

A Price for Justice

by Joseph Patterson

I

Adrenaline pumped, legs dashing over uneven ground.

Gunshots rang out, the constant din piercing and dulling senses as it echoed in the trees.

Red flashes plagued vision, the scent of decay, iron, and blood filling flared nostrils.

A surreal sense of pleasure suddenly suffused the body, a suc-cor unmatched by any mere chemical of man.

Fear and anxiety began to rise faster than pleasure could keep up.

His legs stopped working.

His eyes went wide.

He hit the dirt hard.

The trees stretched infinitely towards a bright sky above.

Voices echoed victorious cheers.

The world was silent, cold, and uncaring.

His eyes went dark.

* * *

Henry was suddenly jolted back into consciousness as the train shook out an uneven bend in the rails. His vision had been painted with blue hues by the sun's glare on his eyelids, creating an unnatural and alien environment. He quickly blinked the eerie dream from them and remembered the world around him. He was still in the train car, not in some forest, and it certainly hadn't been blue-toned when he had drifted off. A phantom pain rolled in his right shoulder, perhaps from the vision but more likely the hardwood bench that had left his back stiff and shoulder numb.

He took stock of himself and his belongings. His bag was still unmolested next to him. His coat hadn't been tossed, as his cigarillo box and pocket watch were still where he had left them. The familiar weight of his service revolver still tugged at his belt at his side.

Everything was in order.

Order...

His orders!

Panic set in again as he glanced at the floor with a sigh of relief. A few seconds later, the freshly unsealed envelope was safely back into his hands. He chided himself for thinking the worse, chalking it up to the strange dream that left gunshots echoing in his ears. It had been a long trip down from the capital and other than the gentle roar of the wind and the constant explosion of fire and steam at the front of the lumbering machine, the inside of the train car was as quiet, empty, and secure as could be expected. Though, one could never be too careful about these matters.

He released a long-drawn-out sigh, watching the ancient oaks of the southern temperate forest whiz by for a moment as he fumbled for the metal case in his jacket pocket. Tobacco would hopefully allow him to relax, or at least fully rouse himself from the dream.

Henry considered that the scenery had changed somewhat since he had dozed off and that new growth had been added to the tree line. A mixture of scraggly sand pines, lanky palm trees and venerable cypress had mixed in with the thick oak canopy—a far different sight from the birch forests and grassy plains that he was accustomed to.

In a well-practiced gesture, he pulled a pre-rolled cigarillo from the metal box and struck a match to rouse it to life. A deep inhalation later, and all was starting to become right in the world. Gently, he shifted a sliding window open to freshen the air of the cabin.

The air was certainly cooler than it had been at midday, but it still seemed to cling to him like the air of a dank basement. The

smell a rotting miasma of leaves mixed with the acrid ash of the steam engine poorly, but the tobacco smoke would soon prevent his nose from caring. Soon pale gray puffs were rushing out the window of the cabin, a much smaller smokestack joining up with the train's constant belching.

Henry rubbed his head lightly as he considered the countryside. The sun was low and just beginning to take on a red hue. From the brief flashes of orange and red on the forest floor near the train, he could pick out steadily widening pools of water between the forest scrub and bark. The tall cypress trees were beginning to overtake the rest of the forest.

There were no farmlands here, the land was too swampy and warm for the traditional crops that typically lined the sides of the railroad between cities. These lands were mostly abandoned to nature though there were plenty of trappers, hunters, and frontier-men that still worked the bogs as their forefathers had for generations before them. He knew from the documents nearby that he was likely nearing his next-to-last stop at the headwaters of the Alehani River.

As if on cue, the train's momentum seemed to shift and slow as it climbed onto a bridge. The forest soon seemed to give way to a long and wide swath of flooded prairie lands stretching for quite a few miles in multiple directions. Soon there were no trees to look at. They had entirely been replaced by small shrubs, pools of water, reedy grass, strange gangly birds, and the nearby raised road that ran parallel to the tracks

Henry knew from his geography lessons that there was likely an underground spring or two that fed the marshy grassland, alongside the regular thunderheads that pounded across the land from inland and offshore. The waters here would coalesce further down the prairie until they were swallowed back into the cypress forest that dotted the land stretching all the way down the shoreline. From the shelter of the trees, the river would begin a painstakingly slow, twisting, and gently rolling journey further south towards Henry's destination: the Port of Alehani City—the capital of the United Republics of Amaria's southern-

most Republic.

