



COTOPAXI

By: Arnon Shorr

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I gotta start with the commotion up 'round Monarch in the spring of '86. That was when William "Mild Bill" Jackson cut the Pass through the Rockies for the D&RG Railroad. It was just after the thaw, and an army of Chinese laborers was dynamiting the hell out of that dip between the peaks. It made the Ute Indians upset, of course, and they sent their delegation over to me in Cañon City to make a fuss. Sensible complaint on their part, but ain't nothin' I could do. I was just the Sheriff.

Then, there was the murders. Couple of Chinese laborers got smashed to bits in their tent one night. I mean *smashed*, like someone heaved a boulder on 'em, rolled it off, then heaved it on 'em again. I ain't never seen anything like that. Heck, I don't think anyone in the entire storied history of the state of Colorado had seen that kind of mangled mess. But that was up at the Monarch Pass, outside my county line, so you can imagine my surprise when Mild Bill showed up in Cañon City and asked for my help.

I liked to stay out of Mild Bill's way. Wasn't gonna clean his dirty laundry for him, but as long as I didn't see it – or smell it – I figured he was gonna do his piece to build Colorado, and I'd do mine to keep it civilized. He played along, too. When his men got themselves in a

dust-up at the saloon, Mild Bill was mighty quick to pony up for bail money and for fixin' up the damage. Next day, everyone was smiles and handshakes. Made it easy to drop charges and avoid trials. Saved the county some hassle.

It wasn't right of me to take on the case. But Mild Bill was sure it was murder, and he wanted me to find the Ute who done it. What was I gonna say? I didn't become Sheriff just to let killers walk. I did tell him, though, I said I wouldn't pin the murder on nobody just on account of a convenient theory. I gotta find real evidence first.

Mild Bill, he had this way of smiling when he talked. It's how he got his name. Even when he said things that were doggone awful, that smile took the sting off. He put on that smile when he said to me, "Sheriff, you know how *impatient* my boys can get. You better clean this up quick."

So I rode up to Monarch and saw the bodies for myself, still in their poses of agony on the outskirts of the Chinese workers' encampment. Skulls crushed, bones pulverized. Looked to me like nothing a human could do. Besides, by then, the Ute used guns like everyone else.

I gave the bodies a cursory review, then turned my attention to their tent – smashed as badly as the bodies were – and its contents. These workers don't have much to begin with – a bit of cash, mementos of home – and as far as I could tell, it was all still there. Nothing stolen. About that time I started figurin' a bear done it. A big, ornery bear. Or something.

A nervous foreman whose English was better'n my Chinese struggled to translate the few eyewitness accounts. The witnesses were plae and shaking, and kept mutterin' something that sounded like *kooafoo*. Poor foreman did his level best to translate. "Giant," he said. "They saw giant."

A giant bear, maybe? It left a trail, marked clearly by broken branches and mangled bushes. The trail led from the newly-carved cliffs of the Pass through the workers' camp and northeast to the pine forest that rolled down the mountain. The thing moved in a straight line, like it was going somewhere in a hurry and couldn't be bothered to walk 'round anything. Not even a worker's tent. That straight line? It pointed right back to Fremont County.

I set off after the creature. It took some coaxing, on account of my horse being jittery. Truth is, I wondered – and I still wonder – if she had it right to be so on-edge. I hoped the killer would get tuckered out and lay down for a spell so we could get the jump on it. Dumb hope, I know, but I had to tell myself *something* or I'd've been just as jittery as my horse.

The thing wasn't hard to follow. The ground was thick with brown pine needles, so there weren't no footprints, but broken and toppled spruce and fir trees marked a clean path eastward along the mountainside. I kept one hand on the reins and another near my holster, and coaxed my horse along.

Soon, I was back in Fremont County, riding through a pleasant mountain meadow. No shattered trees here, but the early spring grasses met their fate under the creature's heavy tread. The mashed grass allowed me to gauge the length of the killer's stride. From one crushed patch to the next, must've been six, seven feet of distance. I remembered – or, maybe sensed is the better word – those rail workers and what they'd said. *Kooafoo*... Maybe it wasn't no bear.

