

## Showdown

By GUNNISON STEELE

It didn't seem possible that Sid Jarret would be able to beat Tuck's four kings—but whether Jarret could or not, Tuck had still lost too much to be able to cover Jarret's bets.

“I’M LETTIN’ you down easy this time, Tuck,” Sid Jarret said, grinning that sly, wicked grin as he shoved more money into the pot. “I’m raisin’ you just a hundred!”

I felt kind of cold inside. I was already eight hundred loser in this draw poker game—eight hundred of the two thousand dollars I’d got for the cattle I’d shipped that morning, money I couldn’t afford to lose. There’d been a couple of others in the game when it started, but now it had narrowed down to just Sid Jarret and me.

I looked across at Jarret. He was a big, dark man with flabby jowls and cold little eyes. He owned the Frying Pan outfit—land he’d won at crooked poker, I’d heard—but he never pretended to do any work. His hands were soft and smooth. If I hadn’t got a couple of drinks under my belt I’d have had more sense than to sit down with him. But now it was done, and I *had* to try to get back that eight hundred.

I peeked again at my three jacks, a fair hand in any poker game. Jarret had drawn three cards.

“Call,” I said, showed in a hundred and flipped my cards.

Jarret spread his hand face up. He had three kings.

“Too bad, kid,” he sneered, raking in the pot.

If he was cheating, I hadn’t been able to catch him. Maybe a dozen men were gathered about the table, sweating the game, but the room was pretty quiet. They knew as well as I did that I couldn’t afford to lose that money. They must have figured I was pretty dumb—a freckled, red-haired button of twenty settin’ down with a poker wolf like Sid Jarret. But I was too stubborn to back down now.

I wanted to slam my fist into Jarret’s grinning face. Instead, I said, “Yore deal—and yuh better deal ‘em straight!”

His black eyes narrowed down. “What you mean by that, kid?”

“Just deal ‘em,” I said.

He dealt, and he won that pot, too. Pretty soon I was a thousand loser. That cold feeling was still in

my stomach. If I went broke it meant more than just losing my money. It meant that likely Rose Tully wouldn’t ever marry me. I’d never seen a prettier girl than Rose. She’d promised to marry me next month. But she wouldn’t marry anybody who’d been dumb enough to lose two thousand dollars in cow money.



JARRET kept on winning. Half a dozen times he just barely topped me. Seemed like he could read the backs of the cards.

Once Jim Sabin, who owned the saloon we were playing in, tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Don’t you reckon you had enough, kid? You’re outa yore class—”

“Let the kid alone,” Sid Jarret said coldly. “It’s his money, ain’t it?”

“It sure is,” I said. “My luck’ll change!”

But it didn’t, and pretty soon I was fifteen hundred loser. I knew then that I didn’t have a chance, but I wouldn’t quit.

“Mind if I take a hand, gentlemen?”

I looked up quick. A runty, pale-eyed little old gent stood there beside the table. He had a neatly trimmed spade beard that had gray in it. He wore a blade suit with a black string tie and a white shirt. I

hadn't noticed him standing there watching the game, but I knew he must have been there behind me several minutes.

Nick Hawn owned the 77 outfit over along French Creek. I reckon he had more friends than any man on the Kettledrum range. Once he'd been a gambler—a square gambler, I'd heard, and folks called him “Two-Card” Hawn—but he never played now except for low stakes with a few old cronies. He'd never more than spoken to me a few times.

Now Sid Jarret's agate eyes narrowed thoughtfully on Nick Hawn. He knew Hawn had once been a gambler, but he must have figured the old-timer was out of practice and would be easy pickings.

“Your money's good as any, old man,” Jarret said. “No limit, no table stakes—play all yuh got, can beg, borrow or steal!”

Nick Hawn nodded curtly and sat down. He took a roll of money from his pocket and placed it on the table before him.

The game started up again. I didn't see how Nick Hawn being in the game would help me. Likely it would just mean more easy money for Sid Jarret.

I won the first pot, a small one, and Jarret won the next three. Jarret was grinning that cold, sly grin. Nick Hawn didn't seem to care much whether he won or lost. He played carefully, watching Jarret with his pale, wise old eyes. I could see he was feeling Jarret out, like a man feels out a gent he's fighting before leaping in for the kill.

Still, that wasn't helping me. I was down to my last two hundred. I could see a year's work—and a slender, yellow-haired girl named Rose—slipping away from me.

Nick Hawn won a couple of good pots off Jarret—and now Jarret had stopped grinning. He dealt more slowly, and there was a puzzled, uncertain light in his eyes.

Before starting this deal—the deal where I caught four kings cold—I saw Jarret look at me, then at Nick Hawn, before a kind of hood dropped over his black eyes. My heart jumped up and hit me under the chin when I saw the four kings. Then it dropped back with a thud.

Even if I got a play on the kings, I didn't have enough money to get back but a tiny part of what I'd lost.

I LOOKED at Jarret and Nick Hawn. Jarret was frowning, peering at his cards. Hawn's gray face was expressionless. He seemed kind of bored.

It was my first bet. I didn't want to give my hand away by betting too much, so I shoved in fifty dollars. Nick Hawn shrugged, tossed in his hand. Jarret peered at his cards again, then very carefully placed them on the table face-down.

