

The Ghoul of Grays Harbor



Dennis P. Ford

THE GHOUL OF GRAYS HARBOR

by

Dennis Pence

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A SALT WATER GRAVE

Nolan downed his whiskey and set the empty glass on the table. His rainwater eyes locked onto the blue ones of Connelly. “Let me tell you something Felt,” he said in a quiet voice. “You be damned careful. If you aren’t careful, you’ll find yourself a saltwater grave right here in the harbor.”

The silence was ominous. The din of the storm outside grew quiet. An icy grip ran down Felton’s spine as he thought of the cold, murky waters of Grays Harbor.

THE GHOUL OF GRAYS HARBOR

DEDICATION

This Book is for my two children

Katie, age 12, loving daughter and my biggest fan

Nick, age 17, a fine young man and computer extraordinaire

I love both of you with all my heart.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Aberdeen, located on Grays Harbor of the Washington coast, was known as the “Hellhole of the Pacific” during the first decade of the twentieth century. It was also known as the toughest waterfront town north of San Francisco. An over abundance of huge trees and a sheltered harbor created an economic boom for the timber industry. Lumber was shipped to ports around the world.

Aberdeen had an ample quantity of love and liquor for sale. There were more than enough brothels and thirty-four saloons were licensed by the city for the sailors and loggers to quench their thirst. Including the 1900's version of the fast food drive-up window. Fronting on the Wishkah River was the Modern European Lunch Counter. Fishermen and tugboat crews could order food or booze while never leaving the comfort of their boats from the “drive-up” window.

Billy Gohl arrived in Aberdeen in 1902 on a sailing schooner from San Francisco. With the unmitigated gall that was characteristic of him, he appointed himself union representative of the Sailor's Union of the Pacific, the Aberdeen local. He set up shop in an office that fronted on the Wishkah River over the Grand Saloon on F Street. He purported to look out for the sailor's best interests while they were in port. Sailors trusted him because he was the union rep. They would leave their valuables with him for safe keeping in the union office while they went on a drunk and visited a whore or two.

Gohl would open his safe, which had several built in compartments, and indicate to the sailor to select one and leave his valuables in it. While the sailor was bent over depositing his valuables in the safe, Billy Gohl would bash him in the head with a club. He then dropped them through a trapdoor to the Wishkah River below. He would row the bodies in a rowboat out into the rivers or bay and dump them overboard, usually with a chain around them so they would sink. Later, after he was “earning more money”, he bought a launch in order to better dispose of the bodies. This was safer and less work than rowing a boat, and he could deposit the corpses farther out into the bay. There were also other ways of killing, but this method was the one he preferred.

Eventually some of the bodies started floating to the surface, hence earning the name of floaters, or the floater fleet. Billy Gohl was

known as the admiral of the floater fleet. During one winter in the last years of the decade, floaters surfaced at the rate of ten a month in the rivers and harbor. After a time, Gohl started murdering loggers also. He was reputed as saying it was the easiest living he ever made. Nobody knows for sure how many men Gohl murdered. Rumor has it over two hundred men were done away with. Forty murders were directly connected to him. As with all stories that are passed on, the facts become distorted with time. But, whether forty or two hundred murders to his credit, it makes him a homicidal maniac.

Who was Billy Gohl? The facts are vague in part because of Gohl himself. He was an adept liar and would often concoct stories when drunk. He apparently was born in Germany on February 6, 1873. It was rumored that he fled Germany in his youth when he was suspected of murder. Not much is known of his life during this time. He landed in Australia, then proceeded to Alaska. After arriving in Aberdeen, a story followed him that while in Alaska, he and a partner invested in a gold mine. During a particularly hard winter they ran out of food. The practical Gohl, as it was said, killed his partner, and in order to survive, ate him. There were other rumors of his previous murderous escapades, some of them perpetuated by himself. As with all stories told over time, truth becomes hard to discern from fiction.

In the midst of all this, Gohl found the love of his life. Her name was Bessie Hagar. She was a twenty-seven year old dance hall girl. As the story goes Billy was drunk one night and tried to put the make on her. She got mad and punched him on the chin with her fist knocking him down. Then she kicked him in the ribs while he was down. Billy loved her spunk. They were married on May 16, 1905.