This meadow was familiar, but I wasn't sure why 'til I got to the other side and saw what was left of a quaint little cabin. It was Mad Helen's place, and I been up there a handful of times to dole out some reassurance. Oh, Mad Helen didn't need no reassurin'. It was the townsfolk. See, Mad Helen was an old and ratty woman who lived up here a number of years, and would come down to Salida or Cañon City for provisions now and again. When she did, townsfolk got

all jumpy, made a fuss about the witch in the hills and whatnot. So I'd ride up and pay her a visit. She always laughed about it, offered me a thick sludge she called coffee, and yammered in her funny way about the forest critters that lived nearby. She had the sound of a foreigner, but I never bothered to ask where she come from. Weren't my business. I'd let her talk 'til the coffee was cold, and then I'd bid her farewell. She was odd, but harmless, and that's what I'd tell the downslope folks at the end of the day.

I didn't know what I'd tell them today. Her cabin had the ill luck of being directly in the killer's path. It was a shambles, one whole side of it ripped entirely to pieces. And Helen herself – when I found her – was half-buried in debris.

She wasn't dead. Not yet. I did my best to make her comfortable. I wasn't keen on letting Mad Helen pass on before she could tell me what it was that done this to her.

“Grupitzky.” That's what she muttered. “Find him, down Salida way. The man that does not fit in. Tell him I finished what he started, and he must finish... finish what I...” She didn't have much breath left, and she used all of it to say, “Grupitzky must help you kill the monster.”

I never got to ask her where that accent come from.

I draped a ratty Pendleton blanket over Mad Helen and made a note to come back, bury her proper. Then, I set off again down the straight-as-an-arrow trail of destruction. I noticed it had veered a bit eastward from its original course. As I went on, the lady hermit's words rattled about my troubled mind. *There's someone downslope named Grupitzky who might know what this thing is. Someone who might know how to stop it.* So, to my shivering horse's relief, I turned off the monster's tracks and headed down towards Salida.

If you ever been through our patch of central Colorado, you probably stopped by this vibrant little hamlet on a pretty stretch of the Arkansas River. And at the center of town, the

busiest spot on any given night is the very same wood-paneled saloon that Mild Bill pays to fix up from time to time. It's the sort of place where everyone ends up sooner or later to quench all manner of thirsts. So that's where I went to find the man who doesn't fit in.

I hitched my horse out front and made my way through the usual evening crowd. I heard lots of chatter about the killings. No one knew about Mad Helen yet, but there was plenty of speculatin' about the rail workers. Folks said Mild Bill was gonna send a posse down to the Ute lands to deliver some justice. That's if the Sheriff don't deliver justice first. I reckon they didn't quite notice my badge as I shoved past 'em.

The barman had a familiar face. "Always good to have you, Sheriff," he said. Wasn't true, but he said it to be civil. I ordered a whiskey, tipped generously, and asked about Grupitzky. He took a beat, then nodded toward a bearded man slouched in his seat at the end of the bar. "That's him."

Grupitzky was a slight man, with pale features partly masked by a graying, scraggly beard, and kept in shadow by the brim of a well-worn fedora that sat low on his head. He might've been thirty, or he might've been sixty, or anything in-between. Either way, it looked like Grupitzky had suffered for his years.

"He ain't from here," the barman offered, as if it might explain some things. Then, he added, "I'd be obliged if you convinced him to move on."

"He causin' trouble?" I asked, genuinely surprised. Grupitzky didn't seem the type.

"Nah, not that way," the barman said. "It's just he's always alone. Quiet-like. Keeps a room, pays his bills, but... He never gives the ladies no business. Comes down for meals, but never orders nothin' more'n a plain potato to wash down the whiskey. He's an odd duck, if y'ask me. Harmless, but I'm losing money while he takes up space."