The Port-City was rather famously known as “Sunset City” for the vibrant red hues that painted the skies during twilight. The place to be at sundown was the Sunset Bridge overlooking the Alehani River as it rolled into the bay—a romantic place that tourists even from the northern republics came to propose to their would-be spouses and young local couples dared to be bold enough to steal a kiss.

He couldn't help but feel a smile climb to his lips. In a past life, he had promised a young girl that he would take her there someday. Though that was before he knew he had the Gift and been whisked away to the capital.

Now he was making the journey alone. Even from the rocking train, Henry had to admit that the skyline had the making of something to inspire and admire— though he was still far from his destination.

A solitary cloud, thundering and pouring fury on the distant horizon of the flooded grassland offered a brief reprieve from the sun's glare, and Henry blinked as he seemed to immediately lock eyes on a wild pig. He barely had time to register the strange sight—a patient pig waiting like a carriage for the train to pass at a road crossing. Before he could confirm that it hadn't been his imagination, it was gone from his line of sight and there was no one in the car to ask if they had also seen it.

The vision of the pig stuck in his mind for more than a few moments. There was almost something familiar about it.

Shaking his head, Henry flicked the remains of his cigarillo through the window and slid it closed as the train pulled back into the cypress forest. Putting his back to the window, he pulled the previously sealed envelope into his gloved hands, considering the contents in his mind for several moments before another jolt in the train urged him to action.

As gingerly as could be, he reached in and pulled out a well-maintained collection of official looking documents, his orders from the Magisteria.

This was to be his first position after being officially appointed to the rank of Conciliator, and his future success was riding on the next five years of his life. Alehani City had not been his first choice of places to go, however, and the warm lands of the southern reaches of the Republic were as foreign of a place to be posted as possible.

His first orders had seemed almost deliberately vague to him, to the point of some measure of suspicion on his part. Beneath the usual fanfare and official letterhead, a simple two bullets had been stamped out by typewriter:

1. *Assume post of Conciliator for Alehani District of United Republics of Amaria. (Per Title 5, Section 2304 of URA Law Code 662, Designated Republic Sector 12)*
2. *Document and report all findings per standard procedure (MD I-2 Rev H)*

The other items were less vague but of equal importance. A deed for a house within the city proper that presumably came with his appointment, alongside a personal invitation from the Prelate for the city to visit the Twilight Cathedral and another personal invitation from the Alehani Assembly to visit the Republic's local house of governance. There was something else amongst the letters that had given him pause, however.

His eyes drifted over the now-familiar cursive script of his predecessor written on a yellowed piece of parchment paper.

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to you, my replacement, to inform you of a grave oversight on my part. I have left unfinished business in Blackwater Township—well within the jurisdiction of your new station. You will find this town small, rural, rustic, and likely not to your taste or predilections. There is a man named Gustavo Barlow that you must speak with before continuing to Alehani City. All will be made clear by him. He is well-known within the Township, and you will have no issue finding him.

*Best regards,
Roger Vrakas*

Henry remembered receiving a sour stomach the first time he had read the note, the irritation of unfinished business a painful reminder that not all his compatriots were as steadfast in their service as he deigned think of himself. Compelled by a sense of duty alone, he would make the stop at Blackwater Station and find Gustavo Barlow.

In truth though, he feared that this might be some sort of unavoidable loyalty test by the Magisteria. It was unusual for a Conciliator to leave unfinished business at their post before exiting, though perhaps time had not allowed for a quick resolution.

There was strange talk in the Capital before he had received his orders, as well as something almost impersonal about how he had received them. Rumors that the Unified Republic Assembly had passed some sort of resolution demanding the creation of a new judicial body had been spreading—a direct challenge to the authority of the Magisteria.

