

THE
BUNTLINE
SPECIAL



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MIKE RESNICK

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A WEIRD
WEST TALE



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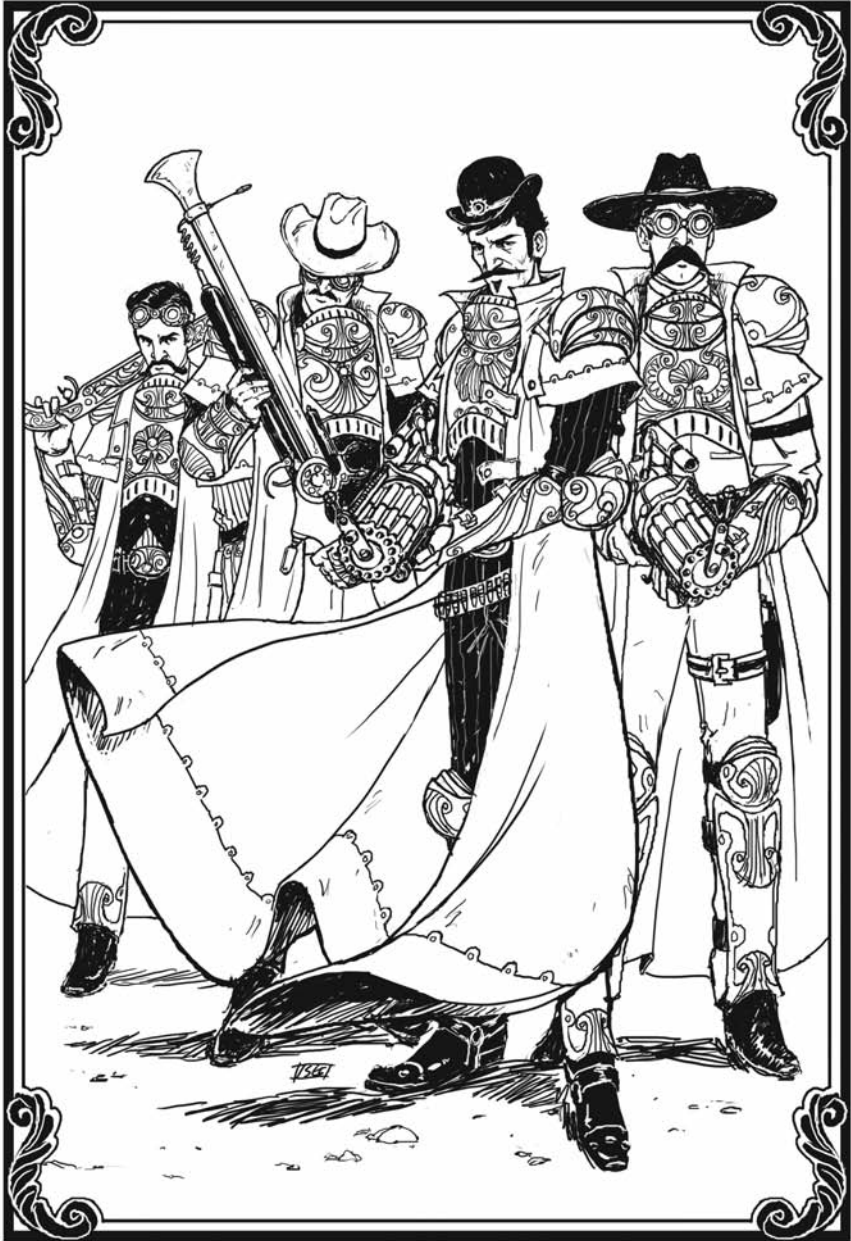
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To Carol, as always,

and to my good friend
(and a fine writer)
Kevin J. Anderson.





PROLOGUE

From the September 7, 1881, issue of the Tombstone Epitaph

THE BRIGHTEST LITTLE TOWN IN THE WEST
BY JOHN P. CLUM, PUBLISHER

TODAY MARKS ONE FULL YEAR since Tombstone became the first city, not just in America but in the world, to be illuminated by artificial electric light, thanks to our two resident geniuses, Thomas Alva Edison and Ned Buntline. The Epitaph thinks it's time to salute these two gentlemen, without whom life in our fair city would certainly be less bright.

Ned Buntline moved to Tombstone from Dodge City three years ago, and since that time he has invented a type of brass that cannot be penetrated by bullets. Most of the outlying ranch houses and barns are now covered with this remarkable material, and of course those who live in town daily pass buildings constructed of Mr. Buntline's brass, which was also used in the construction of our lovely and ornate lampposts.