The barman excused himself to serve other customers, as a waitress swooped by and set a plate with a single steaming spud in front of Grupitzky. I watched him pull a knife from his pocket and slice himself a piece of potato. He stabbed the slice with his knife, brought it to his lips, muttered something, then blew the steam away and took a cautious bite. *A man who doesn't fit in.*

I took my drink with me and sidled over to him. "Scuse me, are you Grupitzky?" He flinched a little. Must've been a while since someone's come up and sprung conversation on him. He took my measure with patient, sad eyes. At last, he said, "with respect, law man, I *am* David Grupitzky. And I prefer to eat alone." He shared that strange way of speaking with Mad Helen. The words were clear, but they come out just a little bit *different*.

I took the seat next to him. "I prefer my meals in private, too, but I got some questions that want answerin'."

Grupitzky huffed and turned back to his lone potato. As he turned, I caught the glint of a pistol peeking out of his jacket. A Colt? Nestled neatly in a shoulder holster.

I tried again to get him talking. "You ain't from around here, are you?"

Without looking up, he replied, "No one is from here. Except the Indians. And they probably come from someplace, too."

I wasn't sure what he was gettin' at. I was born in Colorado Springs. I wasn't from no place else. Grupitzky noted my puzzled expression and let me off the hook. "So, *nu?* You come to find me, and now I am found. Why?"

"You heard of the killings up by Monarch Pass?"

Grupitzky glowered at his potato. "I am disinclined to listen to rumors."

“Ain’t no rumor. A couple of Chines workers were...” I searched for – but couldn’t find – a strong enough word, “...murdered.”

“And they blame the Ute Indians.”

I smiled. “So you *do* listen to rumors.”

Grupitzky turned to me with fury in his eyes. “The railroad men, they are planning a *pogrom!*”

“A what?” I asked.

“The railroad is going to *murder* Indians tomorrow, and the law man wastes his time talking to an old immigrant about *nothing*. Is this the justice that you pursue?” His judgment was pointed, precise and absolute. I couldn’t find words to reply, so he turned away and stabbed the last chunk of potato. “No, I am not from around here, but I have seen this happen before, and I will play no part in it.”

I knew Mild Bill’s men were impatient. Heck, he warned me about that. I just figured I’d have a week or two. Grupitzky was right, I wasn’t moving fast enough. He was right about more than that, but I wasn’t in no place to face it just then.

“Listen, Grupitzky,” I said. He didn’t look up, but I kept talking. “I know the killer wasn’t no Ute. It wasn’t no human being, either. It’s something big and powerful, but if I go to Mild Bill and all them railroad thugs and tell ‘em there’s a monster on the loose, you think they’d believe me?”

Grupitzky turned slowly toward me. Although his face was half-shadowed by the brim of his hat, and half-hidden by his scraggly beard, his eyes kept surprising me with new depths of expression. This time, they regarded me with deep concern.

“Mister law man, have you gone mad?”

I tried to speak with as reasonable and measured a tone as I could muster, but I knew I must seem like a loon. “I followed its tracks. I’ve seen what this thing can do. It’s already killed again, and it’s gonna keep killing unless we put a stop to it.”

Grupitzky’s eyebrows disappeared into the shadow of his hat brim. “We? Mister law man, this is *your* responsibility. I told you, I will play no part-”

“Do you know Mad Helen? Lives up in the woods?”

Once again, something shifted in Grupitzky’s expression. He nodded. “I know Helen. She is not mad.”

“I saw her, talked to her, just before... just before she passed,” I said. “It’s the monster that done her in.”

Another shift in Grupitzky’s eyes. A deepening of the sorrow I first saw in them.

“Matter of fact, her last words brought me to you. She told me to find you, and that you’d help me.”

Grupitzky struggled for words. Eventually, he just come out and said it simple. “Why?”

I shrugged. “Beats me. Said she finished what you’d started, and that you’d know how -”

Grupitzky’s whole body tensed up. “She said what?”

“Said she finished-”

Before I could stop him, Grupitzky was off like a startled colt, barreling through the crowded saloon towards the exit. Without breaking his stride, he shouted back to me, “we must go!”

I caught up with him as he tossed a saddle onto a mangy gray mare. “Where’re we headed?” I demanded to know.

