

## Winner President's Cup 2006

### Forecoach

Ed Trunnion was a hell of a driver. I'll always remember that about him, God rest his whiskey-sodden soul. Never saw him hurt a horse, but to watch his whip hand was like trying to outguess a rattler in a bad mood and the horses didn't know the difference between show and for real - and they sure minded Ed.

It still seems to me it was a waste of a good man when that big, soft, lead slug took Ed between the eyes and splattered the inside of his head over me and the rest of the forecoach. It made the reins so slippery I had trouble pulling in the team left-handed, trying with the other to bring the shotgun to bear on the single rider sitting his horse about ten yards left of the road,

Riding on the forecoach, you get a good view of the road up ahead of the lead pair. Except for the sun behind us, it had to be better than being cooped up inside on those fancy, upholstered cushions that turn into stone slabs the further you get from the staging post.

I guess I'd missed the kid because he was sitting so still.

Now, I took in the Sharp's buffalo rifle, resting butt down on his right thigh and calculated that he'd made quite a shot, considering the speed and distance the coach had traveled in the last half minute.

We sat there, squinting at each other through the fine Tucson dust we'd dragged with us, the team creaking and blowing. I weighed up my chances with the scatter-gun, one handed, the horses still jawing at the bit and pulling me about with my arms crossed, and I decided against it.

The kid was more lean than skinny, and there was something about his eyes that the shadow of his hat didn't hide. The sorry horse looked like it'd been promoted overnight from the plough to the saddle. If the damn Sharp's hadn't been there, like some sort of undertaker's calling card, I might have chanced it and blown the kid out of his scuffed work boots. I'd loaded the twelve gauge with loopers and I reckon it would have been a mercy to take that nag along with him to hell.

I moved Ed's leaking corpse off my lap and tried to ignore the sound the remains of his head made when it hit the footboard. This was damn embarrassing, I thought, listening to the sounds of indignant passengers moving this way and that under my butt.

Then the coach door opened and someone stepped down. I was watching the kid and hanging onto the team, so I didn't have time to look, but the voice reminded me just who we were carrying back there.

"Now see here, sir. We are not pleased to be detained thus. What is your purpose?" just like he was still performing Shakespeare on the stage back in Tucson where I'd first seen him.

The kid hardly changed expression, but I could see he was taken aback for a moment. Most people reacted like that on meeting Mr Jethro Halliwell the Third the first time round. I sneaked a look down to my left and took in that thick mane of white hair spilling over a midnight blue cape secured at the throat with gold cords. In heat that had horned toads looking for shade and killed good horses if you pushed them too hard, I'd wondered about the cape, but I would have given anything to copy the way he had of swirling it. It gave him such an air of mystery and grandeur.

The kid let the barrel of the Sharp's drop through ninety degrees. Even at this distance, the muzzle bore looked like the mouth of a tunnel to somewhere I'd rather not think about. He took his time, and when he spoke, it was to Halliwell, the Sharp's indicating him with an impatient little jerk, "You. Git yer stuff."

Halliwell didn't get it any more than I did. "I can assure you, young man, my effects are of little value. Mere accoutrements of the thespian profession. Costumes and paste jewellery - no more!" Even in these circumstances, he might have been under lights on a stage the way he stood, one fist on a forward thrust hip and the other outflung at the trunk that poor Ed, cussing under one of his last breaths, had lashed to the baggage rack.

"Git it." said the kid. Halliwell started to argue, then thought better of it, showing he wasn't as vain foolish as I'd thought by climbing up and untying the trunk. I didn't move to help him, what with the team and me watching for a chance to take the kid. Anyway, with Jethro Halliwell the Third doing anything in the immediate vicinity, one tended to take on the role of background scenery, like stage props in this latest scene in his life.

Halliwell's trunk hit the dirt upside down with a thud but the catches held, and it stood there, dust hanging in the still air. "Pick it up!" rasped the kid. Now, I'd seen how Ed struggled to lift that trunk, so when Halliwell took hold of one worn leather handle, braced himself, and swung the thing onto his shoulder, I was impressed.

I was less impressed by the way the kid spirited him away from us, with just a jerk of his head, a gesture with the Sharp's and a nudge to the ribs of his tired horse. Jethro Halliwell the Third tramped away to the West, away from the coach, as though this was another rehearsed thing he had to do. I sat there, watching them grow smaller and less defined in the heat haze through which they plodded away from us.

It was then that I handed the reins to the little snake oil salesman who'd joined me, hitched my jeans and took off on foot. With the sun behind me, I surely hoped my direction would bring me across the path of that gangly figure again - slouching in his saddle and taking away my whole purpose in life like that and with such ease. Not a lot of people could understand how much a stage-guard could take that sort of thing to heart. Myself, I reckoned it was up to me to go fetch back my pride.

