

# FETCH ME BRANNON'S EARS

by Seven Anderton

*Hazel had thrown Lafe Garvin years ago because he wouldn't quit hellin' around. But now she was hoping that Lafe hadn't become too tame.*

**A**PRIL DUSK had fallen when Lafe Garvin and Ira Porter rode over a ridge and saw Broken Bow lying ahead of them in the valley. The Black Hills lay four days of hard riding behind. Their horses were travel thinned.

Garvin was lanky, of medium height, and weather-tanned to a coffee brown. There was a saddle bend in his legs. The gray in hair and mustache said he was not young, but his word would have been taken had he claimed to be anything from forty to sixty. The blue eyes under ragged brows were sharp and keen; he moved with easy coordination, and rode like he was part of his horse.

Porter was not yet thirty, a hair under six feet tall, and so solidly and smoothly built that he appeared twenty pounds lighter than his actual two hundred. His lean face was slightly hawklike, his eyes gray and his blonde hair threatened with red.

Well worn range garb and gear marked the pair as saddle tramps who knew their way about the wide frontier. Smooth walnut grips of .45 Colt revolvers protruded from low hung holsters on their gun belts.

"There she is," Lafe Garvin said. "She's growed some; last time I seen her there wasn't no railroad, and I figgered I'd never come back again on purpose."



"Why?" Gordon asked.

Garvin chuckled. "My heart was busted. The only gal I ever wanted to hitch up with married a harness maker because I wouldn't quit hellin' around, and make something better than a cowpoke and buffalo hunter out of myself. Her and me was right soft on each other, but she said a girl had to have a man she could depend on. Her name was Hazel Williams. Wonder if she's still around Broken Bow; mebby I'll find out if we stay around long enough."

"Seems I heard somewhere that the town is still plenty salty," Ira said.

"Mebby so," Lafe replied; "we'll likely find out."

It was full dark when the comrades pulled their horses up at a water trough in the middle of the town's principal street. The street was lighted by lamps atop posts and the radiance from the windows of saloons and a few stores.

"Yonder is a beanery," Ira said, "and I could use some grub."

Lafe grunted. "You was hungry eight years ago when I run across you at Fort

Laramie and you ain't never got over it. But we might as well go eat. Won't do the horses any hurt to cool out 'fore we put 'em up for the night."

The place to which Ira had called attention was a two-story frame building. Yellow lamp light shone through a window upon which painted lettering read:

MA'S RESTAURANT  
ROOMS

As they tied their horses in front Lafe said, "Looks like supper's over. Nobody in there. But mebbly we can anyhow fix for a place to sleep 'fore we look around."

**T**HE RESTAURANT had a counter along one side, six tables and a desk and cigar counter just inside the entrance. There was a room register on the desk. A woman came hurrying through an archway that led to the kitchen. She was buxom and rosy-cheeked, with lively brown eyes and abundant dark hair touched but lightly with gray.

"Supper's over," she said as she stepped behind the desk. "We stop serving at seven, but if—"

"Well dang me, Hazel," Lafe cut her off, "if you ain't purtier than you used to be."

She gave him a sharp look, then recognition dawned in her eyes. "Lafe Garvin!" she exclaimed. "You wouldn't look so bad yourself if you'd shave off that soup-strainer; what are you doin' in Broken Bow?"

"Me and Ira Porter here," Lafe told her, "just come out of the Black Hills with a purty good stake and a hankerin' to see how folks are livin' back east. Figger to take the train from here—mebbly as far as St. Louis. How's Edgar?"

"Edgar got killed seven years ago," she answered.

"Too bad," Lafe registered no deep sorrow. "You married again?"

"No," she said flatly, then hurried on, "If

you and your friend are hungry, I can scrape up what's left in the kitchen. And I got a room if you want to put up for the night."

"We can use the room," Lafe said, "and I can eat most anything; but Ira has got bad stummick trouble."

Hazel's glance at the robust Ira was sympathetic until she saw his grin.

"He just can't seem to get the danged thing full nohow," Lafe added.

She snuffed. "There's anyhow one way you ain't changed, Lafe Garvin; you two come on back to the kitchen."

In the kitchen, a girl of nineteen was putting washed dishes onto shelves. She was a well rounded brunette with pixie-like attractiveness.

"This is my daughter Sarah," Hazel said needlessly—since the resemblance was so marked. "Sarah, this is Lafe Garvin and Ira Porter; I'm going to rustle them up some supper."

