



Don't Frame a Red Head

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

FARO-BANK is an expensive game when luck turns a cold shoulder on any player, and "going broke" is as easy as ruffling a deck. When a man finds he has two dollars left out of more than two months' pay and that it has taken him less than thirty minutes to get down to that mark, he cannot be censored much if he rails at that Will-o'-the-wisp, the Goddess of Luck. Put him a good ten days' ride from home, acquaintances and money, and perhaps he will be justified in adding heat in plenty to his denunciation. He had played to win when he should have copped, copped when he should have played to win, he had backed both ends against the middle and played the high card as well—but only when his bets were small did the turn show him what he wanted to see. Perhaps the case-keeper had hoodooed him, for he never did have any luck at cards when a tow-headed man had a finger in the game.

Fuming impotently at his helplessness, a man limped across the main street in Colby, constrained and a little awkward in his new store clothes and new, squeaking boots that were clumsy with stiffness. The only things on him that could be regarded as old and tried friends were the battered sombrero and the heavy walnut-handled Colt's .45 which rubbed comfortably with each movement of his thigh. The weapon, to be sure, had a ready cash value—but he could not afford to part with it. The horse belonged to his ranch, and the saddle must not be sold; to part with it would be to lose his mark of caste and become a walking man, which all good punchers despised.

"Ten days from home, knowin' nobody, two measly dollars in my pocket, an' luck dead agin me," he growled with pugnacious pessimism. "Oh, I'm a wise old bird, I am! A h—I of a wise bird. Real smart an' cute an' shiny, a cache of wisdom, a real, bonyfied Smart Aleck with a head full of spavined brains. I copper th' deuce an' th' deuce wins; I play th' King to win for ten dollars when I ought to copper it. I lay two-bits and it comes right—ten dollars an' I see my guess go *loco*. Reckon I better slip these here twin bucks down in my kill-me-soon boots afore some blind papoose takes 'em away from me. Wiser'n Solomon, I am; I've got old Cæsar climbin' a cactus for pleasure an' joy. S-u-c-k-e-r is my middle name—an' I'm busted."

He almost stumbled over a little tray of a three-legged table on the corner of the street and his face went hard as he saw the layout. Three halves of English walnut shells lay on the faded and soiled green cloth and a blackened, shriveled pea was still rolling from the shaking he had given the table. He stopped and regarded it gravely, jingling his two dollars disconsolately. "Don't this town do nothin' else besides gamble?" he muttered, looking around.

"Howdy, stranger!" cheerfully cried a man who hastened up. "Want to see me fool you?"

The puncher's anger was aroused to a thin, licking flame; but it passed swiftly and a cold calculating look came into his eyes. He glanced around swiftly, trying to locate the cappers, but they were not to be seen, which worried him a little. He always liked to have possible danger

where he could keep an eye on it. Perhaps they were eating or drinking—the thought stirred him again to anger: two dollars would not feed him very long, nor quench his thirst.

“Pick it out, stranger,” invited the proprietor, idly shifting the shells. “It’s easy if yo’re right smart—but lots of folks just can’t do it; they can’t seem to get th’ hang of it, somehow. That’s why it’s a bettin’ proposition. Here it is, right before yore eyes! One little pea, three little shells, right here plumb in front of yore eyes! Th’ little pea hides under one of th’ little shells, right in plain sight: But can you tell which one? That’s th’ whole game, right there. See how it’s done?” and the three little shells moved swiftly but clumsily and the little pea disappeared. “Now, then; where would *you* say it was?” demanded the hopeful operator, genially.

The puncher gripped his two dollars firmly, shifted his weight as much as possible on his sound leg, and scowled: he knew where it was. “Do I look like a kid? Do you reckon you have to coax like a fool to get me all primed up to show how remarkably smart an’ quick I am? You don’t; I know how smart I am. Say, you ain’t, not by any kinda miracle, a blind papoose, are you?” he demanded.

