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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TIME SNATCHER ***

**Tampering with events of the past could bring
disastrous results in the future. It was why
Brek was given a pair of six-guns to catch—**

THE TIME SNATCHER

By Randall Garrett

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"We're in a hell of a jam, Brek," the Councillor said. "If Sagginer isn't stopped, he'll change history. The situation's desperate."

Time Patrolman Brek Halliday nodded in agreement. It *was* a tense situation. Time travel, he knew, was possible only so long as the traveller into the past did nothing that would change history significantly; the time-stream itself would straighten out little changes in the past so that overall history would remain the same.

But a big change was something else again. If you stick your finger in a river, there are a few ripples around it, but the flow of the river remains the same. If you build a dam, though....

"*When* is he?" Brek asked. "Do we know?"

"Fortunately, yes. He forced one of our operators to use one of the chronokinetic projectors, and then kidnapped her and took her with him. But he didn't know that the power drain was measurable and had been recorded on the meters. We know how much energy he used, so we know how far into the past he went. We've got him pinpointed in the area of the old United States, somewhere between 1880 and 1895."

"Who was the girl he kidnapped?" Brek asked.

The Councillor smiled apologetically. "Dori Clayton."

The muscles of Halliday's jaw tightened. "I see," he said stiffly. "When do I leave?"

"We'll prepare you immediately. It's going to be a touchy job to get both of them out of there, so watch yourself."

"Don't worry," Halliday said quietly. "I'll manage it." He walked out, eyes hot with rage, thinking of Dori in Sagginer's clutches. His hands slowly clenched and unclenched as he headed down the long hall.

A Time Patrolman's first step in any excursion to the past is to learn the language and the history so well that he can pass as a native. For three days, Brek Halliday lay in the padded tank of a hypnrobot while information was poured into him.

Then he was given his clothes. They consisted of a pair of high-heeled boots made of treated animal skin, a pair of tight trousers woven of blue-dyed vegetable fiber, a shirt of similar material, and a broad-brimmed hat. Other clothing and equipment went into a pack, and a money-belt around Brek's waist carried gold coins that not even an expert could have told from the originals.

The thing that Brek liked best was the fact that he would be allowed to carry weapons openly. Some civilizations of the past didn't permit a citizen to carry guns, but where Brek was going, a man with a pair of six-guns at his hips wouldn't look odd at all.

Brek had ridden a horse three times—once in the Battle of Agincourt, once at Chickamaugua, and once during a trip from Rome to Ravenna in the Sixth Century. His fourth horse was saddled a little differently, but he found it easy to handle. He trotted it onto the platform and signalled the operator. There was a brief hum as the chronokinetic projector warmed up. Then there was a sudden surge of power.



Brek's surroundings seemed to vanish into greyness.

Moments later, light swirled around him....

Plata City, New Mexico, was enjoying a warm, lazy summer day. No one paid much attention to the stranger who came into town on a very ordinary-looking cayuse, pulled up before the Casa Loma Saloon, and dismounted. He hitched his horse to the rail, looked up and down the street casually, and then strode into the saloon.

"What'll it be, mister?" asked the fat, mustachioed bartender.

"Whiskey," Brek said. "And a little cold beer to follow it. That road from El Paso is hot."

The barman filled the order. "El Paso, eh? That's a right smart ride. Been on the road long?"

"'Bout a week. I don't believe in rushin' nothin'."

"Hey, barkeep!" yelled someone down at the far end. The bartender went, and Brek downed his whiskey. He sipped the beer reflectively, thinking long and hard.

Jon Sagginer had been convicted once for illegal use of a time machine, and had been sentenced to ten years on Luna. Somehow, he'd managed to escape and, by bluff and daring, actually get control of a Time Patrol Chronokinetic Projector long enough to use it and kidnap the operator, Dori Clayton.

It was bad enough to use the machine, Brek thought darkly, but to take Dori—

Brek clenched his fists. For kidnapping Dori, Sagginer would take his punishment from Brek, not the law.

The first thing to do was find him. Reading the power flow of a Chronokinetic Projector could only give an approximate location. Sagginer had landed within fifty miles of this spot, and at some time within the past five years—but where was he now?

And, Brek asked himself—did he still have Dori with him? *Five years is a long time.*

In the course of a year or two, Sagginer could be a long way from Plata City, but Brek had a hunch that this was his goal. He didn't know he could be traced, and he wasn't prepared for travel.