Aberdeen police chief George Dean secretly hired two private detectives, Paddy McHugh and Billee Montana, to aid with his investigation of Gohl. The two detectives became proprietors of the Grand Saloon where Gohl had his union office. With evidence gathered by the two, and a couple witnesses including one John Klingenberg that had helped Gohl in a killing, Chief Dean arrested him in early 1910 and charged him with murder.

Gohl was convicted by a jury and sentenced to life in prison on May 24, 1910. To her credit, Bessie, the wife, stood faithfully by him throughout the arrest and trial. She was at the courtroom every day during the trial and sentencing. After he was incarcerated in the Washington State Penitentiary at Walla Walla, she followed him there

so that she might be close to him. But, the pressure must have been too great. In 1912, she divorced him and disappeared into history.

While in the penitentiary, he witnessed the murder of a fellow inmate, and went berserk. Strange, considering his own violent past. However, he had cerebral syphilis, which may have contributed to his being mentally ill. Billy Gohl died insane at Eastern State Hospital in Spokane County, Washington, on March 3, 1927.

Today all that remains of the Grand Saloon with its infamous union office are rotting pilings jutting from the Wishkah River. They stand like tombstones commemorating Aberdeen's violent and booming past. Almost all the buildings that housed the saloons and brothels are gone. The Grays Harbor area is in an economic slump due to the decline of the timber industry. Tourism is fast becoming the leading means of employment. Sadly, these are not family wage jobs, with pay rates being far inferior to those offered by the lumber and timber companies.

It should be said here that Aberdeen at the time of Billy Gohl wasn't all sex and sin. Thirty-two of the thirty-four saloons were clustered in a few block area along the waterfront of the Wishkah River just above its confluence with the Chehalis River. Beyond this was a normal business district populated with solid church going citizens. Away from the bordellos and bars, there was virtually no crime. Aberdeen's inhabitants tolerated the seedy element as long as they stayed in their place.

If you, the reader, should visit Aberdeen, take a walk south on F Street starting at Heron. The Grand Saloon was on the river side at the intersection of the two streets. This was the part of town known as the "Hellhole of the Pacific". With the look of the present day, it is hard to believe that this was the toughest waterfront town north of Frisco. The hustle has long disappeared, but if one is intuitive, the energy is still there. Perhaps on a stormy, winter night, one may even....

While some of the scenes in this novel really happened, and my locale and topography is authentic, this is only a work of fiction and not meant to be taken as historical fact. I took much liberty with the "facts". I borrowed the name Billy Gohl from history. My other leading characters including the protagonist Felton Connelly are fiction.

In the future, I plan to write more novels continuing the Connelly saga.

Dennis Pence
Rochester, Washington

CHAPTER I

Dusk settled upon the land. It was already dark within the confines of the coniferous forest. Tree limbs drooped heavily under their rain-laden weight. A wind began to blow, fitfully at first, then stronger. The nearby Chehalis River ran bank full with dirty brown floodwater, and was still rising. The rushing current and the wind were the only sounds to be heard. And the monotonous pattering of the unceasing rain.

In the dying light a man sighted down a Winchester rifle over the top of a Hemlock windfall. His dull faded clothes were soaked and rainwater dripped from the brim of his hat. His boots and pants from the knees down were caked with mud. A Colt pistol hung from a holster attached to a belt around the man's waist.

Felton Connelly dearly wanted a cigarette, but the risk was too great. He had been in this cramped position for nearly an hour now without moving. The mud made a small sucking sound as he squirmed a little to ease a spasm in his leg. He peered over the windfall trying to see into the rainy darkness.

He wondered what it actually was that he looked for. Why he had stayed in that cramped position for the last hour or so escaped him. Except that something was out of the ordinary.

Ever since someone had taken a shot at him in Portland a few days past, he was edgy. Now he was more edgy than ever. Not more than an hour ago while walking through the forest, an alien sound came from ahead of him. He crouched down behind the windfall, not wishing to walk into unexpected danger. If there was danger. Once, glancing along his back trail, he thought he detected a movement. So, he decided to stay put.

