical exertion.

For Blind Man Kremen it was just about the perfect job. All he had to do was hitch up a team, drive ten miles to the sawmill, load up the boards sitting on the loading bay and drive back into town. The only thing that didn't make it perfect was that he had to load his own boards, the lumber mill owner and his men being afraid of getting the pox through contact with Blind Man Kremen.

The rest of the time, he was as happy as a duck in a beaver pond.

It was at this time that Blind Man Kremen took to mixed drink, except he had an unusual method of mixing them. He'd have a bottle of bourbon in one hand and a bottle of rum in the other, and he would draw on each in turn—a bite of one and then a bite of the other, all the way back to town.

While Blind Man was settled into the best job he had ever had, Stink Water and Wild Man had stumbled into a pretty good bit of luck of themselves. Once in the cabin of the poor, diseased miner, they discovered to their horror that the man was suffering from nothing more than a bad case of the chills and thus might recover too soon. They resolved this difficulty by forcing a mustard plaster down his throat that would give him another day or two of a bad stomach and loose bowels.

Day by day they ministered to the miner while, at the same time, going through Slippery Rock's supply of whiskey and grub. Each morning, one of the pair would venture forth to the campfire—which would clear of miners—grab some boiling water and walk back to the cabin.

Since no one else cared to become involved with the dreaded pox, no one objected to the method used in curing the disease. One man made mention of the fact he had not seen his sick comrade in days and felt that some proof of his condition should be forthcoming. Stink Water, whose

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turn it was to get the hot water, stated that the objecting miner could come into the cabin and see his friend's condition for himself. Shouting ahead to Wild Man, who quickly smeared a mustard pack on the victim's arms and legs, Stink Water and the protester walked toward the cabin. Once within eyeshot, the protester took one look at his comrade, turned a shade of yellow-pink and disappeared into the nearby bushes.

That was the last protest from the miners, though there was some understandable hard feeling. While they were living on roasted rabbit, the smell of bacon was always coming from the cabin. Moreover, by the smell of it, the two angels of mercy were eating six weeks worth of grub in a handful of days.

After five days, however, there was no way the two derelicts could delay the inevitable. Announcing that their patient had fully recovered, they exited the cabin with their patient in tow. Though the miner in question was not in the stablest of conditions, due primarily to whiskey rather than the pox, there was no doubt he was on the road to recovery. Quickly taking their pay before the miners could assess damages for the food eaten, the two derelicts bid a hasty goodbye and took their exit.

Arriving back in Hurricane, they found to their dismay, that Blind Man Kremen had stepped in and taken a portion of their hysteria trade.

At first, the meeting was strained, each contingent accusing the other hogging the scam. Finally, seeing that no one was going to leave such lucrative pickings, they established an uneasy truce whereby all profits from the ventures in Hurricane would be split three ways. No one objected, and the alliance was confirmed, with Blind Man sharing the small keg of whiskey he had received from Hatless Harry Holmes to build his coffin. None of the men knew why Hatless Harry had been so uncharacteristically free, but they were soon to find out.

The next morning, the impact of what they had agreed upon the night before struck them. Bandersnatch Charlie, well before noon, kicked the sides of the coffins in which the three had taken repose and rolled them out of bed. Giving each a shovel, he ordered them to dig a grave. No one had died, he assured them, but since the rumors of the pox had been dwindling and he felt the urge to build more coffins, a grave would generate renewed concern and, quite probably, some additional business.

However, convincing the three derelicts to commit physical labor was similar to getting salmon to climb trees. There were loud and raucous protests from the trio until Charlie let loose a load of buckshot; thereafter, the protests were muted. But, in all fairness, it should be noted

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it did take most of two days for the grave to be completed and not without Blind Man Kremen tumbling into the pit on several occasions.

The first day they got a rude shock. The keg of whiskey from Hatless Harry they had been passing around suddenly went dry. This was strange, because the weight of the keg had remained unchanged although the whiskey was gone. Attacking the keg with a desperation known only to drunkards, the three discovered Hatless had placed an ordinary bottle of whiskey in the keg and filled the rest of the space with water. With the throat of the bottle at the bunghole of the keg, it had appeared the entire keg was full of whiskey. It was not.

The three were filled with outrage and delusions of vengeance.

The day the barge came down from Cache Creek, the three paid an unexpected visit to Hatless Harry. At first concerned they had come to seek damages for his keg trick, he was pleased to hear them state they had not had the opportunity of tipping his whiskey yet. Hatless, who fully expected to die at the height of the plague, had wanted his corpse to be taken care of at bargain basement prices and, now that the scare was abating, was concerned his trick would be discovered before he had a chance to rectify his miscalculation or dispose of the cask in question.

The meeting was friendly until Stink Water suddenly remarked that Hatless did not look well, that his pupils were open too wide, that he was breathing too hard and that his words were slurred and weak. These were all symptoms of the pox, Stink Water declared, and "We jus' dug a grave for one wh'ad all them 'ere signs as you, swear it."

All three derelicts leaned forward on cue, appearing to listen closely to the faint utterings of Hatless as he struggled to speak louder. But the more he worried the worse his condition became, until he was practically on the floor in convulsions.

Stink Water shook his head sorrowfully and said there was only one chance and that was to take the barge south to Jabbertown, where there was a plague doctor. Begging God for another chance, Hatless allowed the three conspirators to take charge of his body.

The three angels of mercy quickly wrapped their victim in blankets and tossed him into the buckboard and headed for the barge landing. The barge master allowed them to board, but only after extended protest, and forced the hysterical Hatless to the extreme rear of the barge so that he might keep his condition to himself. Hatless, still in convulsions of self-pity, allowed himself to be strapped down.

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The barge left shortly thereafter, and it was not until a good six hours later that Hatless realized he had been abandoned on board with a barge master who was not interested in coming anywhere near him until they reached Jabbertown “an’ maybe not even till Seward.”