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Of Time and Third Avenue	by ALFRED BESTER	3
The Gorge of the Churels	by H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD	10
The Shape of Things That Came	by RICHARD DEMING	18
Achilles Had His Heel	by JOSEPH H. GAGE	24
The Rag Thing	by DAVID GRINNELL	34
The Cocoon	by RICHARD BROOKBANK	38
The Man Who Sold Rope to the Gnoles	by IDRIS SEABRIGHT	45
Beasts of Bourbon	by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & FLETCHER PRATT	49
Recommended Reading	by THE EDITORS	58
Jane Brown's Body	by CORNELL WOOLRICH	61
Dress of White Silk	by RICHARD MATHESON	124

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Of all forms of folk entertainment, few are as much sheer fun as the tall tales of America; compare, for example, Vance Randolph's admirable Ozark collection in this month's Recommended Reading. But certain purists will insist that these are not, properly speaking, fantasy, in our sense of the impossible-made-convincing. America herself is so gigantic and fabulous that who is to draw the line between the possible and the impossible in her legends? Now, however, Joseph H. Gage (like Walt Sheldon in his memorable A Rope for Lucifer) has found a way to blend the Western tall tale with the supernatural fantasy of older cultures, producing a spang-new and exceedingly funny form. We don't wish to hint further at the plot of this fine fantasia; but we will tell you that Mr. Gage has promised further revelations of equally extraordinary goings-on in Bonedry.

Achilles Had His Heel

by JOSEPH H. GAGE

PECOS BILL? Why, sure; everybody's heard about him. He was considerable of a jasper, for a fact, but he still wasn't in it with Hogjaw Harrison.

There wasn't no real comparison, to tell the truth. Pecos Bill stacked up plenty high as a man. Hogjaw didn't; he was just something scraped off the bottom of the barrel. What made him famous around these parts was his bein' invulnerable. Bullets bounced off'n him like rain would off'n a duck, if there was any ducks in this country and it was ever to rain.

I recollect the first day I ever seen this Mr. K. Ronn, who was the cause of the whole thing. It happened a long time ago, while I was workin' for Old Man Barker, who had the Turkey Track brand.

One of the boys had played a trick on Ah Chow, the Chineese cook, said trick bein' to load some chips with gunpowder. Wherefore the Old Man had to send off to Kansas City for a new stove, and when he figured it was due to come in he sent me to the railroad after it.

I went in the spring wagon and took Hogjaw along, the stove figurin' to be too heavy for one man to wrangle. This Hogjaw was one of the Old Man's riders, and was about as purty as you might guess from his name. He had a long nose and a upper lip that stuck 'way out, and there wasn't much chin to his under jaw. He was a lazy cuss, and sometimes I wondered

why the Old Man kept him around. Had he been run off like he ought to, though, I wouldn't ever have got to see an invulnerable man.

The train come along every Tuesday if it wasn't late. It was on time that week; they stopped and put off some stuff for the Old Man. We started loadin'. This Mr. K. Ronn must have got off the coach, but we didn't see him until the train had pulled out. Then we noticed him standin' there, lookin' like a dogy which has lost the herd.

"Dang drummer," Hogjaw mutters, his mouth hangin' open like always. "Look at them store clothes and hard hat."

The stranger stood there for a while, sort of puzzled and uncertain-lookin', and then ambled over our way, carpetbag in hand. I could see he wasn't no drummer.

"Pardon me," says he, though he hadn't done nothin'. "Is this Bonedry?"

"It is," I tells him. "Both by name and by nature."

He was a little man, dried out and wizzled up like he'd been prospectin' over in Suicide Canyon or up in the Panamints somewheres, but he wasn't no prospector. His hide was as wrinkled as seventeen prunes and about the color of a buckskin shirt after it's been wore a couple of years. I'd have said, offhand, he was about seven years older'n Diablo Peak, but he still seemed spry enough.

"Tell me," says he, standin' there and lookin' all around, "does it ever rain here?"

