

## A Time to Kill

*Bud Morris*

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The trip West had not gone well for eighteen-year-old Ehud Martin—at least not since they had left Springfield Missouri for the gold fields in California. In the first place, the wagon train had been caught in a violent thunderstorm on the Santa Fe Trail when they had scarcely gotten into Kansas. Ehud's mother had come down with pneumonia from the cold soaking she had gotten when the wind whipped the canvas cover off their Conestoga wagon. The family withdrew from the wagon train to wait out her illness. The crisis passed within a week, but the good woman was so weak that the family waited along the trail for nearly six weeks before she was well enough to travel again. Ehud and his father set up a trail-side blacksmith shop and made the best of their delay shoeing horses and repairing wagons and wheels for other emigrants. "Be patient, Ehud," the elder blacksmith enjoined his son. "The Lord always knows what is best."

Ehud was a tightly built young man of average height with black curly hair and golden-brown eyes that roved appreciatively over his surroundings. He was left-handed, of stocky build, and had filled out a lot in his seventeenth year. The six weeks that he had smithied along the trail seemed to have toned his already well-muscled body to perfection. There was not an ounce of flab on him.

The entire Martin family came down with cholera shortly after they crossed the Cimarron River. Although Ehud and his father survived the ordeal, his mother and two sisters were buried along the trail. Mr. Martin led his son in a tearful prayer of parting with their loved ones as well as thankfulness for their own survival. "In a sorrowful crisis like this," the good man admonished his son, "if we don't accept that our heavenly Father loves us enough to always do what is best for everyone involved, we are likely to turn away from Him when we need Him the most."

Although the Ehud and his father arrived at Mesilla, New Mexico relatively late in the season, the Southern Emigrant Trail did not present the winter difficulties of the more mountainous Oregon Trail. Desert conditions, outlaws, and possible encounters with Indians would be the primary dangers along the extreme southern Gila section of the route.

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After resting their oxen and restocking their supplies, the Martin blacksmiths left Mesilla for southern California. Because of reports of current disruptions on the Gila Trail, they opted for the more southern Cooke's Wagon Road, which actually breeched the Mexican border for over a hundred miles. Since they had few belongings except for their tools, they were able to make room for a comfortable four barrels of water in their Conestoga. It was nearly Fall when they took to Cooke's Wagon Road.

The Father-and-son team had averaged over ten miles a day for more than two weeks when the banditos hit them. They had hidden their wagon in a clump of cottonwoods on a small creek, and stopped for the night. While they were drinking their coffee early the next morning, six Mexican soldiers came upon them with drawn guns. Resistance would have been foolhardy, and both of the Americans' hands were quickly tied behind their backs.

"How come you are arresting us?" Mr. Martin asked politely.

"You are come to our country illegally," the leader replied.

"Don't you come and go freely without harassment in our country?" Ehad asked.

"I am Pedro. I go wherever I please," the soldier laughed.

"But why are you arresting us?" Mr. Martin continued. "We are peaceful men who don't even carry guns."

"That is why we arrest you, Senior," Pedro laughed. "It is easy to arrest fools."

"We are Christians," Ehad interjected. "We would rather be killed than to kill anyone else."

The renegades finished off the Martins' coffee and remounted their horses. They tethered the captives to two of their mounts and started off at a brisk walk, forcing the prisoners to accompany them on foot. They lashed them maliciously with a small whip whenever they slowed down or attempted to communicate with each other. Although the banditos drank freely from their canteens, the captives were only given water every couple of hours.

Both the blacksmiths were in excellent physical condition, and were able to keep up with the plodding horses without too much trouble. About noon of the third day the party climbed a gigantic barren hill, pausing to rest the horses at the top. The small mountain towered above a deep valley watered by a meandering spring-fed stream. The valley appeared to be about two miles wide and perhaps ten miles long. A good-looking herd of longhorn cattle grazed throughout it. A huge adobe hacienda dominated the eastern end of the valley just before it narrowed into a short blind canyon.

