

# **A Pair of Queens**

**by E. Hoffmann Price**

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# A PAIR

“**Y**OU dirty coyote, that deck’s stacked!” The snarling stranger went for his gun as he jerked to his feet, upsetting the table.

Dexter Blaine remained seated. He did not



# OF QUEENS

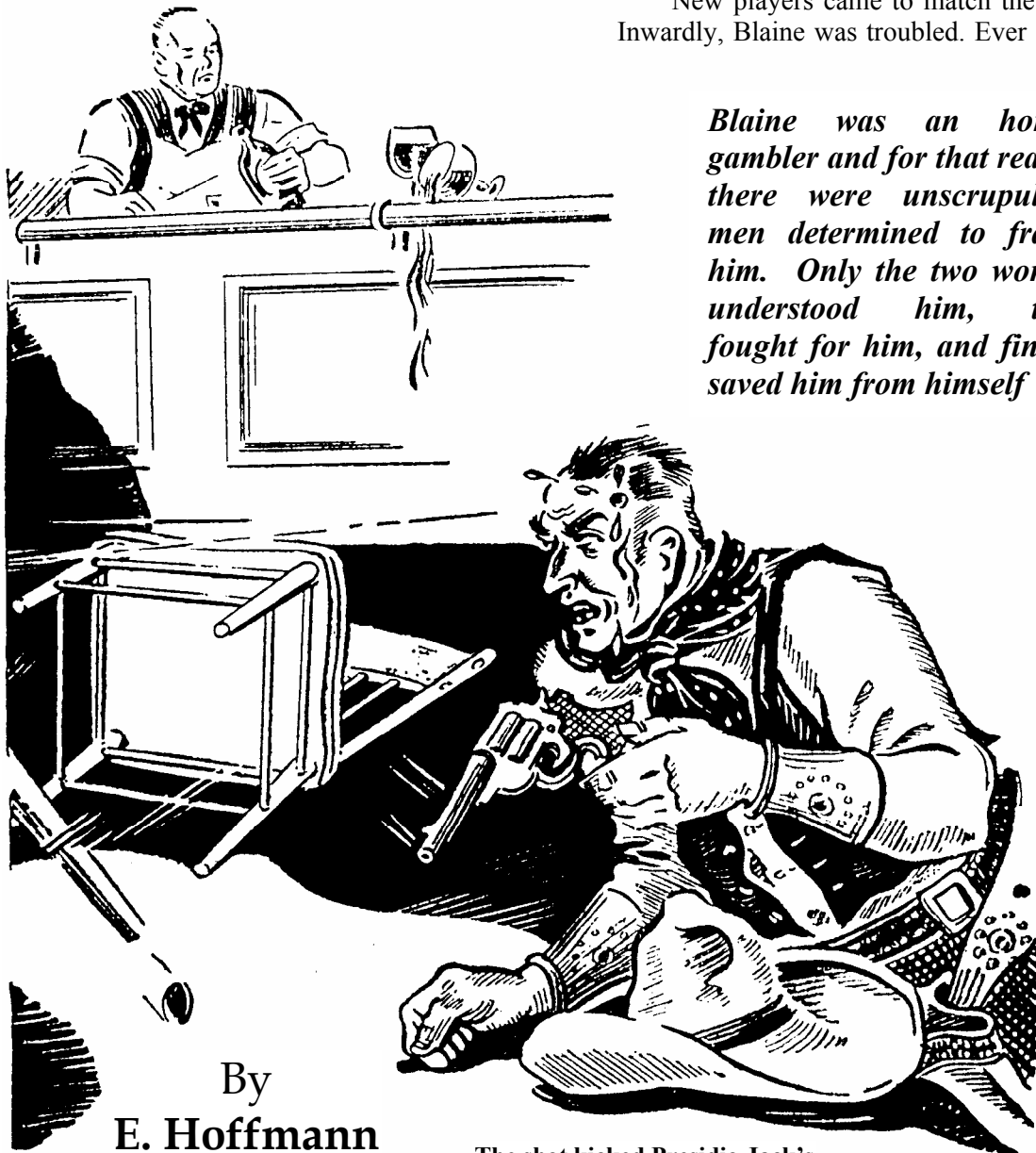
even drop his cards. One hand snaked to his spring clip holster, and the blast of his .45 shook the Bull's Head Saloon. The stranger stood there, gaping. It took him an instant to realize that a bullet had hammered the cylinder of his half drawn gun. The shock had paralyzed his hand.