Perhaps that was why his predecessor had been replaced quickly and abruptly by a young greenhorn? Politics often necessitated experienced men.

Justice has a price.

Henry considered the first tenet of his post carefully in his head. A great responsibility was awaiting him, and it was growing closer with every blackened railroad tie added to his rearview. He was a Conciliator now, not an initiate, and that meant there was no room for mistakes or oversights. Life and death would be in his hands on more than one occasion.

In the past, it had been said that the Spark of Creation had been passed by God to the First Men, who used it to forge the first Republic and the established the Magisteria. The Conciliators were supposed to be the primary bearers of that spark—the branch that ensured justice was honest, fair and well thought out. Not so long ago, the men of his station were considered honorable and trustworthy to a fault. However, recent times had

forced the Magisteria and the Conciliators to change.

On more occasions than one during his training, he had felt more like an enforcer or a glorified hitman than a dispenser of “justice.” He hoped now that this was a chance to set himself apart and back on the path that he knew to be correct. The same path that had inspired and made him proud of his heritage. Perhaps a path that would restore a bit of honor and good name to his station.

Fortunately, he understood this was to be an uphill battle and had prepared extensively to try and hold his moral fortitude and avoid the Darkening of his soul at any cost.

Unfortunately for him, he had been assigned to an area that he had no affinity or familiarity with. The foreign city sprawl built out of the vast and flat swamplands of the Alehani river represented a place just about as far from his home as possible.

He slid the documents back into the envelope as the steam engine whistled out a cloud of pale white smoke to alert some unknown crossing ahead.

Henry reached into his pocket and checked his watch, mindful that the summer days were slowly ticking away one by one. Though one could hardly judge by the daylight still left, it was nearly 7PM and his stomach groaned in hungry protest.

It wouldn't be much further to the station at Blackwater, he thought.

From there he would hopefully be able to get a warm meal and a bed for the night before meeting Gus Barlow—though his initial expectations were bound to be thoroughly trampled if the tone of his predecessor was to be taken seriously.

II

Gustavo Barlow cut a striking appearance perched in his comfortable chair on the other side of a fine oak desk that formed the center piece of his home office. The weathered lines of his face, engrained on the well-tanned skin of a southern native, stood in stark contrast to his sharp blue eyes and snow-white hair. He kept it short, cleanly managed, and parted neatly towards his left side. This was a style typical in the southern reaches of the Republic where heat and humidity were ubiquitous. Such a style was almost a necessity alongside a freshly shaven face. He wore some combination of his station's uniformed jacket's upper half and a day laborer's trousers—perhaps a privilege that had been extended to his more rural office, but more than likely a deliberate gesture.

Despite this more rustic and relaxed look on the older gentleman, Henry couldn't help but think that his manner of dressing seemed more immaculate than his own dress uniform locked away in a trunk at the bed and breakfast closest to the rail station. There wasn't a spec of dirt, dust, or crumb anywhere near him. The man on the other side of the desk was clearly of the blood of the First Men, the Republic's founding stock, but was like most of the other denizens of Blackwater Township as far as Henry could tell. The First Men of the south were almost a distinct group to themselves, and the man's name given name seemed to hint at some distant mixed heritage with the Alehani natives.

Henry couldn't help but feel somewhat underdressed and underprepared as the man promptly shoved the morning paper to a corner of his spartanly decorated desk and stood up to shake his hand, very firmly. There was hardly a break in his movements, any sign of advancing age held only in his wrinkles and hair. A smile eagerly spread across the stranger's face and Henry

couldn't help himself from reflecting it back.

"Sheriff Barlow at your service, Conciliator. I've been expecting you. Please, I'd be rightly insulted if you didn't take a seat and make yourself comfortable." The Sheriff drawled in a dialect distinct to the southlands of the Republic, but Henry followed his words easily enough.

"Thank you, Sheriff. As you seem to already know, I am the new Conciliator for this district, Henry Goodal. I am honored to meet your acquaintance, sir," Henry managed as he settled into one of the chairs in front of him. The level of comfort in the cushion took him by surprise for a moment, before he remembered himself. "I must admit though, I am here on business."

