

PENNYMAN
by
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Sunlight shimmered on the golden eagle which stood guard at the front entrance to the old courthouse.

The eagle, wings outstretched as if in flight, sat on a small round ball atop the flagpole, just outside the third story window of the courtroom.

The golden symbol of freedom, somewhat tarnished with age, moved slightly with each vagrant breeze as if trying to soar from its aged perch to its rightful place in the heavens.

Herb Trebranch watched as the stripes of the American flag unfurled beneath the old eagle, their red and white colors playing against the green of the cottonwood trees on the other side of the courtyard.

The blue and gold of the Montana state flag with its motto *Plata y Oro* in the center, hung just beneath the stars and stripes. It fluttered slightly as the light wind coming around the corner of the old building tugged at its edges. The lower edge of the blue state flag was in tatters and small strips of cloth flew outward like the wingtip feathers of the eagle beneath which it flew. Trebranch had looked hard at the flagpole each time they brought him into the courtroom throughout the six days of the trial.

During the early years of his radio career he had painted radio station towers to supplement his income. He had also painted many flag poles like the one which now drew his attention.

He knew these poles well. He had clung to their silvery shafts with one hand while painting with the other, and had

slid smoothly down the poles without safety ropes while earthbound onlookers stood gaping at his daring.

He turned from the flag pole and faced the judge.

It was his day of judgment, the day when he, and the world would learn his fate.

The show trial was over and everyone had known in advance what the outcome would be.

He had been found guilty by a jury of his peers and now the judge, from his mahogany bench, was about to pronounce the sentence that everyone knew, or at least thought they knew, would be death.

Trebranch would be executed for the murder of his wife.

The courtroom had been jammed with followers of "The Pennyman," as Trebranch was called by the media, and these loyalists were not happy with what they felt had been a travesty of a trial in a kangaroo court. Several had called for a return to the old time Montana tradition of Vigilantes and had told members of the media that Sheriff Lawson would be first on their list for vigilante style justice.

Lawson had been prodded by state and federal authorities for months to shut down The Pennyman and the local part of his movement, and then to lock his followers out of the courtroom to keep them from disrupting the trial which was being watched by the world.

The sheriff had maintained order throughout the trial. On this day, however, trial over, verdict in, some of them had managed to get into the courtroom.

"No matter," thought Lawson, "it's over. They can do nothing now."

Sheriff Lawson was already beginning to savor the victory and had carefully planned the speech he would make to the cameras and microphones of the media circus gathered on the front lawn of the courthouse.

Thoughts of higher political office had been crossing his mind with increasing frequency, and grew stronger with each story about him in the local paper.

The courtroom had been unnaturally quiet as the preliminary events of the morning took place. But now, as Trebranch entered the courtroom for the last time, the sound level was escalating rapidly.

The heat of the Montana morning had already descended on the court house. A solitary yellow jacket moved lazily along the ceiling just above the jury box. Courtroom windows had been closed to keep the coolness of the early morning in the room as long as possible.

The sheriff was momentarily distracted by loud talking from several of Pennyman's followers. "They're at it again," he thought, "These accursed Trebranchers have caused enough trouble."

With the TV cameras of the world upon him and his county he was not about to suffer any disruption in this final moment. His moment.

It was a moment he had planned for and looked forward to throughout these long weeks.

He wheeled toward the transgressors and with an angry look in his eye took long quick steps away from the prisoner's side toward the people creating the commotion.

The eyes of every spectator in the courtroom followed the sheriff's massive lumbering form as he moved swiftly forward to deal with those causing the disruption.

Here! Now!

This was the opening Trebranch had been waiting for. His one hope for freedom was at hand.

He had mentally gauged the steps to the window each day as they brought him in and out of the courtroom. He had gone through his next move a thousand times during the long, sleepless nights on the hard cot of his county jail cell.

With long strides, he sprinted toward the massive old window. Five steps and then a quick leap to the back of the old oak bench sitting just in front of it.

With shackled hands stretched out in front he launched himself from the top of the bench and dove head first through the third floor window.

He had visualized it over and over as he listened to the testimony of the federal agents and state crime lab officials. A thousand times his mind had carried him through the window, spraying glass in all directions, as he then floated smoothly toward the flag pole which had seemed to cry out to him as it stood glittering in the sun.