Blaine wore a black frock coat, a figured silk vest, and a fine white shirt; but his thin face was

tanned, and so were his hands. Nothing about him was soft but his voice. He drawled, "Stranger, you oughtn't to risk more than you can afford to lose."

Baldheaded Tim Higgins, owner of the saloon, caught the dazed fellow by the arm. "Shake a hock, afore I bust yuh with a bung starter. This yere's the only honest game in Tecolote."

New players came to match the cool Texan. Inwardly, Blaine was troubled. Ever since Smoke



*Blaine was an honest gambler and for that reason there were unscrupulous men determined to frame him. Only the two women understood him, they fought for him, and finally saved him from himself*

By  
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The shot kicked Presidio Jack's stomach into his lungs.

Radford had tried to induce him to run a crooked game—a straight one being unfair competition—out of town gun slicks had been coming in to accuse Blaine of cheating.

LATER, Blaine tapped at the back door of the Hoot Owl Restaurant. The girl who answered was fresh and lovely. Her copper gold hair was haloed by the lamplight whose warm glow picked out alluring reflections in the blue silken robe that outlined her lithe figure.

“You’re early, Dex,” Eve Hollis murmured in his ear as he held her close.

A straight flush could not change Blaine’s expression, but Eve’s exquisite curves made his heart hammer. And as he followed her to the rooms above the little restaurant she operated, his blood was warmed by her very nearness.

But when Blaine seated himself beside her on the cushion decorated divan, Eve evaded his ardent kiss. She protested, “You’ve been catching me half asleep. So this time I sat up waiting for you.”

“Honey, I might of knowed you couldn’t like me with your eyes open!” And Blaine caught her again in his arms.

Eve wriggled from his embrace. “Don’t.” she protested. “I have to tell you something. You’ve got to quit gambling. I heard about that fracas tonight. Oh, I know you’re slick with a gun, but your luck’s bound to change. Being a gambler’s wife is bad enough, but a gambler’s widow is worse.”

“Why—what ya’ll mean, honey?”

“I won’t ever marry you, unless you quit.” Her lips trembled, but her pert little chin was held high and firmly.

“Dawgone it all!” he protested, “I run an honest game. The highest court in Texas declared poker is a science, not a gamble.”

“If you’re so scientific,” she countered, “I’ll sell the Hoot Owl, and take your stake and mine and we’ll raise cattle.”

He considered for a long moment.

Eve clasped her hands behind her head and leaned back among the cushions. “Dex,” she murmured, “we can be so happy, if you’ll just quit.”

“I’ll think on it,” he compromised; the first time he had made any concessions.

“Will you? *Really?*” Eager arms reached toward him, and splendor brightened in her long lashed eyes. Then, when that sultry kiss finally let Eve regain her breath, she gasped, “Silly! Don’t be so impulsive and take so much for granted.”

When Blaine slipped out of the back door of the restaurant into the moonlight, he still had not made any promises. Eve, however, had nearly converted him. He was still a little lightheaded from her kisses.

With an effort, he composed himself. Premonition flashed through his mind: “Could have been hit on the head with an ox yoke, and never had sense enough to duck.”

And that was why he moved by instinct, a moment later. Reason would have failed him, and so would natural speed. There was a faint, metallic crunch, as of a rusty tin can getting the brunt of someone’s shifting weight.

Blaine hurled himself for the rain water barrel that loomed up in the shadow of a *dobe*. Spurts of flame reached out from the spaces between fence pickets that lined the other side of the narrow street. Lead flattened against the thick wall.

His movement was so nearly simultaneous with the murderous fire that a familiar voice yelled, “Got the son of a—!”

“*Cuidado!*” warned his companion. “*Par amor de—*”

The Mexican was going to say, “For the love of God.” But Satan or the saints heard the last word; certainly no man. Blaine’s gun was in action. Though fence pickets enabled a man to see without being seen, they were extremely treacherous shelter.

Tin cans rattled under the convulsive drumming of a dying man’s feet. The loud voiced man groaned. And Tecolote, aroused, began to shout and stir.

Blaine called from his shelter, “Stranger, will yo’all live and talk, or do I come a-shootin’?”

“All right, I give up.” Heavy metal clattered among the rubbish. “Don’t shoot.”

Blaine could half discern the huddled figure behind the pickets. He was certain that from the fellow’s posture he could not direct a second gun, even if he had one. That groan was not faked. The man was hard hit without a doubt.