But—

Suddenly, a finger tapped his shoulder and he whirled in surprise. He saw a man wearing a big silver star prominently on his vest.

"Stranger, you'll have to shuck them irons. City ordinance says a man can't carry pistols inside the city limits."

"I notice I ain't the only one with a full gunbelt," Brek said slowly.

The man's eyes narrowed. "Them happens to be John Sager's men, mister, and they all happen to be deputies." His pistol came out suddenly. "I'm orderin' you

to take 'em off."

Brek shrugged and unbuckled the belt.

"I ain't lookin' for an argument," he said, handing the gunbelt to the sheriff. But as the sheriff reached for the belt, Brek lashed out with one hand, slapping the other's weapon aside. It skittered across the floor as Brek jerked one of his own guns from the belt and sent the sheriff reeling backward with a blow in the chest.

Several of the other armed men started to reach for their hips, but Brek's icy voice stopped them short. "First man to touch a gun gets lead!"

The sheriff's face grew red. "You've got trouble, stranger."

"Maybe. But them guns is mine."

"You're trying to buck the law," said the sheriff.

Brek grinned. "It's a damn fool law that needs so many men to enforce it. If you was the only one packin' irons, I might be persuaded to gie 'em to the barkeep here. But as long as everybody is carryin' full holsters, I reckon I don't want to be out of style. I'd look too conspicuous."

Still holding his weapon, he buckled on his belt and walked over to where the sheriff's gun had fallen. Without taking his eyes off of anyone in the room, he squatted and picked it up.

Then he walked back to the sheriff and shoved the six-gun into the lawman's holster. "Don't aim to cause no trouble, sheriff. If you and the rest of these gents will oblige me, I'll ask the barkeep to set us all up a drink."

There was a moment of silence, then the sheriff grinned.

"Reckon I'll take whiskey," he said.

Brek grinned back and put his weapon in its sheath.

It was almost a mistake. As soon as his hand was well away from the gun butt, one of the men at the bar snatched at his six-gun and brought it up to fire.

No ordinary man with ordinary guns could have moved fast enough to do anything. But Brek was no ordinary man, and his weapons were far from ordinary; both man and guns were the product of a science far in advance of the

nineteenth century.

Brek's hands blurred, and his weapons seemed to leap from their holsters as the little robot mechanisms secreted in their butts responded to the electroneural commands of their owner.

There was a roar of sound as one of the guns spoke.

The gunman's weapon seemed to vanish from his hand. It sailed across the room, banged against the wall, and dropped to the floor. Brek had no compunction against killing a man, particularly in self-defense, but the death of one man might conceivably make radical changes in the future.

As the echoes of the gunshot died away, the gunman howled with pain. The shock of Brek's bullet against the gun had sent needles of pain racing up his arm.

The room was silent. Then the sheriff walked over to the gunman, who was massaging his aching, numbed fingers, and grabbed him by the shirt collar.

He said softly, "When I agree to take a drink with a man, I don't take it lightly when one of my deputies tries to shoot him."

"I figured you wanted to take him after what he had done," the man said sullenly.

"If I had, I'd of done my own gunslinging." He reached out and yanked the small metal star off the man's vest. "You ain't a deputy any more. If I catch you wearin' guns, I'll run you in—or shoot you, whichever's handiest."

Still holding his injured hand, the man turned and walked out of the saloon. The sheriff turned around to Brek.

"That was mighty fast and accurate shootin', son. What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't say yet," Brek said, reholstering his weapons. "But as a matter of fact, it's Ed Calhoun. As I said, I don't want to cause no trouble, but I'm glad to oblige them that comes lookin' for it." He laid a ten-dollar gold piece on the bar. "Here's an eagle, barkeep. Let's have them drinks."

One of the other men at the bar looked quizzically at the sheriff. "Sheriff, maybe you hadn't ought to of done that to Cactus. How's the boss gonna take it?"

The sheriff looked at him for a moment. Then he looked at the others. "Let's get one thing straight here. John Sager's an important man hereabouts, and I don't deny it. He needs good gunslingers to guard his property, and I'm only too glad to deputize 'em. But, by the Almighty, if a man don't behave himself, if he ain't

to be trusted with a gun, then he ain't goin' to wear a badge as long as I'm sheriff."