He mounted his horse and said, "Cotopaxi," and charged off toward the stagecoach route that runs east along the river.

I would've written off the old coot. I had a monster to track down, and figured I shouldn't waste time on the crazy loner. But when I started to consider where I might intercept the killer, I imagined that line, down from Monarch, through Mad Helen's, then eastward and down the mountain... and I realized that it was going where we were going. The killer was headed to Cotopaxi. So I hopped on my horse and spurred her into a gallop to catch up with Grupitzky.

Cotopaxi wasn't nothing fancy. Just a small whistle stop about halfway between Salida and Cañon City. Old man Saltiel had a mining concern out there, and the D&RG put in a small railway depot on his account. Other than that, it was just another mountain town without much goin' for it.

To my surprise, when we got near, Grupitzky turned away from the dusty main drag and headed south, up the mountain, along an overgrown logging road that hugged the banks of Oak Creek. He slowed down a touch to pick his way through brambles and weeds. I caught up to him, and heard his poor horse wheezing as bad as mine. I called, "Hey! Grupitzky!" but he kept plodding forward, scanning the undergrowth on either side of the road.

"Almost there," he said.

Soon, the trees thinned out, and we emerged onto a sloping, rocky field. *At least we'll see it coming*, I thought. I'd never been up this way, and was surprised to see five or six tar paper shacks in the distance, worn and withered in the brisk mountain wind. Grupitzky turned his horse towards them.

As we got closer, I could see the walls were tattered, the windows broken, roofs partly caved-in. *It's already here*, I thought. But this wasn't no monster's doing. The damage was old. The winds and the rains and the heavy mountain snows done their work.

Grupitzky dismounted and slung his horse's reins around a cracked hitching post. I followed suit.

"You ready to tell me what's what?" I asked.

Grupitzky found himself a weathered tree stump to sit on and squinted out over the stone-strewn scrublands at the pine forest to the west. He pulled his pistol from its holster, a Colt six-shooter, and checked the barrel. It was full. "When it gets here, we will stop it."

I'd had enough of Grupitzky's reticence, and I let him know, too. I said, "who do you think you are, draggin' me out here, settin' me up for a showdown with a... with a... *whatever* it is – and you ain't told me nothin' yet about anything!"

He holstered his gun and looked up at me from under the brim of his dusty hat. "You still do not remember me?"

That weren't what I expected. I studied his face again, and again, and I couldn't recall him from nowhere. He sighed, shook his head, and said, "I will remind you while we wait. And I will answer all of your questions." Then he told me his story.

David Grupitzky was an actual, honest-to-god Rabbi of the Jewish persuasion, that come from Russia on account of them being persecuted there. He and a few dozen others come to New York, all in a group, 'round about 1880. New York was a crowded mess of a place, so immigrant aid groups tried to help by moving Jews to places that weren't so bad. Places out west.

"A man named Saltiel offered to help us," Grupitzky continued, "to give us houses and farmland – *this* land, here in Cotopaxi. So, we came. When we arrived, only twelve of the twenty

houses we were promised had been built, and those were of poor quality, without doors or windows. And the farmland..." He gestured at the rocky fields around us, "Our first year, we planted fifteen bags of potatoes and reaped only fourteen. You understand?"

"Bad luck," I said, not sure what he was driving at. Truth is, I wasn't fully following the story. The sun had already dipped below the mountaintops, and I kept scanning the treeline to the west for signs of the killer's approach. But the anger in Grupitzky's voice drew back my attention.

"It was *not* bad luck. It was Saltiel. He knew we would not be able to farm. He had his zinc mine, and a fat contract with the railroad. We were his cheap labor."

Something about what Grupitzky said began to ring an old, rusty bell. It was a few years back, when I had just started out as sheriff. A dust-covered zinc miner in tattered clothes came by my office.

"You're the guy who came askin' me to resolve a labor dispute!" I said, excited to finally piece the puzzle together.