**I**N a moment, he had shouldered his way through the lead riddled pickets and was beside the two dry gulchers. One was dead. The one who still lived was the stranger who had accused Blaine of cheating. The gambler said, "Pardner, y'all played the fool twict in one night. But what have you got agin me?"

The hard case glared, slobbered bloody foam. Blaine went on, "Someone sent you. And that man's going to disown you, you pore fool."

There was no resentment in his voice. Blaine felt none. He was a fatalist; a gambler, that is. The stranger sensed this.

The street was a confusion of yelled queries and answers, now that the men of Tecolote had found and donned their boots. The participants of the three cornered battle were out of sight, and the noise masked their voices. "Speak up, pardner," Blaine persuaded. "Who sent you? Tell me, or...but blast it, I could of killed you already. I'd rather not."

That did it. The stranger began, "That dirty—skunk—told me—"

He choked, slumped back, completely finished.

Blaine called to the men in the street, but when help came, it was only to carry two dead men from the city clump. He explained, "I reckon these gents had a grudge." Since he had no proof, he did not mention Radford.

"Reckon," said the marshal, who had heard of the earlier encounter.

Then Blaine approached the heavy jawed man who had unerringly led the investigation to the vacant lot. He was the only one, beside Blaine, whose shirt was tucked inside his trouser waistband. The gambler smiled amiably and said, "Evenin', Mistah Radford. Was y'all a-settin' up late, or was you expectin' trouble, right in this heah corner of town?"

Smoke Radford wore a pair of guns, but he kept his hands away scrupulously from them. He chewed his trailing mustache for a moment, then said, very loudly, "Shucks, Blaine! I allus set up late, readin'."

"The straight game at the Bull's Haid," Blaine went on, "stays straight and keeps on furnishing unfair competition, Mistah Radford."

Radford cleared his throat, then turned abruptly and went his way.

No man had ever run Blaine out of town, and no man would. But it would be tough, telling Eve that he could no longer consider quitting the gambling house in Tecolote. So Blaine evaded her eager queries each night, and kissed Eve to rapturous silence. But that would not last long. She'd surely corner him eventually.

**T**HE game went on. Tough customers religiously avoided the Bull's Head. But one of the dance-hall girls began playing up to Blaine. Milly Graves was a redhead modeled after the Goddess of Liberty, except that her dress was less dignified and more revealing.

She was almost as tall as Blaine; her figure was intriguing, her ripe curves were enough to tempt any man. And whenever she had a chance, during a lull in the game, she leaned against Blaine, giving him a warm pressure and a gust of heady perfume.

One evening she stopped him in the alcove at the head of the stairs, snuggled close and invited, "Come on and have a drink, Dex."

He shook his head. "Sorry, M'am. Agin' the rules, trifling with house employees. I'm powerful sorry, Milly."

"Oh...silly!" She lifted full red lips to tempt him. "I just meant, have a drink while I'm changing. And meet me at my house."

Blaine smiled, more amiably than before. "Sounds mighty tempting, Milly. I'm sho' flattered." One arm went around her waist.

She noted the sharp glance that dropped to the fair skin below her throat. She leaned back from the waist, as Blaine raised his left hand, slowly. Milly expected a caress, a pat on the cheek at the very least, but she was mistaken.

One deft move plucked at the edge of her bodice. There was nothing caressing about the gesture that followed. Blaine extracted a lengthwise fold of new bills. As he flashed them before her eyes, he said, "Either you been picking someone's pockets, or Smoke Radford paid you to entertain me, with my guns out of reach."

He flipped the bills into her face, and went back to his table. She choked, then screamed at the half dozen cowpokes who were chortling and staring. "You low-down skunks, mind your own business!"

Blaine began avoiding Eve. Once he had shot

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it out with Smoke Radford, he could leave Tecolote; not before then. But despite the outward calm of his face, Blaine was shaken inside. His uncanny judgment of the cards began to waver. He lost oftener than he used to. And still he went on playing.

**T**HEN Blaine's luck changed. A big, smooth-faced cattle man came all the way to Tecolote instead of getting his supplies at the town nearest his spread, the Rafter JG. Jason Gale was young, noisy, confident, and a shade drunker than a poker player should be.

His red face beamed like a harvest moon. Blaine said, "Pardner, this heah's a free country, but supposin' y'all come back tomorrow night."

Gale chuckled. "Deal 'em out! Yuh been losin' plenty, yuh'll lose tuh me ef I follows up!"