"They claim it did once," I answers. "But that was before my time."

"Excellent," says he. "Excellent! I had hoped for something like that. You see, I picked the name at random from a map," he explains, and then looked sort of puzzled. "But is there a town?"

"Over that there swell about three mile. You can't see it from here."

"Excellent," says he again. "And there is a hotel, I presume?"

"Well, yes." There was Snake River Sam's Palace, which was a combination saloon, gambling hell, restaurant, and hotel with women.

"Very good," says he, noddin'. "And it never rains?"

"Not even on Leap Year Day."

"I do not like water," he states, flat and plain. "I hope I never again see anything but dry land." He talked American like a book with a accent, but I be dogged if I could say where he come from.

"Then you'll fit right in at The Palace," I grins, it bein' well-knowed for the quality of its wobble-juice.

It looked like the jasper was goin' to be among us for a while, so it was only neighborly to invite him to ride along to Bonedry. He chucked his carpetbag into the spring wagon, climbed in after it, and we pulled out.

He seemed friendly enough; he said his name was K. Ronn. I told him folks called me Handy, and then I sort of run out of conversation. Hogjaw had been skitterin' around all the time, starin' and battin' his eyes and sizin' up the gent, and by then he'd got too curious to keep still any longer. He started talkin' at Mr. Ronn, mainly tryin' to find out something about the man, but we didn't learn much. The jasper was as hard to unravel as a string of Ah Chow's writin'.

There was something about him that gave me the spooks. It wasn't nothin' he said or did, which was mighty little. All the same I got a feelin' like there was a cold wind blowin' across the back of my neck, which was a plumb foolish notion to have in that country.

We left him off at Snake River's and went on about our business, which we transacted mostly at Kansas Charlie's saloon, him bein' a sensible man about extendin' credit.

"I'd sure like to know where he come from," Hogjaw says about the third round. "Let's drift back to the hotel and have us a squint at the book."

Which we did, but we couldn't make a thing out of it. The ink had crawled off'n the grease spots on the page, and what writin' there was left didn't make sense. There was X-a-p and then some funny-lookin' squiggles, but it sure didn't spell K. Ronn. That wasn't nothin' to hold against the gent, though; most of the boys around Bonedry had had different names at different times and places.

Snake River had charged for a week in advance, and Mr. Ronn had dipped into a heavy sack and paid him with gold coin like nobody around those parts had ever seen before. Snake River was still eyin' it; he bit it, rung it on the counter, weighed it, and finally decided it was good, even if it wasn't American.

The boys rode wide around Mr. Ronn. The gent was a greenhorn, and yet he wasn't. Ordinarily we was a mite rough on greenhorns, us not havin' much in the way of amusements, but that K. Ronn was one jigger we never done more'n to roll a eyeball at. One and all admitted that when he was around they got that chilly feelin' across the back of the neck, wherefore Mr. Ronn was allowed to go his way in peace.

He showed up at the Turkey Track a couple of weeks later, which was a surprise. Maybe he got lonesome around Bonedry; I dunno. Anyway, Old Man Barker come back from town in his buckboard one day, and Mr. K. Ronn was with him. They'd got thick as thieves somehow, and they was both as boiled as a weddin' shirt. But if he hadn't come around, Hogjaw wouldn't have got to be invulnerable.

Mr. Ronn moved into one of the 'dobses out back that the Old Man

built for his friends that come down from up north in the winter. There wasn't none of them around at that time, of course, so Mr. Ronn moved right in and made himself to home.

He didn't show much interest in anything around the spread. Mostly he just sat around the 'dobe, outside, and in that heat it was plumb dis-combooberatin' to see him keepin' in the sun. Hogjaw and Slim and Red and Walleye and the rest of the boys was as curious as a old maid with new neighbors.

"Watchin', watchin', always watchin'," says Hogjaw. "You notice that? Don't tell me. He's hidin' out and expectin' somebody to come lookin' for him."

"Where do you reckon he's from?" Walleye wonders. "He talks American good enough, but there's a funny twist to his lingo. Furriner, all right."