"At last, you remember," Grupitzky said, "but I did not come to you right away. That first winter... we tried to make it through on our own, working for scraps in Saltiel's mine. I tried to reason with him, to explain that his wages were insufficient, that his promises were not met. But Saltiel did not respond to my letters. It was only then, as our second winter approached, that I called on you for help. Do you remember what you told me?"

"Listen, Grupitzky," I said, then caught myself. "S'cuse me. *Rabbi* Grupitzky. You just said you weren't getting' paid enough. I said there ain't nothin' I could do except where law's been broken. Seemed to me old man Saltiel hadn't broken none."

Grupitzky fixed me with his withering gaze, and I knew I was being judged again. Then, he turned away, shook his head and stood up. “We should build a fire, before it’s too dark.” I gathered up some kindling and set to sparking it while Grupitzky pried wood planks off the run-down shacks – the same sorry hovels where he and his kinsmen suffered the wrath of the Rockies. I was unsettled by his story. What happened to ‘em? Where are they all now? And he didn’t answer the biggest question of all. So I got the fire started and asked him, “you gonna tell me what’s comin’?”

He brought some planks over and settled himself into the fire’s warm glow. “I have a theory,” he said. “That winter, I had nowhere left to turn, except our books... They helped my ancestors survive pogroms, inquisitions, crusades... I hoped, perhaps, to find some wisdom in their sacred texts, some key to our survival. But instead, I found a story. It is a legend about a man of clay, a man with the strength of a dozen, who toils without eating, without drinking and without complaint. We call it a *golem*.”

“That’s your theory?” I asked, incredulous. “You made a monster out of clay and it’s come back to get you?”

“Not a monster. A helper. When no one else would help.” That last line was leveled squarely at me. It was an accusation.

“No,” Grupitzky continued, “I did not make the *golem*. I tried, yes. I made the form of a man from river mud. But I was never able to bring it to life. After that second winter, most of the Cotopaxi Jews gave up. They left these shacks and wandered off to Denver and Santa Fe and other places. I also left. What more could I do here, a shepherd without a flock?”

All at once, the pieces fell into place in my mind. “Mad Helen! She said she finished what you’d started!”

Grupitzky nodded. “*That* is my theory. She was always very spiritual. Not mad, not crazy, just *spiritual*. It is not surprising to me that she would find a way to give the *golem* life. Perhaps it even explains why she suddenly left Cotopaxi and moved to that cabin in the woods? A place like that, with no help...” Grupitzky shook his head, “it *did* seem crazy. But maybe not so crazy... She *did* have help.”

Much as I knew the Monarch killer couldn't be human, and much as I knew the creature that shattered trees and mashed the grass in seven-foot strides couldn't be human, I took a skeptical view of Grupitzky's theory.

“If this thing's supposed to be so helpful, why'd it kill up at Monarch?” I asked, “Why'd it kill Mad Helen?”

Grupitzky stared into the fire for a moment, lost in thought. “I have a different question,” he said. “Why did the *golem* begin its journey up at the pass? Why was it not with Helen at the start of this? Perhaps she had lost control? In the stories, *golem*'s creators often lose control of their creation.”

“So why are you so sure it'll come here?” I asked.

Grupitzky smiled at me. It was the first time I'd seen him smile. But before he could answer, we heard the sharp crack of a thick tree branch breaking in the distance. Grupitzky leapt to his feet, and in an instant, both of us had our pistols out. I noted with some reassurance that Grupitzky seemed mighty quick with his gun.

Beyond the ring of firelight, the fields were dark, and the forest was impossible to see. We strained to listen over the gentle mountain breeze. Our horses stomped their feet and fretted. They know it's coming.

Another crack, and the groan of a tree keeling over.

“How do we stop it?” I asked, under my breath.

“We must to kill it,” Grupitzky said.

“Sounds simple,” I said.

Grupitzky stepped forward, blinking to adjust to the dim moonlight. “Not simple,” he said. There is a word, *emet*, inscribed on the forehead of the *golem*. We must erase the first letter of this word, so that the *golem* will cease to live.”