"That can wait! You've had breakfast, right? Can either my wife or I get you something to drink or eat? Anything at all. My house is your house. It isn't every day that a Conciliator comes and stops in at Blackwater, after all. I can't have any of you young Capital boys thinking we have no hospitality out here."

"N-no, sir, I've eaten. It's no trouble," Henry stumbled as his stomach seemed to let out a quiet protest.

"You're sure?" The Sheriff considered him carefully for a long moment.

Henry nodded affirmation that he was fine.

"Very well, Conciliator, y'know y'self best, I'm sure," the beaming Sheriff, still the picture of kindness and gracious rural authority, settled back into his chair. The careful and well-practiced gaze of the man looked him over slowly. "Why've you come to Blackwater if it isn't to partake in our hospitality, Conciliator?"

"Well, Sheriff, it's something of a complication." Henry reached into the side pocket of his coat, unfurling the yellowed parchment paper of the previous Conciliator gently. His eyes watched the Sheriff closely as he explained the note. "My predecessor, Roger Vrakas, left me a message saying that he regretfully left unfinished business with you here in Blackwater Township. I'm afraid that he didn't describe what that business actually entailed."

Barlow seemed to notice his probing gaze, but if he cared that Henry was trying to analyze his reaction, he didn't show any sign of caring beyond amusement. Indeed, if anything, his infectious smile grew somewhat impossibly wider.

"Ol' Roger said we had unfinished, did he? Hah!"

"I take it that you know what he's referring to, then?"

"Oh yes, I know exactly what ol' Roger has cooked up." Barlow's smile grew sly as he leaned forward across the desk, his own eyes probing back at Henry for his reaction to his next words. "You're not going to like it though." The Sheriff's smile seemed to fade away as instantly as he had conjured it as his tone became gravely serious. "I'll tell you about this unfinished business, but if ye' don't mind I'll ask y'some questions of my own."

Henry considered a moment, reflecting Barlow's suddenly change in demeanor back at him. His mind raced as he contemplated the meaning. It seemed that both men knew that they were now engaged in something else entirely. It was all but confirmed to Henry at this point, this was certainly some sort of test as he had suspected. Though this test was likely not one that the Magisteria had constructed, but one that Conciliator Vrakas had cooked up with Barlow before leaving.

His mind raced—that meant a few things. First, Barlow knew something that would likely impact his ability to do his job. What that was, he could only guess at. Only time would tell. Second, Vrakas had obviously considered the Sheriff to be trustworthy to perform this task. That meant the older gentleman might prove to be a valuable ally to Henry, though he would likely be relaying and reporting his actions on to his predecessor via letter. Of course, he would need to pass the man's test before any of these revelations would even start to matter. He considered his next words carefully.

"Do you mind if I smoke, Sheriff?"

Barlow pursed his lips, shaking his head as he pushed a glass ash tray towards Henry.

"I'll answer any questions you might have, Sheriff. Of course, I'll have some questions of my own for you, if you don't mind."

Henry procured a thin cigarillo from his case, and Barlow politely shifted a matchbook across the desk towards him without looking away.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, Conciliator. We’re to be working together iff’n you’ve got business in Blackwater Township that ain’t this business besides.”

Henry struck a match, rousing the cigarillo to life with a nod as he looked Barlow in the eyes. “Ask away.”

Barlow’s smile returned, but it was now sly. “What kind of man would you say you are, Conciliator?”

Henry frowned at the opening salvo, and quickly corrected his expression too little too late. “Bit of a loaded question, don’t you think?”

Barlow continued to eye him slyly.

“I hope you don’t mind if I take a moment to consider that. A few of my good friends in the capital would probably just answer immediately what comes to mind, but I suppose I’m more the sort to ramble on for a few moments instead.”

“I take no offense, Conciliator. My wife tells me I’m a bit of a rambler myself,” the Sheriff chuckled in a good-natured fashion. “I assume that ain’t your answer, though.”

