

El Tiro di Gracia

By Colin Cameron

Our readers in the Southwest know the meaning of this title. In city pavement language it is "The Mercy Shot" delivered only when a wounded man or beast faces the slow, tortuous travail of Death.

IN the sun-baked flag station of Palomas, Bob Gilroy sat on the edge of the loading chute of the cattle corrals and smoked a brown paper cigarette. Half an hour before, the crawling freight had picked up the five carloads of steers he and his ranch hands had loaded that afternoon, and his Mexican foreman and three cowhands had accompanied the cattle southward to Torreon. Presently, after resting, smoking and cogitating, Bob Gilroy would also depart, heading home straight across country for his *rancho*. It was a forty-mile ride and a rough one at best.

Meanwhile, he watched the languid preparations of Juan Urbalejo, his Yaqui herd boss, and two Indian cooks make ready to depart for the *hacienda*. It would be an all-night drive for them, with their two mules and the chuck wagon.

His muscles relaxed in pleasing lassitude, his Stetson hat pulled well down across his eyes to shade them from the westering sun, Bob Gilroy leaned back against the lip of the loading chute and meditated pleasantly on the fact that he had prodded two hundred bawling longhorns into the dinky cattle cars of the Mexican National that day. And that was that. A smile touched his lean, weather-bitten face as he tossed away his cigarette and climbed stiffly down from the corral.

Making his final notations and checks in his notebook of the shipment, he gave a few last directions to the Yaqui range boss, saddled his pony and prepared to depart. He would cut straight across country, lessening the forty miles to his *rancho* considerably. But his way would lie across that brassy oven of Coahuila known as *El Valle del Diabolo*, a harsh, unlovely and lonely plain, dotted with sage, cactus and yerba santa, and home of prowling coyotes and lobos. Hard pan it was, an impassable slough in wet weather, now arid and parched by a splintering sun.

Gilroy lifted his pony into an easy lope. Faraway to the west loomed his home beacon, two solitary buttes on the horizon that reared their jagged heads into the sunset. They rose crimson as blood in the dying rays of the sun; long lances of

gold lay across the *valle*, the scent of sage and yerba santa came pleasantly to his nostrils. A Shambo thrush whistled faintly, far across the plain.

Gilroy filled his lungs with the scents of the sage as he swung rapidly across the pan. He was getting a little showing for his two hard years in Mexico; that shipment of steers should bring him a pretty penny in Torreon. And besides, he was thoroughly pleased with the bargain he had made for his pony.

A damn good bargain, that. He certainly liked its comfortable, easy gait—this little roan who was an Irish hunter crossed with a Hermosillo range pony. Idly he wondered why Doc Koons had sold it to him so cheap; had sold it at all, in fact. Doc was a pretty astute dealer where horse-flesh was concerned, and he made shrewd bargains over there in his corrals at Monclova. And fifty dollars. . . . Oh, well, it was an ill wind that had blown *him* some good, at any rate. Doc probably needed the money; in debt again, he supposed. Tugging his hat lower across his forehead, Gilroy leisurely rolled and lit a cigarette.

Might as well try the little cow-chaser out a bit; he hadn't had him long. Urging the roan into a faster gallop, he bent it to the right and left, using his weight alone, never touching the reins. The horse responded without a fault. Sitting well back in his saddle, he suddenly slowed down with a firm rein. And again a smile spread over his bronzed face. Koons had schooled the animal perfectly. But why had he sold it so suspiciously cheap? Gilroy shook his head in mystification. Doc was persistently short of *dinero*—anyhow, it didn't matter. He had the pony.

Leaning forward, he patted the pony's neck. And its forelegs went from under it as if suddenly lassoed by a rope. Gilroy had one fleeting glimpse of the hard pan leaping up to smash his face and swiftly flung himself backward, tugging at the reins with all his strength.