"Likely enough," Red opines. "Well, it's his own business if he's on the dodge."

It got to be sundown after while, and the Old Man and Mr. Ronn come down to the crumb shack to supper. Bein' a widower, Barker ate with the boys except when he had special company.

"What sort of business you in?" Hogjaw asks Mr. Ronn while we were eatin'. He was downright plain about it, even if it wasn't good manners to ask a man personal questions around Bonedry.

"None just now," Mr. Ronn tells him. A muscle started jumpin' in his cheek, and his eyes was like two deep holes with nothin' at the bottom. "I have been operating a ferry. At present I am absent — without official leave, you might say."

"There ain't no barges around here. You must have come from a different country than this."

"Oh, yes; much different." He passed right over the bait and left it layin' there. Hogjaw didn't find out anything more.

A real peculiar thing happened a day or two later. Hogjaw and me was fixin' the windmill one mornin'. He was up on the tower, disconnectin' the pole, and I was in the blacksmith shop gettin' the fire started when I saw Mr. Ronn headin' over that way from his 'dobe.

He was just passin' the corner post of the horse corral when I looked up. The sun wasn't too high yet, so the post threw a strip of shade, and in that shade there was a big old rattler snoozin'. Mr. Ronn never spotted him at all. Maybe they didn't have snakes where he come from.

Before I could yell that old buzz-tail looked up, seen a leg right in front of him, and took a whang at it, immediate. You know yourself that when a rattler's in a hurry he don't wait to blow charge on his bugle before he gets movin'.

I sifted over that way, unlimberin' my hogleg as I went. Mr. Ronn was still amblin' along, dreamy-like, and I swear I don't believe he even knew he'd been bit. I drewed a bead on that snake's head, but I didn't shoot right away because his actions was so funny I had to stop and watch for a minute.

That rattler was battin' his eyes, as much as a snake can, and makin' faces like he'd grabbed a scorpion by mistake. He flapped his jaws, twisted his neck, and backed off a little. And then, by grab, he spit out four busted fangs into the dust.

That stopped me, flatfooted. I didn't know whether to believe my eyes or not. I figured to check on it later, so I shifted my aim a little and busted him one right back of the ears so's his head wouldn't be spoiled.

"Get movin', quick!" I yells at Mr. Ronn. I grabbed him and hustled him back to his shack, hollerin' for Ah Chow as we went. The Chinee was already on the way with the whiskey jug, him havin' seen what was goin' on, and Hogjaw come sailin' down off the tower to help.

We poured a good stiff slug into Mr. Ronn and throwed him in the middle of the floor. Ah Chow and Hogjaw set on him while I got out my knife and yanked up his pants leg. Mr. Ronn was kickin' and sputterin' in some sort of language, but we didn't stop to listen. I got the calf of his leg laid bare and started to make a slash with my knife.

I rocked right back on my heels. There wasn't a sign of a bite anywhere in that leathery hide. I just squatted there, bluffed to a standstill, thinkin' about those fangs the snake had spit out.

I got up on my hind legs. Ah Chow and Hogjaw let Mr. Ronn up. The gent stopped his clatterin' and got around to talkin' American, and I gathered that he wanted an explanation. Which I give him. He didn't *sabe* rattlesnake, but he got the general idea and said something about asps and vipers.

"And whiskey's the number-one remedy for snakebite," I reminds him in conclusion.

"Entirely unnecessary," he assures us. "I wasn't bitten."

"So I noticed," I admits. "Pass the jug, Ah Chow."

"No more, thank you," says Mr. Ronn, sort of owly-eyed from what we had already poured into him. "I don't need it."

"I know that," says I. "You don't need it, but, by grab, I do!" And I rolled the jug up over one elbow and took a little for the jumps that was workin' on my nerves.

"The water of the sticks has great power," says Mr. Ronn, lookin' up at a bottle on a shelf. "Perhaps you know what it did for Achilles."

