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# THE GUN-BOSS OF WHISPERING VALLEY

*A Complete Novelet*

By JAMES P. OLSEN

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## I

YEARS of hell raising were done with, and Howdy Harris was heading for the country of a wild and misspent youth. He felt at peace with the world as he rode Northward, and reckoned the flight of the dove was easier than the winging of the owl, or the headache producing pound on the trail of the elephant.

His decision had been made as he followed the sheriff of Sandog along the cell-block corridor and into the stuffy courtroom on the second floor.

His trial lacked certain formality. The background was provided by numerous frigid-faced ladies, stiff in black taffeta. And a gaunt, pallid man of the cloth, who kept a certain disdainful distance from the prisoner.

The judge looked down at Howdy. He saw a little banty rooster with leathery face, gray mustache, subdued blue eyes. Once, the judge reckoned, those eyes had been the light called "killer blue."

Howdy's hat, clutched in one paw, was battered, and his puncher's boots were run over. The too-tight, skimpy levis were bowed and bagged at the knees. Howdy seemed perpetually crouched and on the verge of taking a long leap.

His Honor didn't *ask* Howdy. After the little old-timer had given the Court "Howdy, Jedge. Helluva hot day," he *told* him, and made it hotter.

"You drift into Sandog, start cutting cards with a gambler, and end up breaking him," the Court summarized. "It is understood he cheated you, and you, in turn, cheated him more so, and drove him out of town.

"Then, you proceed to get drunk. And half the male population of Sandog with you. Men who were church-goers until you came along. A man your age! Tch, tch." His Honor

shook his head.

Howdy eased one shoulder against the bench and scratched his back. He sighed contentedly.

"Stop that!" the Court snapped. He went on:

"When the Reverend Jostlechin and his Aid Society beseech you join church or leave town, you promised you would leave. Are you proud of the fact you rode your horse into the meeting house?"

Howdy screwed his face thoughtfully and began to remember things. He said, "Jedge, I just come to tell them good-bye. Ol' Jostlechin, there, was poundin' his pulpit an' tellin' his folks to foller him, for he was a man of courage as would rid Sandog of the devil come amongst them.

"Hell, Jedge. Wasn't no use'n him crawlin' under his pulpit just 'cause I rode in to say *adios*."

The Court leaned to hide his face, and coughed.

"Howdy Harris, it is the Court's decision: If you will pay for the mirrors you broke, for the two plate glass windows you rode through, and will leave this town within the hour, fine and sentence will be suspended."

"An' how much do you figger is them damages?"

The Judge named the figure, and Howdy grinned.

"You cut 'er to a gnat's teat," he reckoned. The Ladies Aid gasped. "Wouldn't be no use finin' me. Them damages clean me plumb out."

Shortly thereafter, Howdy and the sheriff and two deputies reined up outside of town.

Howdy tugged a bottle out of his shirt front and replaced it with the old Colt .45 the

sheriff handed back to him.

“What was it that sky pilot called me?” Howdy pulled the cork. The sheriff took the bottle. “Said you was an incorrigible old sinner. So here’s a drink to whatever that is.”

“If she’s what it sounds like, it’s fine I’m goin’ on as a man of peace,” Howdy assured them.

“They said it was terrible, a ol’ pioneer like you agoin’ on the peck like that,” a deputy chuckled.

“Hell, they oughta see me when I get goin’ good.”

They had another drink around, said farewells, and Howdy Harris went his way alone. He carried himself proudly, and looked upon a wicked world with eyes of pity and tolerance.

He aimed for Whispering Valley and old friends. They’d find the years had changed Howdy Harris, he determined; a dose of prison and smaller and more bitter pills of jail terms, fights, benders, riotous living had not made of Howdy a Mary’s Lamb.

But now age had made of him a pioneer, by damn! He’d sit on his tail up there at Whispering Valley, and show all the quiet dignity the brand of pioneer implied.

“Comin’ back, Whispering Valley,” Howdy said aloud. “Peaceful, like that—that turkey buzzard as packs a mesquite branch in his claws.”

## II

FROM the rail-end at Grand Center, it was sixty mountain miles to the town of Whispering Valley. As, days later, Howdy Harris took that road, he knew that something had happened; but not what.

He passed two high, heavy freight wagons, loaded to the sky. A stagecoach rocked and jingled toward Grand Center, leaving a trail of white dust to settle over cedar and shinnery.

“Hell, she’s like the ol’ days, when the mines opened,” Howdy told himself. His heart beat faster and a wild eagerness urged him on. He fought down that urge, remembering he was now a paragon of tranquil dignity.

The evening brought Howdy to Pinnacle Station, the highest point in the Orfree Hills. Howdy had been prepared to see this old halfway stage and freight station in a decayed state. Instead, it was in repair, and there were horses tethered outside. A bawling, leather popping, long-line skinner was pulling out, his fresh sixteen-up heaving to the collars. The huge wagon was loaded with mining machinery.

Howdy dismounted and frowned into night’s thickening gloom. Down the road, that ran downgrade from here to Whispering Valley, and on the other side, a new building had been erected. As he looked, a stage pulled in and stopped and while hostlers hooked up fresh horses, passengers piled out and went inside to eat.

Howdy didn’t know if he should hang around or sleep out tonight. He turned and drifted toward the stables in the rear of Pinnacle Station, to see if he could get accommodation for his horse.

He was almost to the stable when a bouncing, rattling buckboard drawn by a matched team coming hellity-tilt slammed off the road and past the station and pulled up near the stable.

Howdy turned. Men with lanterns were coming from the station and the barn.

A young man whose face was pleasant under a coating of dust, tossed his leathers to a hostler and jumped down.

The man on the seat beside him stood, a rifle in the crook of his arm. A tall, thin-lipped man, whose fancy calfskin jacket, tight California pants, and ornate cartridge belt and silver chased pistol, contrasted highly with the blue denims the young driver wore.

