

# Preacher of the Pecos

*by C. E. Edmonson*

The road he took was closer to a trail than the roads he had known back East in Virginia. Every strike of Sunset's hooves threw up a cloud of dust that hung in the still air, splitting the sun's rays into a million parts. Josh was cautious enough to toss an occasional glance over his shoulder—whoever attacked Elijah might be still around—but his thoughts drifted as he continued on.

Off to his right, the banks of the Pecos were lined with trees and brush, their green leaves contrasting sharply with the browned scrub to the west. The river itself was out of sight between its banks, and Josh was instantly reminded of Shiloh and the Hornet's Nest. The Yanks had set up a defensive line on a sunken road and they were dug in hard enough to repel attack after attack. It wasn't until late afternoon, when the Rebels took a knoll above the road, that the tide turned—a tide of blood as it turned out. The Confederates were able to fire down onto the road, fire at will, almost every shot finding flesh.

Only a few months later, Josh watched the same scene unfold at Antietam, only this time reversed, with Rebel defenders packed together like sardines in a can, maybe the worst thing they could have done. Every musket ball fired from the Union position seemed to draw blood.

Josh wasn't in the road at either battle. He'd been a way off, still in the fighting but in a protected position and relatively safe. And so, he'd watched as the hours passed, the bodies piled up, and the blood pooled in every crevice. At times the artillery fire had been continual, a single explosion, a single flash of flame and smoke that

went on and on until the soldiers beneath those deadly shells preferred the gates of hell to another minute under the barrage.

But there was no escape while the war continued, and Josh had followed a trail that ran from one hell to another, one battle to another, from First Manassas to Fredericksburg to Vicksburg, all the way to Appomattox, until he saw, whenever he closed his eyes, piles of amputated limbs awaiting a burial of their own, until he heard in the quiet of the early morning, not the call of the awakened birds, but the screams of the maimed and dying.

He'd carried that memory with him after the war, a man of violence accepting jobs that required violence—first as an enforcer for the Union-Pacific, then as a hired gun in two range wars, the Colfax County War in New Mexico and the Lee-Peacock Feud, then as the marshal in the mining town of Railford, where he acted solely in the interests of the Jubilee Mining Association. Josh put down no roots at any of these stops, took no wife, built no home, so he never had a reason to stay, and after a time he became lost to himself and to the world. He wandered in the wilderness, the great canyons of Arizona where the rising sun turned the cliffs into castles of gold, the Nebraska prairie amid herds of buffalo that appeared to be a single shaggy beast, its body rippling as its cropped grasses swayed in time to a perennial wind, the Rocky Mountains where snowcapped peaks spoke of worlds hidden from the eyes of men.