"I don't," I says, flat. "And as far as power is concerned, this here fire-

water has got plenty for me." By that time the back of my neck was as cold as a dead dog's nose, in spite of the wobble-juice. I took another good belt at the jug, handed it back to Ah Chow, and got out of there, leavin' Hogjaw standin' starin' at the sticks bottle.

I dunno what he meant about water from the sticks. A man could pull up all the brush in that country and run it through a cane mill and he wouldn't have enough juice to paste down the flap of a cigarette. That talk about Achilles was a lot of gabble, too. I knowed all about him. He was a Greek who had a restaurant over to Split Rock and water never did anything to him. It ain't water that gives a man the delirious tremblin's.

I went back to the rattler and had a good look, pryin' his mouth open to make sure. Every one of his fangs was busted off short, like he'd nailed him a gun barrel instead of a leg. I got to thinkin' then that mebbe there was something to that sticks business, whatever it was. Mr. K. Ronn must have been a big medicine-man in his tribe.

Nothin' happened then till Sunday. We didn't ride on Sundays durin' the slack season. Hogjaw and me wandered out along in the afternoon and got some tin cans off the pile back of the cook shack and burned a little powder at a dime a shot, just to kill time.

Mr. Ronn eased over to see what the ruckus was about. Hogjaw was ahead about four bits, and it was his nature to be nasty when he was winnin'. Mr. Ronn stood around and listened to him crow for a while and then horned in.

"Would you like to make a little bet, Mr. Hogjaw?" he inquires, innocent-like.

"A bet?" Hogjaw got cautious right away. "What kind of a bet?"

"Ten dollars that you cannot shoot a hole through this tin can."

"What distance?"

"Any distance."

"Ump." Hogjaw grunts, as suspicious as a tomcat in a strange alley. "You mean that?"

"Certainly. Any distance you choose."

That hit Hogjaw right between the eyes. "Any odds on it?" he asked, sniffin' at the bait.

"Shall we say two to one?"

Hogjaw licked his chops. It was powerful bait, but he was sure there was a hook in it somewhere. He shied off and stepped around for a while, but it was the odds that got him.

"Five against ten," he says, takin' it at a gulp.

Mr. Ronn took a little bottle out of his pocket. It was the one that had been settin' on the shelf in his 'dobe. He poured some water in his hand and

rubbed it over the can. Hogjaw squalled like he'd got his thumb caught in a dally with a steer in his loop.

"Nothing but a little water to wash off the dust," says Mr. Ronn, placid as a old plug in a field of oats. Hogjaw was still suspicious; he put in a good five minutes lookin' the can over, but finally he shelled out a half-eagle. I held stakes.

Hogjaw hung the can on a greasewood stub, backed off a little, and let fly. There was a *blong!* and the can flew about thirty feet.

"Pay me." Hogjaw grinned and shoved out a palm.

"One minute," Mr. Ronn requests. He trotted over, picked up the can, and brought it back with one of his sly little grins.

"I been took!" Hogjaw howls. There wasn't even a scratch on the can, let alone a hole in it. "You switched cans on me!"

"Remember the terms of the bet. Try again." Mr. Ronn grinned, happy as a cat with his whiskers stuck full of quail feathers.

Hogjaw set up the can again and took another shot. This time he went after the can himself. There wasn't a mark on it.

"The power of the sticks," says Mr. Ronn, tickled pink. Then he thumbed his longhorn mustache and told us a tall yarn about that feller Achilles and him bein' invulnerable until some buck jumped the reservation and shot him in the heel with a poisoned arrow.

"Sheep dip," growls Hogjaw. He took another crack at the can, but he couldn't put a hole in it. He kept on shootin' and cussin' even after I'd handed the money over to Mr. Ronn. He'd hit the can and knock it flyin', and then he'd walk up on it and shoot again. The last we saw of him he was goin' over a hump about two miles off, still pursuin' that can. He never come back until some time in the night.

Hogjaw and me didn't get along so good after that. . . .