“Why’n hell ain’t the other team

ready?" the guard roared. "Bigod, you know we're carrying a gold bar." He kicked the heavy iron, padlocked express box that was bolted through the floor onto the buck-board's frame.

"You're early," someone growled. "An' don't be passin' us your blab. Bill Dineen's the driver. All you got to do is ride an' be fancy pants."

Howdy moved forward into the lantern light, drawn by the name of Bill Dineen. He sort of remembered that name. Asia Logan had a nephew by that name. Had taken him in and sent him to school when the boy's paw, and Asia's sister, the button's mother, got drowned in a cloudburst.

Now the kid was a man. How in hell did Time keep it's furious pace without slowing for wind once in a while?

The gun guard, Dude Tern, angered by the stableman's name of fancy pants, spotted Howdy.

"Back, you!" he roared. He held the rifle at waist level as he pulled the trigger. A splash of flame ran downward and the bullet cracked into the hard earth too close to Howdy's feet.

Howdy leaped aside, and Tern hit the ground, coming at him. Hand on the gun beneath his shirt, old Howdy ached to pull that old pistol and let this loud fool have it where he lived. He bridled his flaring temper and stood silent as Tern came to a halt, muzzle of his rifle almost touching Howdy's chest.

"You're too close to a gold shipment, you old rat!" Tern snarled. "Grubliners and saddle tramps ain't allowed to hang around. Get going, you whiskered packrat. Vamose!"

Howdy opened his mouth, closed it quickly. If he had words with this blabbering dogie, he knew his temper wouldn't stand.

He turned. Dude Tern swung a polished boot and sent Howdy staggering forward....

Then—from the dark outside the

lanterns' yellow rays, came a tight, knifing voice. Howdy's voice, and it made the blood of more than one hearer run more than a little cold.

"The world ain't big enough for both of us any more!"

### III

WHITE dust hung heavy over the town of Whispering Valley, shot through with burning sunrays that brought down the choked, dry scent of cedar. Howdy came slowly down the long, twisting street, subduing the urge to tickle his bronc with his spurs and make him pitch while he, Howdy, yanked his old cutter and blasted at the moon.

He ached to shrill a rebel yell and scream "Cowboy's in town!"

Those actions, though, were for fools and wild youngers. And Howdy was a virtuous man these days. Why, he'd even tried to regret threatening that gun guard. Vain effort, that.

He held his mount to a sedate walk and read the story of Whispering Valley as written since he'd left the town.

On the hills above the town, stamp mills crashed and thundered. There were new buildings lengthening the street's long, crawling course. A few men in cowman's garb were on the raised board walks; and many men whose dress and walk proclaimed them off the creeks and from the mines.

Howdy passed the Trompoose Bar. His horse turned toward the rail there. Howdy swallowed, tongued dry lips and urged the animal on.

"Want folks to think I got you trained so's you smell likker an' natchally stall in before the first saloon we meet?" he growled.

He drew rein farther down, before a large, false-fronted building. As he got down, his horse turned its head and eyed him in a way that Howdy swore was reproachful and

surprised. It lifted its tail and pawed the dust.

“An’ the same to you,” Howdy grunted, making a threatening pass with his old hat.

He put his hands on his hips and looked up and the sign painted across the building’s false front. “Logan. General Supplies. Freight Office,” he read laboriously, spelling out each word under his breath.

He turned, then, and looked across the street. A building twice the size of Asia Logan’s reared in opposition over there.

It bore the painted information: Crake-Norvell ... Merchandise & Machinery ... Stage Station.

Shaking his head, Howdy turned, climbed steps from street to boardwalk, went under wooden awning with its rolled-up canvas that was let down to balk the hot sun of afternoons, and entered Logan’s place.

The interior was larger than in the past. Twice as much merchandise of all descriptions was displayed. The counter, with the window and panel of postoffice boxes was gone. The corner the postoffice once had occupied had been boxed in to make a cubby-hole office.

Howdy grinned broadly, mopped his hands on his baggy britches, then settled his face woodenly. He ignored the yap of a clerk who came toward him, telling him he couldn’t go in Mr. Logan’s private office. He went in and closed the door and stood with his back to it.

The gray-haired, heavy man at a kitchen table that served as a desk, didn’t seem to notice him at first. He stared into space, lost in worried thought. Crutches lay on the floor beside his chair, and Howdy noticed Asia Logan’s left leg was in a cast.

“You always was breakin’ somethin’,” Howdy snapped.

Asia Logan turned. His eyes widened, his mouth gaped.

They eyed each other ... this pair

who’d ridden and helled together in their youth, until Asia Logan went into business, and Howdy—because of his own hellishness—went to the pen.

They surveyed each other, each thinking of the other: “Hell, he’s gettin’ old!” And then they saw back through the layers of age Life had so lavishly spread on them. They grinned.

Low, trying so damned hard to appear casual, they gave their greetings.

“Varmints that cross a man’s trail when the season’s closed!” Asia Logan said.

“Howdy, you soft, take-’er-easy town boy,” Howdy answered.

He licked dry lips again. Logan pointed to a cupboard. “I got a busted leg. Rolling down a mountain with a freight wagon riding me. There’s a bottle there, and you don’t care if you do. I can stand a snort myself.”

Howdy got the bottle. He turned and sneered at Logan, and indicted him for softness by pointing to thin, small whiskey glasses on the shelf.

“Never mind them. What the hell you think them tin cups is for?” Logan barked. “Glasses is for special, soft customers.”

They filled their cups half to the brim, drank, settled back.

“So you heard things was wild, and you come raring back.” Logan shook his head. “Howdy, you and me is too old, I guess. There ain’t nothing you can do.”

“Ain’t aimin’ to do nothin’,” Howdy assured him. “I come back here to settle down an’ live peaceable. I’m aimin’ to be a—a sorta pioneer.”

“Then,” Logan stated decisively, “I know the days of miracles ain’t done.”

#### IV

ASIA LOGAN toyed with his cup. “So you see,” he said, “after you left, business fell off.