It took another hour for the group to wend their way down the narrow horse path into the valley and on toward the hacienda. A huge white man wearing a ridiculously decorated military-like uniform came out to meet them as they encroached upon the adobe structure. "Ah, the Generalissimo is here," Pedro exclaimed approvingly while they were still out of earshot. "He will pay us well for these men."

"I see you have got them, Pedro," the big man observed. "Come inside for your money. You have earned your wages well."

“Hurry, Pedro,” one of his henchmen urged, “the cantina is still two hours west of here.” Pedro returned shortly with a leather bag full of pesos; and the banditos galloped down a wagon rut and out the southern end of the valley, hastening towards the distant cantina.

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A couple of leering slave drivers with short whips like the banditos had used took immediate possession of the captives. They led them to a row of posts about ten feet tall, each with a rope strung through a pulley near its top. “Don’t display your strength,” Ehad’s Dad warned in a whisper as he was led past the boy to the next post. The victims’ backs were bared and their hands were placed through nooses on the ropes. Finally, their arms were stretched tightly above their heads as the “Generalissimo” arrived.

“I have purchased you as my slaves,” the big man proclaimed brashly. “Now I will show you who is the boss in this valley.” With that introduction, he commenced beating them mercilessly with one of the whips. Neither of the blacksmiths let out so much as a groan, nor would they plead for mercy. When their backs were thoroughly raw with cuts and welts, their arms were released and they were led past a kennel of about twenty snarling bloodhounds and on to one of about thirty one-room adobe huts.

“You will live here,” the taskmasters instructed them. “You will be the blacksmiths that repair the tools in the general’s silver mine. You will be given an adequate ration of rice and beans as long as you are able to work from dawn to dark. Most people last a couple of years or more. Anyone who tries to escape is hunted down by the bloodhounds and executed in front of all the other slaves. No one has ever gotten away, so don’t try it!”

A loud gong awoke the blacksmiths before dawn. They dressed their painful bodies and joined the crowd of miners trudging silently across the valley to the entrance of the silver mine. The mine followed a large horizontal vein of rich silver ore several thousand feet into the hillside. A hand-truck rail ran down the center and out to a small yard just below the mine, where the ore was smelted into rough ingots of low grade raw silver.

The forge was outside the mine about a hundred feet to the left of the entrance. Mr. Martin was put to work repairing tools and straightening and sharpening drill bits while Ehad was assigned to help design whatever was needed in the refinery. Both men were called upon to shoe horses and repair wheels as needed.

When the gong sounded at dusk, the blacksmiths trudded back to their hut with the same silent unemotional crowd of workers. Once inside their hut, the father and son were finally able to begin assessing their situation together.

“They have broken the wills of all the slaves,” Ehad remarked as the elder man put some beans on to boil. “We must act like our wills are broken too, but we must not let it happen to us.”

“You are right, Son,” Mr. Martin agreed. “We must be as meek as sheep and as wily as coyotes. We must pray continually; and with the good Lord’s help we will escape this place.”

The Martins quickly fell into a routine of soaking their beans and rice all day so they would cook more quickly in the evenings. There was never enough time to cook their rice in the mornings, so they cooked it in the evenings and warmed it up for breakfast in the mornings. Otherwise, they would only get one meal a day.

It didn’t take the blacksmiths long to realize that they had it easy compared to the miners. As long as they feigned a fair degree of fear of the slave drivers they were more or less left alone to accomplish their work. It was the miners and smelters that bore the brunt of the bullying of the drivers. They were beaten if they did not extract enough ore from the mine or smelt enough silver from the ore no matter what the cause of their failure to produce might have been. The smithies did their best to keep the equipment in perfect condition to help them maintain adequate production; but fatal beatings were not unusual. Pedro always showed up with appropriate replacements for the dead within a few days.