Part of me still figured a giant bear would storm out of the forest, or somethin’ similar – somethin’ that could be killed in the usual way. Shoot it in the brain, or some such. I mean, even monsters get killed in usual ways. Silver bullets and such. Grupitzky’s talk of *erasing* just sounded too far gone. Mad Helen might’ve not been mad, but Grupitzky...

Then, we heard the heavy thud-thud-thud of some massive creature’s footfalls.

It was running.

I stepped back, figured I’d let the Rabbi take the first shots. I wanted to see what we were dealin’ with before we did any dealin’.

Grupitzky stood firm, legs planted, gun pointed toward the sound. But by the time the *golem* finally reached the weak light of our fire, it was too late.

I saw this massive thing come chargin’ out of the darkness. By the time we seen it, it was just a few feet from Grupitzky. He got a couple shots off, and I seen ‘em hit the creature’s face, but they didn’t stop the creature none. It took two steps, swung an arm and sent Grupitzky flyin’.

In the firelight, I got a good, clear look. The monster had the appearance of a pile of stones, arranged in the shape of a man, held together with clay. It was all sort of brownish, like the mud by the river. And sure enough, there was somethin’ written on its forehead, but the letters were blocky and different. Wasn’t no English.

The *golem's* face, if you could call it that, is what made my blood turn to ice. It had little holes where eyes would be, and a sort of lumpish thing between 'em for a nose. But the monster had no mouth. It wasn't really no face at all. Just some features that made it seem like it was lookin' at you.

And it was lookin' at me.

I bet this all happened in less'n a second, mind you. The way stressful things do. But it felt like a million years we was lookin' at each other, sizin' each other up.

Erase the first letter, I remembered. And the creature must've remembered somethin', too, because it started towards me, raising a thick, chunky arm to knock me aside like it did the Rabbi.

So I aimed. And I fired. And the creature's forehead burst into chips of stone and mud. But the monster didn't stop. Before I knew it, I was tumblin' through the air and crashin' into one of them tar paper shacks. I'm lucky they were built so shoddy.

I stumbled out of the rubble and spotted the *golem* by our fire. It sank to its knees, and appeared confused, looking back and forth from me to Grupitzky, who was scrambling to his feet about thirty feet away. When the *golem* turned my way, I saw its forehead. The first letter was shattered. *Bull's-eye!*

But then – and I'll tell you, this was a chilling and remarkable thing to witness – the creature lifted up its hand, one finger extended, and it *carved the letter back into its forehead*. In a moment, it was back on its feet, as strong as terrifying as when it first appeared. *Grupitzky's plan didn't work!*

I aimed and squeezed out another shot. Missed the forehead. The *golem* turned fiercely towards me. I shot again. Missed again. The *golem* charged.

In some distant part of my brain, I heard Grupitzky shouting. I didn't know what he said, or didn't register it. But my shooting arm did, because my next shot was true. The *golem's* forehead exploded once again, and when the dust settled, it was the letter on the *right* that was blown away. Grupitzky had shouted, "It's Hebrew! It goes backwards!"

The *golem* instantly pitched forward and broke apart into a pile of loose, tumbling rocks.

I waited. Waited for the dust to settle, for the sounds of the night to return. Then, I picked my way out of the rubble of the shack and joined Grupitzky, standing over the pile of stones.

"This is what happens when people are left to suffer," he said, and shook his head.

I nudged some of the rocks with my toe. They were just rocks. "It's dead," I said. "We stopped it. It won't kill again."

Grupitzky looked at me with his judgmental eyes. "There are more monsters than this, mister law man. Will you stop them, too?"

He was right. Mild Bill and his posse threatened a lynching – no, what'd Grupitzky call it? A *pogrom* – and I'd hardly done anything about it.

"I got my work cut out for me," I said.

Grupitzky nodded in agreement, then mounted his horse. For a moment, I considered asking him to join me. If I go up against Mild Bill and the railroad, I could use a deputy like him on my side. But before I could say anything, he tipped his hat and spurred his horse, and the last of the Cotopaxi Jews rode off into the night.



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