He turned to Brek. "I got to uphold the law, son. I asked you to turn them guns in and you wouldn't do it. I'm damned if I'm goin' to try to take 'em away, so there's only one thing to do." He handed Brek the star that he had taken from Cactus. "Hold up your right hand," he said.

Half an hour later, Brek found himself sitting at a table, drinking beer and talking with the sheriff and a man named Chuck. He'd answered questions about his past with the purely fictitious data that he'd received from the hypnorobot, but all the time his mind had been on the man who was "an important man hereabouts"—John Sager.

Sager. Sagginer. It could be the same man.

"By the way, Sheriff—who *is* John Sager?"

"Owns the bank," the sheriff said. "Got property up on Chloride Flats, too. That's the silver mine district, you know. Bought out a couple of men who was failin' in business and then put 'em to work managin' their own stores for him. People around here have a right smart respect for him."

"Friendly sort of fella, eh?"

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say that. He treats people well, gives money to the church and the school, gives a man a job if he's down and out, but I wouldn't say he was a likeable man personally."

"He's odd," said Chuck. "A real queer one. Maybe I shouldn't say it because I work for him, and he's done real proper by me, but—well, he's a funny one."

Brek raised an eyebrow. "Yeah—How?"

"Well, for one thing, he seems so—well, *cold*. Like he was a side-winder or a rattlesnake waitin' for a packrat to come by. He always seems to be figurin'—calculatin'. He don't smile much, and when he does, it don't look right on him."

"That funny accent of his don't help none," the sheriff chimed in. "It ain't that he can't speak good English, but it sounds funny, the way he says it."

"Been here very long?" Brek asked casually.

"'Bout three years, is all. Done right well by himself, considerin' he didn't have much when he came."

Chuck said: "After bein' robbed and all, it's a caution how he done so well." Then he laughed. "That was downright funny, when you come to think of it."

"Yeah," the sheriff said, grinning. "Him and his sister showed up one night, naked as jaybirds. A couple of owlhoots had robbed 'em and stripped 'em of everything they had. No horse, no clothes, no nothin'. He was lucky, in a way, though. He had a money-belt on him that he managed to hide in a mesquite bush while the bandits wasn't lookin'.

"I was sittin' in my office that night, when I heard a knock at the back door. I opened it, and there was John Sager, all dressed up in his birthday suit and nothin' more. Course, I didn't know who he was—"

Brek listened closely to the sheriff's story. It all fits in. Sagginer hadn't had time to prepare himself for this era; his speech was strange, and his clothes even stranger. So he'd taken off his clothes and pretended to have been robbed. And his sister?

"What's his sister like?" he asked.

"Pretty," Chuck said, "but she's not too bright. Goes around in a daze most of the time."

Hypnotized! Brek thought. That settled it.

Twenty-four hours later, Brek had all the information he needed.

Sagginer had a double plot in mind—one which would both set him up permanently and at the same time eliminate any danger from the Time Patrol. Sagginer knew, of course, where the Great Silver Vein was at Chloride Flats. It wasn't due to be discovered until 1973, but if "Sager" found it, he'd not only be a rich man—he would so change history that the Time Patrol would be unable to reach him. He would divert the time-stream radically by the discovery of such a vast amount of silver.

Brek had presumably spent the night at the Murray Hotel, but he had actually slipped out of his room unseen and made an excursion on foot up Palo Alto Mountain to the big house Sager had erected there.

It was tightly guarded. There would be no chance of getting in there without creating a major disturbance. Cautiously, he crept completely around the house, looking for a break in the guard network. There wasn't any.

In order to get inside, he'd have to get himself invited in. But how?

He returned to the Hotel, headed from there to the Casa Loma, and was sitting in the bar drinking a beer, mulling the problem over, when Chuck came in.

"Ed," the slim man said softly, "it really ain't none of my business, but I thought you ought to know that Cactus is gunnin' for you."

"Thanks, Chuck," Brek said, as Chuck walked over to the other end of the bar, as if not wanting to be seen with Brek.

It was easy to see what had happened. Cactus had told Sager-Sagginer what had happened in the bar yesterday, including, no doubt, the story about the blinding draw from the hip. Sager probably suspected that Brek was a Time Patrolman and had sent Cactus to shoot him.

Brek moistened his lips, got up, and dropped a coin on the bar. Then he tipped his hat to Chuck and pushed his way through the batwings, heading for Sager's bank.