The Martins had been in the valley for several months when Pedro and his banditos brought in a couple of new slaves just at dusk as the slaves were returning to their huts. The generalissimo was angry that he had come at that time of day, and threatened to have him beaten like a slave. The conciliatory slave trader was somehow able to diffuse the despot’s wrath. Something fell to the ground and bounced into a wash when the outlaw pulled out his bandana to wipe the sweat from his brow as the Generalissimo walked away. In the still of the night Ehud returned the area where the encounter had taken place, and was able to find the huge gold nugget that he had seen fall from Pedro’s pocket in the edge of the wash.

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The Generalissimo’s cattle that roamed the valley were becoming so numerous that they were polluting the water in the river. The despot resented any visible filth in his drinking water so much that he had severely beaten several house servants before someone suggested a well. Because of his strength and integrity Ehud was chosen to dig the well.

The younger smithy dug a nice well about three feet across and ten feet deep without striking water. When the water diviner who had determined the place to dig was about to be executed, Ehud asked if he could lower a smaller person into the rather cramped hole to fill buckets with earth. He would lower the digger into the well and winch the bucketfuls of earth up to the surface until the well was deep enough to strike water. A small recently acquired slave named Lenny, who normally chopped the kindling and kept the hacienda stoves stoked, was assigned to work at the bottom of the well. Ehud’s blood boiled at the crassness of these monsters who were extracting forced labor from a lad so young his voice hadn’t changed yet, but the young man remained remarkably cheerful.

The well-digging went well. Ehud let Lenny down the first thing every morning. He worked tirelessly at the bottom of the well, filling bucket after bucket full of dirt, which Ehud winched up from the bottom and dumped in a nearby wash-out. Lenny kept the well straight by using the bucket and its rope as a

central plumb line. Every couple of hours Ehud winched the energetic little digger up for a breather or a necessary break. Young as he was, Lenny was the only other slave the blacksmiths had met whose personality had not succumbed to the hopelessness of their situation.

During the next several weeks Ehud and Lenny became personal friends. They were careful not to converse any more than necessary in public, but Lenny spent more and more evenings after dark at the Martin hut, hashing out ideas for escape with the blacksmiths. Mr. Martin initially hoped to take all the slaves with them, but Ehud and Lenny convinced him that it would be safer to escape themselves, and bring a militia back to rescue the others. Lenny was always urging prayer on each suggestion that was raised.

Ehud and Lenny were beginning to encounter moist earth at the bottom of the well during their third week of working together. As Ehud was winching Lenny up for a break, he leaned over to get a look at the bottom of the well. The steep downward angle of his vision steered his unsuspecting eyes down the slightly sagging neckline of the front of his companion's sweat-dampened shirt. He caught a momentary glimpse of enough femininity to know that Lenny was a woman before he could avert his innocent eyes.

Ehud's first reaction to what he had seen was anger at being duped; but he was of too fair a disposition to hold that against Lenny for long. Her intrigue had not been directed at him. It was an obvious necessity for her survival in these circumstances. "And," he mused, "she's probably a lot closer to my age than I ever imagined." By the end of the day he was feeling downright protective of the little woman, and maybe a bit possessive as well.

Ehud remained relatively quiet throughout the discussion at the Martins' hut that evening. He could hardly keep his eyes off of Lenny's cleverly veiled figure. She was intelligent, she was small, she was lithe, and she moved like a woman. In his eyes she was nothing short of feminine perfection!

Mr. Martin addressed his son after their co-conspirator left the hut. "You caught on today?" He asked.

"Yeh, Dad," he answered, "I accidentally saw the evidence. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I only suspected it," the father replied. "How do you feel about it?"

"I'm loving her more by the minute."

"Then go get her, Son. She's a delightful Christian young lady"

The next evening Mr. Martin winked at his son and stepped out to the outhouse as Lenny rose to leave their hut. The enchanted young man wasted no time in moving in close to hug the girl. She started to pull away; and then suddenly locked her hands around his neck and pulled his head down into a kiss. "I thought you'd never see me for what I am," she giggled as she released him.

"Honey," he whispered, "we've got to get out of here before the Generalissimo figures it out."

That evening the two Martin men talked most of the night.

