

Gunfighter's Return

By LESLIE ERNENWEIN

(AP Newfeatures)

Chapter 1
Durango died at noon. He didn't say a word. Didn't even grunt. He just lay down and died.

Jim Rimbaud crunched holding a bloody bandage he had been adjusting for Durango. Fatigue slouched Rimbaud's lean-shanked body; it marked his angular face and was a dullness in his eyes. Beyond him, propped on trembling legs, stood two tired horses.

Rimbaud peered down at Durango's slack-jawed face and remembered how this dead man had dreamed of becoming president of all Mexico. But he had one weakness. Women. And one he had betrayed him for a pouch of federal gold.

He faced southward, observing a long smear of risen dust above the barren plain. That would be the federal cavalry coming to do the job it had failed to accomplish last night at San Sebastian.

It was characteristic of Jim Rimbaud that he did not glance at Durango again. The smoky years had given him a gambler's fatalism. Durango was dead. Finished. And so was his fabulous dream of driving Porfirio Diaz from the palacio nacional.

There had been some chance of winning the revolution while Durango lived, but now there was no chance at all.

Calculating the distance between this dry river bed and the oncoming riders, Rimbaud decided that it was not more than three miles. A matter of minutes. A man couldn't make a stand here. Nor anywhere this side of the border hills. Rimbaud plodded over to the horses and gave the down-headed animals a squint-eyed appraisal. There seemed little choice between them, for they were both close to being fundered.

"Wore out," Rimbaud muttered, "like me."

Moving without hurry, Rimbaud untied Durango's saddles and transferred them to his rat-tailed roan gelding. The cavalry, he supposed, had obtained fresh horses from some friendly hacienda this morning. There would be no chance of the roan's outrunning them to the border hills, which were upwards of fifteen miles away. Yet, because he possessed a thorough

knowledge of his pursuers, Rimbaud retained a cynical confidence. The power of gringo gold was great in Mexico. It might buy him the time he needed to reach those hills.

So thinking, Rimbaud rode north prodding the reluctant roan to a slow trot. Presently he opened the flap of a saddlebag and brought out a handful of gold pieces—American double eagles, which in Mexico were worth five times their face value.

He dropped one to the ground, and seeing how brightly it shone in the sunlight, understood the temptation it would be to poorly paid soldiers. He tossed a gold piece to the left of the roan's tracks and another to the right then slipped two more farther out on each side.

Cero de Libertad, Durango had called it; gold for the liberation. A small fortune of it, Jim Rimbaud smiled thinly, hoping that the double eagles would last long enough to liberate a gringo drifter whose sole ambition was to reach Arizona Territory alive.

Rimbaud looked back, curious to know how close the cavalry was. The group had pulled up. One man was already on the ground. Now another. They were all quitting their saddles!

Jim Rimbaud loosed a gusty sigh. "Oro de Libertad," he breathed. "For a time then, while he kept the roan to a shuffling trot, Rimbaud watched his back trail. The cavalry was farther off each time he looked, the lead riders stopping to pick up gold pieces while rear ones raced on to the next nest of glittering double eagles.

"Like hogs hunting acorns," Rimbaud mused derisively, and flung another handful, spreading the gold of liberation wide as a man sowing seed on fertile ground.

Rimbaud tilted the brim of his dust-peppered hat low over his aching eyes. He contemplated the miles at nine or ten. There was a spring due north on the southern slope; Smuggler's Well, they called it. And the town of Junction lay a few miles beyond the divide in Quadrille Basin. He had once spent a month in Junction, recovering from a bullet-slashed tendon in his left leg. Thinking back to that occasion, Rimbaud tallied the date and was surprised that it had been scarcely two years ago. He had done a lot of drifting since then.

"Too much," he muttered, and saw himself for what he was: a cynical drifter disillusioned by lost causes. At twenty-eight his chief possessions were a Buntline model revolver and a worn-out horse. That, plus a puckered scar where a bullet had gouged his right cheek, and another scar on his thigh was what ten years of free-lance fighting had got him.

Softly, in a way of a man making a solemn vow, Rimbaud said, "I've had enough, by God. More than plenty."

(To Be Continued)



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School Vacations at Woodburn Slated

Woodburn — Woodburn public schools will be closed Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, March 16, 17 and 18, to permit teachers to attend the Oregon Education association convention in Portland. Classes will be resumed Thursday, March 19.

St. Luke's parochial school will not take a vacation while the public schools are closed but will have a spring vacation April 6 and 7.

The North Marion high school will be closed all next week for spring vacation, re-opening on March 23.