The big mines closed, and only a few creeks was being worked. But I'd sold my cow business to old 'Bitter' Root. Bill Dineen worked for him until I needed Bill.

"Still, we managed. Then they got modern ways to fix up ore, and another strike was made on Slip Creek. Things opened. I put on new freight outfits, and put the old Concord coach on the run again. It was held up a couple times. I had to stand the losses, of course.

"Then this Mason Crake and Sam Norvell come in. Crake had a line in Arizona, or someplace, and was losing out. Norvell backed him, they moved the line, and Norvell—a straight-laced, sort of religious cuss—on the surface, anyhow—built the store over there. He leaves the stage business to Crake, mostly."

"Sure, but—"

"Wait," Logan interrupted Howdy. "I was glad to see them start a stage-passenger run, even when it meant I lost the postoffice. Freightin's my business, anyhow. Norvell told me they wasn't interested in freight.

"Then they started freightin in their own stuff. I yapped, and Norvell said they was in their rights. They put on two outfits, and relieve them at their stage stations—like the one across from our Pinnacle Station.

"Now, Howdy, they're moving me plumb out. You see, we have accidents. Like a boulder rolling down a mountain and smashing up a haul. I made one trip myself, just to see. We got back all right, and going to unload machinery at a mine, we had to roughlock down a hill. The chain broke. Killed eight mules, busted wagon and gear, and smashed up several thousand dollars' worth of machinery the mine needed right away. I got this busted leg. We found the chain'd been filed almost through!"

"You can't prove nothin'," Howdy stated. "An' shippers are goin' to turn to Crake-Norvell entire, this keeps up. Well!"

"Yeah. But that ain't all, Howdy. We haul gold from the mines to Grand Center. Dude Tern—well, we lost one bar and almost another. This Tern showed up and said he'd see the gold got through, or no pay. We ain't lost one run since he's been on—almost two months."

Howdy didn't speak his mind about Tern. Logan said: "There is talk about having Tern made Chief Deputy to old Sheriff Wayne. Tern maybe could stop our trouble entire, that way. But Crake-Norvell would oppose him, I reckon. The job would mean Tern would be sheriff, come next election time."

There was a knock on the door. A teamster grouched in. "That damn stable foreman's drunk again, an' nothin' ready!"

Logan swore. Then he frowned.

"He ain't so young, Howdy, and— Well, it's an easy job."

Howdy Harris, who had, after hearing Logan's story, been ready to forget the ways of peace and turn loose his wolf, was on the verge of giving Logan hell for offering him a grandpa job. The urge to go out and peddle lead pills from his gun was strong in him.

Yet, surprisingly, he said: "Sure, Asia. I'd like the job. Maybe I can figger somethin' out."

"Don't you go figgering like you use to. Folks in this town got to have some peace and quiet," Asia warned.

Yet he was shaking his head as Howdy left. Yes, Howdy Harris really was getting old.

At the big stable down the street, with the yard in the back filled with broken wagons and stored runners and the like, Howdy was moving in. A bleary-eyed hombre sat on a cot in a sort of office in one front corner, an empty bottle in one hand.

"Git your tail yonderly," Howdy greeted him. "You ain't on the Logan payroll no more."

"Hell I ain't. Bigod, you ol'—"

Folks on the street saw that mistaken one roll in the dust; saw old Howdy Harris follow him, boot him to his feet, and leap off his feet following his fist—that landed on the other's chin.

HE dusted his hands as he walked back inside, saying, "That's for callin' Howdy Harris a billy goat." Thereafter, while the ex-stable foreman stood in the street and swore luridly, blankets, odd belongings, clothing came sailing out to him.

He gathered up his doofunnies and turned away, yelling back, "Sure's my name's Gus Loffe, I'm going to get hunk at you!"

Howdy merely grunted.

He'd heard such threats before.

It was mid-afternoon, then. Howdy was settled, had his look at things. In the yard, a blacksmith had been cussin', fitting a new axle on a freighter layed up for repairs.

"Don't see how'n hell," he complained to Howdy, "enough dust gets in to grind these axles out. We need this wagon, too."

Howdy made a brief inspection. Back in the stable, he went into the harness room. He opened pail after pail of axle grease, working the dark, yellow mixture through his fingers.

He found grit in six of two dozen buckets. Some sort of steel or emery grit, he rightly guessed. Let a skinner get one of them and grease his axles, and he'd damn soon find his wagon laid up, the axle ground all to hell.

Howdy put a half hitch on a mental decision to keep an eye on one Gus Loffe.

He went in his office-living-bedroom, had himself a long pull at a bottle, bit off a chew, and sat in the doorway where it was shady and a breeze blew through, carrying horsey odors that pleased his sense of smell.

He was a picture of peaceable old age as Bill Dineen came up the street and wheeled the lathered team into the stable, wheels and hoofs rolling hollowly on the wooden runway.

Howdy got up and started after them.

Dude Tern got down. He leaned forward, let an oath grind past his lips. "I told you!" he snarled, and started at Howdy.

V

"WHOA UP!"

Dude Tern set his feet so suddenly he twisted half around. He blinked at the old hogleg Howdy yanked out of his shirt.

Tern had light, killer-gray eyes. They met Howdy's hard, old, faded eyes of killer blue, and for a moment fear impressed its taut brand on Dude Tern's face.

"Don'tcha grab for that gun on your hip," Howdy said too levelly. "I'll blow you, s'help me—an' 'joy doin' 'er. Stand hitched, you rannihan, an' listen to Howdy Harris make his oratement. Because you ride the gun an' ain't lost nothin', makes no bones to me. Underneath, you're a four-flushin' no damn good one. Time was when I was no damn good myse'f—but I never fourflushed.

"I'm stable foreman here now. Asia Logan's a ol' friend of mine."

Dude Tern reddened and shifted. Passers-by, hearing Howdy give him how, were ganging in the front doorway, fully enjoying this picture of the little old man holding Dude Tern under the gun while he told it to him big.