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Mr. Buntline invited his friend, Mr. Edison, to immigrate to Tombstone exactly one year ago today, and it is Mr. Edison who is responsible for the harnessing of electricity to power not only the streetlights, but also the Tombstone Territory Stage, which has since been renamed the Bunt Line. Remarkably it is now impervious to attack by highwaymen or Indians.

Perhaps the pair's most remarkable creation is Mr. Edison's artificial arm. The original had to be amputated after it was shattered by a bullet during a failed assassination attempt, and Mr. Buntline, under Mr. Edison's direction, crafted the appendage that is now attached to Mr. Edison's shoulder. According to Mr. Edison, it is stronger and works better than the original—and of course is immune to pain. This principle has since been used by Mr. Buntline in other experiments, while Mr. Edison has just completed work on the phonograph and is working on something we have not yet seen which he calls the "telephone."

When asked what they plan to create next, Mr. Buntline merely shrugged and said, "The sky's the limit."

Mr. Edison then added, only half smiling, "There's no reason why it should be. Leonardo didn't accept that, so why should we?"

Whatever they come up with next, Tombstone is proud to have it invented right here. Happy first anniversary, Mr. Edison!

FIGHT AT THE ORIENTAL

There was another disturbance at the Oriental Saloon last night. No shots were fired, and according to Marshal Virgil Earp, both Curly Bill Brocius and One-Armed Kelly will be spending the next forty-eight hours as guests of the county jail, as the city jail is currently being outfitted with Mr. Buntline's brass bars.

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LOCAL LADIES PROTEST

Sheriff Johnny Behan's office has received a petition signed by seventeen local ladies demanding that Mr. Buntline cease and desist certain unspecified experimental work. According to Sheriff Behan, Mr. Buntline has broken no laws, and he is dismissing the petition. Mrs. Eleanor Grimson has told the Epitaph that if Mr. Buntline continues his activities, her group plans to picket his office.

CLANTONS BEAT CHARGE

In a trial that lasted less than fifteen minutes, all charges were dropped against Ike, Fin, and William Clanton, who had been arrested for stealing horses and cattle. The case was dismissed when none of the prosecution's witnesses showed up to testify.

CLAIMS AND MINES

Three new silver mines were opened this week, and claims were filed for fourteen more at the Assay Office.

ANOTHER TRAGEDY IN THE COUNTY

Morgan Earp reports that, acting on a tip from a cowboy who was looking for strays, he found the burned remains of a covered wagon at the eastern end of Cochise County. There were no survivors. It is assumed they were killed for their horses by local Apaches. As Geronimo has never declared war on Tombstone, it is likely that they were renegades who acted independently.

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SOCIAL NEWS

Actress Josephine Marcus, a close friend of Sheriff Beban, has announced her intention to remain in Tombstone and become a resident here when the rest of her theater company moves on to California next week. Miss Marcus is, we believe, the first person of the Jewish faith ever to live in Tombstone, and we welcome her.



1.

THE TALL, LEAN MAN with the thick, droopy mustache entered the saloon and looked past the faro dealers and poker players, past the portrait of Lillie Langtry, until his gaze fell upon a well-dressed lone man seated at the side of the room. The man smiled and waved a hand. The tall man, oblivious to the stares and whispers of the patrons, walked over.

“Mr. Earp?” said the seated man, and the newcomer nodded. “I’m so glad you agreed to come.”

Wyatt Earp seated himself, filled an empty glass with whiskey from the open bottle in the middle of the table, took a swallow, and wiped his mouth off with the cuff of his black jacket.

“All right,” he said. “You sent for me, Mr. McCarthy. You do the talking.”

The man extended a hand. “I’m pleased to meet you,” said McCarthy. “Your reputation precedes you, and of course your brother has informed me of your current activities.”

“Which brother?” asked Earp. “I’ve got a lot of them.”

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“Virgil,” answered McCarthy. “He’s a good man.”

“I notice you didn’t send for *him*.”

McCarthy smiled. “I’m sure all his time is taken up with being deputy marshal of Tombstone.”

“He keeps busy,” said Earp, not returning the smile. “Now suppose you tell me what this is all about, Mr. McCarthy.”

“Call me Silas.”

“After I find out why I’m here, Mr. McCarthy.”

McCarthy looked around the saloon. “Shall we go outside?” he said. “I’d prefer not to be overheard.”

Earp shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

They got up from the table, walked through the swinging doors, and out into the street of Deadwood, Colorado.