“**W**HAT you mean?” asked the other, smiling as he waited for the joke. It did not come, so he continued. “Don’t take no harm in my fool wind-jammin’, stranger. It’s in th’ game. It’s a habit; I’ve said it so much I just can’t help it no more—I up an’ says it at a funeral once; that is, part of it—th’ first part. That’s dead right! But I reckon I’m wastin’ my time—unless you happen to feel coltish an’ hain’t got nothin’ to do for an age. I’ve been playin in hard luck th’ last week or so—you see, I ain’t as good as I uster be. I ain’t quite so quick, an’ a little bit off my quickness is a whole lot off my chances. But th’ game’s square—an’ that’s a good deal more’n you can say about most of ‘em.”

The puncher hesitated, a grin flickering about his thin lips and a calm joy warming him comfortably. He knew the operator. He knew that face, the peculiar crescent-shaped scar over one brow, and the big, blue eyes that years of life had not entirely robbed of their baby-like innocence. The past, sorted thoroughly and quickly by his memory, shoved out that face before a crowd of others. Five years is not a long time to remember

something unpleasant; he had reasons to remember that countenance. Knowing the face he also knew that the man had been, at one time, far from “square.” The associations and means of livelihood during the past five years, judging from the man’s present occupation, had not been the kind to correct any evil tendency. He laid a forefinger on the edge of the tray. “Start th’ machinery—I’ll risk a couple of dollars, anyhow. That ain’t much to lose. I bet two dollars I can call it right,” he said, watching closely.

He won, as he knew he would; and the result told him that the gambler had not reformed. The dexterous fingers shifting the shells were slower than others he had seen operate and when he had won again he stopped, as if to leave. “When I hit town a short time ago I didn’t know I’d be so lucky. I went an’ drew two months’ pay when I left th’ ranch: I shore don’t need it. Shuffle ‘em again—it’s yore money, anyhow,” he laughed. “You should ‘a’ quit th’ game before you got so slow.”

“Goin’ back to work purty soon?” queried the shell-man, wondering how much this “sucker” had left unspent.

“Not me! I’ve only just had a couple of drinks since I hit town—an’ I’m due to celebrate.”

The other’s face gave no hint of his thoughts, which were that the fool before him had about a hundred dollars on his person. “Well, luck’s with you today—you’ve called it right twice. I’ll bet you a cool hundred that you can’t call it th’ third time. It’s th’ quickness of my hands agin yore eyes—an’ you can’t beat me three straight. Make it a hundred? I hate to play all day.”

“I’ll lay you my winnin’s an’ have some more of yore money,” replied the puncher, feverishly. “Ain’t scared, are you?”

“Don’t know what it means to be scared,” laughed the other. “But I ain’t got no small change, nothin’ but tens. Play a hundred an’ let’s have some real excitement.”

“Nope; eight or nothin’.”

He won again. “Now, sixteen even. Come on; I’ve got you beat.”

“But what’s th’ use of stringin’ ‘long like that?” demanded the shell-man.

“Gimme a chance to get my hand in, won’t you?” retorted the puncher.

“Well, all right,” replied the gambler, and he lost the sixteen.

"Now thirty," suggested the puncher. "Next time all I've got, every red cent. Once more to practice—then every red," he repeated, shifting his feet nervously. "I'll clean you out an' have a real genuine blow-out on yore money. Come on, I'm in a hurry."

"I'll fool you *this* time, by th' Lord!" swore the gambler, angrily. "You've got more luck than sense. An' I'll fool you next time, too. Yo're quicker'n most men I've run up agin, but I can beat you, shore as shootin'. Th' game's square, th' play fair—my hand agin yore eye. Ready? Then watch me!"

He swore luridly and shoved the money across the board to the winner, bemoaning his slowness and getting angrier every moment. "Yo're th' cussedest man I ever bet agin! But I'll get you *this* time. You can't guess right all th' time, an' I know it."

"There she is; sixty-two bucks, three score an' two simoleons; all I've got, every cent. Let's see you take it away from me!"