“The way I figure it,” Mr. Martin said pensively the next morning, “the Generalissimo keeps everything so tightly controlled under his own fist that no part of this outfit can function without his personal say-so. All we have to do is take him out, and there’ll be so much confusion about who’s supposed to do what that we’ll have enough time to commander some guns and horses and get away.”

“I think you are right, Dad” Ehud replied. But how are we going to do that without killing him?

“It is time to kill him, Mr. Martin stated emphatically. “Do you really think we should let him live to continue working men to death and murdering those who don’t submit to him? He is a wicked mass murderer who will continue killing others as long as he can get by with it; and the Mexican government is tolerating his murder of Americans because of the ill will between the two countries. How many more people will die if we don’t kill him?”

“Much as I hate it, I have to admit that you are right, Dad,” Ehud agreed reluctantly. “Let’s form a definitive plan as soon as Lenny gets here tonight.”

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The plan that the three enslaved prisoners developed that evening was simple. When the well was finished Lenny would undoubtedly return to her normal job in the house. She would watch for where the guns were stored, and find out where the key was kept if possible. When she knew, she would report it at their nightly meeting at the hut. The blacksmiths were familiar with the stables because they frequented them to re-shoe the horses. They would be choosing which mounts they should abscond with as opportunity presented itself. Ehud would secretly forge himself a double-edged dagger about a foot long to do away with the Generalissimo. When the time was right, he would lure the Generalissimo within reach with Pedro’s nugget, by telling him he had discovered gold in the valley. Like his namesake in the Bible, the left-handed blacksmith would strike a fatal blow into the murderous despot’s innards. Lenny suggested that they do it at siesta time, because she had noted that the bodyguard generally slept just outside the generalissimo’s door during the big man’s siesta.

Lenny would unlock the kitchen door for Ehud and hide in the gun closet. She would arm herself, and wait for Ehud’s coded knock. She would be selecting the guns while Mr. Martin proceeded to the stables, ostensibly to re-shoe one of the horses. Ehud would disable the general’s body guard, strike the general, take his gun and keys, and meet Lenny at the gun closet. They would bring the guns to the stables where Mr. Martin would be saddling the horses.

A week later everything was in readiness for siesta-time, just after the noon meal at the hacienda. Ehud entered by the unlocked kitchen door and slipped silently towards the Generalissimo’s apartment. As Lenny had suggested, the body guard was sleeping peacefully just outside the door. A solid blow to the head with the iron handle of the heavy dagger knocked him out of the action, probably for several hours. Ehud bound and gagged him before replacing the dagger back into the sheath that dangled through the slit pocket in the left side of his pants.

Ehud slipped quietly into the Generalissimo's office with the huge nugget between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. Much as he hated it, the time to kill had arrived. Suddenly he was aware that the huge man was sitting at his desk watching him with his cocked side arm in his hand. Amusement played in the corners of his mouth as he turned his chair toward the cornered blacksmith and voiced the question, "Yes?"

"General," Ehud whispered conspiratorially, rolling the nugget tantalizingly between his outstretched fingers. "I have found gold between the huts and the mine. I didn't think you would want anyone else to know of it yet."

The despot's eyes literally glittered as he reached out to take possession of the nugget. Just as he had it between his fingers, the dagger in Ehud's left hand struck him full force through the belly. The stricken despot let out a muffled grunt and slowly fell forward to the floor. Leaving the dagger completely buried in the wound, Ehud took up the fallen handgun and removed the key-ring from the clip on the dying desperado's belt before proceeding to the gun closet.

Fear struck Ehud in the gut as he realized that Lenny was not answering his knock at the closet door. Retracing his steps, he found her bound and gagged inside the Generalissimo's bed chamber. She motioned him to silence as he untied her bonds, and they slipped quietly to the gun closet together. Taking the key-ring from Ehud's hand, she flipped directly to the right key. When they were inside he closed the door and folded her tightly into his arms. "Did he hurt you?" he asked

"No, he caught me when I slipped into his office to get the key. No telling what would have happened if you hadn't come, 'cause he knew that I was a woman the moment he grabbed me. Then he heard the sound when you hit the bodyguard and realized that someone else was coming."

