

The Intolerance of San Melas

By Tony Burton

The pounding hooves, the rocking and rattling of the stagecoach and the blowing dust all combined to give Jim Dailey a terrible headache. He reached up and massaged his temples with fingers that possessed clean and trimmed fingernails, a rarity in the West of 1883.

Across from Dailey sat the only other passenger in the stagecoach, a scruffy-looking and sweaty individual who had introduced himself as “Big Tom” Branson. Occasionally he leaned over and spat a brown stream of tobacco juice out the open window of the stage, and Dailey would close his eyes in distaste. But when he opened them, he could still see Branson’s grinning, tobacco-stained mouth.

As Dailey patted his brow with a pale-yellow silk kerchief, there was a slowing in the speed of the stage, and the coarse voice of the driver called down, “Pullin’ into San Melas, boys! Wake up, iffen yer a’ sleepin’!”

Thank God, Dailey thought. *Finally, a place to get a drink, a room and a hot bath.* He rearranged his clothing, checking all his buttons, tucking in what had become untucked. His traveling companion looked at him with some disgust.

“You some kinda dude or somethin’? I never seen nobody dressed up so purty, unless it was a woman!” He guffawed, exposing an extremely limited array of brownish teeth, then leered. “But, lookin’ at you, I don’t ‘spect you got no use fer no woman, do ya?” He spat tobacco juice again, but this time it landed right between Dailey’s polished but dusty shoes.

“You can keep your opinions and your tobacco spit to yourself, Mr. Branson. Whether I do or do not have a ‘use’ for a woman is no concern of yours,” Dailey stated firmly. “If I did, I am sure she would enjoy being with someone carrying less than five pounds of dirt on his body, as you seem to have.”

Branson's eyes slitted dangerously, and he was about to speak when the stage lurched to a stop. Within seconds, there was the sound of baggage hitting the dusty street and the stagecoach door was flung open. Dailey slipped through the door and slapped it shut behind himself, right in Branson's face. He grabbed his valise from the ground, and stepped to the wood-slat boardwalk.

"Excuse me, but where is the nearest bar?" he asked the lounge sitting in front of the stage station.

"There ain't but one – The Silver Rose. Right down there," and he pointed.

"Thank you, sir," Dailey said, tipping his hat and walking quickly down the street toward the saloon.

Moments later, a red-faced Branson approached the same individual for directions.

"Where is the closest saloon? I got a mean thirst and a hankerin' fer a woman – maybe even two!"

The old geezer took his pipe from his mouth, spat, and said as before. "There ain't but one – The Silver Rose." After a pause he continued, "But, mister, I think I ought to..."

"Later, old timer! I need me a drink, and pronto." Branson snatched up his bedroll and a beat-up duffel, and strode toward The Silver Rose.

The batwing doors had just stopped swinging from Dailey's entrance when Branson stepped through. The bar must have had twenty or twenty-five men in it – cowmen, most of them, with a couple of cattle barons in evidence, gold watch chains glittering. There were one or two poker games going, and a piano player sat playing tin-panny tunes. Branson dropped his bedroll and duffel in a corner near the door, and walked up to the bar.

"Gimme a rye and a beer to wash it down," he demanded, slapping a silver dollar on the table. The barman silently placed the drinks in front of Branson, and his four bits in change, and returned to polishing glasses.

Branson downed the rye in one swallow, squinting as though it burned all the way down, then followed that with a long swallow of beer. He wiped the foam from his face with and turned to look at the room, hooking his heel on the bar rail.

He sipped at his beer some more, gazing around the saloon. His face crinkled in irritation, and his searching seemed to intensify. But then, in mid swallow, Branson coughed and spat beer, then slammed his mug down on the bar, sloshing out even more beer. The barman wiped it up with a growl, but Branson ignored him.

“Hell fire, boy, what you doin’ in a man’s saloon?” He addressed this question to Dailey, who was standing at the far end of the bar, nursing a glass of some beverage. Dailey said nothing, so Branson swaggered over to where he stood.

“I asked you a question, sissy-boy! I said, ‘What you doin’ in a man’s saloon?’” Branson’s loud voice had attracted the attention of several men in the saloon now, and they were looking up with frowns on their faces.

“Leave me alone, Branson. All I want is to have my drink in peace. Is that too much to ask?” said Dailey in a quiet voice, still facing the bar and not looking at Branson.

Branson grabbed Dailey’s shoulder, and jerked him around easily. Dailey’s slight frame was no match for the mass and muscle Branson carried. “It’s too much to ask ME, you perfumed, silk-hanky-carryin’ daisy!” He breathed heavily, the alcohol freeing up his already loose inhibitions. “I ain’t fergot how you slammed that stage door in my face back there!”

Dailey’s face looked strained. He glanced around, and saw the hostility written on the faces of many of the men there. Dailey swallowed, and said, “I apologize for that. I was in a hurry. How about if I buy you a drink? Rye and beer chaser, wasn’t it?” His voice broke on the last and he tried to turn to the barman, but Branson’s grip locked him in place.

“Rye and beer chaser, wasn’t it?” mocked Branson. “Did you boys ever hear such comin’ from a man before? Sounds more like some woman, to me!” Branson reached out and

tweaked the silk kerchief from Dailey's breast pocket. "And looky here! Silk, and it smells like a French whore!"

He continued, "You fellers know somethin'? I asked this feller if he had any use fer a woman on the way in here on the stage, and he said he don't. Maybe means he has use for somebody else, eh?" He grinned nastily.

There was angry muttering from the bar patrons now, and a number of them were on their feet, glowering at Dailey and Branson. The muttering grew louder, with occasional phrases like "oughta get a rope!" and "cain't abide them kind 'round here!"

Branson was enjoying himself now. He could see the sweat beaded on Dailey's face, and the nervous darting of his eyes from side to side as he sought an avenue of escape. But there wouldn't be any.

"Yeah, fellers, I reckon this un is one of them 'boy-lovers' from back East – a reg'lar... reg'lar Sod-o-mite!" Branson had reached deep into his memory for that word, having heard it as he stood outside a revival tent meeting last summer, drinking and making fun of the preacher.

This was the match to the fuse. The little crowd of men roared with blood lust and anger. A hand in the crowd waved a coiled lariat in the air, and a voice cried out, "Hang him!" Everyone in the bar surged around Dailey and Branson, and the flow of their fury carried the lot of them through the doors and down the street, a maelstrom of outraged citizenry.

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Two days later, another stage pulled into San Melas. Before it completely stopped, the door burst open and a slender young man in gray pinstriped trousers, frock coat and bowler erupted from the stage. He stumbled to the hitching post and leaned over it, retching and heaving as he vomited up everything he had eaten that day and a few things he hadn't. He managed to stop retching and wiped his mouth with a handkerchief.

"My God!" he gasped. "When we came into town, there was the corpse of a man hanging in the cottonwood tree at the edge of town... there were crows perched on it, eating its

lips...” he swallowed, “and its eyes.” He placed his hands over his face and asked in a muffled voice, “What in the world happened?”

The old geezer sitting on the chair in front of the stage office took the pipe from his mouth, leaned forward and spat into the middle of the vomit soaking into the dust of the street. “I tried t’ warn him, I shorely did. But he warn’t gonna listen, no sir.”

The younger man looked up, pale and eyes wide. “But what happened?”

The old man shook his head sagely. “That feller offended a lot of folks. You jest cain’t walk into a gay bar, full of cowboys and their companions, and go mouthin’ off about ‘boy-lovers’ and ‘Sodomites’. They lynched th’ feller. Folks ‘round here are powerful set agin’ intolerance.”