The gambler frowned and choked back a curse. He had risked sixty dollars to win two, and the fact that he had to let this fool play again with the fire hurt his pride. He had no fear for his money—he knew he could win at every throw—but to play that long for two dollars! And suppose the sucker had quit with the sixty!

"Do you get a dollar a month?" he demanded, sarcastically. "Well, I reckon you earn it, at that. Thought you had money, thought you drew down two months' pay an' hain't had nothin' more'n two drinks? Did you go an' lose it on th' way?"

"Oh, I drew it a month ago," replied the sucker, surprised. "I've only had two drinks in this town, which I hit 'bout an hour ago. But I shore lost a wad playin' faro-bank agin a tow-head. Come on—lemme take sixty more of yore money, anyhow."

"Sixty-two!" snapped the proprietor, determined to have those two miserable dollars and break the sucker for revenge. "Every cent, you remember."

"All right; I don't care! I ain't no tin-horn," grumbled the other. "Think I care 'bout two dollars?" But he appeared to be very nervous, nevertheless.

"Well, put it on th' table."

"After you put yourn down."

"**T**HERE it is. Now watch me close!" A gleam of joy flashed up in the angry man's eyes as he played with the shells. "Watch me close! Mebby

it is, an' mebby it ain't—th' game's square, th' play's fair. It's my hand agin yore eye. Watch me close!"

"Oh, go ahead! I'm watchin', all right. Think I'd go to sleep now!"

The shifting hands stopped, the shells lay quiet, and the gambler gazed blankly down the unsympathetic barrel of a Colt.

"Now, Thomas, old thimble-rigger," crisply remarked the supposed sucker as he cautiously slid the money off the table to be picked up later when conditions would be more favorable. "Th' little pea ain't under *no* shell. *Stop!* Step back one pace an' elevate them paws. Don't make no more funny motions with that hand, savvy? But you can drop th' pea if it hurts them two fingers. Now we'll see if I win; I allus like to be shore," and he cautiously turned over the shells, revealing nothing but the dirty green cloth. "I win; it ain't there—just like I thought."

"Who are you, an' how'd you know my name?" demanded the gambler, mentally cursing his two missing cappers. They were drinking once too often and things were going to happen in their vicinity, and very soon.

"Why, you took twenty-five dollars from me up in Alameda onct, when I couldn't afford to lose it," grinned the puncher. "I was something of a kid then. I remember you, all right. My foreman told me about yore bang-up fight agin th' Johnson brothers, who gave you that scar. I thought then that you were a great man—now I know you ain't. I wouldn't 'a' played at all if I hadn't knowed how crooked you was. Take yore layout an' yore crookedness, find th' pea an' yore cappers, an' clear out. An' if anybody asks you if you've seen Hopalong Cassidy, you tell 'em I'm up here in Colby makin' some easy money beatin' crooked games. So-long, an' *don't* look back!"

Hopalong watched him go and then went to the nearest place where he could get something to eat. In due time, having disposed of a square meal, Hopalong called for a drink and a cigar, and sat quietly smoking for nearly half an hour, so lost in thought that his cigar went out repeatedly. As he reviewed his disastrous play at faro many small details came to him and now he found them interesting. The dealer was not a master at his trade and Hopalong had seen many better; in fact the man was not even second class, and this fact hurt his pride. He had played a careful game, and the

great majority of his small bets had won—it was only when he risked twenty or thirty dollars that he lost. The only big bet that he had been at all lucky on was one where doubles showed on the turn and he had been split, losing half of his stake. But when he had played his last fifty dollars on the Jack, open, the final blow fell and he had left the table in disgust.