In a little while, it would be all over town.

"You leave me be, Fancy Pants, an' I'll try to keep from shootin' you for what you done up at Pinnacle. You put a paw on me again, though, I'll use this cutter to fancy your belly with buttonholes!"

He stuffed the old pistol under his waistband and turned, hand outstretched to Bill Dineen. "I remember you, Howdy!" Bill cried, and pumped the oldster's hand.

Dude Tern glowered, looked thinly at Dineen, wheeled and stalked out, the audience

in the doorway falling back for him.

“How in hell do you stand him,” Howdy asked, starting to unhook the team.

“Well, Howdy, a man can do lots of things. Tern wounded one holdup man. No-o-o, it was proved he wasn’t with Crake-Norvell. ’Nother thing—Aw, hell, Howdy. When two fellers are setting up for the same girl, it looks damn little of one to quarrel with the other’n.”

“Like that, huh? Who’s the gal, Bill?”

“That’s the hell of it!” Bill grunted. “It’s Sam Norvell’s daughter, Nan. And—Well, Howdy, I just can’t fit them into the picture. You wait’ll you meet Nan, and Sam Norvell. Crake, of course, nobody likes. But Norvell is really the money that runs them.”

“An’ what does Norvell think about you aimin’ at his Nan?”

“He don’t give me no encouragement. Don’t say much. Still, he seems fair, an’ ain’t booted me away, even if I am the nephew of Asia Logan.”

“Think mebbe somebody is wreckin’ things to get the two outfits fightin’, so they can step in?” Howdy wondered.

Bill grasped that eagerly. “I think it could be!”

When the team was cared for, and Bill Dineen had gone, Howdy shook his head. “I don’t figger I can see ’er like that, son,” he said sorrowfully.

He greeted a stable hand who came in—a silent, quiet man who’d never be anything but a flunkey and hostler. Howdy decided he wouldn’t be fixing things for accidents and such, and left him there while he strolled up the street.

He went into the Trompoose Bar and started to join a loud group toward the front.

Then he remembered his new found dignity, and that, to Whispering Valley, he was a pioneer. (He didn’t know it, but men were pointing him out already as the “Ol’ rooster who was so funny, makin’ Tern

hunker quiet. Good thing he’s old as he is.”)

He ranged on toward the rear, and cinched down near a man who stood quite alone. He was a stocky, heavy-set customer with a dark face, a cruel mouth, and sly, deep eyes. His store clothes fitted him well, yet he seemed uncomfortable in them. Like a man who’d grown up without dude skins, and would never get used to them.

Howdy studied him covertly. And grinned. The way the man stood, the way he looked around—little things most men never would have noticed—told Howdy things. Things he reckoned none of his business, seeing as he didn’t know the gent and, judging by his looks, didn’t care to know.

HOWDY ordered his whiskey double. The dark man turned. He stared straight at Howdy, and scowled, his lips drawing at one corner. Then he sniffed, said something about “Horse—” and walked away.

Damn, but she was sure a hard job being a gent of dignity and peace, Howdy assured himself, aching to have it out with that nasty, hifalutin’ son. He motioned a bartender.

“Him?” The bartender shrugged. “Don’t let him bother you. That’s Mason Crake.”

Howdy stood there, deep in thought, and a wicked, plumb ornery light in his old eyes. He grinned some, too. Maybe, now there was a chance to be a dove and a pioneer and have hiyuh wild fun right along with it.

He watched the place filling up as outside the sun went down. The babble of voices in the Trompoose stopped suddenly, and from outside came again the cry that had silenced them:

“Fist whuppin’! Fight!”

Howdy went out with the crowd.

Dust hung heavy in the still air of evening dust kicked up by scuffing feet of two men battling there. One was Gus Loffe, who went down as Howdy recognized him. The

other was a scar-faced individual.... Howdy said "Hell!" softly, and pulled back into the crowd. He knew Loffe's antagonist, too. A gent named Scad Waters.

In Texas, some years back, Howdy had been in jail with Scad Waters. Waters had held up a stage and almost killed a man. He'd been waiting in jail for his ride to the penitentiary.

Howdy watched. He saw Gus Loffe, his nose broken, spitting teeth, go down. Waters put the boots to him. The old sheriff was puffing toward the scene. It was Dude Tern who stepped out, drew his gun and stopped the fight.

## VI

THEY helped Gus Loffe to a doctor. Scad Waters explained to Sheriff Wayne: "He cussed me and shouldered me off the walk." He turned on Dude Tern then, and Howdy thought he detected a false note in Waters' voice when he said, "You got no business butting in!"

Waters drifted on down the street. Dude Tern moved back to the opposite sidewalk, and climbed to the walk before the Crake-Norvell establishment. There was a slip of a girl there beside the door, and Tern bowed low and handsomely, his hat in hand.

There wasn't a lot of friendliness in the way the girl returned the greeting. She spoke, tossed her shapely head and turned back inside the store. Dude Tern's face was dark as he yanked his headpiece back on and slammed away.

"I betcha that's Nan Norvell," Howdy told himself. "An' it ain't much use in Bill Dineen bein' worrit about Tern. It's hell to be in love when things get throwed in your way—an' I don't reckon time's goin' to make Crake-Norvell less enemies of the Logan tribe."

He saw Bill Dineen come along over there, enter the big place, and he left the walk

and moseyed over there himself. He walked in with a fine nonchalance, greeted Bill, who stood at the end of a counter that tied in with the row of boxes and the window of the postoffice section of the place.

"This is Howdy Harris, Nan," Bill introduced. The girl gave Howdy a smile that lit him all up inside. He said, "I'm pleased, ma'am. I wondered if they was any mail for me?"

She went behind the partition, looked in pigeon holes.

Howdy felt Bill's eyes on him and said, "Dammit, ain't I got a right to have me some mail?"

"Sure, Howdy. Got a yaller-headed biscuit-shooter on the end of a lass rope, back down the line?"