“Indeed not, Sheriff. The appointment to Conciliator has always been a great responsibility—take no insult by this, but you’re certainly quite a bit older than I am, and perhaps things are different down here—I am sure you can remember a time when it seemed like justice was an honest and honorable affair. I’d like to think that I’m the sort of man who wishes to see that again. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about what it means to be a Conciliator, and what it means to be a servant of the Republic, so I suppose I’m also the sort of man who also does that. You’ll pardon me, but I don’t actually know if that answers your question or not.”

“Y’say you’ve thought about it a lot, but have you thought about what it takes to make that happen?”

“What do you mean?” Henry blinked at Barlow.

“Well, you’re a Conciliator now, Conciliator—not some enforcer or soldier just following orders. Do you know what you’re going to do to restore justice to be an’ honest and honorable affair?” Barlow looked over him in some measure of sympathy. “Ah—I don’t mean to be hard on ya’, but I’ve noticed something about y’young folk—and don’t take no insult to this. I see it all the time in the boys in town, in the work groups, and even in the young bloods gathering at Church. Y’all have good ideas and want to do lots of good things, things that sound nice in your heads. They’re usually mighty fine ideas, but at the end of the day you don’t know what actions you will take to make them good things happen.”

Henry felt somewhat dumbfounded as he puffed on his cigarillo, considering the Sheriff’s words for a few long moments. “I—...Well, I suppose if I’m being honest with you Sheriff, I guess I hadn’t thought too hard on the specifics, I haven’t actually taken the office yet.”

“Don’t feel bad, Conciliator. I’ve lived my whole life in Blackwater, seen more than ten Conciliators. Most of them don’t think about it. Fortunately for you, you’ve got a long time to figure that part out—longer than I’ve got left on this world anyway! So, consider this. You’re going to be taking office and I’m sure you’ll have lots of things to be thinking about. Make sure you put some thought into what you’ll be doing to make things more honest and honorable first. Then, you know, do them!

It’s plenty good to have thoughts and ideas, but if you don’t do anything then they don’t amount to much.” Barlow gave a hearty chuckle. “Of course, maybe ol’ Roger rubbed off on me a bit, I don’t usually go out and give words like these to just anyone. I haven’t decided if you’ve got a good head on your shoulders yet though and I haven’t quite finished my questions either.”

Henry rubbed at his face slowly, feeling a bit sobered as he took another puff from his cigarillo. Barlow’s words certainly stung a bit more than he was expecting, and a nagging fear was now tugging at his stomach.

“I’ll take your advice to heart, Sheriff, and I appreciate it.

You'll forgive me if I say that I hope your next question isn't quite so thought-provoking, though?"

"Afraid I can forgive you, but that won't change my next question." Barlow smiled warmly once more, his eyes shining with mischief. "How many other folks were on that train with you, Conciliator?"

Henry was relieved at a seemingly more mundane question and mused for a few moments as he took stock, "my train car was empty but there were a few families here and there that got on and off the other cars, at least one other man got off with me here."

Barlow nodded a few times, warm smile still present "And ye' didn't think there was anything...odd about that?"

"Well, no, not really."

"You know what they do down here in Alehani, right?"

"Imports and exports, mining, agriculture. At least, that's what I remember from the newspapers."

"Not wrong, Conciliator. Not wrong. Those are all jobs that require a certain amount of folks though, the right kind of folks. Do you know how many citizens are in the Alehani District you're to be overseeing?"

"About two million or so?"

The Sheriff gave another hearty chuckle. "That's folks like you or me. Two million of the First Men, proper Republic Citizens. Hard working folk. The population of your city you'll be overseeing is two million, but that city isn't the whole district. You'll be having a lot of other types of folks there."

"What do you mean, other types of folks?" Henry's brow furrowed in partial confusion. "I know there are the natives, but I thought most of them had died out or been granted citizenship?"

"You won't believe me if I tell you, you'll have to see for yourself. I will say this though, they aren't citizens, and they definitely aren't folks like you or I." Barlow looked at him with a measure of sympathy.

Henry couldn't help but shake his head, wondering what the suddenly forlorn Barlow could possibly mean. "Just what sort of

a situation are they sending me into, Sheriff?"