“That’s a magnificent animal,” said McCarthy, gesturing to a roan that was tied to the hitching post in front of the saloon. “He wasn’t there when I arrived. Yours?”

Earp shook his head. “We don’t have much use for horses in Tombstone, not anymore.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard about that.”

“I suppose word gets out.”

“Chilly, isn’t it?” said McCarthy, as they turned a corner and began walking down a side street.

“I’ve seen worse,” replied Earp. He stopped and turned to McCarthy. “I’ve come a long way at your request, Mr. McCarthy,” he said. “I’m hungry, and I’m tired, and I’ve got a blister on my left foot, and I’ll be damned if I’m inclined to walk all around town until you’re sure no one can hear your voice or read your lips, so why don’t you just stand still and tell me what’s on your mind?”

McCarthy nodded. “Might as well. It’s a legitimate request.” He took one last look around. “Mr. Earp, your country needs your help.”

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"I was born too late for the War between the States, and I'm not aware that we're fighting another one," said Earp.

"You're wrong," said McCarthy adamantly.

Earp looked mildly surprised. "England? France? Maybe Mexico?"

McCarthy shook his head.

"I'm not real good at guessing games, Mr. McCarthy," said Earp.

McCarthy studied him silently for a long moment, and then spoke. "Why do you think the United States ends at the Mississippi River?"

Earp shrugged again. "Nothing much on this side of it. Couple of gold and silver mines, a few ranches, maybe a couple of hundred settlements, and a bunch of Indians."

"It's the Indians that we're at war with."

"Dumb," said Earp firmly. "You go to war with the Apaches and the rest, you're going to lose. They'll kill you all."

"I notice they let *you* live," noted McCarthy.

"I'm not at war with them," answered Earp. He pulled out a tobacco pouch and began rolling a cigarette. "Tombstone is a silver-mining town, and they have no interest in silver. We haven't got anything they want, and they haven't got anything *we* want."

"Well, they have something the United States wants," said McCarthy, swatting a fly away from his face.

"What?" said Earp, lighting the cigarette.

"The Western half of the continent, of course."

"Why?"

"It's our destiny to reach the Pacific Ocean," said McCarthy with absolute conviction.

"I've heard that manifest destiny crap before," said Earp. "If you want all that land, why don't you just buy it from them?"

"We haven't bought one square inch of the United States!" snapped McCarthy. "We're not about to start."

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“Seems to me you bought New York from the Indians. Twenty-four dollars, wasn’t it?”

“That was a totally different situation,” said McCarthy defensively. “The government of the United States didn’t do that, because there *was* no United States at the time.”

“Okay, it’s your destiny to own all the land from one ocean to the next,” said Earp. “Good luck taking it from them.”

“That’s where you come in, Mr. Earp.”

Earp looked amused. “You think *I’m* going to scare the Apaches and Sioux and Cheyenne and the Western tribes into giving you their land and hightailing it to Canada or Mexico?”

McCarthy returned the smile. “That was never our intention.”

“Well, then?”

“Let me explain. The reason that we stopped our expansion at the Mississippi was not that the Indian armies were too much for us. No, Mr. Earp, we defeated the British, and we can defeat the Indians, tribe by tribe or all together, on a field of battle.” He grimaced. “But what we can’t do is defeat the magic practiced by the medicine men of the Western tribes. We may have the cannon and the Gatling gun, but the Southern Cheyenne have got Hook Nose, and Goyathlay of your local Apaches is almost as powerful.”

Earp frowned. “Goyathlay?”

“You know him as Geronimo,” said McCarthy. “Those two, and scores of less well-known medicine men, have used their powers to keep us on our side of the Mississippi.”

“You’re wrong,” said Earp. “They haven’t kept me and my brothers there, or a hell of a lot of other men.”

“You’re allowed in the West on sufferance,” continued McCarthy. “You represent no threat to them. You don’t make war on them, you don’t hunt the game they need for food, and while there’s not much

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water there's enough for them and the small handful of whites they allow to live in their territories."

"They let more than white men come out here," noted Earp. "Damned near every tribe has got an escaped or freed slave as a translator. That way they don't have to learn our language, and we don't have to learn theirs." He paused. "Okay, so now you've explained why the United States stopped at the Mississippi, but you still haven't told me what you want of me. I hope you don't think I'm about to wage a one-man war against the Apaches."

"No, of course not," said McCarthy. "We're taking steps to counteract their magic."

"Then why the hell did I travel all the way from Tombstone to Deadwood?" demanded Earp irritably.