Howdy cussed and moved restlessly away. He went down a counter. There was a tall, thin-faced man in a dark suit that made Howdy think of an undertaker, facing him.

"Chawin'," Howdy ordered.

He paid for the plug and loitered, taking a long time in choosing the corner that suited him.

"Sam!" a harsh voice snapped. "Why let stinking tramps like this loaf around the place?"

HOWDY looked up. Mason Crake had come up from the rear, and stood outside this counter close to Howdy now. The tall man, Sam Norvell, said stiffly, "This man is a customer, Mason."

"Customer, hell! He's the old fool that's been raising trouble around today. I heard of him. He was sent from here to the pen and ..."

Old Sheriff Wayne, in the front doorway, called out as he came on in. "Howdy Harris is a lot older now. The man he shot, that time, needed it. Howdy would've got off, hadn't been he called the Judge a burro-headed fool, saying he wanted no favors off

nobody. And he called me a pot-bellied groundhog.”

The sheriff laughed with the shrill of age as that court-room scene presented itself to his memory. “Hell, they’d had to give Howdy a little something after that!”

“I don’t give a damn!” Crake snarled. “Sam, what is this? A hangout for Logan spies? You, you old bag of stinkweed—get!” Crake laid a heavy hand on Howdy’s arm.

Howdy’s right foot came down, heel on Crake’s instep. Crake howled and lunged, grabbing Howdy. Howdy was light against Crake’s bulk. The wind was driven out of him when they hit the floor, Crake on top.

Crake got up, drew back a foot, aiming to put it to Howdy’s ribs.

“The hell you do!”

Bill Dineen had plunged past the sheriff, winding up a right fist as he came. The blow drove Crake backward, bleeding at the mouth. He held to the counter, gobbling at Norvell.

“You see? You going to stand for the Logan outfit coming in here and making trouble?”

Sam Norvell drew himself up as only a strict, law-abiding man could.

“You may call for your mail,” he pronounced. “You, Bill Dineen, are not welcome any more. I have been fair. You are not welcome any more.”

A stricken look drew Bill’s face, then anger flared in him. “Try stoppin’ me from doin’ anything I want!” he barked.

“Don’t you threaten him,” Crake raged.

Perhaps Norvell believed he had been threatened.

“Don’t call here, on *anyone* again.” he intoned.

“There’s more ways than one of skinnin’ a cat!” Bill ranted back. “You’ll see.”

He motioned to Howdy, and they stalked out. Back of her postoffice partition,

Nan was crying softly, and didn’t look up. Howdy saw her shaking shoulders as he passed the window.

“Fine huddem mess I done up,” he swore at himself. “I reckon I got to figger out a way to play this here, now, feller Cupid. One with no chaps on, an’ with bow an’ arrer in his paw.

“But dammit, I’ll grow horns afore I do wings. An’ I’m too damn ol’ an’ knock-kneed to traipse around without no clothes!”

## VII

ASIA LOGAN filled the tin cups. He studied Howdy above the cup rim as he hoisted the drink.

“So you’re a peaceable cuss, huh?” Logan jeered. “Aim to be a pioneer—a model for the up and coming youngsters.”

Howdy nodded emphatically.

“You had a ruckus with Tern, and Crake, and tossed Loffe on his ear,” Logan pointed out.

Again Howdy nodded. “Asia, they’s somethin’ all-fired funny a-goin’ on. Look—I betcha Loffe was causin’ breakdowns to a lot of your equipment. He gets drunk an’ loses out there. Then he gets him a hellish beatin’ from that Scad Waters. I got ’er in the saloon that Waters ain’t hooked up with Crake-Norvell. Yet he hangs out around there a lot.

“Wonder if Crake-Norvell got Waters to beat up Loffe because he lost his stable job with you? Then, I’m wonderin’ about Dude Tern. How was it he played Mister Big an’ stopped that fight? For the looks of ’er, I betcha.

“Then, take Crake, tonight. He made ’er seem that Bill Dineen was threatenin’ Norvell. Somethin’s bein’ built up, Asia. You mark my words!”

“You’re just aching for trouble, is the reason you think such things,” Asia said. “It’s my freight shipments being busted up that’s

worrying me. I had a offer from Crake this evening," he added pointedly. "To buy me out. Norvell come along and said he wanted no such deal; said they had enough on their hands as it was. Crake had to give in—not that I'd sold, anyhow." They had another drink and Howdy rambled back to the stable. He slept with one eye open and his old pistol beside his cot.

IT was mid-morning of the next day. Howdy sat on a bale of hay by the door. A flicker of interrupted sunlight as somebody passed the back doors drew his attention.

Casually, he picked up a fork and worked his way—pausing at this stall and that—to the rear door. He took a quick squint out.

Back in the wagon-yard, Dude Tern and Scad Waters stood beside a big freighter. They seemed to be arguing, Waters nodded agreement to something and they broke apart. Howdy hurried back to the front of the stable. Scad Waters came out to the street, got his horse from a tie rail, hit leather and cantered off in the direction of Grand Center.

Half an hour later, Howdy watched Bill Dineen roll the buckboard out, pick up Dude Tern and a bar of gold at the store, and wheel toward Grand Center in a hot cloud of dust.

It wasn't in the cards, Howdy thought, that a holdup was in the deck. Whatever Tern's game, he'd not chance losing prestige at this stage of it.

Howdy went to the Trompoose and had a couple of doubles. He must have mooned there better than an hour, when a commotion on the outside drew him.

The buckboard bearing Bill Dineen and Dude Tern had come racing back into town and pulled up before Logan's store. Howdy joined the rapidly gathering crowd.

"Where that little crick crosses the road," Dude Tern was yelling. "Tried to hold

us up."

Bill Dineen looked a lot sick. Tern got down and strutted to the back of the buckboard. Old Sheriff Wayne came up, and Asia Logan crutched out to the porch.

"That's what holdups get from me!" Tern yapped.