Halliwell was a toiling, silhouetted speck, his burden like a huge, awkward hump on his shoulders with the horse and rider following along at a leisurely pace behind, that long Sharp's rifle erect as a trooper's lance on escort duty. They were heading for the distant, shadowy opening to a gulch in the low cliffs that had angled away from us on the left since Tucson. I stepped out, Indian pace, to where some sort of antelope trail led to the top of the butte, praying the kid didn't look back, even with the sun in his eyes.

I was blowing worse than the team by the time I reached the start of the trail and I still had a hundred feet to go to the mesa above. Somehow I made it, but I was pretty done in when I did. Up here, there was a breeze of sorts and it cooled me just enough to put one foot in front of the other and head for the break in the mesa surface that marked the edge of the canyon.

Round about now, I'd lost hope of catching up to the kid and his prisoner, but something kept me going until I buckled at the edge of the cleft and lay there with my face on my arms, gasping enough to stir dust into my eyes. The left hammer of the scatter-gun was digging painfully into my sweating face but I couldn't move. Eventually, I dragged myself forward to peer over the lip. There was nothing to see. Of course, they would have entered the narrow way and passed right through the butte to wherever it led. I dropped my face back on my arms and tried to cope with the fire in my chest.

After a while, I rolled over on my back. Buzzards were circling up there, the way they do when anything lies too long in the sun without moving. I lay there, staring at them for some time before I realized the sounds breaking the silence weren't the hammering of my heart and my wheezing. It was a voice I'd remember to my grave, distorted and twisted by the angled walls of the canyon but, unmistakably, that of Jethro Halliwell the Third.

Somehow, I got myself upright, moved away from the edge and started off in the direction of the sound. So the kid was still nearby, going through Halliwell's things, like as not. Although I couldn't make out the words, there was something familiar about the way the voice rose and fell. Squinting across the mesa, I could see the two jagged edges of the canyon separating further and further until it opened up into some sort of hidden place that you wouldn't guess was there. I got down and crawled forward to the nearest lip with cover. Then I had a look.

The walls were nearly sheer, roughly curved in a lopsided circle around an area that about a million years of flash floods had filled with smooth sand. The sun was getting to be overhead, so the place was lit up. I couldn't see the kid or his horse, but in the center of the sand was Jethro Halliwell the Third. His open trunk stood off to one side with some things hanging out of it. He had a sword in his hand.

For a moment I admired his courage, although it seemed a fool thing to challenge someone holding a Sharp's on you. Then Halliwell moved and started speaking again, and I realized he was acting.

I also realized the kid must be directly below me, taking advantage of the shade thrown by my side of the canyon. Halliwell was sweating heavily, working at his trade out there in the sun. I didn't understand much of what he said, although "Now, Tybalt, take the villain back again" and a lot of stuff about "Mercutio's soul a little way above their heads" seemed to make some sense although he was talking to himself. Suddenly, he yelled "This shall determine that!" lunging forward with the sword and fencing with the empty air.

Just as suddenly, he stopped, looking down as if he'd skewered somebody. Then he threw his arms wide and screamed at the sky, "Oh, I am fortune's fool!" before running crazily away across the sand. I could see he was real upset. There was nowhere to go, and he would have fetched up against the far cliff-face, but the running must have spooked the kid because the Sharp's boomed once and a huge spout of sand kicked up next to Halliwell's pounding feet.

Up where I was, I clapped my free hand over my ear - the magnified echoes alone were enough to make your head ring - and Halliwell stopped his performance in shock. Shaky, he started walking back, the sword trailing along in a limp right hand.

"Bravo," drawled the kid from somewhere beneath me, "Another one". Halliwell opened his hands in silent appeal, and the same, dead quiet voice said "Another one."

Shoulders slumped, Halliwell dropped the sword to bend over his open trunk and root about. He shut the trunk and sat on the lid, his chin on his fist, looked at the grinning skull in his hand and started off,

"Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times . . ." and on and on in the strange language I'd heard actors use instead of plain English. That voice and his gestures even made me watch and listen and feel something move inside, without understanding why. I reckon it must have had the same effect on the women who flocked to see all his performances in the lamp-lit livery stable he rented when he came to Tucson.

It probably explained why he was seldom seen around after dark and why the lamp in his room at the Royal Hotel was usually out by 8.

Suddenly, the scene below me changed. Halliwell was delving into his trunk again and this time he came out with a balance scale and a knife and a sort of stocking cap and launched into another of his monologues. It had something to do with a pound of flesh and he seemed to be talking to some Portia person. I moved to where Halliwell could see me - if only he would look up. He was pacing up and down, and seemed to have shrunk in his clothes. His shoulders were hunched - like a man against big odds. At last, he swung around, arms outstretched, the little scales see-sawing in his hand, and looked skyward as though appealing for justice. It was then that he saw me.

