

The Physician's Gun – Synopsis

By John Evan Harris



Henry Appleton (15) is the adopted son of English immigrants who have a small farm on the outskirts of Nelson in 1866. Henry could be doing more to help his widowed mother Victoria, but he is a day dreamer, obsessed with guns and dime novels about American cowboys. He dreams of being a Western hero like Wild Bill Hickok, or New Zealand folk hero Gustavus von Tempsky, and he's convinced he *needs* his own rifle to be a man.

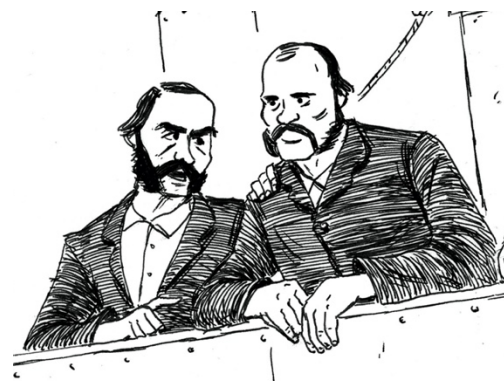
He's excited when his hero Johnny Slick comes to town. Slick is a loud-mouthed American author who writes dime novels romanticising Western gunslingers. He offers one piece of good advice to young Henry: don't focus on other men's stories, but instead 'write' your own story. Live your own life.

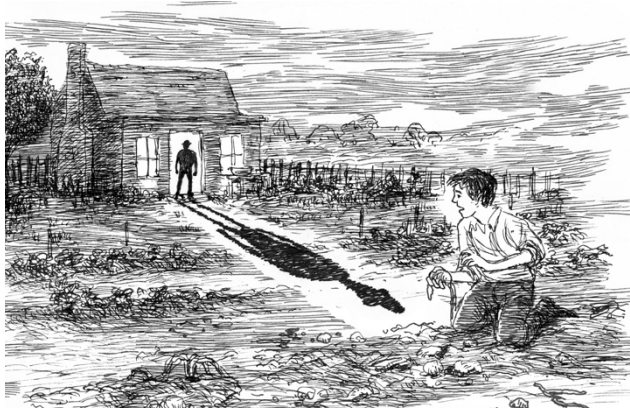


Henry's life is turned upside down with the arrival of English physician Doctor Zephaniah Smith, and his young assistant Miriama. Smith is not here to practise medicine: he carries a rifle, and is hunting the man who murdered his wife. He hires Henry to guide him.

forrest he encounters a group of bedraggled highwaymen. This is the Burgess gang, and their leader Richard Burgess is the man Doctor Smith is looking for.

Henry's moral compass is soon put to the test. As he is riding through the dark





Burgess is a scary customer – a multiple murderer - but he’s also a charmer, and tells Henry he’s going to take him under his wing. He invites him to join the gang, and Henry is briefly tempted when Burgess tells stories of his ‘Robin Hood’ exploits and promises Henry his own pistol. But Henry is jolted back to reality

when his newfound father demands that Henry bring him the keys to the bank where he works. To make sure he does what he’s told, the gang takes Henry’s mother hostage.

Henry ‘borrows’ the physician’s high-powered rifle and sets off to rescue his mother. But he is promptly taken captive by the gang, along with his mother and Miriama. He is forced to watch while the gang prepares



to ambush a group of wealthy travellers in the Maungatapu hills. He manages to break free, but he is shot and left for dead in a riverbed, while Burgess and his gang kill five travellers for their gold and cash. (True story: The Maungatapu Murders.) Henry will forever walk with a limp, but he manages to retrieve the physician’s rifle and helps to free his mother and Miriama.



At the trial Burgess reads out his infamous ‘Confessions’, describing their crimes in grisly detail. He and two accomplices are sentenced to hang.



On the morning of his execution Burgess tells Henry where to find a fortune in stolen gold. Henry is tempted: he could use the gold to buy the debt-ridden farm for his mother.

But Miriama makes him face the uncomfortable truth – the gold is stolen, and he must give it back. He struggles with this decision but knows it's the right thing to do.

Later Henry watches as the hanged men are buried in the Nelson prison yard, and swears he will not end up a criminal like Richard Burgess, the man who may well have been his father.

Burgess and his gang will forever inhabit his nightmares, but Henry has chosen a different path. Instead of aspiring to be a gunslinger, he studies to become a physician like Doctor Zephaniah Smith, and starts a family with Miriama.