He reached for the piece of canvas that covered the still form stretched in the bottom of the buckboard, pulled it back, and disclosed Scad Waters' death-distorted face!

Howdy held his tongue. He couldn't figure what good it would do to yowl around that Tern and the dead Scad Waters had a pow-wow that morning. Folks wouldn't have listened, anyhow. They were too damn busy making a fair-haired boy out of Tern.

Mason Crate and Sam Norvell come across the street and went up to Asia Logan. It was Crake who boomed for all to hear: "Logan, even if Tern is your man, he's the kind we need, I say. I'm proposin' we make him a Chief Deputy under Wayne. Of course, he'd have to quit you. But with him on the job, your stuff would be safe with even a man like—like—"

He looked around for an example, and his eyes found Howdy.

"Like that old goat over there."

Howdy reddened and his stringy old muscles bunched. He toothed down his ire, banking his inward fire with ashes of shrewd restraint.

"How about it?" Crake asked.

"It would seem a man such as Tern is needed," Norvell said, as though reluctant to admit he'd back a man who'd kill.

That seemed to decide Logan.

"If it's agreeable to Tern and the sheriff, I won't stand in the way," he said.

Somebody unchinned a cheer and the crowd echoed it half-heartedly.

A little later, Howdy helped Bill put up the team.

"Won't make the trip until tomorrow,"

Bill explained. The sick note was still in his voice.

“Bill, did you notice anything funny about that holdup?” Howdy demanded.

Bill Dineen frowned. “I never noticed much of nothin’, at first,” he replied. “Never saw that Waters until Tern started shootin’. He must have eyes like a treeful of eagles. What got me, Howdy, was the way Tern done it.

“Waters yelled, like he was damn surprised. An’ Tern just kept pumpin’ lead into him, even after he was down an’ dead.”

“Yeah,” Howdy grunted. “Tern wanted to be *sure!*”

Bill Dineen didn’t get what he meant.

### VIII

ASIA LOGAN seemed in pretty fair spirits that afternoon. “Maybe, with Tern to ride herd on the road, things will ease up, Howdy,” he opined. “Come to think of it, maybe it ain’t Crake-Norvell causing all our trouble. Crake was fair in offering to buy me out, and Norvell ...”

“Wouldn’t have none of ’er,” Howdy grouched. “Mebbe he figgers to get the business without spendin’ nothin’. You’re whistlin’ in a holler log, Asia.”

“You’re just honin’ for trouble,” Logan laughed.

“An’ sharpened up for ’er, bigod!”

It was toward dark when Bill Dineen went over to get his mail. He lingered to talk to Nan Norvell. It was Crake who got Norvell out of his quarters in the back of the store.

Norvell came forward. He didn’t seem to mind Bill talking to Nan so much; it was that he’d given his strict and narrow word that Bill was not to come to see her any more, and that word must be obeyed.

“I won’t have words with you, because you’re Nan’s father,” Bill told Norvell. “But it ain’t no use. Time’s comin’ when you will find that out!”

“I warn you—” Norvell began.

“I’ll see you in hell before I’ll let you bust us up!” Bill cut in. He nodded to Nan, turned on his heel and left.

Full darkness covered Whispering Valley, then. Howdy was in a biscuit barn, emptying the last drops of coffee from his saucer. Above the rising din of night life in the town, came the sound of a shot, a yell, another shot.

He put his saucer down and wiped his mustache. It would be good, he reckoned, to be a free, wild one, who could shoot at the stars and yell to the skies. Sedate pioneers, however....

Somebody ran by, and shouted, “Crake-Norvell’s store. Somebody done murdered Sam Norvell!”

Dust hung thick in the yellow light splashing out of windows and open doors. Men pushed and crowded. Dude Tern and Wayne came from the store, snarling and commanding a way through for the four men following them; four men carrying the limp tall form of Sam Norvell.

“Who done it?” somebody yelled. “Is he dead?”

“Dying,” Tern said. “We’ll have the devil that done it in the jug inside the hour. Bigod, this’s the worst yet—the skunk sneaked up an’ shot through the window. Got Norvell twice.”

Men continued to mill and gabble, and out of that gabble came the rising point: “Bill Dineen told Norvell tonight he’d see him in hell! Remember? ...”

Bill Dineen had a little cabin on a hillside about a half mile out of town. Dude Tern and Wayne found him there.

A man whose job demands he pack guns usually sees to it those guns are always kept in readiness. It was Bill’s hellish luck he was performing this task when they walked in on him.

He’d cleaned and oiled his pistol and it

lay on the little table at his elbow.

“We’re too late to get him with the dirty gun, Sheriff,” Tern barked. “But I reckon it won’t be needed. Bill, you’re under arrest for murdering Sam Norvell!”

Crowds ganged around the jail. Howdy helped Asia Logan get through and into the sheriff’s office in the old courthouse.

They had Bill in there, heavily manacled and under Dude Tern’s gun.

“I never had nothin’ to do with it!” Bill protested fiercely.

“It won’t work,” Tern snapped. “Mason Crake saw you come around the store and get into the crowd on the street, after the shots was fired. A dozen people heard you threaten to see Sam Norvell in hell. It’s murder ...”

“It ain’t murder yet!” Asia Logan snapped. “Norvell ain’t dead yet.”

“But he’s dying,” Dude Tern stated positively.

“I’ll fight it for you, Bill. You sit tight and take it easy,” Asia Logan said, trying to force a cheerful confidence he did not feel. “We’ll beat this if it takes every damn dime we can beg, borrow or steal.”

“There’ll be a sort of preliminary in the morning,” Wayne told them, sighing. The old man hated this. Only Dude Tern and Mason Crake seemed triumphant here.

HOWDY helped Asia Logan back to the store. Logan shook as he lifted a drink.

“Howdy, you know Bill wouldn’t do that. He didn’t! Who would want to kill Norvell? Why’d Crake claim he saw Bill?”