The pony floundered along on its nose and knees for a few yards and then recovered its

balance. Gilroy pulled up and glanced behind him for the crack or outcrop that had thrown his mount. There was none; the track was as smooth as a garden path. His face darkened with anger, an oath slipped from his lips as swift realization dawned.

Now he knew. Koons had sold him a "pup," a confirmed stumbler. They were the curse and bane of cowmen. He should have suspected, known this—an unblemished, well-trained, good-looking three-year old for fifty dollars! A cursed pony that tripped over its own shadow! He would get his own back for this—when next he saw the astute Koons in his corral at Monclova.

Carefully he examined the roan. Its nose was a trifle grazed, but its knees were unbroken, and only slightly dusted. As long as the damned death-trap did not actually hit a stone it could go on falling on the plain three times a day for the rest of its life without showing a betraying mark, he thought savagely. He eyed the pony uncertainly.

Well, he would have to risk getting home on it, anyhow. He had gone too far to turn back. Mounting again, he rode on cautiously, keeping the roan's head well up and sitting far back in the saddle. The pony resumed its easy lope as if nothing had happened. Three miles passed behind, four, five.

Gilroy began to regain confidence. Might have been an accident after all, a second's drowsiness combined with his sudden shift forward to pat it. Certainly it was a comfortable little beggar. Might be OK after all.

Picking his way gingerly through a patch of high *mescal*, Gilroy rode into a belt of sage and his sharp eyes caught sight of something moving away to the right—a bush buck. He needed meat just then, too. And after the fashion of many cowmen who live in lonely *haciendas* and travel over sage and mesquite-studded plains and through belts of timber where panther, bear and mountain lions are frequently met, he carried strapped to his saddle a high-powered rifle sheathed in a cavalry scabbard, always ready to his hand.

Jerking the roan up short with his left hand, he lifted the Winchester with his right, dropped to the ground and instantly fired. Bush shooting is snap shooting; he who hesitates goes hungry.

His bullet caught the buck too far back—somewhere in the quarters, he thought. It squatted for a second, as if its hind legs had slipped, then picked itself up and made off eastward toward the

Rio Hondo, a low, boulder-strewn stream whose banks were covered with a thick mat of stunted growth. Gilroy fired again but a flick of dust a yard to the left signaled a miss. On the third try the hammer fell with a click on an empty chamber.

Cursing softly to himself, Gilroy jerked open the magazine and rummaged in his pockets. A search disclosed one more cartridge. Shoving it in the magazine, he mounted again and rode to where he had last seen the deer.

He had hit it, he knew, and he intended to get it. He wanted meat and, incidentally, sportsman that he was, had a strong dislike of "runners," of leaving wounded game out to die slowly and painfully, a prey to hunting animals. Apart from the cruelty of the thing, it offended his pride in his own marksmanship; he rarely ever mussed-up a shot. But he would have to hurry if he caught the fleeing buck. It was fast growing dark and soon he would not be able to see.

He rode at a fast gallop, bent over the pony's off shoulder peering for the spoor. It led him due east through the sage—blind, treacherous country in the swiftly-striding dusk of a Mexican night. The wounded buck was bleeding heavily and from the plain trail along the ground was dragging its rear legs. It could not be good for much more distance; still, in the failing light, once among the scrub on the river bank it would be next to impossible to find the creature.

Rubbing the roan with his spurs he urged into a faster gallop, his sharp eyes barely making out the spoor. The buck was almost all in—dark spatters and marks on the ground where it had fallen a couple of times told him that. He should be on it any second now. . . .

Suddenly they crashed through a low tangle of sage on the lip of an *arroyo*—a dry, boulder-strewn wash, gashed and scarred and fifteen feet to the bottom.

Gilroy shouted a frantic—

"Whoa!" to his pony and desperately flung all his weight on the reins. The roan snorted, reared, propped wildly with its forelegs, slithered the very edge of the *arroyo*—and tripped again.