The last vestiges of light disappeared as the dark of night prevailed. Visibility was at best only a few feet. Still, he did not move. He didn't have the nerve to move. He dearly wanted the warmth of a campfire and the taste of harsh cigarette smoke. But, some sixth sense seemed to warn him to stay put.

After riding the train from Portland to Centralia, he caught a ride with a teamster who was driving a wagonload of supplies as far as Rochester. That was yesterday. For some odd reason, he thought he was being followed from the time he left Centralia.

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This morning, he left Rochester on foot under cover of the predawn darkness. He thought he slipped away undetected, but after passing Oakville in midmorning he was sure he was being followed. Not that he had seen anything or anybody on his back trail. It was that sixth sense that told him he was tailed. Now, a few miles out of Oakville on this stormy night, that same sixth sense was flashing another warning.

Maybe he should have taken that Indian's offer of a ride in his cedar dugout canoe down the river from Oakville to Aberdeen. He had thought it best to stay afoot. The stream was rising rapidly due to the stormy weather and it might have been a wild ride down the floodwaters of the river. Not to mention that sitting in a canoe he'd be like a duck in a shooting gallery to an unseen marksman.

He was having second thoughts. At least he'd be in shelter and warm right now. Instead of laying in the mud soaked to the bone and freezing his ass off. And the fact that someone might be waiting for him to make a move. A move that might be his last.

One thing he knew for sure. He was a damn sight colder now than he'd been an hour ago.

The wind increased. A gust stronger than the others caught the trees and relieved them of their weight of water. Only to be burdened again by the steadily falling rain.

His stomach growled. He suddenly remembered he'd eaten nothing since morning. With as little movement as possible, he dug into a makeshift backpack lying beside him. Finding a piece of jerky, he stuffed it into his mouth and began to chew.

He felt fear's icy grip on his spine when a stick cracked a few feet away. He tightened his clench on the rifle and tried to see into the inky blackness. He saw nothing. It must be the wind.

A half-hour went by with no other sound but that of the wind, rain, and the flooding river. He was shivering from the wet cold. And, he dearly wanted that cigarette.

The hell with it. He was going to smoke a cigarette. He was cold and hungry and getting mad. The cigarette would improve his spirits. Let the bastards try to get him.

He paused. Who? He still wasn't sure there was somebody out there. But that sixth sense again told him he was not alone in the forest this night.

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He released his grip on the rifle and felt in his shirt pocket for his tobacco pouch. With hands shaking from the cold he clumsily rolled a cigarette. It was pretty ragged, but would do. He put the cigarette between his lips.

He reached in his pocket for a match and started to strike it under his thumbnail. He arrested the motion in mid-air as a thought nagged at him. Maybe he was being foolish. If there was someone waiting for him to make a wrong move, the light of the match flame would stand out like a bolt of lightning in the rainy blackness. The sixth sense kept ringing its alarm.

He could almost taste the harsh tobacco smoke. It was too much. He bent his head down behind the windfall so that he might conceal the flare of the match flame from alien eyes. He struck the match and touched the flame to the tip of his cigarette.

Simultaneously a flash of light and a loud boom of a gun being fired stabbed out of the darkness at him. The bullet hit the windfall next to his face kicking splinters and bark into his eyes.

In one motion he grabbed his rifle and rolled over flat on the ground. He fired blindly at the spot where the shot came from. He immediately rolled over again as another shot narrowly missed him.

He came up off the ground, fired twice more, and dove headlong into the dark. Another gun of different caliber barked from off to his right. He fired in that direction and started to run away from the unseen assailants. Not being able to see, he ran into a protruding tree branch that took him off his feet. It was the only thing that saved him. A bullet clipped the branch where his body had just been.

He lay still on the ground. As suddenly as the shooting started, it stopped. For several minutes he did not move. A gust of wind moaned through the treetops sending forth a deluge of water. The rain was now falling like driven nails. Other than the wind, it masked all sound. Even that of the river.

The silence was nerve wracking. If it could be called silence. His ears rang from the deafening noise of the gunshots.

Likely they thought him dead, but didn't cherish the thought of poking around in the darkness to find out.

