

Quick-Trigger Teacher

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A modern-day crook gets a hot-lead lesson from an out-of-date trigger.



I WALKED eagerly up the single flight of stairs. Professor Will Pentley had an apartment on the second floor. He had invited me this afternoon. It was three o'clock on the dot when I knocked on his door.

It opened promptly. Professor Pentley said, "Oh, it's you, Joe. Come right in." Joe Humphrey—that's my name.

Going through the door, I looked around me. The first things I noticed were guns. Guns hanging on the walls, standing in the corners, lying on the dresser. Old guns, new guns, good ones, bad ones and indifferent. You've guessed it. Pentley, in his spare time, was a gun collector.

That, in fact, was why I was here. For I liked guns, too, even though I knew practically nothing about them. I was a student at a Southern teachers' college, where Pentley was head of the History and Social Science Department. When the prof had mentioned guns in a lecture, I had become interested. The result had been this invitation to look over his collection.

Pentley ushered me into the living room, which was also more or less cluttered with guns. Pentley was something of a character himself. Short and skinny, but he had a big red face and a pronounced paunch.

"As I told you," he began in his quiet, unobtrusive voice, "I concentrate mostly on scarce models of the old West. Take, for instance, this six-shot revolver here. It's a single-action, .45 caliber Colt, called the Peacemaker. It was introduced about 1873, this 5-½ inch artillery model. It's the only gun up here that I keep loaded. Then, over here is a—"

The jangle of the telephone interrupted him. Frowning, he walked over and picked up the receiver. I inspected a flintlock rifle while he talked.

I wondered at a harmless old guy like Pentley making guns his hobby. He'd spent a small fortune

on them. I sighed. I decided if I ever made enough money teaching, I'd have a collection like this, too.

When Pentley hung up, he crossed the room slowly. "A man wants to see me on business," he said regretfully. "He said it was about a magazine article of mine. I'm sorry, but I guess our little lecture will have to be postponed. Stick around a while in the lobby. Maybe it won't take too long to finish my business."

"Okay," I nodded. "By the way, do you have a copy of one of your articles? I'd like to read it while I'm waiting."

"Let me see," Pentley grunted. "I think I have one here. Oh, yes, here by the radio. It's my very latest article. The name is *How Guns Saved City Hall*."

I licked my chops mentally. "Sounds interesting. Thanks a lot, Professor. I'll be back up after a while."

Pentley said, "Very well," and showed me to the door.

GOING downstairs, I found a comfortable chair in the lobby. Just as I had gotten my magazine unfolded, a stranger sat down beside me. I paid no attention to him till he started looking over my shoulder.

I turned, stared at him. He gave a start.

"Oh, excuse me," he said quickly. "I didn't realize what I was doing. My name is Gregg. So you like Pentley's pieces, too, do you? I read every one I see. He knows his stuff."

"I know him personally," I said, setting aside the magazine. Here was a chance to blow off steam about my relations with Pentley. I was too young and inexperienced to know better. I went on:

"The prof lives right here in the Luckie. On the second floor. I'm going up in a few minutes to look at his gun collection."

Gregg looked me over with increased respect. "It's wonderful to know interesting people like

that," he sighed. "You're very fortunate. What kind of a fellow is this Professor Pentley, anyway?"

"Not at all like you'd suspect," I assured him. "He's just a gentle, kindly old soul. He abhors violence and bloodshed. Funny that he'd pick a subject like guns for a hobby, isn't it?"

"Very queer. Seems as though he'd be scared at night, surrounded by all those guns."

I laughed. "Oh, he doesn't keep them loaded, of course. None except one revolver. It's an old model Colt which he keeps on his piano."

"Then you've been up before?" Gregg asked with raised eyebrows.

"Just once, for a few minutes," I replied. "He only had time to show me that Colt when the telephone rang. Pentley had to see someone on business."

Gregg pulled out his watch, looked at it. "That reminds me," he said, rising. "I have to keep an appointment myself. Well, it's been nice meeting you Mr.—er—ah—"

"Humphrey," I finished for him. "Joe Humphrey. Glad to know you, too, Mr. Gregg."

There goes a nice guy, I thought, as he crossed the lobby. I watched as his slim, well-dressed form disappeared from sight. Rather hard-eyed, and I didn't like the way his hair was slicked back, but all in all a very nice guy. That's what I was telling myself as I picked up my magazine again.

Will Pentley had made more money writing articles about guns than teaching school. He usually connected a certain type of gun with a past historical event. That was the case in *How Guns Saved City Hall*. The subhead read, "—And Without a Shot Being Fired!"

This one was the best by Pentley that I had read yet. It was a factual account of the days when Perryville was little more than a meeting hall and general store. Pentley had delved into some obscure records somewhere and read about Perryville's biggest Indian raid.

The redskins had succeeded in leveling the store. All the citizens that remained alive were surrounded in the city meeting hall. In this square-walled massive building, they prepared to make a last stand.

Numerically, the defenders of the town were stronger than the Indians. And they had the advantage of positions. But there was a joker in the pack.