Sarah Grove regarded Lafe for a moment with interest, then her dark eyes went to Ira Porter and remained fixed. Ira seemed fascinated. Neither of them paid any attention when Lafe said, "By gum, she's mighty near as purty as you was—I mean are—"

"You mean was," Hazel cut off, "and you're still lyin' because she's prettier. Sarah, you better run along to the quilting party. I'll feed these two and finish up here."

"What?" Sarah said, tearing her gaze away from Ira. "Oh, yes, mother. I guess I'd better." She took off her apron and hung and hung it on a wall hook.

"Better go out the back way," her mother said—and Sarah did.

**F**IFTEEN minutes later Lafe and Ira were eating the bountiful meal Hazel Grove had "scraped up" and placed on an oilcloth covered kitchen table. She sat at the end of the table, ready to bring more.

"Mighty nice to see you again, Hazel," Lafe said. "I ain't heard nothin' from here for

a long time.”

“I heard about you now and then,” she said. “Last time was four-five months ago. Some men rode through here and was talking about you and Wild Bill Hickock raising Old Ned in Dakota.” She regarded him steadily for a moment, then continued, “Lafe, this may surprise you, but I wish you had rode in here as young and hellacious as you used to be.”

Lafe gulped a mouthful of food and stared at her. “Well I be jiggered,” he said. “Why?”

“Because,” she replied. “The minute you show up where he is—Gabe Brannon—he’s the marshal here—is goin’ to make you take off your guns. He don’t allow anybody to wear guns in town, and he will be plumb mean about it. If you was the young hellion you used to be you’d kill him; and if there was ever a job that needed doing that’s it.”

Lafe had lost interest in food. “Danged if you don’t sound plumb bloodthirsty,” he said. “Well, Hazel, I ain’t as young as I used to be—which same I can’t help. But one thing is plumb certain—when any gent makes me shuck my hardware I’ll be dead. What puzzles me is hearin’ you say you want to see any man—‘specially a lawman—salivated. What got you to feelin’ thataway?”

She didn’t answer the question. “I’m sorry I said that, Lafe,” she said. “I guess you ain’t changed any other ways—but you *are* older, and I don’t want you to get hurt. Didn’t you ever hear of Gabe Brannon?”

“Um,” Lafe said. “Seems I did hear Broken Bow had a holy terror of a marshal—but the name slipped my mind. What’s he been doin’ that makes you want somebody to fetch you his ears?”

“He’s a beast,” Hazel replied bitterly. “You can’t blame everybody for being afraid of him. He’s quicker than lightning with his gun—and he’s itching every minute to use it. He’s killed seven men in the two years he’s been here, and crippled several and run a lot more out of town. It was a sorry day for Broken Bow when Ben Slatt and Alva

Dingman and that bunch brought him here.”

“Alva Dingman!” Lafe exclaimed. “That polecat I know about; Hickok and me hightailed him out of Abilene once. What’s he doin’ here?”

“He runs the *Hot Time* saloon; it’s a hellhole. This town was bad before he came, but he lined up with Ben Slatt and the others and made it ten times worse. Ben. Slatt is the banker, and there’s half a dozen others—like Abe Hiller that runs the *Emporium*, and they run the town. They got most of the folks in debt to them, or buffaloeed one way or another. They hired Gabe Brannon to do their dirty work—and there don’t seem to be any way to get rid of him. Elections is just a joke. They run them. I’ve been sore tempted to load up Edgar’s old shotgun and kill Gabe Brannon myself when he comes pesterin’ around.”

“Brannon’s been botherin’ you, that it?” Lafe’s eyes grew cold.

“Me!” Hazel exclaimed. “I wish—I just wish he would. He’s got a crazy notion about Sarah. She can’t hardly even speak to any other fellow. Brannon warns ‘em off—and they know he’d just as soon kill them as look at them. He—”

“How old is Brannon?” Lafe cut her off.

“Must be close to forty,” she replied. “But he’s wicked bad, Lafe. Don’t you go and—”

“I’m a purty ornery galoot myself,” Lafe told her, “Seems you told me that a good many times. I reckon I’ll have to take me a sashay around town and find out whether a gent can’t wear his ornaments in a free country.” He pushed back his chair.

“No, Lafe,” Hazel protested.

**I**RA HAD stopped eating to listen with interest when Hazel spoke of Brannon’s attentions to Sarah. He stood up with Lafe.