He knew the game. Sager didn't care whether Cactus got killed or not; what he wanted to do was watch Brek's gunwork, which would give him away as a Patrolman if he depended on the robot pistols.

Brek would have to take a chance.

He reached down and turned off the robot armament. All he had now was a pair of ordinary pistols. Overhead, the noonday sun was coming down strong and hard, and he began to sweat.

Casually, he sauntered down the wide, unpaved street toward the bank. There were a few people strolling idly in the other direction. He moved up against the row of shops, looking in all directions.

No sign of Cactus. He frowned. Brek knew of Cactus' fear of his lightning draw, and suspected that Cactus would try an ambush. Brek glanced uneasily across the street, over at Bishop's Livery, where a cowpoke was hitching his reins to the rail. It wasn't Cactus.

Then, suddenly, a gun spoke. Brek felt a hot bolt of lead blast its way into his arm, and he staggered dizzily. He glanced up as he struggled to regain his

balance, and saw gunsmoke drifting out an open window in the second floor of Sager's Bank. *Cactus*, he thought. He leaped back as another bullet raked the dirt near him. His left arm was warm with his own blood.

The street was silent. Brek leaned against the cool glass of a shop window, waiting, holding his breath.

In a few minutes, a head peered cautiously out the second-story window. Brek tugged at his gun—it seemed to take forever to get it out with the robot armament shut off—and fired once.

A man tumbled out the window, bounced off the awning in front of the building, and dropped heavily to the ground. He lay still.

Brek mopped the blood from his arm. His head was starting to swim with pain, and new worries assailed him. He had killed a man, now. Would it change the past? Would he ever reach Dori again? He didn't know. All he knew was the blinding pain in his arm.

He was in fairly good repair an hour later, though the arm still throbbed a bit. He'd taken it to a local doctor; Sagginer would be suspicious if he'd used Quik-Heal on it. He stood in front of the Murray Hotel, methodically packing his few belongings into his saddlebags.

Chuck walked up. "Ed, the boss would like to see you. Sager."

"Sager? What does *he* want?"

"Wants to apologize for what Cactus done. He fired Cactus as soon as he heard about the run-in with the sheriff, so he wants you to know he ain't responsible. Cactus had no business layin' for you from that bank window."

Brek shrugged. "Might as well go," he said. "I never figured Sager was behind it anyway."

He headed to the bank. Sager was sitting behind his desk, flanked by a couple of his gunmen. He was a lean, long-nosed man with cold eyes and a narrow, thin-lipped mouth.

"You are Ed Calhoun?"

Brek nodded.

"I want you to know that I am sorry for what my ex-employee did. I do not like that sort of thing." Sager's speech was stiff and formal, Brek noted.

"I figured he was on his own," he said easily. "I didn't know of nothin' you might have against me."

"There is nothing, I assure you. I understand you are leaving Plata City."

"Yep. I'm headin' for Arizona—cattle country. I'm a cowman by trade."

"You are also a very good man with a gun. I need men like you. How would you like to work for me?"

It had worked, Brek thought exultantly. Pretending to be about to leave town had removed all suspicion from Sagginer's mind.

"Why, I reckon I might stay if the pay was good," Brek said thoughtfully. "Long as a man makes a livin', it don't matter much *what* he does."

"I will make it well worth your while, Mr. Calhoun."

Brek drew his breath in sharply, fighting the temptation to shoot Sager where he sat. It would eradicate one considerable blotch on the human race, but it would also involve killing others and it still wouldn't get Dori out of that house.

"Reckon I'll listen to your proposition, anyhow, Mr. Sager."

It was three days before Brek was asked up to the house. He knew his time was running low. If Sager actually started mining operations on his property, his death or disappearance wouldn't stop it. Someone else would find the Great Silver Vein, and the time-stream would be unalterably diverted, causing incalculable change in the world of the future.

Brek's opening was a lucky one—a prowler had been caught, a Mexican itinerant shot and killed by a guard. It had apparently scared Sager, who probably suspected the Mexican might have been a Time Patrolman, and so he had decided to increase the guard around his house. Brek was called from his bank duties and taken up Palo Alto Mountain to the Sager mansion. His job was to patrol the grounds.

That evening, as dusk fell, Brek strolled around the grounds, going from one of the posted guards to another.

"Sam? It's me, Ed."

"Howdy, Ed. Seen anything?"