Blaine did not like it. Eve's lectures had been getting under his skin. Despite his stout defense of poker as a science, his philosophy had been shaken, just a bit. This yokel, not long from Ohio, had no business gambling recklessly.

Still, Blaine could not turn business away from the house. He played, and Gale foolishly backed hands he should have dropped.

Finally the ruddy face became drawn. Then it became gray. Gale was now painfully sober. His blue eyes were haggard, and sweat cropped out, trickled down his cheeks. He mopped his forehead with his bandanna, and grimly hunched forward in his chair.

At last he produced another poke, poured it on the table, and settled down to recoup. Poker, however, is very much a science. Hours later, the big fellow tottered out into the chilly gloom. Blaine shook his head.

"Poor devil, he couldn't afford that loss."

"Reckon not," admitted a bystander. "Reckon not. He was a-heading fer the county seat tuh make a payment on his notes er mo'gage, er suthin." When he saw Blaine's jaw tighten, he hastily added, "Shucks, Dex! No offense, a-tall. Wan't yore fault, Gale bein' a fool kid! It'll larn him suthin', the young booby owl!"

Blaine slowly rose. "Gents, the game's closing for tonight. Meet me tomorrow, and we'll court lady luck for a spell."

But Blaine went to his own rooms. He realized more and more that Eve was right. Only,

she would not understand; if he told her he had to stick until Smoke Radford came out in the open, she would be all the more insistent on his quitting.

**T**HE next night, Blaine did not go to his table. Instead, he waited for Eve to close her restaurant. They were sitting in the room overlooking the main street, and the silence became more awkward every moment.

"Dex," she finally said, "what's the matter?"

Her eyes were wide and blue. In the moonlight, she was a sweet length of white and gold. Her legs gleamed, long and lovely and silken, and the curve of breast and throat were glorified in the night's glamour.

Blaine drew her to him and said, "Honey, I been thinking a lot."

"About Smoke Radford?"

He nodded. "I cain't let him run me out of Tecolote!"

Her lips tightened. She sighed. "Well...I understand that, darling. But isn't principle above pride?"

"Blast it!" he flared, "that's what this is. Principle. You women jest cain't understand matters of principle, a-tall."

Eve forced a laugh, but the smile that lingered was real. "Dex, I love you an awful lot. You know that. Couldn't you please me in just this one thing?"

She might have won, had it not been for the sudden shouting in the street, the clattering of hoofs. Blaine stepped to the window. Eve, right on his heels, snuggled close beside him when she reached the window sill.

A man lay face down, and crosswise in the saddle. The sheriff and a deputy rode with the dead. They stopped in the full glare of the lights that blazed from the saloon just across the street. The yellow glow brought out every stark detail when they dragged the corpse from the horse. First the coroner, then Boot Hill....

The rumble of voices gave enough clear bits to tell Blaine the story. The bullet riddled man was Jason Gale. To recoup his losses, he had set out to rob a stage coach.

Worst of all, Eve understood. Blaine's exclamation, coupled with the gossip she had heard as she fed the town at her lunch counter, made only a few words necessary. Her voice was

bitter. "Poker's a science! Dex, you can't kiss me silly any more, and make me forget like you've been doing."

"Why—honey—now, listen," he protested.

She evaded his arms. Head flung back, she went on, "Being a gambler's wife or widow, no! Quit me, or quit gambling."

"Blast it! Listen, I didn't cheat Gale. It was a fair game. By God, Smoke Radford can't run me out of town."

"So your pride means more than I do?"

He tried to wheedle her into reason. For a moment, she relaxed in his arms; her eyes misted, and her breath came in quick, short gasps as he drew her closer, kissed her into submission. Then she cried out as though in physical pain and said, "Don't touch me—don't—I won't—you murdered that poor fellow! *Don't!*"

Her stinging slap made him blink. She turned and ran into the adjoining room, and flung herself face down on the bed. Dimly, he could see the silken sheen of her lovely legs. But Blaine knew that he had lost out. He slowly went down to the street.

**B**LAINÉ knew his cards better than he did women. It never occurred to him that Eve was hurt because he placed her second to his pride. He staved well away from the restaurant, convinced that she despised him.

Radford went about with a contented expression on his blue-jowled face. Blaine, despite his well founded suspicions, could not force a quarrel; not after Eve had called him a slayer by proxy, and a card slick who won tolerance by his gun skill. Though they were estranged, the lean Texan still wanted to avoid justifying her charges.