"I'm not going to lie to you, son. It's not great. Alehani isn't the city it was fifty years ago. Heck, it ain't the city it was ten years ago anymore. There are some..." Barlow tongued his cheek, searching for the correct words. "Different folk in Alehani Assembly, and they have a great deal of power with the Governor proper. Like I said, you're going to have to see for yourself. Once you do, you can come on back here and I'll tell you more."

More questions than answers shook through Henry's mind, things had seemed so simple just a few hours before. Now, things seemed different, more muddled. It seemed that he had gained an ally in Sheriff Barlow, but it was clear to him that the situation that he was about to enter was so different than what he expected that there would be no amount of preparation that would help. He took a long drag off his cigarillo before tapping ash from the end into the Sheriff's desk tray.

"I knew that Alehani was a bit of a frontier town compared to the Capitol, but you say that there are different folk in charge of this Republic's Assembly and that they wield power over the Governor. How am I supposed to interpret this as anything but treason?" Henry pondered aloud as he took another long puff of his cigarillo. Something particularly dark suddenly dawned on him. "The Magisteria already knows. That's why Vrakas didn't express this through the proper channels."

"They know, all right," Barlow nodded sympathetically.

Henry could read between the lines plainly enough. Vrakas had been removed from his position because he knew too much about what was going on. However, that couldn't be all the story—surely the Magisteria wouldn't be so corrupt as that. The thought was as insulting as it was blasphemous. Bags were already forming beneath Henry's eyes as he considered the dark ramifications.

Barlow nodded sympathetically. "You see why I asked you what you were planning on doing, son? This region isn't just some backwater. Alehani is the largest port in the southlands, the rail lines here run all the way back to the Capitol. They end

here, in the swamp lands on the Bay. Important things happen here. I've been watching it my whole life. This is where decisions on the future of the Republic are made, not in some capitol building or in a big city—but here, on the edge of civilization. You could venture to all ends of this Earth, but not find yourself in a more important place to shape the future of the Nation. Our future, son." Barlow's sharp blue eyes stared at him full of promise and expectation.

Henry rubbed at his face, considering what the future might hold for him. Conspiracy, plotting, intrigue, and perhaps worse all loomed in the foreground of his mind as he pushed the butt of the cigarillo into the ashtray. His face became gravely serious, though he felt as though he might have aged ten years in the span of the conversation. Yet something was working through him, invigorating him. Beyond fear, doubt, and confusion something else was stirring within him. He looked Barlow directly in the eye, a fire igniting in his belly.

"If the Nation and the People's future is at stake, then there's no turning back now, is there?"

* * *

Henry watched the lanky cypress trees sliding by the window as a cold rain beat against the train's windows. Thick heavy drops almost gave the impression of hail impacting on the metal roof, filling his ears with a thunderous din. Outside, lightning flashed but was lost in the hazy white, and thunder seemed to rattle the train just as hard as an unforgiving rail bend. It was a perfect reflection of Henry's mind as he mused on his conversation with the Sheriff.

Alehani City was less than an hour's ride to go, and more questions than answers darted through his thoughts. Still, at least he had seemingly gained an ally in his unpredictable future and gotten a decent night's rest in a rural township. From now on though, he was bound to the rail lines. There was literally only one direction to go from here, forward towards Alehani City.

A burst of thunder shook the train once more alongside a blast of fresh air as the door between train cars flew open. Henry looked over in time to see a woman, half-soaked from the storm outside, barreling across the length of the train car as quick as she could. He caught clear sight of her face, soaked black hair tossing back and forth against the dark blue uniform of the military proper. He barely had a moment to consider her cute, let alone give the look of fear on her face credence before the sound of lightning and thunder, much louder and closer, sent shockwaves through the passenger car.

He had even less time to realize that the sound and color of the flash didn't match the blue-white colors of a thunderstorm as the train seemed to groan harshly in abrupt protest.

Henry felt himself being flung forward into the hard wood of the seat of the next row, where his head bounced neatly and predictably painfully against it.

The sound of screeching metal on metal, brakes clamping down hard, and a noise suspiciously like a tin-can being crushed filled his ears as he fell to the floor between seats. All was suddenly very dim and quiet...