"You and your brothers own the Oriental Saloon in Tombstone, do you not?"

"Two of them."

McCarthy seemed surprised. "Two saloons?"

"Two of my brothers: Virgil and Morgan. We'll be sending for James and Warren when the saloon's a little more prosperous."

"What would you say if I offered to let you keep running the Oriental while you and your brothers work for me, and paid you double whatever it makes, month in and month out?"

"I'd ask who you wanted me to kill—Geronimo or President Garfield?"

McCarthy uttered an amused chuckle. "I hope you won't have to kill anyone."

There was a momentary silence. Finally Earp said: "I'm waiting."

"First I want your agreement that anything I tell you will be kept confidential."

"It's been nice knowing you, Mr. McCarthy," said Earp, starting to walk back toward the saloon.

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“*Wait!*” cried McCarthy.

Earp stopped and turned. “I don’t make blind promises, Mr. McCarthy. I probably won’t tell anyone what you want to tell me, but I won’t promise it until I know what it is.”

McCarthy considered the statement. “Fair enough,” he said at last. “What do you think of Tombstone?”

Earp looked puzzled. “I like it fine. Certainly better than Dodge or Wichita.”

“As well you should. You know, New York’s and Boston’s streets are still illuminated by gas, and our main form of transportation is by foot: either our two or our horses’ four.”

Earp stared at him. “This has got something to do with Tom Edison, right?”

“He is the most brilliant scientific mind the country has yet produced. Ben Franklin proved there was awesome power in electricity, but it took Thomas Edison to harness it. The potential in this electricity of his is limitless. Yes, Mr. Earp, this has got *everything* to do with Thomas Edison. Why do you think he moved to Tombstone? He could make ten times the money in New York or Baltimore.” McCarthy didn’t wait for a reply. “He’s in Tombstone because we paid him to go there, to secretly study the medicine men and see what he could concoct to counteract their magic.”

“You want me and my brothers to protect him,” said Earp. It wasn’t a question.

“That’s right. Outside of Sheriff Behan, whose reputation is, shall we say, *questionable*, you’re just about all the law there is out there. I know how you cleaned up the criminal elements in Dodge and Wichita, and Virgil was just as successful in Prescott.”

“You’ve got to understand,” said Earp. “Virgil is the Tombstone Territory marshal. We don’t have any US marshals out here. His

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authority isn't very well defined; the mine owners invented the position because Behan still has two years to serve and nobody trusts him. The truth of the matter is that Virgil's more of a private lawman than a public one."

"Details," said McCarthy impatiently. "You've *got* to protect Edison!"

"Against who?"

McCarthy shrugged helplessly. "We have no idea. As more and more whites have settled in the West, some of the tribes have started to feel threatened. We've kept it quiet, but five towns have been destroyed, burned to the ground, every citizen slaughtered. Tombstone's getting to be a popular destination, thanks to its silver strike—"

"And to Edison and Buntline's improvements," interjected Earp.

"That, too," agreed McCarthy. "Mr. Earp, we *can't* lose Thomas Edison. He is our best hope, maybe our only hope, of fulfilling America's destiny. This land was put here for us, and nothing is going to keep it from us."

"And you don't know who's planning to kill him, or even if anyone is?" said Earp.

"We're hearing rumors," said McCarthy. "We can't pinpoint them, but Edison's too important for us to ignore them. It will be your job to protect him. It could be the Indians, or a jealous rival, or an entrepreneur who wants to steal his secrets and get rich off them. It could be a hired killer, working in the employ of any of those I just named. We don't know who will try, just that *someone* will, and you have to prevent it."

"That's a tall order, Mr. McCarthy."

"I know. To that end, I've contacted William Masterson."

Earp frowned. "William Masterson?" he repeated, puzzled.

"The two of you brought law and order to Dodge City."

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Suddenly Earp smiled. "You mean Bat Masterson."

"I guess I do," said McCarthy. "At any rate, he has accepted our offer and is on his way to Tombstone even as we speak."

"It'll be good to work with him again," said Earp. "You couldn't ask for a better lawman."

"Well, that's four lawmen—you, your two brothers, and Masterson," said McCarthy. "Hopefully that will prove sufficient against any threat that may arise."

"I need one more," said Earp.

"Another lawman?"

Earp smiled grimly and shook his head.

"A medicine man from a friendly tribe, perhaps?"

"This man makes his own medicine—with his gun."

"Is he willing to face death for you?"

"He looks death in the eye every morning," said Earp.

"Every morning?" repeated McCarthy, puzzled.

"When he looks into the mirror."