“Tuck,” he said, “I'm tired of playin' poker for today. I'll just raise the rest yuh got!”

I counted out my last hundred and fifty, cussin' the black luck that had given me four king cards and no money to back 'em up with.

“That's all the money I got, tinhorn—which is a lucky thing for you!” I said.

“Good hand, eh?” Jarret purred.

“Good enough to back up, if I had more money—”

“You got some land, ain't you?”

“Yeah, I got some land—”

“But no nerve, huh, kid?”

“Why, cuss dang yore mangy hide!” I yelled, rearin' up. “Get on yore feet and I'll show yuh who's got nerve!”

“I didn't mean that kind of nerve,” Jarret said, his eyes cold and merciless. “Remember, we ain't playin' table stakes. Yore little cow outfit ain't worth much, but it's worth something. Put it in the pot—or toss in your hand and give me the pot!”

I sat back down. I felt kind of pale inside. I'd worked hard to build up my little place on Hungry Creek. It was all I had. If I lost it, along with the money that was already gone, I'd be laughed out of the country.

Everybody was looking at me. They knew Jarret had me where the hair was short. Nick Hawn was lighting a cigar, staring at me over the match.

Those five cards—the four kings and a trey—seemed big as a barn in my hand. Not once in a million times would a man draw a hand that would beat four kings.

“Reckon that busts up the game,” Jarret said, reaching for the pot. “Tough luck, kid—”

“Just a minute, tinhorn!” I said. “Don't get any grease on yore fingers off that pot. I'm callin' yore bluff. My outfit ought to be worth four thousand, hadn't it?”

Jarret settled back. I could see his eyes narrowing down warily as he looked at me. Then he grinned thinly.

“So you decided to ride that hand after all,

huh?" he sneered. "Well, to me yore land's worth just two thousand- I'll put up the two thousand—you write out a bill of sale for yore land. We'll put it all in this one pot. Take it or leave it!"

I took it. Sid Jarret counted out two thousand in cash. Jim Sabin brought pen and paper, and I wrote out a bill of sale in Jarret's name for my outfit. Those four kings looked bigger and bigger all the time. I felt pretty good.

Nick Hawn hadn't said a word. He just sat there, watching Jarret more than he did me through his cigar smoke.

**N**OW, as I started to shove the paper into the pot, he spoke up sharply: "Just a minute, there, Tuck Boone! I'm makin' you a little loan!"

The room got mighty quiet. Sid Jarret leaned forward, quick suspicion on his thin features.

"You're *what*?" he demanded flatly.

"Why, makin' the button a little loan," Nick Hawn said calmly, and took a money belt from about his waist. "You might call it a kind of investment, in that hand of his. I believe he's got yuh beat! Anything wrong in that?"

Jarret licked his lips, but said nothing. He watched with a kind of desperate fury in his eyes as Hawn started countin' out big bills from the money belt. I felt like a mule had kicked me in the stomach as the stack before me kept buildin'.

"There's fifteen thousand, kid," Nick Hawn said. "Use yore own judgment—and pay me back when you get ready. I got confidence in you."

"And I got confidence in this poker hand," I said. "I'm seein' yore two thousand, Jarret—and raisin' yuh the fifteen!"

I never saw a man turn paler than Sid Jarret did. He seemed to have forgotten me. He was staring at Nick Hawn, that desperate uncertainty in his eyes—and Nick Hawn stared back, smiling a little, contempt plain in his pale eyes. Jarret wet his lips.

"I ain't got that much money," he muttered.

"You got land," I said. "But no nerve, huh, Jarret?"

"I ain't takin' a chance on my land!" he said harshly.

He ripped his five cards in half. Then he got up and stalked out of Jim Sabin's saloon without looking back.

"He was bluffin' all the way," I said, grinning. "He knew I had 'im topped. There's yore fifteen thousand, Mister Hawn—with interest."

"Just the loan, Tuck." Nick Hawn looked kind of sad as he put the money back into his money belt. "I get my interest in knowin' I helped a young gent who's about to marry a yellow-haired girl out of a bad jam."

"Jam? I already had my money won back with these four kings. Nothin' but four aces—or a straight flush—beats 'em!"

And I spread my poker hand face up.

**N**ICK HAWN didn't even look at the cards. "Even before I started playin'," he said, strapping the money belt back about his thin waist, "I knew Sid Jarret had thumbnail marked every card in the deck. You couldn't feel the marks, Tuck, because yore hands are tough from handling a rope and posthole digger and such like. But Jarret's soft hands could feel 'em, and so could mine. So I kind of messed up his marks, and added a few of my own. That made Jarret lose confidence in his own cards."

"You mean that skunk was playin' crooked cards on me?"

Nick Hawn nodded.

"When he dealt you that last cold hand, he was sure he had you beat. Then, when I loaned you the fifteen thousand to raise with, he wasn't sure. He got scared he'd read the marks wrong, and turned yellow."

"He knew I had him beat!" I grinned. "That's one time a tinhorn showed good sense, anyhow!"

"And one time you didn't," Nick Hawn said gently.

Slowly he turned over the four aces and a ten that Sid Jarret had torn in half and slammed face-down on the table. Then he turned and walked out into the sunshine.

(THE END)