A gasp went up from onlookers in the courtroom as the glass in the window seemed to explode.

Trebranch appeared for a moment to be floating through a glowing, moving, changing, multi-colored rainbow as the sunlight glittered on the shards of glass which sprayed out on all sides of him.

Like a high diver in the Olympics he floated through the air, reaching for the flag pole which had silently beckoned to him from the first day he saw it through the courtroom window.

Now curling his thumbs around the handcuff chain and stretching his hands tightly apart, he flew unerringly toward that slender silver shaft.

Contact!

The impact with the flagpole, just below the state flag, was powerful and sent the flag pole whipping back and forth in furious gyrations. The silver links of the handcuff chain wrapped tightly around the pole and began to arrest his descent.

His feet dropped swiftly downward toward the pole moving instinctively into the familiar vee shape that he had used so many years before while painting flag poles.

The burnished steel chains of the handcuffs squealed against the metal pole, sending a dusty cloud of old aluminum paint into the air. His plunge slowed rapidly when his feet hit the pole and he jammed the heels of his shoes hard together to act as brakes.

Sliding smoothly down the pole, his descent began to slow with the pressure from his shoes and the handcuff chain. Approaching the end of his three story fall, he pushed away from the pole with his hands and feet and jumped to the ground, landing on his feet, then falling forward to his hands.

He was already sprinting hard as he straightened up and hurled himself forward. At top speed he bolted for the corner of the historic old brick courthouse.

He heard a shout from above.

A shot rang out!

A bullet whined past his head and ricocheted off the bricks sending a shower of dirt and sand into the air in front of him.

As he darted around the corner of the building he startled three deputies standing by the squad car which was to be used to haul him off to the state prison after the sentencing.

Waiting, with engine running, they were obviously not going to waste any time withdrawing him from public view and from any possible communication with the press or his supporters.

Ducking his head to one side, and concealing the handcuffs under his suit coat as he ran, he shouted, "Help me, he's got a gun, he's got a gun. He shot at me!"

All three deputies raced for the corner of the building, drawing their guns as they ran.

Trebranch dove through the open door of the squad car.

Slamming the gear shift into the drive position he swung his feet inside and jammed the gas pedal to the floor. The vehicle squealed away from the curb as the door slammed shut, and he spun the wheel to make the first turn out of the alley and onto Fifth Avenue. Spotting switches marked siren and lights, he moved his shackled hands off the wheel long enough to hit them both and was rewarded with the scream of the siren overhead.

Cars swerved to the side of the street and pedestrians scampered to get out of the way.

The blue and white squad car careened down Cruse Street, through the intersection of Main, and then raced the two blocks up the hill to Park Avenue past the Convention Center and Fire Hall. A quick swing to the right down Park Avenue and in seconds he was turning onto Highway 12 and fleeing toward open road and freedom.

With all other traffic surrendering the roadway to the squad car with the screaming siren and flashing blue lights he was onto the highway in less than sixty seconds and headed west out of town.

The siren and lights were seen and heard by traffic far ahead. Cars, trucks and pedestrians moved out of the way leaving him a clear shot at the Big Bear Mountains and MacDonald Pass seven miles away.

The mountain top with its huge rock formations jutting out above the tree covered slopes shimmered in the morning sun like a monument beckoning him onward.

He marveled at the miracle that had taken the deputies away from the vehicle and given him his opportunity for flight.

The shot from the shattered third floor window of the courthouse and the quick reaction by the officers gave him the few seconds start he needed.

With the accelerator pedal pushed to the floor the squad car was soon running flat out with the speedometer topping one-hundred miles an hour. Racing down Highway 12, across the flat land of the valley leading to the base of the pass, he took a quick look in the mirror and saw no pursuers.

As he reached the foothills and began the rapid climb upward toward the pass, he slowed slightly to negotiate the switchback turns going back and forth as they carried him up the side of the mountain.

He again glanced back toward town and this time got a brief glimpse of flashing blue lights miles behind at the city's edge.

Everyone would be after him. Helena police, Lewis and Clark County sheriff's deputies, state police, and even federal authorities.