Smoke Radford had his plans; they formed when he saw that Blaine and Eve were avoiding each other. Though their quarrel had been private, everyone in Tecolote knew that she had from the beginning wanted him to stop gambling.

Eating his own smoke was giving Blaine spiritual indigestion. He never drank while at work, but he began taking a bottle home with him. The rumor spread, and Radford liked it. He enjoyed it even more when after a separation of two weeks, Eve and Blaine accidentally met at the post office steps.

Either could have spoken, but neither did. Eve went home with her head high and chin up, but once in her room, she did some private weeping. Blaine just sent for an extra bottle that night. If that's the way she felt, to the devil with her.

And then fate brought a splendid creature to the Bull's Head Saloon; though none of the boys used any such high-faluting terms. They said, "Jeehosaphat! That gal's built like a brick silo, an' purty as a picture."

Both counts were true, and Viola's shoes were danced to tatters her first night as a dancehall girl. Her red smile and sultry eyes and blue black hair marked her among the bleached blondes. Instead of a gown that was low on top and high at the bottom, she featured coy concealment.

Her black lace dress gave tantalizing hints of the beauty beneath. Her dainty feet and fine ankles slyly suggested the sleekness of legs hidden from view, except when her skirt clung to their curves for an indiscreet moment. But most alluring of all was that promise of fire smoldering behind a dark screen.

"Where she come from?" wondered Blaine, turning from his vacant table.

"You orta know better," reproved Tim Higgins. "Did I ever axe you any impertinent questions when you come to Tecolote?"

Blaine nodded. "Uhuh. Seein's believin', I reckon."

Tim winked, jabbed a stubby forefinger into the gambler's ribs. "Shucks, Dex! Yo're the only gentlemun in town, and she's a lady. Refineder 'an all get out. Don't tell me you cain't dance!"

Baldheaded Tim felt that getting a new interest in life would keep Blaine from living on a diet of Bull Durham and Old Crow.

The gambler smiled bleakly. He understood the old fellow's solicitude. There might be something in that idea, too. Those sleek hips and that proud, firm carriage didn't make a lady; but the way she refrained from flaunting her curves did. Viola, he sensed, was another of those women whom fortune had hammered down in the world, yet without shaking her quality.

"You mustn't neglect your cards, Mr. Blaine," she smiled, slipping into his arms when he asked her to dance.



Blaine tossed a gold piece to the keys of old Pablo's piano. The cowpokes yelled to the fiddler, "Twist 'er tail, 'Doro!"

"Drown me in a rain bar'l ef that lanky galoot cain't dance!" Tim Higgins rubbed his hands together. "That's jest the female critter to straighten him out!"

Blaine had the same idea. An armful of Viola told him that she had none of the dancehall girl's tawdry tricks. Once, sitting close to a light, he noted a faint, unmistakable depression that encircled a finger. She had recently removed a wedding ring.

**B**UT that was no subject for queries. Later, in Viola's room at the Antler Hotel, there were too many other things to ask her. The kind of things one can ask without being inquisitive....

"Why...I hardly know you," she said. Though the reproof was whimsical, rather than indignant. "Just because I dance at the Bull's Head—"

Viola no longer wore the baffling black gown, but her chiffon robe was scarcely less a riddle.

And the long, splendid line from hip to knee brought Blaine's heart to his throat. Even if not to blot Eve from his memory, he would admire this gorgeous creature who smiled at him from the lounge.

He evaded her futile white hands, and for a moment, she was pressed against him, warm and throbbing. That instant of abandon ended in a lithe move that left his arms empty. All he had won was the taste of rouge, a momentary glimpsed beauty exposed when her evading motion parted her chiffon gown for an instant.

"Please don't—" She was soft voiced and serious until her smile blossomed in a promise, and she added, "I feel so strange in Tecolote. Later...."

She was a lady, so he let it go at that. If "later" didn't mean "soon," he might as well go back to school and start all over.

**T**HAT night, Blaine ignored his bottle. Regardless of the outcome, he had at least burned his bridges behind him. Only the hotel clerk had seen him enter and leave, but all Tecolote would know by noon. Since there could now be no reconciliation with Eve, Blaine was no

longer wavering. Nothing could induce him to back down from his principles. He was his own man again.

The next day, Eve had taken down the "For Sale" sign that had decorated the window of her restaurant. But that meant nothing to Blaine, other than that the jig was up. Which he knew without any signs!

A week passed. Each night Viola evaded him. He began to slip out of the back door of the hotel, to avoid letting the town know how early he left her. But the pursuit stimulated him, and his game improved.