BOB GILROY opened his eyes on a velvet sky studded with stars. A pale, silvery mist in the east presaged the rise of the old moon. Dazedly he stared upward, fighting for recollection, grimly battling the nauseating faintness that gripped him.

He was lying on the stones at the bottom of the *arroyo* with the pony across his right leg. The roan was very still, and from the way its head was twisted under its body he knew its neck was broken. And as for himself, he thought that every bone in his body was smashed; he was one torturing ache.

Must have hit his head on a rock when he landed, Gilroy thought weakly; it was splitting with pain and his right eye was full of blood. Yes—he felt it now—a nasty gash above the temple. Unconsciousness swept him again, and he fought it with clenched teeth and whistling breath.

“No good—that,” he groaned. “Must think—do something.”

Painfully, slowly, he stirred his arms to ascertain the extent of the damage. They both moved, as did also his left leg. Only badly bruised after all—the pony had broken most of the tumble. Now for his right leg, the one that lay under the roan. Very gently he tugged at it, bracing his hands on the ground. Swift, excruciating pain shot up the limb as if on white hot wires, and Bob Gilroy’s head fell back against the rocks as a fog of oblivion swept him.

Again he opened his eyes, and lay quiet. The pain in his leg was maddening. It reminded him with poignant surety of his position. It was quite hopeless. He could not move and there was nobody to help him. He was far out in an unpeopled waste, in the heart of *El Valle del Diabolo*, and he knew that in that desolate, lonely land there was no human being closer than Hermanas, sixteen miles or so eastward. He was miles beyond hail of even the nearest cattle trail. His own hands would never think of searching for him; he was in the habit of leaving his *rancho* for days at a time; his absence would cause no alarm when Juan Urbalejo and his two cooks finally arrived at the *hacienda* early in the morning. The Yaqui and his pintado pony were well away by this time. No, he was in for it, completely trapped. He would lie there, pinned by the weight of the dead roan on his splintered leg, until a slow, torturous death released him or some prowling animal mercifully ended his agony.

The thought suddenly swept him with a terrible, terrifying force, made him lose his head completely, and like a madman he shouted for help—once, twice and again; screamed piteously into the empty wilderness of pear and sage like some lost child frightened in the dark. An echo in

the *mescal* tops repeated his cries thrice, faithfully, mockingly, flinging back at him his terror. The howl of a roving coyote came faintly to his ears. Then silence.

Gilroy sank back quietly once more, panting and ashamed.

It was a hazard all dwellers in lonely lands had to face, this. In his goings up and down the world he had known many such—solitary trappers severing a foot with a glancing ax and bleeding to death miles from help; prospectors caught by fall and slide; forest rangers kicked or thrown from their horses—even as he, even as he.

Some years past he had learned not to take life seriously. It didn’t pay. And now he wondered how those other men had faced the long last hours. He recalled a hunter found dead of thirst in the Kalahari Desert with a scrawled message to his wife in his hand—a note full of tender love for her and not a word of himself, of his plight. Again, a timber-cruiser freezing to death under a fallen tree on the Athabasca scratching “*Resurgam*” on the bark of the spruce that crushed him. And in France—many, many more. Those men had met their last hour nobly—hard men dying game. Sportsmen. Well, so would he.

Resurgam—the word lingered in his mind, vague and haunting. Oh yes, he remembered; to rise again, sometimes, a shadowy Eighth Day. He wondered. Well, anyhow, he would finish cleanly, leave no bills unpaid. He puzzled his aching head to remember things he had left undone, things he might possibly rectify, but could think of nothing—nothing within his reach now. He was just a wanderer, a dweller in lonely lands, with no one dependent upon him. As for his immediate affairs, everything was in order, his property willed—yes, he would finish cleanly

Wait . . . there was Koons. Doc Koons who had sold him the “pup” for fifty dollars. Some day his ranch hands—his own men—would seek and find what was left of him here in this cursed *arroyo*, and then Doc would blame himself. Koons was a good chap at heart, he thought slowly, a damned good fellow, only he was perpetually pressed for money. An invalid wife, too. And the *keno* tables took the rest. Well, he didn’t blame him—not now. He wouldn’t trouble Doc’s sleep, poor devil! He would write something in his notebook to set the horse-wrangler’s conscience at ease. Finish clean.