“I don’t know,” Howdy lied. He forced his voice to a certain calmness. “I do know, though, that in the ol’ days, when we was younkners an’ not pioneers, we’d grabbed a six-gun an’ fought ’er out with whosomever our notion struck.”

“And if I could see through this, I’d do it now!” Logan rasped. “Crutches or no

crutches under me, bigod!”

“Yeah. Well, ain’t nothin’ can be done ’til mornin’. I’ll *pasear* around a li’l, then go to bed.”

There arose, an hour later, one hell of an argument in the Trompoose Bar. Old Howdy Harris, appearing to be damn well snooted, was holding forth in a loud voice to effect Mason Crake was a huddem liar, and his word not to be believed.

“We’ll prove ’er at the hearin’, too. Prove he’s a liar!” Howdy bawled. “An’ if Crake was here, I’ll tell him so.”

“That’s enough!”

Word, as Howdy had intended, had reached Crake’s ears. It was Dude Tern who came in and told Howdy it was enough. Mason Crake came in after Tern.

“I said I’ll prove him a liar, one way or another,” Howdy yodeled. “You know, they’ll ask him questions when he testifies. Mebbe the jedge’ll ask him if he’s ever been in the pen. If he says he ain’t, he lies. If he admits he has, mebbe he can explain some things about that Scad Waters. I betcha Waters had him by the short hair, because Waters was in prison once, an’ he likely knew Crake there!”

Dude Tern paled. Mason Crake’s collar seemed to choke him. A weighty silence mantled the saloon.

Howdy Harris had thrown his words blindly, basing them on the fact he knew Scad Waters had served time. And on the foundation that Mason Crake had habits prison leaves with a man.

“You’re drunk, and I’m juggling you!” Tern snarled.

“No,” Crake croaked. “Let him alone, because nobody’d believe the old fool, anyhow.”

“I told folks you was a liar,” Howdy jeered, and turned to the bar. “Gimme a bottle,” he ordered. “I’m goin’ to the stable an’ get tight where the smell is lots better than around Mason Crake.”

Howdy lurched and swayed, bumped the doors, half fell through them and took himself away.

Alone in the dark, he stopped his staggering.

The shrewd, wicked grin was on his old face. The light in his blue eyes was a hopeful, deadly one.

## IX

STEADY snores filled the little cubby in the corner of the Logan stable. Whiskey smells choked the place.

A footstep sounded as boot-sole scuffed the splintered runway, and a man's dark figure stopped beside the half-opened door into the room.

Eyes accustomed to the deep darkness, the man moved on in, easing toward the figure on the cot. The snores continued.

The man raised a heavy axle-nut wrench and the breath came grunting past his lips as he brought it down. The grunt became a squawk. From under the cot, a pair of hands came out to seize his ankles and jerk him down. Light flashed a blinding ray across his brain as a flailing gunbarrel caught his skull.

He was sitting on the cot, his wrists swelling from the ties that held his hands behind him when his head stopped roaring and he could see again.

Howdy had closed the door and lit a lantern. He sat on a box regarding his prisoner stonily. Gus Loffe, that prisoner, felt the emptiness of stark fear tearing his belly out.

"Snores from under a cot sound almost like them made on top of one," Howdy said flatly. "An' rolled grain sacks under a blanket shape up for a feller's figger pretty well."

He reached his bottle and took a drink.

"I left the Trompoose like I was drunk an' aimed for gettin' drunker. I'd started folks to thinkin' about Crake, too. So I wasn't safe to have around no more. Well!"

"Crake never had nothin' to do with 'er," Loffe said, his quavery voice unconvincing.

"You're a liar. You was Crake an' Norvell's man when you was stable foreman here, huddem your soul!"

"Norvell never had nothin'—I mean—"

"So-o-o," Howdy rumbled. He had another little drink.

"You take Scad Waters, now. He had somethin' on Crake. His past, likely. So him an' Tern an' Crake framed 'er that Waters was to be let rob a gold shipment. Only Waters got crossed an' killed, an' it got Tern made the law.

"They had you whupped by Waters because you lost your job here. Now they've sent you to get me. An', judgin' by the matches stuck in your hatband, you aimed to fire the place. Folks would say a drunk ol' fool set the fire by accident an' got burnt up."

Loffe remained sullenly silent.

"Thing is, Loffe, you reckon you'd lived long after? Hell! Tern'd find excuse to kill you so quick! I don't doubt he's layin' outside right now, waitin' for you to show."

Loffe choked. "Hell," he wailed, "what'm I goin' to do? I know they rigged Waters. I wasn't supposed to, but Scad talked. Fact is, him an' me was aimin' to tail with the gold he thought he'd get, an' let Crake hold the sack."

"Uh-huh. An' you want to know what you're goin' to do? You're goin' to walk out of here, an' let Tern have a shot at you. Unless you crave to talk. How'd you shoot Norvell?"

"I never!" Loffe cried, truth in his voice.

"An' it couldn't been Tern, because he's accounted for in my book. That leaves—Crake! Now, why'd Crake kill Norvell?"

"I don't know, unless it's because Norvell is honest an' don't want to control this country by controllin' all shippin'."

“So they build ’er up a feud between Norvell an’ Bill Dineen. Norvell is shot, Bill—the man Nan loves—is in jail, an’ Asia Logan goes broke tryin’ to help Bill out. Crake holds things in his palm, an’ Tern, a law, is his man.

“Well, Loffe, get up. An’ take your walk.”

Loffe cowered back. “No!” he squeaked. “Listen. I’ll go on the stand. I’ll testify that Crake done time with Waters. An’ that Dude Tern is wanted for a killin’ in Wyomin’. I’ll do anything. Don’t make me walk out there. Damn them, they would have shot me, like they done poor Scad. I...”

“Save ’er for the court,” Howdy growled. He shoved Loffe back on the cot, bound his ankles, roped him down tight, blew out the lantern and closed the door behind him when he left?