“You ain’t in on this,” Lafe said.

“Who’s goin’ to keep me out?” Ira retorted. “I’ll go along, or be pretty close behind.”

Their eyes locked for a moment, then Lafe

said, "Mebby you can be handy at that—if you'll do like I say. You know you ain't fast enough to draw against a holy terror, but you're a sidewinder other ways, I'll admit. You go up to our room and leave your artillery."

After hesitating a moment, Ira started to unbuckle his gunbelt. "I'll leave it right here—"

"I said up in the room," Lafe stopped him.

Lafe's left eyelid had drooped slightly. Ira nodded understanding. Lafe turned his head and looked a question.

"Number three," Hazel Grove said. "just at the top of the stairs."

"Lafe," Hazel said anxiously when Ira had gone, "I wish you wouldn't—"

"You don't wish nothin' of the sort," Lafe said calmly. "That purty little gal might be ours if I had knowed once what I know now—and not gone hellin' off to Wyoming when I did. Mebby you and me might unmake a mistake or two after I do some palaverin' with this Brannon jasper."

They stood for a long minute, speaking only with their eyes. Then Lafe said, "Ira's comin' downstairs. I better go."

"I—I have to hope you can, Lafe," she said softly.

"Can what?" he said, turning back at the archway.

"Bring me Brannon's ears," she replied. Tears were brimming in her eyes.

**B**USINESS—drinking, gambling and dancing—was in full blast when Lafe and Ira entered the Hot Time saloon. They found a place to belly up to the long bar. Lafe ordered beers. They sipped the beverage while surveying the crowd in the smoke-hazy room.

"See the gent with the slicked down black hair and the dinky mustache down yonder at the end of the bar?" Lafe said. "That's Alva Dingman; I'm wonderin' if he'll know me when he looks around."

They were looking at the flashily dressed

proprietor when a gruff voice at Lafe's elbow said, "All right, feller, shed that belt and gun and pass it over to the bartender. Nobody wears hardware in this town."

The speaker was a big, sandy-haired man. His beefy face was florid but not unhandsome. His sharp black eyes were steady and his right hand hovered near the butt of his bolstered Colt. A polished star shone on his unbuttoned vest.

Lafe Garvin put down his beer glass and stepped back slightly as he turned to face the speaker. Ira Porter stayed close to Lafe's back.

"Nobody?" Lafe said, looking at the marshal's gun.

"Nobody but me," Gabe Brannon snarled. "Unwrap that belt and pass it over—quick and careful."

Neither man had spoken softly and the crowd grew suddenly silent. Even players at the card tables stopped to watch what was happening. Customers nearest to Lafe and the marshal began to edge away.

"Now, mister," Lafe said. "I can't rightly do that. I just as soon be barefooted in a patch of sandburrs as out in public without my hawleg. Sort—"

"Gabe, be careful!" a frantic voice shouted from the rear of the bar. The sudden silence had drawn the attention of Alva Dingman. "That's Lafe Garvin," Dingman screamed, "and he's a poison dirty killer."

Lafe did not raise his voice, but it cut clearly through the tense dive.

Without removing his cold gaze from the marshal, Lafe said, "You're a damned liar, Dingman. You know I never shot a man that didn't draw first, and at that I never killed but two. I just fixed the rest so they wouldn't never be handy with a gun again. If this pet wolf of yours tries to draw on me, he ain't ever goin' to have much use for his gun hand afterwards. I'm waitin' for him to reach."

Then Lafe added a sentence that puzzled his hearers—with the possible exception of Ira Porter. "Come to think of it," Lafe said, "you

could get better ears offen a jackrabbit.”

The silence was heavy for long moments. Then Lafe said. “Dingman, tell your star-totin’ lobo to draw or pull in his horns. Seems to me that iffen I was runnin’ a no-gun town I would do it by provin’ I was man enough to do it without wearin’ one myself.”

Alva Dingman had crouched until only his head was visible. “Gabe,” he shouted, “let that crazy killer alone. This is a law-abiding town; we’ll take care of him later.”

Lafe and Brannon stood with eyes locked. “Well,” Lafe said, “you goin’ to try it now or behind my back?”

“You heard the mayor’s orders,” Brannon snarled. “Now you get out of here—and you better get out of town.”

Lafe nudged Ira with an elbow, then said, “I’ll be around for a spell; got interests. But I’ll mosey along. This dump stinks of skunk anyhow.”

