AVENGER

 The three aged cowpunchers sat at a worn table, nursing their fourth lukewarm beer in a typically dank, grubby saloon. They were part of a crew of ten that had just finished moving over three-thousand head of cattle up from the Texas Panhandle, to the railhead pens here in Miles City, Montana. They were too old and tired to visit the whorehouses, but each had just enough energy to limp over to a nearby bathhouse after they finished drinking. From there, it was a short walk to the barbershop for a shave and a proper haircut. The day would conclude at a cheap local hotel, with a warm, welcomed meal and the sweet oblivion of sleep. Having badly-needed laundry attended to would come later.

 It was mid-September in the year 1892. Colder weather would be moving in from the north by month's end. The Old West that the men once knew was closing fast. The days of the big cattle drives was nearly over. Each man of the trio had little to show for their lives -- no home, no wife, no children, no real savings to speak of. All they knew how to do for the past thirty plus years was to move cattle hundreds and hundreds of miles across wide, open range lands.

 Pete, the eldest of the bunch, spoke up first.

 "Well, boys, we might need to head back down south to Mexico once we rest up here a bit. We'll freeze our asses off when the snows hit, otherwise. Maybe we can find some winter work on one of those big Mexican ranchos."

 "Yeah, but the pay down there -- in pesos -- is for spit," Walt added. "Might as well stay here in the U.S. and ride fence." He referred to the lowly and odious job of mending remote miles of barb-wired fencing -- an increasingly common practice now -- which was continually sectioning-off the formally open plains. Such work was seen as only fit for has-beens, cripples, and others who couldn't pull their weight as real cowboys anymore.

 "I vote for Pete's idea," Sam offered, scratching his chin. "At least we'll have a warm bunkhouse roof over our heads, and three squares a day -- even if it's just beef scraps, beans and tortillas."

 While pondering their choices, each man stretched his battered body out while still seated -- arms, legs, hands, sore backs -- that at one time or another had been kicked, bruised, trampled or mangled during their careers punching cows and tending horses. Under their working clothes, each man's torso was a motley map of jagged scars, with their innards resembling naught but a tired bag of crudely-mended broken bones. Their faces were perpetually sun and wind blistered, except for the thin, pale band of flesh on their foreheads where their hats covered.

 "Say, did I ever tell you gents about that strange church service that happened around Amarillo way, a few years back?" Pete asked. "Hosted by a preacher by the name of Ebenezer Longmire?"

 "I reckon I know that tale. But I thought it happened in San Angelo. Preacher's name was Longman, the way I heard it," Walt offered, by way of rebuttal.

 "No sirs...You're both mistaken. It happened in Lubbock. The man's name was Longstreet, for sure." Sam took his cigarette makings out of a dirty shirt pocket, carefully rolled himself a smoke, then lit it -- satisfied that he alone was correct.

 "Well, no matter, boys. It's still a hell of a story, regardless of where it happened, or what the preacher's name was," Pete concluded. Then he began telling the story, just because he wanted to. The sour beer had sufficiently kicked in for all three men to simply enjoy the legend. Even the bald-headed bartender put down the damp rag that he was drying shot glasses with, to listen. The rest of the saloon was empty, anyway. Business was usually slow this time of day in this remote Montana cattle town. Pete's story went like this:

 "The preacher, the Reverend Ebenezer Longmire, had just finished delivering a fiery sermon to his congregation, consisting of about two dozen folks, mostly widow and spinster women and bent old men. They were just about to sing 'Shall We Gather at the River' when suddenly, the creaky church door was kicked in. Three bad hombres strode in: a half-breed, a Mexican, and a young white man wearing a battered Confederate officer's hat. Where he got that brim, who could say. Anyway, they had been drinking hard, and were well-heeled and looking for trouble.

 Now, the preacher stopped the service and made to welcome the strangers to the service, all nice and 'Christian-charity' like. But those mean hombres would have none of it. The half-breed -- holding his cocked Winchester -- blocked the doorway so nobody could leave the church to go warn the sheriff. Next, the Mexican slowly walked among the seated rows of the congregation, grinning with black, rotten teeth -- eyeballing the women and sneering at the old, defenseless men.

 The young white man, meanwhile, boldly marched up to the front of the church near the pulpit where the Reverend Longmire was standing. Now Longmire was a substantial man with a big head, which was crowned with an unruly mane of white hair. Folks said that he resembled the old abolitionist John Brown -- you remember him, I'm sure, from before the Civil War. Anyway, this whelp goes right up to the preacher's face and spits in his eye. 'There's another sin I'll probably go to Hell for,' he laughed, as the congregation gasped in horror. Then the man sucker-punched the startled Reverend so hard in the jaw that the poor preacher went down like a sack of stones.

 The bully's two companions commenced to whoop and holler in excitement at seeing that violence. The nearby elderly woman church organist looked away in fright from the rapidly escalating and dangerous scene. But the attacker screamed at her: 'Play some music, you old hag, or I'll blow yer head off!' He whipped out his Navy Colt and cocked it and pointed at her. 'Now play, Godammit!' he demanded, his eyes blood-shot, glowing in a kind of cruel frenzy. She timidly pressed the organ keys for the hymn 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God,' with tears of fear dripping down her cheeks.

 Meanwhile, the Mexican bandit went back down the seated rows again, this time collecting money, watches, jewelry -- anything of value -- and shoved the loot inside his greasy, half-unbuttoned shirt. Anyone who hesitated or refused was cruelly pistol-whipped in the mouth until they complied.

 But the Reverend regained consciousness and weakly got to his feet. 'God will repay you for this outrage, you demons! Take your stolen loot and leave this church at once!'