“Galoped pony over edge in dark”—something

like that.

Painfully he felt in his pocket for the little book but could not find it. Must have dropped it as he fell. His fingers fumbled about the rocks without success; then his hand touched steel—his rifle barrel. Laboriously, breathing heavily with the pain of moving, he drew the Winchester toward him. Cold sweat dewed his forehead; multi-colored devils danced before his fogged vision. He closed his eyes, biting back a groan. Then, his brain clearing as he lay quiet, he slowly drew the weapon before him, examining it carefully. It was undamaged, and there was still one cartridge left in the breech.

Well, one was enough—all he needed. There would be no eternity of waiting now, no age-long hours of thirst, starvation and pain in the blaze of a Mexican sun, with red-headed buzzards circling low above and loathly vultures perched like sentinels on the lips of the *arroyo*, waiting; no tortured eternities while coyotes slunk nearer and nearer, biding their hour.

Freedom was at hand; in his hand, the Mercy Shot, as they said south of the border. It would come in a flash, swift and merciful. He was not troubled by any question of ethics; circumstances are stronger than laws. His life was his own and he was merely speeding the inevitable. He would take the muzzle in his teeth, press the trigger with his toe, and . . .

Carefully laying the rifle down beside him, he crooked his left leg backward and began to unlace the boot. Drops of agony broke out on his forehead, his breath whistled brokenly through clenched teeth. Only two more eyes—and this torture would be over. A moment's rest, a last cigarette, then—*el tiro di gracia!*

His hands were fumbling on the last eye of his boot when a sudden noise as of something struggling wildly a few yards on his right halted his groping fingers, brought his head swiftly around, dulled senses whipped into alertness, every hair standing on end at the strange sound.

"Who's there?" he greeted, his startled voice echoing in the night. "Who's there?"

There was no answer to his hail, and the noise stilled as suddenly as it had begun. The moon had lifted clear of the *arroyo* walls and was flooding the wash with milky light. Gilroy peered long in the direction from which the noise had come. And finally his eyes made out a curious shadow against

the far side of the gulch. As he watched, it moved, bobbed up and down quickly several times, kicking and thrashing against the stones, then lay still. An animal of some sort, in difficulty. Again there came to Gilroy's listening ears the wail of the coyote, much nearer this time.

"That buck—that buck I hit," he muttered. Half-blind with pain it had fallen headlong into the *arroyo* and was too crippled to get out.

"This happened to be an off day for me," Gilroy groaned. "My God, what a mess! What a hell of a mess! All three of us—the pony, me and you—broken to bits and piled up in the bottom of this damned gully. And all my fault!"

The buck struggled and floundered afresh, beating wildly against the stones like an imprisoned bird against a window.

Gilroy cursed. Poor brute! Must be going through the same torture that he was—worse, maybe. And all this mess through a rotten shot. But for that blunder the buck would be out of pain now, the dead pony comfortably corralled and munching his feed, and he himself lazily lounging in his low adobe hacienda with its fireplace, Navajo rugs and crackling logs, his Airedale sprawled before the hearth. Yes, and he would have been deep in the packet of Continental papers that had arrived but yesterday, with his pipe for company. Instead . . . Hell, he wished he had another cartridge so he could put that poor beast out of its misery before he went west. But there was no second cartridge, so there was no more to be said. He slipped off his boot. The buck sighed twice, brokenly.

"Want my last cartridge, eh?" Gilroy snarled. "Well, you won't get it—it's booked—so give over."

He stripped off his sock to give his big toe plenty of play, and slowly rolled and lighted a cigarette, inhaling deeply. His rifle lay in his lap.