Maybe they pulled foot. Shit! He was only fooling himself.

A strange noise came from a few feet away. Like rough clothing being scraped on a bush. He thought he heard a low moaning sound. He wasn't too sure. Seemed like he wasn't too sure about

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anything lately. One thing he was sure about. He wasn't cold anymore. In fact, the sweat was running off him. He grinned to himself when he discovered the cigarette still hanging from his mouth. Of course it wasn't lit and had fallen apart. He spit it out.

The sound of something heavy footed came from the direction of the river. As if a heavy animal, maybe a horse, was walking.

The sound died out in a few seconds as it got farther away.

A half-hour went by with no other sounds out of the ordinary. He was getting cold again, and his legs were cramping. Maybe they really did pull foot.

Moving slowly as to make no noise, he stood up. He instantly froze into position. Nothing happened.

Bending down, he felt quietly around on the soggy ground for a chunk of wood. Finding one, he gave it a toss in what he thought was the direction of the windfall where he'd been when the shooting started. It landed with a thud. He waited, every sense alert. Except for the stormy night, there was nothing.

Still afraid to move, he waited a few more minutes. All he heard was the wind and rain.

Trying to be as quiet as possible, he gingerly started to make his way back to the windfall where his backpack was. He had to have that pack. Everything he needed was in it.

He stopped. Was that pack worth risking his life over? Suppose the assailants hadn't pulled foot. A chill ran up his spine at the thought.

On impulse, he began making his way from tree to tree. He was in doubt as to which direction the windfall lay. He had become disoriented during the melee. He moved to where he thought it should be.

He stumbled over some unseen object, falling headlong. His rifle slipped from his grasp. Cursing silently to himself for being so clumsy and noisy, he felt around in the dark for the rifle. He recoiled when his hand touched human flesh. Almost in a panic, he clawed for the Colt pistol in its holster. He thrust it out in front of him ready to fire. Nothing happened.

Almost afraid to, he reached with his free hand to where he felt the flesh. He touched it. It was somewhat warm. It was a dead body. So one of his bullets found its mark.

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On shaky legs, he stood up. He steadied himself against a tree. His nerves were frayed.

After a minute or two, he began to calm down. He decided to risk a light. He was sure now whoever else there was had pulled foot. He was positive there was only one other. At least there were only two shooting at him.

He reached in his pocket for a match. He struck it on his belt buckle and looked at the body. It was no one he knew.

With the light of the match, he found his rifle. He struck another and found the windfall where his pack was. It hadn't been touched.

He was startled as a low moaning sound could be heard on the wind. As suddenly as it started, it was gone. Probably it was nothing. Only the wind. That's what he told himself.

Suddenly he knew he must be shut of this place of the newly dead. A wave of panic threatened to seize him. He shouldered his pack and made his way to the river. Out in the open on the riverbank, he took the much stronger force of the wind and rain in his face. Visibility was a little better once out of the confines of the forest. Sight distance was a few feet anyway.

Off in the distance on the opposite side of the river he could see a light. Must be a farmhouse. He felt a pang of loneliness as he looked at the light. A family was probably just finishing dinner. It would be warm in that house. Not just of heat, but heart too. They probably hadn't heard the gunfire over the din of the storm. They wouldn't know that death had happened a short distance away. It just as well had been a world away.

For a moment he tried to imagine what they were like. Hard working and living by the Good Book. He imagined a husband and wife and several children, and much love. A hardworking family from dawn to dark, their only day of rest being Sunday. Then they would attend church and socialize.

Somewhere in the smoky recesses of his mind, there was such a time. But now, it was committed only to memory. A dim memory at that. Because he would not let it resurface except on rare occasions. Then it seemed to spring up of its own volition.

He took one last wistful look as a cold gust of wind brought him back to reality. Slowly he started slogging down the river. How did he ever get to this point? Slogging along in the rain, soaked to the

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skin, cold, lonely, and now the added burden of death on his shoulders. He knew the reason but tried to blot it out. In his mind, only the weak dwelled in the past. The past would never be again. It was water under the bridge.