One night he found her with her face buried in a pillow. Her bare shoulders shook convulsively. He knelt beside her and said, "Honey, what's wrong? Someone get familiar—was it that polecat, Smoke Radford?"

Viola sat up, raised somber eyes, blinked away her tears, and cried, "Oh, it's a crazy world—crazy—*crazy!*"

"Why—sweetheart—" He didn't know what to make of that, so he supported her with one arm, stroked her sleek, trailing hair. "You look sad-like."

"My Lord—" She checked herself, then fiercely caught his arms and demanded, "Kiss me, Dex—kiss me from now to sunrise—then leave town!"

Women were all more or less crazy, he reckoned. First Eve, now Viola, teched in the head, babbling about leaving town. Might as well kiss her for a spell. But Blaine lost the initiative. Viola was clinging to him in a possessing frenzy that inflamed him too much for any thought as to its reasons, or why she made him promise to leave Tecolote the following day. Naturally, he promised her anything. He was a bit too dizzy not to.

**W**HEN they met again, at the Bull's Head, they maintained the pose of formal courtesy, suitable between a gentleman gambler and a prima donna whom the cowpunchers did not paw. If she was surprised at seeing him still in Tecolote, she gave no sign; though he wondered at the strange light in her eyes.

"Po' gal's a widow," he reasoned. "Broodin' over someone. Lonesome, and made fo' love, and last night just didn't somehow seem *exactly*

right....”

That piece of feminine psychology worked out, Blaine dismissed the eyes that had become windows into hell. The cards whirred and hissed in his supple grip, and he invited, “Gents, fickle lady luck is honing to be played with tonight, and there’s no limit except your stack!”

Once, Blaine felt a probing stare. He turned, just in time to see Viola regarding him. The motion of her swiftly dropping hand told him that it had just left her bosom. This night’s gown was cut lower.

He had an uncomfortable moment as he deliberately turned his back and resumed the deal. Maybe she *was* a mite teched in the head. Maybe that was a derringer concealed in her bodice. But Blaine could not be a gambler without being a fatalist, so he went on helping four poker players court the fickle goddess.

One of them was a stranger with a well notched gun. He had a mean eye, a chronic sneer, whether winning or losing. And the losses predominated. Blaine felt it coming. The name, Presidio Jack, was vaguely familiar; so also was that lantern jaw and jutting nose.

Blaine had seen his picture. Probably the thousand dollar reward offered in the Big Bend country had been withdrawn. Nobody in New Mexico would risk trying to collect it. That was an old story, but it was worth remembering that Presidio Jack was left handed.

Just a mental note. It was Blaine’s business to know his customers. That was why the highest court in Texas had declared poker a science.

Jack scarcely picked up his cards when he slammed them down, growling, “Marked, by God! No—wonder I’m losing!”

His right hand stayed with the cards. He did not rise. But his left hand had started with his right. He was betting on an early draw. And he was quick, deadly swift.

His only mistake was in not knowing that a good gambler studies his customers. Blaine slumped to the planks, just as lead and flame swept over the table. The other three players fell backward over their chairs.

Blaine fired from the floor. The shot kicked Presidio Jack’s stomach into his lungs, He piled over in a heap, lay there with his left hand convulsively groping for the gun he had dropped.

He found it. Girls and men, thinking him dead, were crowded about the table. They did not realize how dying fury drove him; that someone would die with him. But Blaine knew his customer. On his feet now, his eyes flickered right and left; he saw women’s soft curves that a wild slug would riddle.

He saw, scarcely understanding, a white hand flicker toward the table. That woman was in danger. Blaine had no choice. He fired again, and Presidio Jack’s forehead became a horrible blot. His gun dropped, uncocked. Blaine was sick. Those curious fools crowding about him did not even now realize how death had narrowly missed one or more of them.

The Bull’s Head was an uproar. Smoke Radford had come in from the street, but he did not join in the incredulous cry, “Must of been crazy, sayin’ them cards is marked.”

Radford boomed, “Try lookin’ at the cards. That’ll tell.”

That was fair. Someone snatched the deck from the table. A dozen men squinted at the pasteboards. Tim Higgins, face white with wrath, announced, “By gravey—they is marked!”

Blaine could scarcely understand. Both guns were out; the only logic to answer the muttering that swelled across the hall. Radford was grinning. The marshal had appeared. He said, “Dex, I ain’t sayin’ yuh doctored them cards, but thar they be. Slick work, too.”