"Not a thing. You?"

"Nope. I think the boss is just jumpy."

Brek poured tobacco into a cigarette paper, rolled it deftly, and put it in his mouth. "Got a light, Sam?"

"Sure."

As the guard struck the match, Brek leaned forward to light his cigarette—and, at the same time, he put his hand on the other's shoulder. Automatically, a little device in his palm silently and painlessly injected hypnotene into the man's blood stream.

After a moment, Brek said: "How do you feel, Sam?"

Sam blinked slowly. "Just fine."

"You'll do anything I tell you—won't you, Sam?"

"Why sure, Ed. Whatever you say."

Brek grinned savagely. "You won't hear any noise from the house."

"No noise from the house," Sam agreed.

"No matter what happens, you won't hear anything out of the ordinary, or see anything out of the ordinary. This will seem just like any other night to you."

Under the influence of the drug, Sam nodded in agreement.

"And you won't remember what I just said. All you'll remember is that I bummed a light and went on."

Again Sam nodded.

"Well, so long, Sam."

"So long, Ed," said Sam tonelessly.

The same process, with variations, was repeated with the rest of the guards. When he was finished, Brek fired his gun into the air and strode boldly up to the front door. He rapped.

"Who is there?" asked a voice from within.

"Ed Calhoun, Boss. We just killed another prowler. You want to take a look at him?"

A pause. Then, "Are you sure he is dead?"

"Bullet through his head," Brek said.

"What does he look like?"

"Ordinary. Might be an Indian."

The door opened, and Sager stepped straight into a right upper-cut which bowled him back through the opening. Brek charged in after him, but the man lay limp, his eyes closed.

Brek stood over him for a moment, debating what to do. Then he heard footsteps on the stairway.

Dori.

She stared at him, no recognition in her eyes. A chill of horror ran through him as he saw what Dori had become.

"Who are you?" Her voice was dull, uncaring.

He walked over to her and looked at her eyes. Burning fury rose in him. Using hypnotene, Sagginer had made Dori only the shell of the girl he had loved.

"Who are you?" she asked again. "I do not know you."

"You once did," he said tightly. "You—"

He felt a sudden blow on the back of his neck, and his knees sagged. Sager had been feigning unconsciousness, and now had returned to the struggle at a moment when Brek was unprepared.

A fist smashed into his side, and he ducked away, blinking away the pain. He turned and advanced toward Sagginer, while Dori moaned wordlessly in the corner.

Sagginer jumped forward and drove a fist toward Brek's jaw, but Brek countered and felt knuckles crash through the time-jumper's teeth. As Sagginer rocked, Brek hit him below the heart, and he grunted and folded up.

This time Brek made sure of the job. He continued pummeling Sagginer's senseless body until he was out of breath, then stood up and looked at Dori.

She was huddled helplessly in a chair, sobbing in terror. Brek scowled as he

remembered the girl he had once known, and gave the unconscious form of Sagginer another kick. Then he slid his gun out of its holster and pressed a button on the underside of the robot gunbelt.

The time-scoop closed around the three of them.

When the greyness cleared away, Brek stumbled out of the time-scoop and saw the Councillor waiting for him, smiling.

He shook his head to clear it. "Here I am," he said. "And here's your time snatcher. Mission accomplished, sir."

"Very fine job, Brek. Very fine."

Brek looked at the Councillor. "There's one problem, though. The girl, Dori—"

He saw the Councillor blink apprehensively. "Oh, I brought her back, all right," he said quickly. "But—but—she's been badly treated, sir. I don't know if the damage Sagginer's done to her mind can ever be repaired. I—"

The Councillor's eyes widened. "What are you talking about, Brek? What has happened to Dori? I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean."

"Why, she's right here—unconscious, in the back of the Time-Scoop," Brek said, puzzled. "And—" He turned to find the girl. "Why—she *isn't* here!"

"Of course not," said the Councillor. "She's been right here, all the time. Where else should she be?"

Dimly, Brek began to realize what had happened. Some act of his—the shooting of Cactus, perhaps—had altered the future, his present, ever so slightly. Just enough so that in *this* present, Sagginer had gone back alone—*without* Dori.

A door opened, and a girl stepped out, clad in a white lab smock. Her eyes were bright and clear, and when she saw Brek, she gave a little scream of joy.

Then Brek folded her into his arms.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TIME SNATCHER

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