He brought himself back to his present situation. If he didn't find some sort of shelter, he was in trouble. One didn't last long with such a cold wet rain expending body energy without some sort of shelter.

He glanced up one more time in the general direction of the light. It was gone. Probably a different angle now, maybe behind some trees on the opposite bank. Perhaps he never saw the light. His mind sometimes had a habit of playing tricks on him. Resurrecting the past when he least expected it. He slogged on, thinking now only of his present situation.

He must find shelter. Occasionally he would walk through water in some unseen low spot. Once he almost went down as he stepped into a puddle hip deep. Another time, holding his rifle and pistol over his head, he waded a side stream that came to over his waist.

He plodded on, methodically putting one foot in front of the other. He knew to stop now would be foolhardy. First he would lose his body heat, thereby expending all his energy. Then it would be only a matter of time.

He wondered if the rain would ever stop. It seemed like forever since he'd been warm. Or had anything of substance to eat.

Stumbling along with his head down, he bumped into something knocking his hat askew. He readjusted it. The object he bumped into appeared to be a wall of some sort. He followed it around and discovered it to be a shack. He found a door being held on by crude leather straps. Must be a hunter or trapper shack. With the muzzle of his rifle, he slowly pushed open the door.

He stepped carefully through the door, his rifle at ready. The shack was empty. The inside smelled musty and damp. But, already he felt warmer from being out of the wind. It seemed to renew his energy. Life was looking up.

He removed his pack and set it on the dirt floor. He found a candle and lit it. The light showed on a tiny low roofed lean-to with no windows. The roof leaked, but it was a damn sight drier in here than out in the weather.

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A mouse squeaked and ran under a pile of rubble in a corner, upset at this alien intruder. In another corner was a crude fireplace made of a ring of stones. There was a smoke hole deliberately left in the roof by the builder. The walls were built out of rather small logs not much larger than big tree limbs. Mud had been used for chinking, but in most places had fallen out.

The previous occupant had left a few sticks of semi-dry wood. With a little coaxing he got a rather smoky fire going. He had no idea where his unknown assailants, or now assailant, was. He hoped the smoke wouldn't give him away. Damn it. He was cold and needed to dry out.

He felt in his shirt pocket for his tobacco. It was damp, but he built a cigarette anyway. He leaned over the candle flame and puffed it into life. He inhaled the smoke and felt reinvigorated.

Gradually, he warmed a little from the meager heat put out by the fire. Not much, but a little. If fire it could be called. There was plenty of smoke, but not much fire.

He inhaled the last drag on the butt and tossed it into the fire. The wind blew rain through the cracks in the walls. He rummaged through the pile of rubble and found a couple old moldy blankets. His own blankets were soaked. He shook out the dirt and vermin, and their droppings. He snuffed the candle and sat down cross-legged in a corner, wrapping the blankets around his shoulders.

He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. He wrinkled his nose at the odor. It was almost unbearable. It smelled like mouse piss. Though he didn't quite know what mouse piss smelled like. All the same it still smelled like mouse piss.

He drifted off into a dream filled sleep, waking often with a start. He dreamt about a white clapboard house, with a fire in the hearth. It was a warm fire. A warmth, more than just from the fire, penetrated throughout the house. The inside of the house was cheery and clean, with a woman's touch. All was cozy and snug. A young woman, very pretty, sat in a chair knitting, not far from the fireplace. Her hair cascaded off her shoulders. Her blue eyes shown in the lamplight. Two young children, a boy and a girl, played on the floor in front of the hearth. The youngest child, the girl, was the very picture of the woman.

Suddenly, in his dream, there was the sound of gunfire. Flames engulfed the house. A woman screamed and the little girl's

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voice could be heard crying in the night for her daddy to help them. There was no answer.

He jerked awake with a start, reaching for a gun. Wild eyed, he pointed it into the darkness, hammer at full cock and ready to fire. There was nothing.

He forgot momentarily where he was. Then he remembered. He blinked his eyes and shook his head to clear the fog from his brain. He eased the hammer of his gun down to half cock and slowly set it down. He was shivering violently, but the sweat ran off him. A cold sweat.