After a brief kiss that somehow promised more, the couple gathered three Jennings repeater rifles and three gun belts with full bullet loops and two revolvers apiece. They were approaching the stables before the first confused alarm sounded from the hacienda.

The armed escapees had no trouble securing the stables. The unsuspecting guard wisely yielded to their arms and was bound and gagged. The few slaves who were mucking the stalls barely responded when promised release in the near future. They just kept on working while the escapees saddled their horses. Knowing that they had no idea where to find water along the way, the run-aways confiscated four canteens full apiece. Confusion still reigned at the hacienda as the trio galloped towards the trail that led out of the valley.

Once out of the valley, the fugitives rode at a brisk trot northward towards the U.S. border for an hour or so, finally slowing to a brisk walk. They rode more cautiously as night came on, navigating northward by the stars. They happened on a small stream at sunrise, where they watered the horses and refilled their canteens. They were leery of camping anywhere near the water because they knew that's what would be expected of them. They finally stopped in a concealed draw to get some sleep and rest the horses in the shade until nightfall.

Ehud took the first watch while Mr. Martin and Lenny got some sleep. He awakened them around noon-time when he detected the dust of a rather large company of men coming in their general direction. The fugitives saddled up and walked their horses up to the edge of the draw where they could observe group. After an hour or so they were able to determine that a U.S. Calvary detachment was approaching.

Mr. Martin insisted that Lenny and Ehud remain hidden while he rode out to contact the group. If he kept his hat on, the two younger people would know that it was safe to join the group, but if he took it off, they were to remain hidden and make their way back to the U.S. border, where they could obtain help.

Two soldiers from the group rode out to intercept Mr. Martin. After identifying themselves as U.S. Army soldiers, they politely took possession of the fugitive's arms, escorting him back to their captain. As they approached the captain, they asked the blacksmith to dismount. The captain also dismounted and walked up to the visitor.

"Hello," the captain greeted his visitor, stretching out his hand. "I'm Captain Rodgers, U.S. Calvary."

"I'm Nathaniel Martin, a U.S. citizen, and I'm very glad for this fortunate meeting," Mr. Martin replied, clasping the captain's hand in a warm handshake. "I'm on my way back to the U.S. after having escaped slavery in a Mexican silver mine."

"We have breached the Mexican border in search of a notorious slave trader who masquerades as a Mexican Soldier," the captain explained. "He has been kidnapping pioneers along the Gila Trail as well as Cooke's Road. He waylaid a couple of our soldiers above the border a two-days ride west of here three days ago. Our official goal is to get them back"

"That wouldn't be Pedro by any chance, would it?"

"That's what he calls himself."

"Captain," Mr. Martin exclaimed eagerly, "we can lead you to a silver mine where he sells some, if not all, of his captives. We took out the Generalissimo that ran the mine, and escaped in the subsequent confusion. There are about forty hopeless slaves still there. If Pedro takes your men there, he will have the initiative to take over the operation. Are you prepared to rescue that many men who's wills are so broken that they will be unable to help you?"

"I have fifty men in case we encounter resistance from the rather undisciplined Mexican Army," Captain Rodgers replied. "Do you have others?"

"Just my son and the girl that escaped with us," Mr. Martin replied. "They'll be riding in here just as soon as they are sure it is safe. I have already given them the signal. She'll be impersonating a man, and I wouldn't try to disarm them if I were you. He'd fight to the death for that woman."

“Understood,” The captain agreed. “Sargent, restore Mr. Martin’s arms to him and welcome his two companions as allies when they ride up. “I think I see them in the distance now.”

That evening the captain, a scout, and the three escapees gathered in the captain’s tent to plan a rescue operation. “We will assume a certain amount of organization, especially if Pedro is there,” Captain Rodgers mused. “I want Pedro and his group taken prisoner for prosecution in the U.S.A.”

“I hope you will take the taskmasters and guards too”, Lenny suggested.