Ira Porter had already walked towards the door. Lafe followed, looking over his shoulder. Other men, many of them looking pleased, cleared his path.

A LAMP on the desk was turned low and the kitchen was dark when Lafe and Ira returned to Hazel Grove’s place. They had been absent less than a half hour.

Hazel rose from a chair placed where she could watch the street. “What happened?” she asked as she turned up the lamp.

“Nothin’ much,” Lafe told her. “Brannon talked rough, but ‘peared shy about reachin’ for his iron.” He grinned. “I was given to understand that this here town is law-abidin’ and will take care of me later. I’m lookin’ forward.”

“You better look behind pretty often, too,” she said. “That outfit will get you foul, Lafe. I wish you’d pull out for—”

“Now, Hazel,” Lafe cut in, “you ever know me to start a undertakin’ and then tuck my tail?”

She sighed. “No, I didn’t. But please be

careful; this is going to make Brannon all the meaner about Sarah when he finds out you’re our friend. He’s plumb ruining her life.”

“Such as how?” Lafe asked.

“She can’t even go to the Saturday night dances. Brannon asks her to go with him every week. She won’t—but she’s afraid to go with any other fellow, even if they wasn’t afraid to take her.”

Ira broke his scowling silence. “Tomorrow’s Saturday. Is there a dance?”

“Yes,” Hazel said, “but don’t you—”

“Mebby,” Ira interrupted, “I’ll collect Brannon’s ears ‘fore Lafe gets around to it.”

“Well, well,” Lafe said. “Let’s put our horses away and roll in ourselves. Tomorrow might be sort of strenuous.”

Lafe and Ira came down to breakfast early but a few shop workers and the crew of a freight train were ahead of them. Sarah Grove was waiting tables while her mother minded the kitchen. Lafe and Ira took the vacant table nearest the entrance to the kitchen. Hazel popped out of the kitchen to take their order. It was simple. Ham and eggs.

“They’re up to no good,” Hazel said in a low voice as she bent above the table. “Brannon always comes in early on Saturday to ask Sarah if she’s decided to go to the dance. He ain’t been in; you watch out.”

“Allus do,” Lafe assured her.

Hazel returned to the kitchen. Soon afterwards Sarah brought their food. “Miss Sarah,” Ira Porter asked bluntly, “would you go to the dance with me tonight?”

Her cheeks flushed. “I can’t; it would only make trouble.”

“There’s goin’ to be trouble anyhow,” Ira said.

“I’m afraid so,” she agreed. “I’ll let you know.” She left to wait on a man who was tapping the cigar case with a coin as he looked over the room.

Ten minutes later, as Lafe and Ira were finishing their meal. Hazel screamed from the kitchen, “Lafe, look out!”

But she was too late. Two men had entered by the back door. While one of them struggled with Hazel the other stepped out of the kitchen and thrust the muzzle of a shotgun against Lafe Garvin's back. At the same moment Marshal Brannon and Alva Dingman, both armed, entered by the front door.

"Freeze, Garvin, or I'll blow you apart," barked the man with the shotgun. He was a bartender from the Hot Time. "I'm a deputy."

"That's right, Garvin," Brannon affirmed as he approached with Dingman at his elbow, "And you're under arrest for resisting an officer. Stand up careful so I can get your gun."

Two minutes later Lafe was being marched off to jail. Gabe Brannon turned back to snarl at Ira Porter, "and you, feller—walk mighty careful around here; don't tie on any hardware."

Ira sat still at the table and made no reply. Lafe had instructed him before they came down from their room. Hazel Grove, freed by her captor when he was sure Lafe had been taken, came out of the kitchen, disheveled and panting.

"Lafe," she screamed, "don't try to escape. Gabe Brannon killed a man for that, but nobody saw it happen."

"I won't," Lafe replied. "I know about snakes and—"

He was stopped by Alva Dingman's fist smashing into his face. "You keep still," Dingman snarled, "until you talk to the judge."

**B**RANNON and his henchmen departed with their prisoner. Hazel glared at Ira Porter. "Ain't you going to do something?" she demanded.

"I'm goin' to do near as I can what Lafe told me to," Ira replied, "but I got a few ideas of my own—seein' that Lafe didn't figger on anything like this. You think Brannon will come back here?"

The restaurant was empty, everybody

having gone outside to watch the progress towards the town jail. Even Sarah had stepped outside the front door.