The tiny lean-to smelled of damp smoke but not a live coal showed in the fire ring. He managed to roll a cigarette. The harsh tobacco smoke calmed his frazzled nerves. He drew in on the smoke and leaned his head back against the wall. He was still very much tired. After such a fitful sleep he never could get rested.

It was always this way. When he needed rest the most, the same dream, with almost no variation, plagued him. He could still hear the little girl crying out in the night for her daddy to help them. Worst of all, he could still hear the woman's scream. A scream that pleaded to help her children. A scream that held so much finality in it. It would haunt him for years after.

He put out the cigarette. The rain continued to beat on the low roof and the wet wind found its way through the chinkless gaps in the walls. He had no idea what time it was. Only that it was some time in the middle of the night.

Finally he slept. He slept the sleep of the drugged. The sleep of the exhausted. And, to his relief, it was at last a sleep without dream

CHAPTER II

Felton Connelly stirred in his sleep. Vague gray light filtered through the gaps in the logs. It was dawn. He opened his eyes trying to focus them. He felt drugged and exhausted, as if he only slept a few minutes. He was shivering from the cold. He tried going back to sleep, but became aware of a dark form towering over him.

Suddenly, he was wide-awake. He looked up to find himself staring into the muzzle of a rifle.

“Get up,” a raspy voice ordered. “Nice and slow.”

Felton tried to make out the face, but couldn't in the dark and shadowy interior of the shack. The only thing he could see was what looked like a tam the man was wearing for a hat.

Slowly he started to get to his feet. Tired muscles and a sore back protested with every move. Once on his feet, he placed a hand on the wall to steady himself. He glanced at his own rifle and pistol that were laying on the floor beside where he had slept.

The intruder stepped back a step. “Don't try it,” he warned in that raspy voice. “You'd be dead before you hit the floor.”

Felton believed him. He tried to make out the face, but saw only a shadowy form instead. One thing for sure. He could clearly see the rifle muzzle pointed at him. He felt his guts tighten a little at the sight. It looked as big as a cannon.

The light between the gaps in the logs was getting brighter. A tendril of smoke rose from the fire ring towards the smoke hole. Rain fell through the hole. He could hear it still hitting the roof and the wind continued to blow like the banshees. Outside to the rear of the shack he heard a horse blow. Vaguely he remembered that in his sleep he heard a horse blow. He cursed himself for sleeping so heavy and not blocking the door.

“What the hell you doing here?” the stranger demanded.

“Trying to get out of the weather. What the hell do you think?” Felton snapped back. He tried to think fast. How the hell did he get himself in such a mess? Most likely this was the other person that shot at him last night. His guts shrunk a little more as he wondered if this stranger knew that his partner was dead. Killed by Felton Connelly himself.

“Don't get smart with me Asshole. You know what the hell I mean.”

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"I'm looking for land to homestead," Felton lied. "I was scouting the area and got caught by the storm. Ran across this shack and decided to weather the storm here."

"Bullshit!" the stranger rasped. He paused, and then went on. "There was a shooting upriver last night. Was it you? My partner and I were fired upon while heading to Oakville. I haven't seen him. So I don't know if he is dead or alive."

The horse stamped impatiently outside. The steady dripping of the rain through the smoke hole sounded monotonous in the shack. "I wasn't upriver at all. I came from Elma. This is as far upstream I've been since I've been scouting land," Felton continued lying trying to stall for time. It suddenly dawned on him that this stranger didn't know for sure who he was, or he would have killed him outright. However, the stranger didn't want to kill some hapless wayfarer who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Strange that the man didn't know for sure who he was. After all, last night he was one of those that had ambushed him. Must be the only reason he was still standing here talking rather than lying dead on the ground, shot in his sleep.

"Why don't you put that gun down and let's talk about this," Felton said conversationally, trying to take advantage of the fact this man wasn't positive of his identity. "I am obviously not the one that fired upon you and your partner. I must say, I don't blame you for being mad. I would be too if I was in your shoes. But, I am not the culprit."

The stranger was taken aback a little by Connelly's sudden mild manner. It took him a second to regain his composure. He almost believed Felton. "I think you're lying," he accused. But now there was less certainty in his voice.