“Unfortunately, their crimes were committed entirely in Mexico, and cannot be prosecuted by the U.S.A.,” the captain replied, “but we know that many of Pedro’s kidnappings occurred well inside the U.S.A.”

“Can we legally take the rescued slaves back to the U.S.A.?” Ehud asked.

“Actually, the international legality of this entire mission is questionable,” the captain answered. “We are justifying it as an attempt to rescue two U.S. soldiers. Whatever else we do will be off the record unless we get challenged by the Mexican Army. I hope to capture Pedro and his banditos who all pose as Mexican soldiers, complete the rescue, and be back on U.S. soil within five days if possible.”

“Captain,” Mr. Martin stated, “These slaves are so psychologically damaged that they will probably need to be cared for for the rest of their lives. With your permission, I’d like to suggest that Ehud, Lenny, and I be allowed to bring any of the mines silver ingots we can find back to the U.S.A. on pack horses so we can establish a fund for their care. That way no one can accuse the army of robbing a Mexican mine.”

“The army elects not to interfere with anything the victims of the mine, including yourselves, confiscate as remuneration for their forced labors,” the captain assured him. “The slaves will also need horses to get them back to the U.S.A.”

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Two mornings later the strategists were glassing the “Generalissimo’s” valley from the trail, planning their attack. Someone was obviously in control, as everything seemed to be operating normally again. Even as they watched, a pack train of a dozen horses was being loaded with ingots at the smelter.

“I guess Pedro, or whoever is running things, is planning to ride out with the silver this morning,” the captain observed. “If we are patient we can let him have the honor of bringing it up the trail for us.”

“They may go out the rut at the western end of the valley,” Mr. Martin warned.

“We could stage our assault from that end of the valley, then,” the captain mused. “We’ll send two groups of fifteen men each in from the west, and keep twenty men at the trail’s head. They’ll see our forces coming and try to escape up the trail where the rest of us will be waiting. We’ll capture the horses and men from whichever way they come.”

The two groups were hastily organized and sent to enter the western edge of the valley. Ehud guided one group and Lenny, whose gender had not been disclosed to the men, guided the other.

As the captain had surmised, Pedro and his banditos headed up the trail when the lower forces were detected. They were dragged from their horses one-by-one as each one rounded a hairpin turn in the trail. The pack-train of silver was left to Mr. Martin's disposal.

There was no resistance to the soldiers' take-over of the valley. The missing soldiers, though painfully beaten, were recovered. The employees of the establishment were detained to delay any possible communications with the Mexican army until the convoy was ready to leave.

Lenny took charge of the slaves. They were accustomed to following orders without questions, so she ordered them to mount whatever horses could be found for them without giving them any explanation that might render them too uneasy to cooperate. Those too dependent to ride alone rode double behind whatever soldiers took pity on them. The whole group was ready to leave the valley by noon. Just before their departure the soldiers stampeded the employees' horses towards the western edge of the valley to give the convoy more time yet to reach the U.S. border ahead of any Mexican army interference. The whole convoy crossed safely into the U.S.A. without incident.

When the convoy finally reached Tucson, Mr. Martin sold the low-grade silver ingots to the bank for a fair price. He deposited most of the sizable amount of money to the Slave Miners Rehabilitation Fund, and set about establishing a not-for-profit organization to administer the funds. As the first president of the organization, he hired a sympathetic full-time supervisor to build a home for and oversee the care of these unfortunate people. By common consent, the Martins kept enough of the commandeered money to replace their wagon, beasts, blacksmithing tools, and the cash that they had lost in the incident. The mine owed them much more than that.

Pedro and his side-kicks were condemned to death for multiple kidnappings by a military tribunal; and the army hanged them without further ado. Lenny began wearing women's clothing the moment they reached civilization. She proved to be a graceful and sparkling young woman; and Ehud wasted no time in sparking her. They were married within a month of their arrival in Tucson. Since the California gold rush was tapering off rapidly, the elder and younger Martins remained in Tucson, where the men established a respected and successful blacksmith shop. Lenny became the mother of three sons that favored the Martins and a daughter that looked just like herself.