“Are yo’all referring to Presidio Jack’s heart failure?”

The marshal shrugged. “Even with slick cards, self-defense is self-defense, I reckon.”

Tim Higgins cut in, “Yo’re givin’ a honest place a bad name, Dex.”

Blaine smiled bleakly. “Your next house man won’t be a lily, Tim.” He turned to Radford and said, “Nice work, Smoke. But I ain’t leaving town. Now that the Bull’s Head ain’t bein’ injured by my actions any more, you and me are shootin’ on sight, starting sunrise.

“*Smoke?* Smokin’ out folks by proxy. Dudes, old men, boys, and gents with their backs turned. Want it now, or sunrise?”

**H**E HOLSTERED his guns, so that his enemy could get an even start. But Smoke Radford declined the invitation to draw. He said, “Yo’re all

het up, Blaine. I'm ignorin' hot words, but onless yuh eats 'em by sunrise, yuh better come a-shootin'."

Blaine put his gold pieces into a long buckskin pouch. He wondered where Viola was. None of the other girls had left. He shook his head, and as he went down the street, he said, "It's crazy. Why'd she put a crooked deck in place of a honest one?"

He had no fear of ambush. Smoke Radford would not dare fire from cover; not after the challenge that had been offered and accepted before witnesses. Tecolote would not stand for that.

Blaine however knew that he'd have to face trick work. He had won too often. A man's luck changed, sooner or later. Gunnery, like poker, is a science in which there are slips. A strange urge moved him toward Eve's rooms. He was fatalist enough not to be chilled at the prospect of sudden death, but before that happened, he wanted a final word with Eve. He knew now that he had never ceased loving her; that he perhaps never would.

He met her at her own back door. She started, recognized him, resolutely turned her back. He caught her shoulder and said, "Ain't what you think it is—"

"I know," she bitterly retorted. "Want to play on my sympathy! As if I didn't know you can blow Smoke Radford and all his crooks to ribbons! You—you fool! You silly conceited jackass! That girl—Viola—she's Jason Gale's widow!"

"How do you know?"

"None of your business!" she choked. "I know. Now go ahead and make love to her. You killed her stupid young husband, beating him at poker."

She slammed the door in his face. Blaine retraced his steps. Sheer wrath left Eve no chance to dissimulate. Moreover, he had to believe her. That explained Viola's strange actions; she must have planted the crooked deck, so that Presidio Jack, who by an unforeseen slip had just failed to kill Blaine with an early draw, would have had ample justification for firing without warning.

Without that marked deck, such a shot would have been murder. It all pointed to Radford, who had seen other gunslicks fail. So he had worked on Viola Gale's loyalty, set her to work seeking

vengeance.

Blaine digested that, and suddenly, all Eve's influence combined to hit him a single blow. Gambling was a rotten business. He had killed three men; skunks, all of them, but nonetheless, men. His honest play had made a young numbskull's celebration end in a fatal robbery.

With a wife like Viola, no wonder Jason Gale turned to crime rather than telling her he could not meet his notes.

Only Blaine remained aloof, unwounded in body. Gambling, he now saw, was all that Eve had said. And staying to kill Smoke Radford would prove it beyond any doubt. He now felt, somehow, that he surely would kill Smoke.

"Ain't worth it. Feuds and enemies are one thing. Making a routine of it is suthin' else," he told himself.

He stalked into the Antler Hotel. The clerk's eyes widened. He said, "Mis' Viola's done left, sudden-like. She said she was fixing to go to Jason Gale's spread. Dagnation, who'd of believed she was his wife? Thought him a stranger, genrully allus going tuh B'ar Gulch fer vittles—hey, whar y'all going to, now?"

"To give her my gambling money!" Blaine was too weary to resent the direct question.

**B**LAINÉ rode through what remained of the night, and all day long he continued his ride. He made no attempt at trailing Viola. He was no tracker, but he could inquire his way to the Rafter JG.

That evening he approached the ranchhouse. He heard neither horses nor cowpunchers. The Ratter JG must have fallen flat, since Jason's death.

He entered the silent house. Viola was there, but she did not hear him until he was almost at her side. She jerked upright from the sofa. Her reddened eyes widened, and fear made her oblivious of the fact that the kimono she wore was hardly adequate for receiving visitors.

"Go ahead," she challenged. "I planted that deck to protect Presidio and I wanted him to kill you."