I reckon Halliwell deserved more than the usual applause for his presence of mind. A lot of men in his position would have plainly showed they'd seen salvation, but he just went on as though I was a rock. A rock with a scattergun and a restless trigger-finger, peering and craning to get a glimpse of the kid hard up against the wall of the arroyo below me. Try as I could, I couldn't see him to get in a shot.

Halliwell walked away from the cliff, towards the centre of his open-air stage, and started another scene, but whispering this time. Mind you, a whisper from Halliwell the Third was still something to hear, although those in the cheap seats would have to lean some to get the meaning.

So, I guess, when the kid moved forward to follow the lines, he was like any theatre lover under the Halliwell spell. It took him just far enough out of the shadow of the cliff for me. I could only see his head and shoulders about forty feet below me, but it was enough. Like I said, that scattergun was loaded with loopers and I let him have the first barrel. The bang scared that old horse out of the shade and in the first jump it carried the kid, dying in the saddle, right up to where Halliwell was standing, almost knocking him over until he put a hand on the bridle and stopped the horse. The kid slowly toppled into the sand at his feet. I could see there'd be no need for the second barrel.

Halliwell and the kid were out of sight when I found a way down to the bottom - and when I came out into the sunlit circle of sand it was to see Jethro Halliwell the Third with the Sharp's in his hands and the kid lying sprawled just where I'd last seen him. His face was unrecognizable. Halliwell was white-faced and shocked, but he called out

"Aah, good custodian of travelers. You come upon us at a time of great need. What would have become of us without your steadfast protection one cannot imagine!"

I got the gist of that and a glance at the kid told me he wasn't going to bushwhack any more stages but habit kept me holding the shotgun resting easy in the crook of my elbow. I looked round Halliwell's makeshift stage, at the disturbed sand and the acting things scattered where he'd dropped them. The sun caught something shiny beside the kid and I walked over and picked it up. It was a locket on a broken chain. The sort of thing women like to wear.

"More stage frippery! A bauble from a scene I enact. It must have been caught up in one of the other things I took out. Ohh . . . this poor deluded soul! What could he have been thinking?"

I popped the catch on the locket and it opened to reveal a picture of Halliwell with a much younger woman looking adoringly up at him. I glanced at him and saw him looking flustered for the first time. "Aah, the guile of painters in light and shadow!! How they toy with the senses - inducing one to believe what one sees!"

I looked from the locket to Halliwell and back at the locket. "Sure looks like you, Mister Halliwell. Come to think on it, the lady here kinda favours the boy - the way he was, I mean. Kin it be that...?" I was stuck for words.

Maybe Halliwell was also stuck because he seemed to undergo some sort of change and became more like normal folks. Actually he went quite a couple steps back next time he spoke.

"Shute, Missa Stage Guard! - yuh got it all figgered out, thas' for sure! Yer done seen through a whole mess o' Halliwell pertence. Not a lot o' folk woulda done' that..... Pity!"

Just the tone of that one word – "Pity" – saved my life for sure. I swung to face him as the Sharp's came up and for a long moment it was Mexican stand-off. Him, with the muzzle of the Sharp's pointed at my chest. Me with the barrel of the scatter-gun snuggled into my left elbow and casting a shadow across his belly, my finger on the second trigger.

"Man got a reppitation t'uphold, lessen he want ter end up lak all the rest! Y'all know . . . man cain't let one little slip with some dirt farmer's ho' take all *this* away fum him." His sweeping gesture took in the littered sand where a short while ago, he'd been acting for his life.

Watching this part of the Halliwell show, I was a little slow and as his hand came back, he snatched off a shot that, with a millisecond better timing, could have punched a hole through my chest big enough to drive the stage through. Thing with shotguns, they seldom miss, and the loopers tumbled Halliwell backwards in an untidy, surprised heap next to the kid on the sand.

After a bit, he coughed a few times and got up on one elbow. Like I said, he was real tough for an actor. In that state, he reverted to being Halliwell, although, with all that hoarse rattling, it was plainly not going to be for long. I watched him gather his last strength to say something. As usual, it didn't make much sense to me.

"As thou'rt a man, give me the cup: let go; by heaven, I'll have it. O God! Horatio, what a wounded name! Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me. If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, absent thyself from truth a while ... and in this harsh world ... draw thy last breath in pain - to tell my story."

About then, he finally slid down onto his side. I stood there a while, thinking about whether I wanted to go back to all the questions. Reins trailing, the kid's horse was standing head-down and exhausted by the effort of carrying the kid this far. I wasn't going to ask it to hump two bastards back to the stage.

I buried the locket, picked up the Sharp's and the reins and started trudging back out onto the flatland, leaving the Tucson sheriff to make of it what he could – after the buzzards had been.

**Mike Job**