He had speed and surprise in his favor and he was going to need them. Topping the ridge he was through the 7,500-foot pass in seconds. He again floored the gas pedal and raced down the west side of the mountain.

Looking ahead he spotted the place where he would cut-off toward the lesser known Stanhope Pass several miles south of the highway. This little used gravel road would take him into the back country and bring him close to the Continental Divide Trail and the liberty his pursuers would try to deny him.

As he neared the cut-off he slowed quickly. Moments later he topped the first small rise on the Stanhope cut-off and swung into the first turn.

Switching off the lights and siren he turned onto the gravel road, silently giving thanks for the early morning rain. It had soaked the road enough to prevent the tell tale plume of dust left by fast moving vehicles on a gravel road.

As he did so he thought he once again caught the flicker of blue lights in his rear view mirror. They could have been the lights of a squad car going past on the highway which was now a good three miles behind him.

At top speed he raced up the mountain road toward the hiking trail he had walked so many times with Louise during the good years before the Pennyshopper Movement and its national media attention.

Near the top of the hill he slowed and swung left onto a rutted, rock littered, dirt road. A scant one-hundred yards and he again swung the wheel, this time turning hard to the right, onto a grass covered trail which led through a small

grove of trees and up to the old abandoned silver mine which had been his goal since fleeing the courthouse.

It seemed like only a few minutes since his dive through the window and his frenzied race through the valley.

Here, in the secluded mountain glen encircled by towering pines and silvery aspens, it was placid and peaceful. Even the birds had stopped singing as the squad car burst into their idyllic setting.

Reaching the long deserted silver mine, he had left the police, the court, and his followers behind and had entered a far different world. A world permeated with all the primeval loveliness and quiet dignity of a pristine Montana mountain meadow. Pulling the squad car close to the dilapidated old log shed which sat next to the mine entrance, he jumped out and ran to the building.

The weather beaten door was almost off its hinges.

He pulled hard and when it didn't give in to his efforts he grabbed an old board from beside the shed and pried on the bottom of the door until he could force it open. With a squealing of long un-oiled hinges, the door slowly moved outward.

Driving the squad car inside the shed he cut the engine and rapidly went through the key ring looking for the key that would open the handcuffs. Finding it on the third try, it took only a moment to release his wrists from the cuffs which he threw, along with the keys, to the floor of the car.

Trebranch opened the glove compartment searching for anything that might help him in his freedom flight down the Continental Divide Trail, the footpath which had been planned for years by the federal government in cooperation with states along its route, was only now becoming known to the general public. It ran from Canada to Mexico following along the ridges of the mountains keeping to the highest points along its route.

The Divide was the nation's watershed, its dividing point. This trail, little known to most Americans, was to be his passageway to freedom.

A service revolver with holster and belt caught his attention and he pulled them out of the glove compartment and laid them on the seat.

Seeing a yellow button inside the compartment he pushed it and was rewarded by the sound of the trunk lid unlatching. Clutching the gun he stepped out of the car to see if there was anything in the trunk that could help him in his escape.

He knew that fleeing to the back country was his only chance and that an army of local, state, and federal police was already beginning the search for him.

He could see the headlines now.

FUGITIVE ESCAPES!

They would expend every effort to find him. Federal authorities had been very conspicuous in the courtroom throughout the trial. They were demanding maximum retribution for the man they felt had unleashed chaos on the international financial markets through the shoppers' slowdown he had concocted.

Although he knew county and state squad cars were equipped for mountain search and rescue, he couldn't believe his good fortune at what he found in the vehicle's trunk.

This squad car was equipped with everything essential for any type of mountain top search and rescue operation at any time of the year. A backpack that appeared to be crammed with back country survival needs was on top.

As he went through the pockets he saw a cache of energy bars and what appeared to be military style rations ready to eat. Discovering a small hatchet at the side of the trunk compartment, he slid its handle through a loop on the side of the backpack.

A metal box fastened to one side of the trunk yielded another revolver and several boxes of ammunition. Leaving the weapon, he put two boxes of bullets into the pockets of the backpack.

Lifting the pack from the trunk he was startled at its light weight. It was the latest in mountain hiking gear, made for prolonged back country expeditions. It even included a small one-man tent and a sleeping bag tagged for use when temperatures plunged as low as forty below.