A gust of wind caught the door and blew it open. It banged against the wall almost ripping it off the straps. The stranger instinctively swung his rifle to cover the door.

Connelly, quick as a cat, dropped to a crouch and dove at the stranger's legs. He hit him just below the knees. The man went down, but he was fast. He rolled with the blow and never released his grip on the rifle. He viciously chopped down with the gun barrel. It caught Felton on the shoulder staggering him.

Felton winced at the pain. He grabbed the rifle barrel and tried to wrench it from the assailant's hands, but to no avail. The man tried

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to force the muzzle back in line with Felton's body. He almost made it when he pulled the trigger.

The roar of the gun being fired was deafening. Connelly felt the concussion of the bullet, but it missed and went harmlessly through the wall. He heard the horse give a frightened snort and gallop away.

The assailant came up off the dirt floor and tried to use the rifle as a club. Connelly ducked under a wicked swing. The man was strong and quick, and Felton could feel himself weakening. No sleep or rest and inadequate meals had taken its toll on his physical strength.

He grabbed the man before he could recover from the wild swing with the rifle. Connelly pulled the man to himself and kicked him in the crotch. The man doubled up and gasped in severe pain. But, he still managed to cling to the rifle. He tried working the lever to jack a fresh round into the chamber. He had the action halfway open when Felton grabbed the gun. Felton chopped upward. The point of the steel butt plate caught the man on the side of the head just above the ear. He went down as if poleaxed.

Connelly staggered trying to catch his breath. He was mad clear through. Something snapped inside him. He grabbed his own rifle and turned to bear it on the inert form of the unconscious man. He eared back the hammer to fire. He stood there a moment trying to control his breathing.

He blinked his eyes as he regained his senses. The anger inside him subsided as quick as it had exploded. He lowered the gun and set it in the corner. He may be a lot of things, but killer was not one of them. Self-defense was another matter, but not an outright cold-blooded killer. He leaned against the wall to steady his nerves. "Son of a bitch," he husked glancing at the still unconscious form.

What in the hell was going on? Ever since receiving a telegram in Salem to meet a friend in Aberdeen, all hell had broke loose. All the telegram said was help was needed. And the final cryptic words, be careful. Nolan Delford. What an understatement. Shot at in Portland, last night's gunfight in which he killed that man, and now this.

Crap. It was 1910. The gunfighting days on the frontier had been over for twenty years or so. If he wasn't so close to Aberdeen,

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he would have turned around right then and there and returned to Salem.

Full dawn light was now streaming through the open door. He walked to the opening and looked outside. The river was less than fifty yards away. A few Alder trees grew from the bottom ground and leaned toward the river. The ground was strewn with broken branches. The trees were still bending violently from the force of the wind. A couple had uprooted and lay on the ground. One had broken off, leaving a long sliver of naked red wood sticking up. The rain fell in buckets.

He stepped to the unconscious form. He was out like a light. Maybe he had killed him too. But on closer examination, he saw the man was breathing.

Felton searched the man for ID and other weapons, but found none. He dragged the man to the light cast by the open door. His nose was askew and appeared to have been broken several times. A scar ran from his right ear to the bridge of his nose. It was on one Connelly recognized.

He took the man's rifle. Ejecting the shells, he walked to the river. With a heave, he threw the rifle into the rushing waters.

He searched a few minutes for the horse. It was nowhere to be found. Too bad. The ride would have been better than walking.

The thug was starting to stir when Felton shouldered his pack and picked up his rifle. He checked his Colt and wiped it dry before putting it into its holster. Once outside he closed the door. As an afterthought, he tied the door shut from the outside with a piece of rawhide. It wouldn't stop the louse, but might slow him down a few minutes.

Facing west, he started downstream toward Aberdeen, still some twenty miles away. He would skirt Elma and Montesano if he could so as to not draw attention. Depending on how bad the lowlands were flooded.

He bent his head as the full force of the wind and rain drove directly into his face. With any luck, providing the floodwaters didn't detour him and he could get a ride, he would be sleeping in a hotel bed tonight in Aberdeen.

With marked determination, he plodded on, mile after mile, with no other thoughts than that of reaching his destination.