"I ain't aiming to hurt you, Vi," he said, seating himself beside her. "I just learned who you are." He laid the heavy pouch of gold pieces on her knee. "I ain't insulting you by paying for

Jason's death. But it's all I can do. I shuffled my last deck of cards."

For a long moment their eyes clashed. Her body was frozen ivory in the failing light. Suddenly she cried out, flung her arms about him.

"I know you didn't cheat Jason. Not after doing this. Dex, darling—that evening in my room—I was falling in love with you—and hating myself for it—and for what I'd promised to do. I didn't know—will you—"

She was going to say *forgive*, but his kiss smothered the word. And her hungry mouth told him how love and vengeance had battled that night....

**T**HE moon rose, glorifying her loveliness. The glow in her dark eyes was no longer somber; but for all the sweetness of her ardent mouth, there was bitterness in Blaine's heart. Finding himself had cost him Eve's devotion. Yet the reward of pride and stubbornness was warm and throbbing in his arms....

Hoofbeats brought the lovers apart. Blaine was on his feet, pistol ready, just as the door burst open. A rifle barrel gleamed.

"Hold it!" he snapped, before he saw the woman's silhouette.

"Dex!" It was Eve, and she recoiled, seeing Viola's beauty in the patch of glow the moon cast through the window. Then she said, "It's not on her account I'm here—I don't blame you—I expect that—"

She thrust the Winchester carbine into his hands, reached into her sagging blouse, bringing out two boxes of cartridges. Before Blaine or Viola could find their voices, Eve went on, "Radford knows where you are. He heard it. Like I did. He knows that if you and Viola get together, his rotten plan'll be exposed, and he'll be run out of town. So—"

"There'll be a dozen hard cases with him," Eve panted.

Viola picked up the old .45. It was loaded. Blaine said, "Eve, I thought you was plumb through with me.

"Men are the dumbest critters! You, Viola! Light a lamp—"

"Lamp?" echoed Blaine.

"Do as I say! A dozen are against us."

Eve had arrived with no more than minutes

to spare. Horses with muffled hoofs came up like ghosts. Men dismounted, many yards away, crept from shadow to shadow. The Rafter JG ranchhouse was silent, but a lamp glowed in a bedroom window.

"Thar they be!" muttered Smoke Radford. He licked his lips as he saw Viola's body silhouetted against a shade. He knelt, drew a Colt. "Ain't no use rushin' 'em. He'll be passin' by, any second."

"Better you git closter, Smoke," someone advised.

They hung back. A shot from the dark was safer than rushing Dexter Blaine. His past record made them cautious. And Radford had a private score to settle. He had promised Viola vengeance for a price, but she had fled instead of waiting....

He crept ahead. A wheelbarrow, out in the middle of the yard, was his goal. Its shadow would conceal him, if the lovers did find time to glance out the window. But he cursed between clenched teeth when he heard Viola sighing, "Oh...Dexter...*darling*—"

What followed froze him to the heart. A cold voice said, "Fire at will, Smoke. I warned you!"

Dexter Blaine was not kissing a woman to ecstasy. He was rounding the corner of the house. Radford yelled. His shot went wild. Blaine fired, just once. As Smoke Radford sprawled in a heap, a Winchester began crackling from the other corner of the house.

The ruffians fled, howling. They did not stop to think that Eve Hollis would be a very poor shot, even in daylight. The death of their chief, and Blaine's searching fire combined to send them away in panic.

A few moments later, Dexter Blaine faced the two women. He would rather have looked smoking guns in the eye. He did not know what to say. So he blurted out, "Eve, I quit gambling. And I gave Viola every cent I made at it. To—uh—to—make it really quitting."

Eve said, "I'll tell you how I knew who she was. I went to her room to claw her eyes out. And I found some letters."

The widow laughed softly. "Dexter, don't be afraid to tell me. I know where your heart is." She picked up the buckskin pouch. "You two will need that. I'm going back east."

Eve shook her head, caught Blaine's hand. "We won't need it. We're in the restaurant

business. With a clean start.” She watched Blaine gulp, reddened now that he had time to think of the close embrace the blond girl’s sudden arrival had interrupted. Eve laughed in sweet malice and went on, “We’ll call it the Royal Flush! Just for old times sake, you know. Don’t be silly! I’ll look the

other way while you kiss her goodbye.”

But as Dexter Blaine rode back to Tecolote with Eve Hollis, he could not help but think that if the Hoot Owl Restaurant was going to change its name, it should be called Pair of Queens.