Working swiftly he pulled his suit coat and trousers off and rolled them up in small bundles which were then stowed away in the main compartment of the backpack.

He donned the camouflage colored all weather survival suit that had been rolled up in a small plastic cover next to the sleeping bag. He added heavy socks and the mountain hiking boots which were in a box next to the back pack.

Taking the hatchet, he went behind the building and cut a branch from the backside of a small tree. Dashing the two hundred yards back to the gravel road he swept the leaf covered branch slowly back and forth across the road obliterating tire marks which could show where he turned off. Sweeping the branch back and forth as he went, he backed slowly toward the grass covered trail which led from the road to the mine removing most of the tire marks that led to the old shed.

Discarding the branch, he picked up a rusty half-gallon can and stepping into the old shed, filled it with dirt from the floor.

Again sprinting to the gravel road he sifted the dirt through his fingers, letting the breeze carry it across the road, further obliterating all traces of his turn-off. Following the same procedure, he backed slowly toward the grassy trail sifting dust from the can onto the road.

Returning to the shed he closed the door and put a small piece of wood through the rusted old hasp to keep it firmly shut.

Picking up the branch he again swept the area immediately around the front of the shed, then sifted dust and leaves through his fingers, letting the vagrant breeze carry them across the front of the building, until the last vestiges of his brief visit had been covered over.

Trebranch let his eyes move slowly over the entire clearing searching for anything he had missed. Any trace of his passing that might alert his pursuers to his visit.

With a quick smile of satisfaction at the results of his work, he picked up the backpack, settled it on his slender frame, and turned toward the tree-covered mountain and the trail that would lead to freedom.

He slipped through the curtain of leaves hanging from the aspen trees which surrounded the secluded mountain meadow, and moved into the forest. He heard a mountain meadowlark begin anew the song it had stilled when the squad car first raced into its clearing.

Other birds quickly picked up their songs and in moments there was no evidence of his coming or going.

Chapter Two

The escape from court room to freedom had been exhilarating.

The 100-mile per hour race to the top of the Big Bear Mountains had been a white knuckle affair. The discovery of the squad car's riches, the search and rescue gear, had been the frosting on the cake. The search for his goal, the Continental Divide Trail was brief. He had remembered its approximate location from his mountain hikes of the past.

The trail, which originated at the Canadian border in the north and ended at the Mexican border, wound its way through some of the most spectacular terrain in the world. It was lonely, forbidding, and rugged attracting only those hikers looking for the ultimate in back country travel. The 3,100-mile trail had been authorized by Congress in 1978 with a goal of completion by the year 2000. Although Montana, Idaho, Colorado, and New Mexico had completed substantial portions of the trail in their states by the mid 1990s, long stretches of forbidding mountainous country remained to be marked and improved.

Grizzly bears and mountain lions were natural predators and this trail encroached on their domain. Hikers were often warned to make noise as they walked to warn the animals they were coming to avoid surprising them and provoking an attack. Each year several people were mauled by grizzlies, and mountain lion attacks were becoming more frequent as humans expanded their search for solitude in the back country.

It was unlikely that any hikers would be using the primitive trail, but Trebranch looked carefully to see if any were about, then took the first steps on his journey to freedom.

The pathway through the wilderness wasn't well publicized but each year a few dedicated hikers found it. Maps were inadequate at best but could be obtained from state agencies if you could find them.

The Montana sections of the footpath had been marked with huge wooden signs by volunteers only a few years before, and had been scheduled for improvement. The necessary federal and state government funding requests had not yet made their way through the system so few improvements had been completed. The volunteers and their signs had been trucked in as far as possible and were then carried deep into the wilderness by pack horse.

As Trebranch walked, his thoughts went over the past year's events, again and again. What could he have done differently?

She was dead. Louise was gone. He was convicted of her murder.

Most of his followers believed him when he had said at the trial that men wearing black suits and backpack flying units had broken into their house during the night, shot Louise, sprayed him with pepper spray or some type of gas and placed the gun in his hand.

They had neatly framed him for her murder. He shook his head at the thought. He had never even owned a gun. Never.

He had told that to the judge, who smiled and nodded his head, as if he had heard it many times before.