Why weren't there cue-cards, so the players could keep their own tally of the cards instead of having to depend on the cue-box kept by the case-keeper? This made him suspicious; a crooked dealer and case-keeper can trim a big bet at will, unless the players keep their own cases or are exceptionally wise; and even then a really good dealer will get away with his play nine times out of ten. While he seldom played a system, he had backed one that morning; but he was cured of that weakness now. If the game were square he figured he could get at least an even break; if crooked, nothing but a gun could beat it, and he had a very good gun. When he thought of the gun, he reviewed the arrangement of the room and estimated the weight of the rough, deal table on which rested the faro layout. He smiled and turned to the bartender. "Hey, barkeeper! Got any paper an' a pencil?"

After some rummaging the taciturn dispenser of liquid forget-it produced the articles in question and Hopalong, drawing some hurried lines, paid his bill, treated, kept the pencil and headed for the faro game across the street.

WHEN he entered the room the table was deserted and he nodded to the dealer as he seated himself at the right of the case-keeper, who now took his place, and opposite the dealer and the lookout. He was not surprised to find no other players in the room, for the hour was wrong; later in the afternoon there would be many and at night the place would be crowded. This suited him perfectly and he settled himself to begin playing.

When the deck was shuffled and placed in the deal box Hopalong put his ruled paper in front of him on the table, tallied once against the King for the soda card and started to play quarters and half-dollars. He caught the fugitive look that passed between the men as they saw his cue-card but he gave no sign of having observed it. After that he never looked up from the cards while his bets were small. Two deals did not alter his money much and

he knew that so far the game was straight. If it were not to remain straight the crookedness would not come more than once in a deal if the frame-up was "single-odd" and then not until the bet was large enough to practically break him. His high-card play ran in his favor and kept him gradually drawing ahead. He lost twice in calling the last turn and guessed it right once, at four to one, which made him win in that department of the game.

When the fifth deal began he was quite a little ahead and his play became bolder, some of the bets going as high as ten dollars. He broke even and then played heavier on the following deal. His first high bet, twenty dollars, was on the eight, open, only one eight having shown. Double eights showed on the next turn and he was split, losing half the stake.

It was about this time that the lookout discovered that Mr. Cassidy was getting a little excited and several times had nearly forgotten to keep his cases. This information was cautiously passed to the dealer and case-keeper and from then on they evinced a little more interest in the game. Finally, the player, after studying his cue-card, placed fifty dollars on the Queen, open, and copped the deuce, a case-card, and then put ten more on the high card. This came in the middle of the game and he was prepared for trouble as the turn was made, but fortune was kind to him and he raked in sixty dollars. He was mildly surprised that he had won, but explained it to himself by thinking that the stakes were not yet high enough. From then on he was keenly alert, for the crookedness would come soon if it ever did, but he strung small sums on the next dozen turns and waited for a new deal before plunging.

As the dealer shuffled the cards the door opened and closed noisily and a surprised and doubting voice exclaimed: "Ain't you Hopalong Cassidy? Cassidy, of th' Bar-20?"

Hopalong glanced up swiftly and back to the cards again: "Yes; what of it?"

"Oh, nothin'. I saw you onct an' I wondered if I was right."

"Ain't got time now; see you later, mebby. You might stick around outside so I can borrow some money if I go broke." The man who knew Mr. Cassidy silently faded, but did not stick around, thereby proving that the player knew human nature and also how to get rid of a pest.

When the dealer heard the name he glanced

keenly at the owner of it, exchanged significant looks with the case-keeper and faltered for an instant as he shoved the cards together. He was not sure that he had shuffled them right, and an anxious look came into his eyes as he realized that the deal must go on. It was far from reassuring to set out to cheat a man so well known for expert short-gun work as the Bar-20 puncher and he wished he could be relieved. There was no other dealer around at that time of the day and he had to go through with it. He did not dare to shuffle again and chance losing the card beyond hope, and for the reason that the player was watching him like a hawk.

A ten lay face up on the deck and Hopalong, tallying against it on his sheet, began to play small sums. Luck was variable and remained so until the first twenty dollar bet, when he reached out excitedly and raked in his winnings, his coat sleeve at the same time brushing the cue-card off the table. But he had forgotten all about the tally sheet in his eagerness to win and played several more cards before he noticed it was missing and sought for it. Smothering a curse he glanced at the case-keeper's tally and went on with the play. He did not see the look of relief that showed momentarily on the faces of the dealer and his associates, but he guessed it.