HE used small caution in leaving. Tern, Howdy knew damned well, would be in some public place; Crake, too, for that matter. They’d want no one to harbor a thought Crake had set the fire. Tern likely would stick around near Crake to make the alibi iron bound.

Right now—and Howdy grinned evilly as he walked up the street—they were likely waiting, straining and eager, for the alarm. For the roar of flames that would wipe Logan’s stable and stock and equipment and Howdy Harris out.

Trust Tern to figure a killing for Loffe to shut his mouth; but a killing that would react to Dude Tern’s benefit.

Howdy stopped, pulled the old six-pistol from under his shirt, lifted the hammer a little and spun the cylinder. He stuck the gun back under his waistband outside his shirt.

Bigod, he aimed to show folks in Whispering Valley a thing or two; aimed to give them a lesson in action they would not forget. Pioneer stuff? Hell, and a mighty yes! He’d show them how old-timers performed.

He’d go on a high peck and clean things up for them.

His blue eyes were pale with a wild light, his cheeks pinched, his lips pulled in a macabre grin as he paced on, turned, and walked into the Trompoose bar.

Mason Crake stood nearest him. On down the bar, Dude Tern stood with a filled whiskey glass in hand. The pair were watching the door, nerves tensed.

Howdy’s appearance froze them in their tracks.

## X

A MAN’S laugh stopped on a high note. Another stopped talking, with his mouth open. Dozens of pairs of eyes blinked and widened as Howdy moved on in, staying wide of the bar, and gained a point halfway between Crake and Dude Tern.

They formed the three points of a silent, tense triangle. A figure men could not understand.

Old Howdy, withered, small, looking like he was crouched and ready to leap—what could he be thinking of? What did he have on his mind?

That was soon learned.

“Loffe sorta failed to bust my skull in an’ set the Logan stable on fire,” Howdy said thinly, the movement of his lips not erasing his hellish grin.

“Wh-what’re you talking about?” Tern rasped. “You’re drunk, you old fool.”

“Loffe’ll tell you different. He’ll tell the court a lot different, too. How it was framed to kill Scad Waters, I can swear to that. I saw you jawin’ with him before the holdup.

“You want to jug me? Can’t stop me from tellin’ that yo’re wanted for killin’s in Wyomin’. Won’t stop me from sayin’ ’Crake done time with Waters. Hell, a fine bunch you are! With Crake shootin’ his own partner to gain control ...”

“Lies!” Crake screamed in a fear-ridden voice. He pawed for the gun in the shoulder holster beneath his coat.

Dude Tern squalled, “Don’t you draw on Crake!” and his hand slapped pistol butt and leather as he threw his draw.

Howdy Harris was coming at Tern, his bootsoles not leaving the floor when his first shot caught Tern under the right breast. Tern’s shot drove a splintery hole in the floor as he was driven backward against the bar.

Howdy did a little crowhop and the first shot from Crake’s weapon seemed to scorch his shoulder blades. Howdy fired deliberately. Crake dropped, his left leg broken under him.

Cool, almost seeming to be enjoying this, Howdy swung back. Dude Tern had recovered his gun. He was on his knees, his strained face beaded with glistening globules of icy sweat as he lined down on Howdy again.

Again Howdy’s old Colt slammed sound against the quivering walls. Something smeared the bar back of Dude Tern’s head and he twisted down in a gruesome huddle, a blue hole over his left eye.

Still moving deliberately, not wasting a single motion, Howdy showed Crake his full attention now. Again men winced as the roar of Howdy’s six-gun pounded their ringing eardrums.

Crake screamed terribly as his right arm flopped at his side.

No man moved. They watched Howdy, who squatted on his haunches a few feet from Crake. He leveled his gun and thumbed back the hammer as he calmly allowed, “this last one’ll be for Sam Norvell!”

“Don’t!” Crake shrieked. “Somebody—help. I shot Norvell. Get the sheriff. Let him arrest me. Help!” He cowered, covering his face with his left arm as he leaned against the face of the bar, left leg out at an odd angle, right arm dangling limp.

Howdy helped old Wayne when he arrived. They got Loffe into jail, Crake to a doctor, under guard, and toted Tern away. Asia Logan came crutching into the saloon, after things had quieted a little bit.

“The drinks,” Logan said, “are on me, with the compliments of a old hellion named Howdy Harris.”

That was all. Logan never tried to thank Howdy any other way. Action, trouble, likker—these were the thanks Howdy Harris best understood.

A WEEK later, unshaven, eyes bloodshot, Howdy stood in Logan’s office and raised a tin cup with him.

“Let’s see,” Logan growled, looking at a paper on his table. “You shot out two bar mirrors, broke the window in the barber shop, and burnt up a bed and carpet in the hotel. Not bad. Only—a lot of womenfolks are complaining because you got their men drunk, and kept them that way along with you all week.”

“The wimmen,” Howdy orated, “don’t know the ways of a pioneer. Still, mebber they’re right. After this, I’ll be a man of peace.”

“You’re talking through a hangover,” Logan snorted. Then he grinned. “Maybe we can give you a job that’ll have some action that’ll let you bust loose once in a while.

“You see, Norvell—no, of course you wouldn’t know!—is going to get well. Him and me is going to throw the stage and freight business together. A good idea anyhow, seeing that Bill and Nan are getting hitched, and Crake going to the penitentiary.

“You can be a sort of manager, and can sit on your tail for the folks to point out to their kids as a mean old devil who was famous in the old days when.”

“Yuh-huh.” Absently. “Huddem, we’ll throw a lot of loops on this thing called fun when Nan an’ Bill get spliced.” Howdy licked

his lips. Then he began pulling off his faded shirt and pawing at his shoulders.

“What the hell’s biting you?” Asia Logan demanded.

“Well, since I played the part of this

nakid feller with the bow an’ arrers, I’m afeerd mebbe I’m sproutin’ wings.

“An’, hell, Asia, you know doggone well wings wouldn’t look no good on a real ol’ pioneer!”