The whole thing had started so innocently. He had conducted the Capital Conversation radio talk show for as long as most people could remember, over thirty years. It was a pioneer in the world of AM talk radio.

He had heard it all. Through the turbulent sixties and its war in Viet Nam, the seventies with the never ending calls about the Federal Reserve banks being owned by the international bankers, the incessant calls about the Council

on Foreign Relations and how it was designed to turn America over to communists and a one-world government.

Local politics, state politics, national politics. The Capital Conversation Show had carried on through one administration after another. The calls kept coming day after day, interspersed with federal and state elections which produced a barrage of calls about congressmen and senators and their exorbitant pay, and would then settle down once again to the school board and city and county commissions. Complaints about local, state and national government were unending.

But it had never been as fatalistic as it had gotten these last couple of years. NAFTA, GATT, jobs going to other countries, a declining standard of living for what had always been thought to be the greatest country on earth.

He had calls about corporations that didn't seem to care about their employees. Employees who misused sick days and mental health days, and maternity leaves for fathers. Lack of health care. People forced into the poor house when an aging relative needed extended care and they didn't have the savings to provide it.

The callers to Capital Conversation had a litany of grievances which they blamed on the bloated, burgeoning, bureaucracy. A bureaucracy that seemed to be expanding at a pace rapidly going out of control.

A larger and larger share of the tax dollars went to support this fast growing, mass of bureaucrats which purported to meet all the needs of a demanding people.

The National Taxpayers Protective Association, which kept track of such things, said the typical American toiled from January 1st to the middle of July just to pay their taxes. Over six months of the year. Freedom from Tax Day they called it.

When the show had gone on the air in the sixties, the freedom from tax day had been in March, now it was in July and each year anti tax groups created special events

for talk show hosts to use, to keep it in front of the taxpayers.

The callers blamed their elected officials and the faceless bureaucrats in Washington who just didn't seem to care.

The people of the United States were fed up with the burdensome policies and actions of their government. Never in his thirty years on the air had the complaints been as caustic and as consistent.

The president had called on Americans to stop listening to what he referred to as Hate Radio. AM radio talk shows. And most of the nation knew who he meant – Charlie Carter, the first talk show host to take his show to the world via shortwave radio and satellite uplinks.

The president had called Charlie Carter from World Talk Network the most divisive voice in America. His callers talked about the lost American dream. The illusion of security that big government gave to a nation that Carter often said was fast going down the tubes.

He and his callers presented problems and asked for solutions.

Government's response was to spend more and tax more. The talk of a balanced budget was drowned out by the voices accusing Congress of manipulating the budget figures to make it look like lower spending when it was really just the opposite.

It was no wonder that people listened when someone proposed a solution to these problems and an antidote for their feeling of helplessness.

In the past Congress would inflate its own pay, ignore the firestorm of complaints and wait for them to die down, knowing full well that people would forget by the next election.

Not this time.

The masses said they had finally had enough. In 1994 they had thrown the Democrats out. It didn't help. In 1996

they had re-elected a Democrat president but gave him the burden of a Republican congress.

Voters were fed up with the exorbitant tax burden and the extravagant spending. Legislative pension plans that allowed senators and congressmen to retire to a life of luxury. Executive perks for appointees to high government posts, and a never ending stream of gifts from political action committees representing the economic elite. Many called it an *Elected Royalty* and an *Appointed Aristocracy*. There were foreign governments who spent lavishly in their lobbying efforts to advance their nation's trade status which would lower import tariffs to help their country's manufacturers, while destroying American factories.

American jobs were on their way out of the country.

Through the Global Monetary Fund our own Congress was loaning tax money, which should have gone into health care and social programs, to huge multi-national corporations who were using the money to build factories in Third World countries.

They were using the people's tax dollars to help the corporations build factories overseas, so the corporations could then take more and more jobs from U.S. workers and move them off shore to low paid Third World workers.

The spread between the grotesquely wealthy and the desperately poor had grown rapidly through the 1980s and now Trebranch and his on-the-air callers referred to it as the "desparity index." The measure of despair that permeated that segment of the population living in poverty at the lower end of the economic scale.