HE had no use for cue-cards when he felt like doing without them; he liked to see them in use by the players because it showed the game to be more or less straight, and it also saved him from overheating his memory. When he had brushed his tally sheet off the table he knew what he was doing, and he knew every card that had been drawn out of the box. So far he had seen no signs of cheating and he wished to give the dealer a chance. There should now remain in the deal box three cards, a deuce, five and a four, with a Queen in sight as the last winner. He knew this to be true because he had given all his attention to memorizing the cards as they showed in the deal box, and had made his bets small so he would not have to bother about them. As he had lost three times on a four he now believed it was due to win.

Taking all his money he placed it on the four: "Two hundred and seventy on th' four to win," he remarked, crisply.

The dealer sniffed almost inaudibly and the case-keeper prepared to cover him on the cue-rack under cover of the excitement of the turn. If the four lay under the Queen, Cassidy lost; if not he

either won or was in hock. The dealer was unusually grave as he grasped the deal box to make the turn and as the Queen slid off a five-spot showed.

The dealer's hand trembled as he slid the five off, showing a four, and a winner for Hopalong. He went white—he had bungled the shuffle in his indecision and now he didn't know what might develop. And in his agitation he exposed the hock card before he realized what he was doing, and showed another five. He had made the mistake of showing the "odd."

Hopalong, ready for trouble, was more prepared than the others and he was well underway before they started. His left hand swung hard against the case-keeper's jaw, his Colt roared at the drawing bartender, crumpling the trouble-hunter into a heap on the floor dazed from shock of a ball that "creased" his head. He had done this as he sprang to his feet and his left hand, dropping swiftly to the heavy table, threw it over onto the lookout and the dealer at the instant their hands found their guns. Caught off their balance they went down under it and before they could move sufficiently to do any damage, Hopalong vaulted the table and kicked their guns out of their hands. When they realized just what had happened a still-smoking Colt covered them. Many of Hopalong's most successful and spectacular plays had been less carefully thought out beforehand than this one and he laughed sneeringly as he looked at the men who had been so greedy as to try to clean him out the second time.

"Get up!" he snarled.

They crawled out of their trap and sullenly obeyed his hand, backing against the wall. The case-keeper was still unconscious and Hopalong, disarming him, dragged him to the wall with the others.

"I wondered where that deuce had crawled to," Mr. Cassidy remarked, grimly, "an' I was goin' to see, only it's plain now. I knowed you was clumsy, but my G—d! Any man as can't deal 'single-odd' ought to quit th' business, or play straight. So you had five fives agin me, eh? Instead of keepin' th' five under th' Queen, you bungled th' deuce in its place. When you went to pull off th' Queen an' five like they was one card, you had th' deuce under her. You see, I keep cases in my old red head an' I didn't have to believe what the cue-rack was all fixed to show me. An' I was waitin', all ready for

th' play that'd make me lose.

"As long as this deal was framed up, we'll say it was this mornin'. You cough up th' hundred an' ten I lost then, an' another hundred an' ten that I'd won if it wasn't crooked. An' don't forget that two-seventy I just pulled down, neither. Make it in double eagles an' don't be slow 'bout it. Money or lead—with *you* callin' th' turn." It was not a very large amount and it took only a moment to count it out. The eleven double eagles representing the morning's play seemed to slide from the dealer's hand with reluctance—but a man lives only once,

and they slid without stopping.

The winner, taking the money, picked up the last money he had bet and, distributing it over his person to equalize the weight, gathered up the guns from the floor. Backing toward the door he noticed that the bartender moved and a keen glance at that unfortunate assured him that he would live.

When he reached the door he stopped a moment to ask a question, the tenseness of his expression relaxing into a broad, apologetic grin. "Would you mind tellin' me where I can find some more frame-ups? I shore can use the money."