The men were armed almost exclusively with

Colt Walkers. A five-shot revolver weighing four pounds, nine ounces, and 15-½ inches long, these formidable weapons, however, were of the cap and ball type. The cap was necessary to set off the powder, which in turn expelled the missile. And some traitor among them, dying from an Indian bullet, had crawled away with all the caps!

Making the best of a bad situation, the men threw their nearly useless Walkers into the basement. They armed themselves with whatever weapons they could find, and waited for the attack.

Meanwhile, the wily redskins had stumbled onto something. In the basement of the general store was the entrance to an underground passage. The defenders had forgotten about this passage, which led straight to the city hall. The Indians could easily have overcome the whites in a frontal attack, but they didn't know about the caps being stolen. Therefore they launched a surprise attack—through the passage!

The end of Pentley's piece packed a real punch. The Indians had come across all those heavy guns in the meeting hall basement. Imagine how they reasoned! If the palefaces had all these weapons to have to fight with! The Indians gave up the attack and went back.

THAT was the article. It was good, but something in it dissatisfied me. I couldn't make up my mind what it was.

Then it struck me suddenly with the force of a bombshell. I jumped up from my seat, headed grimly for a telephone booth. Stepping inside, I closed the door and inserted a nickel. I dialed the old city hall museum.

I asked, "Is this the city headquarters for war bond sales?"

I was pretty sure it was, but I had to know.

A feminine voice answered, "Yes. Do you want to buy a bond?"

"Sure," I told her. "Only I don't have time right now. Thanks a lot." I hung up and mopped my brow feverishly. So far my hunch was working.

You see how I figured it, don't you? It worked out that Pentley was one of the few men, probably the only one, who knew where that old underground passage was located. Some store had been built in place of the general store, but which one was it? *Find out from Pentley, the crook reasons. Then, after bumping the old professor off, pull a nice clean robbery of the war bond money.*

The building itself would be guarded, of course—from the outside. But not from the basement, where the long unused passage led!

I strode rapidly across the lobby. The fear was growing in me that Gregg had already struck. Wasn't Gregg the logical person to suspect? He had smoothly and efficiently gotten information from me concerning Pentley's guns. And undoubtedly he was making for the prof's room when he left me!

Accordingly I took the steps three at a time. I knocked breathlessly at Pentley's door. It seemed an age before it was opened.

Pentley stood there, looking completely at ease. "Come in, Joe," he invited. "We can continue with our interrupted discussion now."

So I had been wrong! I breathed a sigh of relief, followed Pentley inside. When I sheepishly told him about my fantastic theory, he laughed heartily. As though anyone would commit violence in his home! Unthinkable.

We started looking at guns again. Pentley remarked, "Now, here are two interesting guns lying side by side. The Texas Paterson .40 caliber model on the right, Wells Fargo .34 caliber on the left. The Paterson was introduced about 1836, and helped Texas win its independence from Mexico."

I was tremendously interested, yet for some reason my attention was wandering. Something was wrong . . .

Pentley said, "Want me to tell you something about the Wells Fargo model? You know how important the express company was in opening up new frontiers. Well, they wanted good guns for their guards and riders. Notice the points of this gun, then called the Baby Dragoon. It's light, .31 caliber, five-shot. No ramrod. The octagonal barrel—"

With a gesture, I interrupted him. I had discovered what was wrong. I pointed mutely at the piano. The Colt Peacemaker was gone from its place!

I didn't have time to ask for an explanation. Gregg, his little dark eyes shining, stepped from concealment. He said purringly:

"My young friend from the lobby has sharp

eyes."

In Gregg's right hand was the Peacemaker, the only gun Pentley kept loaded! I could have cried like a child. Pentley shrugged. He had done his part in trying to keep me from suspecting Gregg's presence.

"I'm giving you one last chance, Professor," Gregg purred. "Either tell me the secret of the passage, or I shoot you and the boy. I'll do it with your own gun. The police will call it murder-suicide. I won't be suspected a moment. I mean what I say, Professor. What's your answer?"

Pentley shook his head, smiling regretfully.

Gregg's face underwent a swift change. It twisted into rage and hatred. He jerked the gun up, cursing. I saw his trigger finger tighten, then go white with the pressure he exerted. Nothing happened. Again he winced with the pressure, with no success.

He laid the Peacemaker down in disgust. "I'll use my own gun," he snarled.

As he reached inside his coat, Pentley picked up the Peacemaker. I asked myself what he hoped to gain by that. The old gun wouldn't work. But it did!

Just as Gregg got his automatic out, Pentley's Colt exploded. Gregg clutched at his shoulder and went down!

After the smoke had cleared up and police had taken Gregg away, I asked Pentley:

"Why did the gun shoot for you when it wouldn't for Gregg?"

"Simple," he chuckled. "Remember, I told you the Peacemaker was a *single-action* revolver? Well, that meant it had to be cocked. Gregg didn't know that; I did. I simply pulled the hammer back and let him have it."

The professor sighed reminiscently. "You know," he confessed, "I never realized before today the thrill one could get out of spilling human blood. I wonder if I might try it again sometime."

I reached for my hat. "So long, Professor," I said. "I'd feel safer if we postpone our gun inspection until tomorrow. You're in the wrong mood today!"