The unfair tax program, ruled and regulated with an iron hand by the IRS was called the "Over Extraction System," and was rapidly becoming so oppressive as to be untenable.

History has always taught that when a nation's poorest people despair for the future of their children, when they feel a depth of hopelessness that shows no light at the end

of the tunnel, when they become discontented enough, they will stage some kind of a revolution. The discontent which erupted in opposition to a war in the sixties brought down a president. It bubbled to the surface again in the seventies when government corruption became too much to bear, and had now brought the nation to the precipice.

This would not be a cultural or social revolution. This time it would be a revolution of economic despair. Like the French peasants storming the Bastille the desperately poor of the world were now going to be caught up in a battle of the classes of such gargantuan proportions the world would never be the same. The steaming, bubbling cauldron of discontent had spilled over with the formation of armed militias and Freeman societies organized by people made desperate by the lack of response from their government to their despair. Now, aided by AM talk radio, shortwave radio overseas, and the Internet were providing communication opportunities never before afforded the poor, the discontent was about to erupt into the world's first all out battle for economic justice.

It could be no other way. The chasm between rich and poor had become too wide. The checks and balances had failed a large segment of the population. Failure of those in government to read the signs and to heed the wake up call was sending the nation and the world over the edge of the economic brink. The extremism of those on top of the economic scale was about to sink the ship of state, and the torpedo which would cause the explosion was about to be delivered by AM talk radio.

The on-the-air call that started it all had been innocent enough. Just another criticism about federal policy.

"Good morning it's Capital Conversation, you're on the air!"

"Herb? This is John and I'm gonna unload on ya this time."

"Go ahead John, I've got broad shoulders, what's got ya hot man? What's got ya hot?"

"Herb, they've really done it this time. They've really done it."

"Go ahead John. Who are they? And what have they done?"

"Our government! Its been moving more and more jobs out of the country. NAFTA was bad enough. GATT was even worse, but now the president is pushing for the CBI. Have you heard about that one Herb? The Caribbean Basin Initiative will expand NAFTA to the Caribbean area and if that isn't enough he has granted most favored nation status to China and is even going to bring their workers here to teach them our computer technology and our high tech aerospace technology.

"We have a twenty-billion dollar a year trade deficit with China now and the president and Congress are going to make it even easier for them to take our jobs and our future. PowerMart and the other discount stores in the country don't seem to stock anything that isn't made in China. Charlie Carter says on his show that this stuff is being made by slave labor in Chinese prisons.

"We help their government out every time we buy their stuff. Herb, somebody's gotta do something. This country is going down the tubes and Congress is providing the pork barrel grease to make it slide faster. We gotta stop 'em Herb, We gottta stop 'em."

"Slow down John, you've covered half the country's foreign policy problems in one breath. The question is what are *you* gonna do John? Not what are *they* gonna do, so what are you going to do?"

"I just don't know Herb. We buy their junk, so it's our own fault. They make it with slave labor in prisons and the discount houses stock the shelves with it and we end up buying it. It's just not right Herb. We oughta be able to

come up with something that would stop the flood of jobs leaving the country."

"John, I know you're serious. I know you mean it, but how many people in Helena, Montana, would actually take the time and take it upon themselves to do something that could have an affect on national policy? How many John?"

"More than you think Herb. There are a lot of us who are really steamed. The last election was just the tip of the iceberg. There are lots of us ticked off, Herb. Lots of us. If there was a way to put the skids on what our government is doing to us a lot of us would jump on the bandwagon. Lots of us."

"Tell you what, John. I've got an idea that could maybe at least focus the national spotlight on the problem, but it would take people. How many fed-up tax payers can you get to a meeting at the Vets Club tonight? People who are so stirred up that they would actually put their time and effort into a protest of their government's actions?"

"I'll bet you we can get fifty, sixty people out right now. I'll get on the phone. You invite your listeners. If you've got an idea. I'll get the people."

"Eight o'clock, John. Keep the phone hot, and we'll meet at eight at the Vets Club. See Ya."

That's all there was to it. Just another on-the-air call from a ticked off listener. That's where it started.

Other callers had joined in with suggestions on how to get more people out to the meeting and said they would come. By the time the program ended over fifty callers had announced their intentions to be at the Vets Club for the meeting that night.