"Sure he will," Hazel replied, "he'll not miss a chance to crow for Sarah."

"Ain't there even one man in this town with enough gall to give me a little help?" Ira asked.

"Help with what?" Hazel asked.

It took Ira several minutes to tell her. When he had finished she was regarding him with respect.

"Can you do that?" she asked.

"I will," he said grimly.

"Then I'm all the help you need," she declared. "A man might get shot, but even these skunks ain't goin' to shoot a woman. You hustle along and get ready. Brannon won't waste much time gettin' back here."

"They took him into the jail," Sarah reported as she came back into the restaurant.

"You go back to the kitchen and stay there," her mother said. "Ira and me got things to do; don't you get in our way."

Twenty minutes had passed when Marshal Gabe Brannon emerged from the jail and cut across the street towards the Grove restaurant. He was strutting. Hazel Grove stood at the window and watched his approach. Just behind her, a ten-gauge, double-barreled shotgun leaned against the end of the desk.

Brannon stepped onto the sidewalk, grinning triumphantly at Mrs. Grove. She glared back at him. Then, from an open window in the end of the upstairs hall, the loop of a lariat dropped over the marshal and was jerked tight. A moment later his feet were dangling two feet above the sidewalk. Hazel Grove turned, snatched up the shotgun and stepped outside.

Brannon saw her and stopped yelling as he looked into the twin muzzles of the scattergun. "Shut up," she said, "or I'll fill you so full of buckshot that you won't float in brine."

She stepped up to the dangling marshal, snatched the Colt from his holster and backed

away. She dropped the revolver at her feet and steadied the shotgun. "Come on down, Ira," she called. "He'll be here—one way or another."

**I**RA CAME down the quickest way. The rope went slack and Brannon sprawled on the sidewalk. Ira Porter landed beside him.

"Get up, you skunk," Ira panted as he gained his balance.

Brannon scrambled up. "You're foolin' with the law," he warned, backing against the building.

Brannon's yells had brought people into the street. Among these were Alva Dingman and his shotgun-armed bartender. Dingman drew his revolver as they ran towards the scene. They were passing Sid Holt's hardware store when Sid stepped out of the doorway with an axe-handle he had snatched up. Sid had no idea what the hubbub was about, but on general principals he swung the axe-handle and knocked the bartender flat. Then he traded the axe-handle for the shotgun and ran on towards the focal point of ruckus.

From his blacksmith shop across the street from the Grove restaurant, brawny Bill O'Shea came running with a red hot horseshoe held in a pair of tongs. "You need any help, Hazel?" he yelled.

"Looks like I got it, whether I need it or not," she replied.

The spark had been dropped into the powder keg that was Broken Bow. Nearly a hundred men gathered quickly—and it was a grim assembly.

"What's goin' on here?" the blacksmith demanded.

"If you'll get back and give him room," Hazel Grove answered, "this young fellow is about to beat hell out of Gabe Brannon for botherin' Sarah." Her shotgun was still steady on the cowering Brannon.

The blacksmith glanced over the suddenly quiet crowd, then back at Ira Porter. "Good idea," he said. "Start in, mister, we'll keep it

fair." A growl of affirmation came from the gathering.

It was then that Ira Porter squared his shoulders, faced the assembled men and displayed the quality that was to make him a state senator some ten years later. "I'd sure enjoy doin' that," he said, "but if I cripple him up it might give him a excuse. Seems to me like if this town has got to have a gun boss we ought to find out who it is. I think his name is Lafe Garvin and he's down yonder in the jail where a bunch of damn cowards put him a little while ago. Let's get him out of there and let him and Brannon settle it out here in the street."

The crowd's response to the proposal was silence until Alva Dingman spoke up, "As mayor of this town—"

The shotgun which Sid Holt thrust against his back choked Dingman off. "As mayor of this town," Sid snapped, "S'pose you shut up and lay down with your pups until we mebbly have a honest election. Well, some of you gents get them jail keys offen Brannon."

**F**IFTEEN minutes later, Lafe Garvin and Gabe Brannon stood in the dusty street, surrounded by a dozen grim-faced men. His belt and gun had been restored to Lafe and Brannon's weapon was back in its holster.

"Brannon," Bill O'Shea said "you have gun-bullied this town for more'n two years. Garvin, here says you ain't man enough to do that. We aim to find out. You are goin' to stand right here and we'll take Garvin way down yonder by the feed store. Then you and him start walkin' towards each other. I got to tell you that Garvin wants you to know he ain't goin' for his gun first."