 When the rebel with the hat heard this order, he swung around and said, pointing his gun, 'Aw, preacher, you shouldn't oughta of said that...you should of stayed down, with your mouth shut. Now, I got to kill you for being so inhospitable to us, your honored guests.' He smirked and spun the cylinder of his revolver with his thumb, checked its load, then aimed to shoot.

 Just then, the church door swung open, and a tall stranger appeared in the entranceway. The half-breed guarding the passage warily stepped back, but still kept his finger on the trigger of his rifle.

 The stranger was wearing a full-length tan duster, but when he moved forward, the folds of his coat opened, and one could see that he was indeed a walking arsenal of weaponry -- two side arms in their leather holsters, and two additional pistols tucked neatly in his belt by his belly. The man had piercing blue eyes, and stood over six feet tall. He was clean-shaven, tanned and lean, and tough with muscle, too, judging by his strong hands. He removed his hat indoors, as a sign of churchly respect, and hung it on a nearby wall peg. His blonde hair was swept back, ending at the base of his neck. The lady organist stopped playing her classic hymn in mid-note. All eyes were on this mysterious man. The church was spellbound and silent.

 The man spoke with a deep, dark voice, his words ringing out clearly, breaking the hushed silence of the scene.

 'Sorry I'm late, Reverend. But from the looks of things, it appears that I might have come just at the right time.' He surveyed the unusual scene with a firm awareness of the dire seriousness of the situation. He glared at the outlaws.

 'You know, it ain't fittin' to be openly swinging around any firearms during a church service, gentlemen. Don't you have any respect for God's holy place?' His voice then dropped down to a menacing, deep growl. 'I would strongly suggest that you return those valuable things that you wrongly 'borrowed' from these good folks here, and leave quietly and peacefully before somebody gets hurt real bad.' He stared at the outlaw trio, one at a time, slowly. Then he carefully moved the folds of his tan duster back, ready for any contrary argumentations."

 Pete stopped, and drained the last of the warm remaining beer from his mug. He wiped his mouth, then gave a loud cough, and casually spat a gob of phlegm into a spittoon near his left boot at the side of the table. Meanwhile, Walt and Sam were totally enjoying the dramatic re-telling.

 "Jesus, friend...don't stop there! Tell us what happened next!" the bald-headed barber insisted. He had propped his head up in his hands, his damp rag tossed aside, and had leaned forward with his elbows resting on the smooth, long mahogany bar. The only other customer, during this time, who wandered in had been a local drunk who greedily guzzled a half-bottle of whiskey, then promptly passed out at a far corner table.

 So Pete continued. "What happened next is the stuff of Western legends. The three bad hombres backed off until they were standing, foolishly bunched together, at the front of the church, near the altar. I guess they thought they could duck under and use it for cover when the shooting started.

 'The hell you say, stranger! Cain't you count? We's three agin one! Go ahead...pull it! I dare ya!' the crazed rebel with the battered grey hat yelled. The rest of the congregation rapidly ducked behind and under their pews, in expectation of what was surely about to happen.

 But the tall stranger didn't hesitate more than a breath. As quick as lightning, he drew and blazed away, faster than any man was ever known to do, according to the eyewitnesses, who were right there in that very room, when they later gave their sworn statements to the Amarillo sheriff. One respected townsman, Grandpappy Zeb, testified that 'no human being could match that stranger's draw...it was something sorta supernatural, I tell ya. I never saw the like!'

 Well, boys, the young man with the hat took hot lead right between his surprised eyes, while the Mexican and half-breed both caught blazing bullets dead-center in their chests. None of the three bandits even got to squeeze off a single shot.

 When the gun smoke cleared and the noise subsided, the preacher asked if everyone else was alright. He slowly walked over and verified that all three outlaws were deader than George Washington, then muttered a brief prayer. The Reverend Longmire next sent an old-timer named No Teeth Curtis, who was seated in the back of the church nearest the door, to quick go and fetch the town's sole lawman.

 But before the stranger could even be thanked by Ebenezer, the mystery man had already turned away from his deadly work and was headed out the same way, and in the same manner, that he had arrived.

 'Please...what's your name, stranger?' Granny Bea asked, timidly touching the tall man's duster sleeve as he was walking past to retrieve his hat off its wall peg. Her cloudy, ninety-year-old green eyes peered intently into his electrifying blue ones. 'You see, I just gotta know,' she pleaded.

 The man simply smiled and patted her frail, stooped shoulder. 'Some call me Johnny Angel. Some call me The Avenger. But you can call me Michael -- Slayer of Evil and Protector of the Righteous.'

 'God bless you, my son!' the preacher loudly cried out. 'And thank you...' The stranger raised his right hand and waved it back behind him in departing acknowledgement. The Reverend Longmire then thought he saw, for the briefest of seconds, a large silver sword in the man's raised hand -- but it was most likely only his aged eyes playing tricks on him.

 And so, the mysterious stranger who brought the church its salvation, left. Nobody ever saw him again. No one knows where he came from, or where he went to, after that one time, in Amarillo. Oddly, also, no one even saw him arrive on a horse, or hear him ride off afterward. It was as if he had simply...vanished."

 "Damn! That was a sure corker of a story!" the bartender exclaimed. "Was that really God's honest truth, mister?"

 "Yessir, I spoke the Gospel Truth, sir. In fact, I'd swear on a Bible right here -- if'n ya got one, which I rather doubt, this being a saloon and all -- that what I just told you was exactly as I heard it, not more than a few years back. Now, please be so kind and bring us three more mugs of your pitiful beer, so we can finish drinking and then go soak in a hot tub."

 "Well, boys, I reckon the last round oughta be on me. Belly up to the bar!" the bartender gleefully announced. "I'll be joining you too!" He lined up four fresh glass mugs under his beer barrel's spigot, and let the suds flow...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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