Mr. K. Ronn lit out that same night, without sayin' yes, no, or maybe. Just raised himself a dust between sundown and sunup and was gone. Never took any of his gear with him, as far as we could tell. The sticks bottle was missin' off the shelf where it had been settin', but after what happened later I knowed Hogjaw stole it.

There was a powerful funny smell around the 'dobe, like somebody had been strikin' sulphur matches or something. The boys made a lot of guesses about Mr. Ronn, rememberin' how he kept watchin' his back-trail as if he expected somebody to be huntin' him. We cut sign all around the 'dobe, bein' plumb curious, but there wasn't nothin' but some fresh steer-tracks around the door. Mr. Ronn had lit himself a shuck; we never seen him again or found out where he had went.

Then Red told a funny story about Hogjaw takin' a bath. Claimed he

saw him out back of the horse-barn washin' himself all over with a rag. Nobody believed Red; they might have if he had told it about anybody but Hogjaw. But I reckon the story was true enough; Hogjaw was usin' the sticks water he had stole.

Hogjaw never said a word about what he had done. And then, one night, he undertook to trim his fingernails while we were settin' around, but he couldn't cut them.

A couple days later Red tried to cut Hogjaw's hair. He spoiled our shears and a pair of tin snips before he give up. I reckon Hogjaw had been some juberous about the power of sticks water up till then, but his eyes started to bug out when he looked at the tin snips.

"By hell," he says under his breath. "Reckon that old galoot really was tellin' the truth? Mebbe I *am* intolerable, after all."

"Ain't no doubt of it," says Red. "But nobody'd notice it much if you was to keep your mouth shut."

"Don't be so danged ignorant," yelps Hogjaw. "A dumb ranny like you wouldn't know nothin' about bein' intolerable, nohow!"

"Oh no?" Red snarls, him bein' sort of touchy. "Why, you mangy, prong-snouted baboon, you call *me* ignorant!" He threw down the comb he'd been usin' and grabbed for his gun where it was hangin' by his bunk. Invulnerable or not, Hogjaw wasn't ready for that kind of a test. He went out through the window in a shower of glass.

We got Red cooled off. Hogjaw come back after a while, and there wasn't a scratch on him in spite of his divin' through the window. He was just about convinced by that time that nothin' could faze him. We all offered to bounce a few bullets off'n him to make sure, but the power of his convictions didn't run that strong.

He got his *proof in Bonedry*. He set into a game at Snake River's one night while the rest of us was propped up against the bar in the other room. The Turkey Track crew was all in town, it bein' payday, so we seen what happened.

They'd been playin' for quite a while. All of a sudden there was a crash in the gamblin' room. Somebody let out a yell, and the furniture started bouncin' off the walls. There was a lot of skirmishin' around and trampin' back and forth, and then the shootin' started.

Hogjaw come backin' out the door. He stopped just inside the bar room and snapped a shot at somebody in the gamblin' room. A couple of guns answered. There was a *blong blong* like somebody hammerin' on a anvil and slivers of lead whistled around the saloon. We scattered and holed up.

Hogjaw stood there, shootin' slow and careful, with the bullets bouncin' off'n him like hail off'n a tin roof. There was upset slugs whizzin' and flyin'

all around the bar, bustin' bottles and slammin' into things. Every time a bullet hit Hogjaw the wallop set him back on his heels; it was like he was bein' clubbed, even if the lead didn't stick in him.

He never needed no more proof of bein' invulnerable. There must have been anyway twenty slugs glanced off'n him while he stood there.

Snake River Sam was one of the dead ones we drug out after it was over. The Palace had always been a one-man layout, and Sam's cashin' out didn't change it none. He was finished with it, so Hogjaw moved in. He never went back to the Turkey Track a-tall. He took over the Palace, lock, stock, and barrel.

He lived easy after that, just by nickin' the curious who come around. Fellers come from all over the country and paid five dollars a head for the privilege of takin' one shot at him. Hogjaw just stood there, grinnin'.