Brannon licked his lips and said nothing. Sid Holt and another man walked away with Lafe. A minute later the blacksmith said, "Go ahead, Brannon; Garvin is comin'."

The other men in the street moved quickly away. The throng on the sidewalks took shelter in doorways or inside, behind

windows. Alone in the sunbathed street, Brannon and Garvin walked towards each other, hands held at thighs but not swinging. A hundred yards had separated them at the start. Then it was eighty—seventy—fifty.

At that distance Brannon suddenly halted. He stood like a man frozen, making no move to draw his weapon. Lafe Garvin came steadily on. Forty yards—twenty—ten. Still neither man had moved a hand towards his gun. Even those farthest away could see that Brannon was trembling. Otherwise, he seemed unable to move. Without haste, Lafe Garvin came on, stopped face-to-face with Brannon and reached a brown hand to lift the gun from Brannon's holster and fling it aside. Then, first with his open right hand, then with his left, he slapped Brannon hard on either cheek. Brannon fell sidewise into the dust and lay whimpering. The blustering town tamer had broken completely.

Lafe Garvin stooped, grasped a handful of collar and dragged Brannon towards where Hazel Grove stood in the restaurant doorway with her arms about her daughter. Silence still hung heavy.

Lafe looked at Hazel and his lips twitched. "Here they are," he said. "They're still fastened onto him, but if you got a knife handy—"

"I don't want them!" her scream cut him off. "Lafe Garvin, you ain't human." She turned and pulled Sarah with her into the restaurant.

Confused, Lafe looked down at the limp bulk of Brannon. "Say!" he exclaimed. "This buzzard looks dead."

Doctor Howard Ong, coming from among the spectators, confirmed Lafe's judgment a few moments later. A strong shock can stop a rotten heart, and Brannon wasn't the first man whose wounded vanity proved mortal. Ira Porter went into the restaurant to tell Sarah and her mother.

LAFE GARVIN turned to where Alva Dingman stood in the encircling crowd. "Dingman," he said, "I helped run you out of one town; if you're in this one at sundown you won't be able to leave afterwards."

Dingman turned to push frantically through the crowd. "Let me away from him!" he yammered.

"Folks," Bill O'Shea's voice boomed, "don't forget there's a dance tonight. Let's make her a celebration. These things has to happen—and this one was sure overdue."

Lafe Garvin went into the restaurant and found Ira with the widow and her daughter in the kitchen.

"Look, Hazel," Lafe said. "I only done what you asked me to. I didn't intend to kill him at all—just fix him so he couldn't be handy with a gun any more. But he wouldn't draw."

There was silence for moments, then Hazel said, "I guess you ain't to blame, Lafe. Sarah, here it is almost ten o'clock and dinner ain't even started."

Lafe and Ira escorted the widow and her daughter to the dance that night at town hall. Bill O'Shea broke it up before midnight.

"We got some business," the blacksmith announced. "The menfolks are goin' to take the ladies home now. Then all of them that is legal voters is comin' back here for a meetin'. Seeing that our mayor skedaddled east on the evening train, and we are likewise shy a marshal, it looks like some reorganizin' was in order."

Lafe, Ira and Hazel and Sarah Grove had eaten and were lingering over coffee around the kitchen table when Bill O'Shea arrived.

"Hoped I'd find you fellers up," the blacksmith said. "I been sent to tell you that the meetin' picked you two for marshal and mayor. Like to know if we can count on you."

Ira Porter was the first to find voice. "I couldn't be no mayor," he protested.

The blacksmith chuckled. "You got it the wrong way around. We figger we don't want

any more gun marshals; this here is goin' to be a law-abidin' town. Some of us heard you offer to knock the stuffin' out of a bigger man than you are, so we picked you for marshal. Same time, we'd like to know that if any gunslingers was to come around we could call on the mayor to cool 'em off. How about it?"

"Well," Lafe Garvin said, "I been everything but a mayor. Guess I could take a crack at it—providin' it don't interfere with me gettin' married." He looked at the widow

Grove.

The widow's face flushed. Her eyes fell. "I don't think it will," she said.

Lafe looked around and saw Ira whispering in Sarah Grove's not unwilling ear. He grinned at the stalwart blacksmith.

"Not to hurt your feelins'," Lafe said, "but it seems to me you are sort of unnecessary around here right now."

O'Shea departed without argument.