Just a few moments more, the length of a cigarette, then—Good-bye, life. Well, he had no kick. It had been good, full-flavored and with plenty of sauce. He had few regrets. His debts were all paid, he could—the buck moaned, long drawn and quivering. Gilroy slowly pushed the muzzle of the Winchester away from his face. Were all his debts paid? He was leaving a "runner" on the debit side to soil his record of a clean hunting sportsman, abandoning a poor, mangled animal to a fate he dared not face himself.

"Dared not!" Ugly words, but—true. "Dared

not!" Was he who had breasted forty strong years of life, he who had met fate in bush and jungle and fought it barehanded, was he to cringe before the last few hours? Those other men had seen it out to the finish with heads up, sportsmen to the last. That hunter on the Kalahari might have shot himself with the gun they found beside him. He had not—he had written to his wife. That timber-cruiser in Athabasca might have cut his throat with his knife. He had not—he had carved *Resurgam*. A sudden desire to hold up his head at the finish took possession of Bob Gilroy, a desire to face the end as fearlessly as those other men, an impulse to pay his last debt in full.

He, too, could play the man.

In spite of the white-hot torture in his leg he slowly twisted around and brought the stock of the rifle to his shoulder. The moonlight washed the *arroyo* walls with silver; the dark blot of the wounded buck lay plain. Unsteadily he brought his rifle to bear upon it. The moon rays touched the foresight with a white spark as he pressed the trigger; a jet of flame sputtered into the night, the crash of the report roared up out of the *arroyo* and went echoing away across *El Valle del Diabolo*, shattering the silence. The buck jerked itself in the air, fell and lay still.

Bob Gilroy sank back among the stones, shaken with hysterical laughter until merciful unconsciousness took him in its arms.

GRAY mists, cool and soothing, swirled all about him. He had a holiday from school, and was on the cliffs of Mohor looking across Galway Bay. Presently the sun would come out and he would see Aran far away—a blue smudge on a silver sea. Billy Scarlett walked out of the mists and waved his hand to him; Billy Scarlett killed in Ecuador years ago. There were others who followed him—Terry Shane, mauled by a lioness on the Tana River in '13; Dick Anthony, Frank Garst, Carlo Rangoni—killed on the Western front.

Friends of his youth, true and trusted, "men slain in fight with their bloody mail about them" come back to him out of the mist of years across the meads of asphodel. They nodded and smiled, but when he held out his hand he could not touch them, the swirling and writhing tatters of mist separated them still. Their smiling faces faded; he called—"Billy! Terry!" There was no answer; they were gone.

The fog curled and eddied about him again, charged with light now. In a minute it would split apart and he would see Aran across a sparkling sea. What was it?—something had him by the shoulder, pulling, shaking him. Instantly the roseate mists faded like wind-blown smoke; swift, bitter consciousness flashed into his being once more. He was in the *arroyo*, under his roan pony, in mortal pain and they—the foul bush undertakers—had come for him already. With a choked cry he tried to sit up, grasp his rifle—he would club the first skulker—then sank back weakly, staring. The anxious face of Juan Urbalejo, his Yaqui herd boss, was bending over him.

"*Señor?*" he whispered again.

Slowly Bob Gilroy raised an unsteady hand and felt the arm of the little Indian. "My God, are you real?" he asked.

"The *señor* drop hees leetle book by the corral. An' I follow his pony's trail in the moonlight an' bring eet to heem—so." The Yaqui held up Gilroy's notebook. "The boss ees hurt?" he finished anxiously.

Relief, overwhelming, inexpressible relief and release from death swept through and through Bob Gilroy like some magic flood. Life—glorious, infinite Life was his once more. Yet still he did not quite comprehend.

"But—but what made you look for me—my spoor—way out *here?*"—weakly.

"I hear one shot, *señor*," the Yaqui answered simply.