The Duke heard about him and come over from the Dollar ranch where he was stayin'. The Duke — I disremember his right name — was from England. His folks thought so much of him they sent him a wad of money every three months, even if he didn't ever go home for a visit.

"Unbelievable," says he, watchin' Hogjaw shed bullets. "An illusion."

"Illusion, hell!" snorts Hogjaw. "Didn't you ever hear of sticks water? Well, that's what I used."

"Really!" says the Duke, his eyebrows climbin' up under his hat. "Oh, I say, now! You wouldn't be pulling one's leg?" And then he got thoughtful-like. "But even Achilles had his heel," he says. "And Siegfried missed a spot between his shoulder blades. One can't —"

"Haw, haw!" Hogjaw bellers. "Maybe them fellers wasn't so smart. I didn't miss no spots, mister, because I heard about that Achilles. If you know so dang much, take this here knife and see for yourself."

The Duke was game. He grabbed the bowie and went at it like he was fightin' wasps, but it wasn't no use. "You satisfied now?" Hogjaw asks a while later, after the Duke had tried everything he could think of.

"Oh, quite. Quite." He acted sort of dazed. "One really must sober up," says he to himself, and then he walked off, shakin' his head.

"Haw, haw!" Hogjaw was like to bust himself. "Strong medicine, this bein' intolerable!"

I left, too, about that time. Hogjaw was tellin' more truth than he knowed.

The bullet business petered out after a while, and Hogjaw settled down to steady gamblin'. By that time his fingernails was so long he couldn't deal the cards, so he kept a houseman to do it for him. Gamblers come from all over to play against him, but he couldn't be beat.

He never packed a 'six-shooter no more. His fingernails was too long to

let him handle one. But he didn't need it. If some jigger got suspicious of his luck and started shootin', Hogjaw just reared up on his hind legs, walked in, and cut the obstreperous individual's jugular with a gouge of his long thumbnail.

He got to be plumb nasty, for a fact. The boys figured it would come to where he had to be got rid of, but nobody could think of a way to get it done. We was still hashin' it over when Silk Judson come in from Denver to try to lift some of Hogjaw's loot.

They set down and went at it. The story of that game is still bein' told. It lasted for two days and nights with never a break. There was three others in it besides Hogjaw and Silk, with the houseman settin' by to deal for his boss. Luck kept sawin' back and forth, and nobody was much ahead when it got near daylight of the third mornin'.

Hogjaw and Silk both had good hands on that last round. The others got raised out as the bettin' went on, but Hogjaw and Silk kept nudgin' back and forth till there was a boodle of coin on the table when the showdown come.

Silk called. Hogjaw was laughin' in his long black whiskers as he spread his cards on the table. Silk took one look and moved as quick as the cat which was sleepin' behind the stove when the coffeepot boiled over. Mebbe it was because Hogjaw showed a ace that Silk had discarded before the draw. Anyway, Silk whipped out a sticker and drove it down on Hogjaw's hand, aimin' to nail him to the table.

That was plumb foolish in the head. The point of the knife snapped off. Silk sat there for a second, just starin' at it.

Silk dropped the knife and pulled a little double-barreled derringer out of his sleeve. He fired; the bullet hit Hogjaw in the chest, bounced back all flattened out, and landed in the middle of the table.

Hogjaw didn't make a hostile move himself, knowin' that he could take his own good time in reachin' for Silk's neck.

"Help yourself, Mister," he howls. "You don't know it, but you ain't got a chance. Go ahead and shoot all you want!"

Silk's face got whiter and whiter, and his eyes was wild. Hogjaw just set there, his hands pushin' against the table, his head throwed back while he laughed fit to kill.

And that's just what his laughin' did to him. Silk tipped up his derringer and touched off the second barrel. His bullet glanced off'n Hogjaw's under lip, ripped up through his palate, and plumb addled his brains before it stopped rattlin' around inside his skull.

Exit Hogjaw. Achilles had his heel; Hogjaw had his own big mouth. Mebbe he should have used some of that sticks water for a chaser.